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“Critical Habitat” and Other Stories

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The University of Southern Mississippi

“Critical Habitat” and Other Stories

by

Michael Mitchell

A Thesis

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Abstract

The nature of writing, that is, storytelling, is difficult to discuss in a technical manner. Often it is easier to demonstrate by example rather than theory how storytelling does and does not work. This thesis is a collection of short stories written to practice the art of writing and storytelling. They do not follow a central theme or motif; they are self-contained projects demonstrating the application of the theories discussed in the introduction. The point of this thesis is not to show the correct way to write or provide examples of perfect stories. It is to show the learning process of taking theory and applying it in actual writing practice.

Key words: short story, writing, storytelling

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Introduction

The history of storytelling has no defined beginning, at least not in a way that can be accurately mapped on a timeline or flowchart. Storytelling predates the written word through oral traditions and music. Ann Charters wrote, “The history of storytelling extends far back to a time long before the invention of the printing press.... For thousands of years this genre could hardly be described as an entity cohesive enough to ‘evolve’” (Charters, 1599).

Charting the history of the short story is difficult because while the academic concept of the short story is rather young, the form itself is older. Such works as Aesop’s fables or Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales could be considered short stories, though they were not written with the idea of the “short story” in mind. A vague timeline of the modern short story as it is now thought of can be traced from early writers of “tales,” such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nikolai Gogol, through authors like Herman Melville, Ambrose Bierce, Guy de Maupassant, up to modernists such as Anton Chekhov and James Joyce. But, except for the more modern ones, these writers were not purposely pursuing or defining a style of storytelling; they were writing stories that were short.

The short story, as a form, has had varying lengths and requirements attached to it. Usually this consists of some arbitrary word length, like 3,000, 7,000, or 10,000 words, to separate it from the novella or the novel. Edgar Allan Poe suggested in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” that a short story be short enough to read “in one sitting” (Poe 163). But discussing word lengths does not help in defining a short story. The difficulty in defining what a short story is comes from the fact that the importance of a short story, or any work of fiction, is not determined by how it is made. It’s determined by what it does, and

how it affects the reader. In Henry James' words, a story's only obligation is to be "interesting" (James 8).

Rust Hills defined the short story this way: "a short story tells of something that happened to someone" (Hills 1). This is a good place to begin because it provides us with a bare bones foundation. For something written or told to be considered a story at all it needs a progression of some kind (the "something that happened") and an element that provides personality or character within the progression (that is the "someone" it happened to). If there is only the progression, the writing is a report. If there's only the element of personality, then the writing is a character sketch or analysis.

However, even this isn't a satisfying definition. It offers no difference between the short story and, say, a news article or a biography. It offers nothing on what a short story does. Poe wrote that it is the effect a short story is intended to produce that ought to be in the center of the author's attention when writing. He wrote with the intention of bringing about some specific emotional or intellectual response in his audience, or, as he put it, "I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect." (Poe, 163).

Poe's short stories provide examples of his statement. Each of his stories is built to elicit specific responses from the readers. His classic horror stories such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "Fall of the House of Usher" are designed to evoke disgust, shock, and dread, while more humorous stories, like "The Man That Was Used Up" or "Bon-Bon" were intended as sources of comedy and thoughtful parody, in the cases of these stories, on masculinity and classic philosophers respectively.

A short story is important for what it does. When discussing writing, it is easy to become bogged down by technical aspects of writing: sentence construction, point of view,

characterization, and theme. All of these things are parts of writing that writers must understand and utilize in storytelling, but none of these things guarantee any sort of emotional or intellectual effect for the reader. A theme of revenge isn't guaranteed to inspire the reader with feelings of anger or sadness, nor does a first person point of view guarantee a better understanding of a character. Flannery O'Connor said in her essay "Writing Short Stories" that "discussing story-writing in terms of plot, character, and theme is like trying to describe the expression on a face by saying where the eyes, nose, and mouth are" (O'Connor, 89).

These technical aspects of the story are part of the writing process but they are not what make a story a story. In my own personal experience as a young writer, I often fall into the loop of being fixated on a technical aspect of writing, thinking to myself, "If I master this one thing, I will understand how to write well." I tried out common writing exercises, like journaling or graphing my stories, thinking that I could fix my work by quantifiably visualizing it or simplifying it. Such exercises were fun and offered a different way of looking at what I'd written, but they didn't show me how a story works. I made the mistake of assuming that "writing" meant the same thing as "creating," which it does not. It's not the component parts of a story, the technical aspects involved in writing, that make it work; it's the story as a whole. The created situation and the created characters acting upon one another in a way that is emotionally or intellectually effective.

How a short story accomplishes its effect, how it works, is through what O'Connor here calls the "mystery of personality." "A story is a complete dramatic action-and in good stories, the characters are shown through the action and the action is controlled through the characters.... A story always involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality"

(O'Connor 90). The mystery of personality is the voyeuristic delight of watching someone handle some situation, not as we, the reader, would, but as they, the character, do. A story shows us life from another point of view. It isn't just the enjoyment of looking into another person's life that provides the effect in stories; witnessing a specific personality handle a specific situation in the story provides the reader with meaning. Sometimes this meaning may be something like a moral or lesson, such as in the fable of the tortoise and the hare: "Slow and steady wins the race." But there is no such moral embedded in O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Rather, the work provides experience, the experience of a situation.

How does an author create experience? It is not through the technical aspects, which are only components of the story. Poe said that he started out with an intended effect to produce, but not the specific experience he would use to produce it. Writing an experience involves being able to write O'Connor's mystery of personality. The characters in the story must be real and approach the situation as only they would and could, rather than as the author or the reader would. Donald Barthelme described writing this mystery of personality as "not knowing." That is, a writer approaches a problem in a story not knowing how he will deal with it, and the written attempts he makes at dealing with the problem, through the characters in the story, are the emergence of personality in the characters themselves. "The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention" (Barthelme 12).

By not knowing exactly what will happen next in a story, having only the elements there that make up a problem, the author relies on the personalities of the characters, which have been built by the descriptions of them and their actions so far, to act on the problem.

This is the creative aspect of storytelling, a writer utilizing imagination to create new, possibly illogical connections from a set of circumstances that reveal the personality of the characters. David Jauss noted that this act of creation was the writer's willingness to extrapolate from his or her own experiences to understand how people react and feel in situations the author might not have experienced (Jauss 69) It isn't that the author has absolutely no idea at all in which direction the story will go from a specific problem or event; it's that the story's direction will be determined by what the author knows of the characters in it. In discussing a hypothetical story involving two characters named Jacqueline and Jemima, Barthelme says, "What I do know [about Jacqueline or Jemima] comes into being the instant it's inscribed. Jacqueline, for example, loathes her mother... I discover this by writing the sentence that announces it" (Barthelme 12).

This is the central part of understanding the creative process that the writer undertakes. The creative act of writing is not a vague process of "waiting on my muse" or "searching the dark for the light." It is the act of sitting or standing or lying down and writing. In creating characters, a writer creates situations for those characters to be further created in. As the characters continue to emerge, they act upon their situations, which reveals more about the characters themselves. One continues to create, from character to situation, and, when necessary, looking back to revise so the story's central experience is not lost or dulled by tangential ideas. John Gardner put it as, "What Fancy sends, the writer must order by Judgement. He must think out completely, as coolly as any critic, what his fiction means, or is trying to mean" (Gardner 7). Ultimately, the writer seeks to bring the reader an entertaining story of how "something happened to someone".

It has taken me years to learn, and far more to fully understand, that a writer does not “master” writing. A writer simply writes as a means to create. It’s an effort of “keep trying, aiming for better each time.” When asked how one should start writing fiction, David Brin replied, “You write and you write, loving your hobby, and then you circulate it” (Brin 2). One doesn’t look to perfect their writing in a quantifiable way; the stories of Chaucer are boring to some well read modern readers simply because the conventions and content of his writing are more difficult to relate to than modern fiction, being so much older. Even if his writings are demonstrably “masterful” (and they are) society and readers change and what is entertaining, that is, what is an experience for the reader changes too. There is no “true” form for a story to take. What is important to a writer is understanding how to create and doing so. Whether writing for oneself or a specific reader or a specific audience or for the ages, a writer’s goal is to write and to entertain with his writing.

I won’t say that each story in this collection was written with the goal to entertain in mind. These stories were written over my years in writing classes, as I was coming to understanding (a bit at least) how writing works. Some were written in the mindset of “If I do better with Point of View/my prose/my dialogue/my plot then I’ll be good.” When I first began writing “Shotgun Wedding,” it was to get more practice at first person point of view. In fact, the original story included several skips in time so I could experiment with the use of time in short stories. It was during the process of revising and work-shopping with other students that focused less on the technical aspects and more on finding what made the story interesting to me at all. “Critical Habitat” was written specifically for the challenge of writing on a subject I didn’t know very well, in this case land surveying and bird watching. It started out as a large collection of facts about land surveying classes, tools, and techniques until

subsequent revisions helped me excise all the clutter and concentrate on the story of a pair of siblings and their father.

Other stories were written in the mindset “This is a fun idea. What can I do with it?” “A Perch” was written out of an image, that of a businessman on a balcony. I did not start writing it with the intent of trying out some technique, but the process of writing helped me better understand Barthelme’s concept of “not knowing,” that is, of going from a basic idea (in this case, the image of a business man on a balcony) to a fully developed story. Some stories, like “Updating Payroll” drew from elements in my life and began as just an attempt to find an interesting story out of some situation I had recently experienced. These stories, mainly “Updating Payroll” and “Advertisement Space” helped me understand how an author can utilize what he knows from his own life without making his stories just glorified biography. Like the image in “A Perch,” I would start out these stories with a simple issue and then build it away from my own life, what I knew, and into someone else’s life that I didn’t know. The stories grew as I wrote about how others would react to the issue or problem until it was no longer the idea that I had started with but had become a full story all its own.

None of these stories are perfect and none of them are stories I regret. This thesis has been an exercise in getting to the point where I could write this introduction and, hopefully, move on from it to learn more and improve from where I am now. The stories included are ordered by the date of their composition to reflect how I as a writer and my stories have changed as I learned more about the creative craft of writing.

Shotgun Wedding

July didn't pay me any attention when I shouted for her to leave my room, even when I came over and raised my fist like I'd hit her. The fist stopped working after the first time I didn't use it. She wasn't much for bluffs. She just rolled her eyes, scoffed. The blue around her eyes had gotten better since she'd moved in. When I got close to her, I could smell the peaches in her shampoo.

From the living room of the trailer, Papa shouted, "Bent, don't yell at your sister." Then, lowering his voice so me and July weren't supposed to hear, he said to Mama, "Read the directions again. I still can't get the thing to work."

July had lived with us for about two weeks now. Mama brought her home one day, right after Papa switched to his new job working for Mr. Lillix. Said she was my real sister, the one they had to let another family, a friend of Papa, take care of when she was born because we didn't have the money to raise both her and me. July was about eight or nine, a year younger than me, so I don't remember when she was a baby. When she went to live with Papa's friend, I was only about a year old, and after that, the guy moved away to another state for a while. So I never saw her until Mama brought her in. She had real tired eyes, blue around the edges. Blue around her neck too, like new bruises.

I asked Mama why we were taking her back now, and she said that July hadn't been able to stay with Papa's friend anymore.

"That man," she'd said, staring into a pan of bubbling water, "Mr. Edward Kingley wasn't what your daddy thought he was. He wasn't a good man. So July's

coming back to live with us now that your daddy's earning more money. That's all you need to know, ok Bent? You just be nice to her. She's your sister, not some 'doptee. So you treat her like real family."

She didn't like to talk much. I had to make her angry to get her to say anything at all, which was pretty easy to do. When I tried to be nice, like when I said "Morning," she wouldn't say anything back. She'd kick the back of my leg if I got in her way in the hall. She acted like I wasn't worth talking to, so I just stopped trying. There was no way I could see her as my sister, not when she treated me like our cat.

Digging through the layers of clothes at the bottom of my closet, July said, "Where's my boots? I finally get invited to one of these hick girls' houses and I can't find my rain boots."

"Why'd I have your boots in my closet?"

"You had my undies in your drawer. Your mom said she put them there by mistake, but you took them out of my room, didn't you?"

I get red when I get surprised, and I tried to hide it by stooping down and picking up my shoes and the jeans she'd just hurled out. Fat water drops splattered against the window. The trees outside shivered; the sound of the leaves was loud since the TV was off. Outside, the neighbor kids danced across their muddy backyard, looking like Indians in their underwear. The oldest was just about July's age, and she was streaking with her two younger brothers, her body slick from the drizzle.

"I did not take them," I said, "Mama wasn't lying. She really did put them in there. And why don't you call her 'Mama' instead of 'your mom'?"

She ignored that. “Yeah right. I’m sure she just accidentally mistook my panties for your dirty underwear.”

Without thinking, I shoved July down into my pile of laundry. She tried to grab the closet door frame but missed and pulled down one of my jackets on top of her. I expected Mama or Papa to be standing out in the hallway, passing by in time to see my crime, but I could only see Saturn’s green food bowl, brown on the rims, and the edge of the living room carpet. July dug herself out of my clothes. Now she’d rat on me, I thought, but instead she shouted, “Panty stealer” and threw my jacket in my face.

“Hush it up!” Papa said, “Boy, come out here and hold this TV!”

July continued tossing out huge handfuls of clothing, throwing them across the bed, but I ignored her. Mama told me to hold up the Sanyo Papa was working under, trying to replace one of the innards that had shorted out. She stepped back, letting me buckle under the weight of the set. Lightning struck loud outside, and the kids next door screamed, one of them letting out a whooping war cry.

“Colt,” Mama said, easing into the rocker, “You sure you should be under there in a thunderstorm?”

“I got it Mama,” Papa said, “You keep this thing steady boy, kay?”

“Yessir,” I repositioned my arms, “Why don’t we just buy a new TV?”

“Cause we don’t got the money for it Bent. You have two hundred dollars to spare?”

“No sir. But I thought that Mr. Lillix paid you twice as much as the mill did.”

“Yes,” he twisted something tight, making the TV shake, “and now I got twice as many kids to shove food inside. Want to make a guess where that money went?”

I braced against the weight cutting into my fingers. Moist air blew in past the cardboard covering a broken pane of glass on the front window of the trailer. I could smell the rain, strong and sweet and fresh, being pushed around by the swivel fan in the corner. Summer showers made the living room feel sticky since the window broke, like the furniture was covered in a layer of sweat. I had to beg a garbage bag from Mama to keep my Nintendo in until we could fix the window, so it wouldn't short out. That was probably what happened to the TV, at least that's what Papa thought.

Papa stopped to look at a booklet he had lying next to him on the floor and said so only I could hear, "You aren't messing with your sister are you Bent? Pushing her around or anything?"

"No sir." I knew better than to tell the truth. "Just talking."

"Ok. Bent," he repositioned himself so he could see me, "Your sister's been through a lot of bad times. Things that don't bother you, horse playing like you and Cody do, pushing and hitting, it bothers her. I don't mean like it normally bothers a girl. It doesn't just hurt her feelings a little. It can scare her ok? So don't you ever let me catch you shoving or hitting your sister, you got me? I mean ever. Or I will wear out my belt on you. Ok?"

I nodded eagerly, whispering prayers of thanks that he hadn't seen me push July down. I didn't even consider that July may tattle on me later; the look in his eyes, the seriousness in his voice scared me more than his threats.

The living room window cracked as something struck it, almost making me lose my grip on the Sanyo. Papa swore loudly. A crack twinkled across the bottom pane of glass. Mama was up, flying across to throw open the window hard enough to make the

crack spider-web. She screamed into the storm, “I saw that Alex! I saw you throw that rock! I’ll be telling your mama!”

Alex, the youngest of the boys next door, shouted in protest, but Mama didn’t compromise. She slammed the window shut. A calloused hand emerged from under the TV and tapped my leg.

“Hold it up boy. Feels like you’re about to crush me.”

“Yessir.”

Mama walked to the bedroom, mumbling about the phonebook. Little chips of shattered glass glistened inside the crack in the window. Drops of water were starting to seep through. A second after Mama left, Saturn ran in, dragging a tuft of string, followed by July as she shoved her feet down into her boots.

I said, “So where were they?” She rubbed Saturn, but she didn’t look at me.

Under the TV, Papa asked, “Where you going sugar? Weather’s rough.”

“I’m not scared,” July picked up her blue umbrella from beside the door, “I’m just walking down the road to Dina Mauch’s house.”

“No you ain’t. Not in this weather.”

“She’s the first to invite me over. I’m trying to make new friends.”

“Yeah but it’s going to get rough. I don’t like you going alone.”

“Mr. Dolton, please,” she said.

“Mr. Dolton?” Papa’s head halfway emerged from under the TV. July looked away from us into the kitchen, shaking her umbrella loose. It was always “Mr. Dalton,” “Mrs. Dalton,” and, for me, “Hey.” Why was “Papa” so hard to say? I could hear Papa’s

silence giving into her. He unfolded from underneath the TV with a groan. My knuckles crackled when I eased it down.

Turning to me, Papa said, “Son, walk your sister to her friend’s house.”

“Why do I got to?”

“Go on Bent. You watch out for July.”

I kicked absently at Saturn’s tail, looking for an excuse. But Papa never liked to wait very long for excuses, so he turned me outside with July. The wind was hard; I tried to tuck my head down as far as I could into my coat, but the rain still got in my face, slipping down beneath my shirt. Cold spiders slid along my chest to my stomach.

“Thanks a lot.” I tapped July’s ankle with my shoe. I should have known better than that, because she still didn’t know the difference between kidding and picking. For her, everything was picking, and she returned fire by kicking me hard in the shin with the toe of her boot.

“I didn’t ask you to come with me,” she said. I had to hobble to keep after her, cursing now that Mama couldn’t hear me. My face burned even in the rain. Behind us, the neighbor kids shouted and whooped at the sky, Alex’s high voice above the others. Our wind chime was screeching, and the mailbox for the trailer next to us rattled against its post, eager to fly off.

The yelling got quieter when we crossed the road, but the wind kept blowing water in my eyes. Gordy Douphin, the man in the lot across from us, was splattering soap on his car, letting the rain help him wash it. His six year old boy scrubbed the tires with an old yellow brush, dripping thick globs of soap lather. They didn’t see us pass by. Behind their lot, the trailers went on like a deck of cards. Mrs. Ollivender’s white

double wide with the pretty red truck out front. Tony and Blair Mesh's with the Frisbee still stuck on the roof and the spray paint on the back. Way in the back, Mort Francis' trailer sat on cinderblocks, the screen door jumping in the wind, the insides dark since Mort had been gone for three weeks.

I asked where the Mauch girl lived. "I'm not walking you far," I said, trying to rub my shin and still keep up with her. She didn't slow down at all for me.

"She's right behind the trailer park."

"That's pretty far in the rain."

"Suck it up."

I considered thumping the back of her umbrella to mess with her, but decided against it. That'd just invite another hit or kick, or maybe she'd tell Papa on me. It was like she was a guest in the house rather than a sister, somehow unapproachable and untouchable. My hair fell and stung my eyes. As I rubbed them clean, someone squealed. Mud splashed under running feet. Alex ran up, knocking the umbrella out of July's hands as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and jumped up on her back, holding onto her with arms and legs. Alex was about seven, and in the rain, he looked more like a hound dog than a boy, his long hair replacing the floppy ears. He was scrawny; the shadows of his ribs showed under his arms as they locked together beneath July's chin. She shouted and managed to hold him up without falling, but the surprise of being jumped on still made her stagger. She screamed again, louder, and grabbed hold of me, almost pulling me down in the slick mud.

Alex, laughing and kicking his feet, shouted, "I got you! I got you! You got to do what I say!"

July almost slipped. I grabbed her arm, to keep her steady, but she threw me off and started twisting her body, trying to throw Alex. “Let go of me!” she bucked and twirled across the muddy road. Alex hung tight, reaching down and grabbing the chest of her shirt to get a better handhold. One of his feet dug into the band of her pants, pushing it down to support his weight. A lot of the other kids in the trailer park thought Alex had rabies and would infect anyone else who touched him. Watching him cling to my sister, making her spin and buck and jump, I could believe it. Animal-like, more like a squirrel than a hound, he held on, and without expecting it, I started laughing. July was short, but Alex was shorter and scrawnier, and seeing them twisting and jumping together, two wet animals in the rain. I couldn’t help but laugh.

July didn’t find this at all funny. She shouted at me to get him off. Her voice was at a higher pitch than normal. In fact, it sounded strained, louder than any other time she’d been ticked off at me. I laughed at that too.

“Just throw him off,” I said, “He doesn’t weigh two pounds.”

While I stood there laughing, Alex hugged tight to July’s neck, saying, “Tell your Mama not to tell on us or I won’t let go. I’ll pull you into the mud if you don’t.”

He dug both feet into her pants, further resembling the squirrel working up wet bark. July screamed again, this time so loud and so high that it hurt my ears.

“Bent! Make him let go! Make him let go!”

But I didn’t want to. She screamed and thrashed and yelled at me. It wasn’t funny anymore, but I didn’t want to stop it either. It didn’t feel right to listen to her while she kept screaming in that high, awful voice, but it did feel good after all the kicking and ignoring. “Condescending,” what Papa called Mr. Lillix, that was the best

word for the way she acted, but not at that moment, with Alex clinging to her. July stumbled to one of the mailboxes across the road, holding herself against it, unable to keep Alex up by herself anymore. Alex started bouncing on her, as if to make her go faster again. She was crying now. Papa's warning not to mess with her came back to me; I panicked, looking around to see if he'd heard all the noise and come outside. No one was out, except Mr. Douphin and his boy, and they were both on the opposite side of his truck. The wind was covering up most of the squealing. No one had noticed, yet.

I ran across the road to fix things before that changed. He was slick, but I grabbed Alex around the waist and pulled. His hair got in my mouth, leaving the taste of mud on my tongue. He tried to hold onto July's shirt but she clawed at his hands and feet, leaving red scratches across the back of his limbs. That started him screaming too and kicking, trying to drive her away. I expected to hear Papa's voice at any moment, or Mr. Dauphin. Lightning flashed and my jaw shook.

When I had Alex peeled away, squirming to get out of my arms, July turned around and popped him across the face. She did it again and a third time. Alex howled. Red droplets, exactly the color of food dye, fell from his nose to the mud. She raised her fist again, but he squirmed out of my arms and ran off down the road, crying that he was telling on us. I saw Mr. Douphin turn his head to watch the half-naked boy run past, holding his hands to his nose. When he got to his house, he tripped over the curb and sprawled out in the high lawn. I couldn't hear it in the wind, but Mr. Douphin threw his head back in laughter.

July was a mess. She was soaked, her shirt and her pants both were stretched and baggy. She had mud all over her. The color of her face matched the mud beneath our

feet. Not only that, she was shaking. Not like when you're cold and shivering. Her chest was twitching; her breathing came in fast, sharp gasps through her nose. Her eyes were closed and I wondered if she was having a seizure. Cody used to have them before he got on medication. The thought of her falling in the mud, her arms and hands jumping around while her jaws locked up tight, made me even more afraid, and I ran over, asking if she was ok.

"I'm sorry," I said, straightening her shirt, trying to hold her down as if she'd take off into the sky, "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry July. Please don't tell Papa. I'm sorry."

She shoved me away. I thought she might try to hit me or kick me again and I jumped back, but she didn't. Instead, she picked up her umbrella, shaking the mud off before folding it up. Then, she kept going down the road, walking fast. I ran to catch up, still trying to apologize while hot puddle water leaped up on my legs. She didn't show any sign of hearing me.

We kept walking, not talking. The last trailers passed. A ditch separated the park from the neighborhood on the other side. I was going to lift July over the mud but she didn't stop to wait on me. Just pushed through it, shoving down the floating twigs and leaves and Burger King wrappers into the mulch.

"July," I said, "I didn't mean for that, ok? I know that sounds real stupid, but I didn't mean for that to happen. Or to go on for so long."

She wasn't behaving like she was angry; when she was angry, she either yelled and kicked me or got real quiet and said something to make fun of me. This was frightening, the way she just kept walking, how she wouldn't turn her head. Cody and his seizures kept coming back. Was this some kind of waking seizure? I wondered

would Papa know? Would he realize I'd let Alex mess with her for so long just by looking at her?

She was so quiet and I was so concentrated on wondering what Papa might know that she surprised me when she spoke.

“We're here. This is Dina's house.”

We were in the back yard of one of the houses on Beaux Road, the real houses with a foundation. The lawn was cut low like Papa does. Bushes of azaleas surrounding the house let out their strong smell under the rain. We stood there for a long time, at the edge of the lawn. I waited for her to say something, to go inside, to turn around and start back home, anything.

She did say something. She asked me, “Did you take my panties and put them in your room? Or did your mom do it?”

Her face was calm, normal again, and she kept shaking her umbrella. When I looked at her, she looked back. But something still felt wrong. I'd done something wrong and I could see it. But would Papa see it too? I said, “No. I really didn't take them. I swear.”

“Ok.” She walked around the side of the house, leaving me in the back yard. She stopped at one of the windows and waved. The blue of her umbrella disappeared onto the front porch. I heard her stomp the mud off her boots, the screen door wailing, then just the wind.

I walked back faster, now that the wind was at my back. The whole neighborhood felt quiet, even with the sound of the rain striking aluminum siding and metal mail boxes. When I got back to our yard, I could see the neighbor's yard was

empty. Big red puddles of mud stood in the ditches that had been dug by running feet. The arm of a doll stuck up out of one of them, as if she'd almost made it out.

The Sanyo stood up right, where it was suppose to be, the big fish eye screen showing the Fox channel instead of a rolling field of stupid color. Papa was sitting on the couch, massaging his shoulder with one hand, holding the instruction manual for the TV in his other. He looked up at the sound of the screen door opening.

"Boy," he was up, coming across the room fast, "What's this I hear about Alex?"

Fear overtook me so fast I couldn't even close the door. I became aware of the sound of Mama in the back bedroom, talking loud to someone on the phone. Probably Alex's mama. I heard Mama say, "-that young'un of yours breaks enough windows, of course he'll get himself hurt." Then the bedroom door shut and Mama was muffled. Papa was standing over me, his red knuckles just below the flapping bass on the front of his shirt.

"I didn't hit him," I said, "July hit him. He was picking on her and she punched him. It wasn't me."

"So he came up, messed with her, and she hit him?"

"Yes sir." I nodded fast, but it only made him frown.

"I told you to take care of July. Why the hell didn't you listen to me? I said that I didn't want anyone roughing her up and you go and let that brat next door mess with her. What did he do? Did he push her around, pull her hair?"

"Yes sir." I couldn't tell him. Would July tell him everything? Then I'd be in more trouble for lying. But I couldn't tell him what really happened.

"Why didn't you do like I said?"

There were no words available to explain that moment. It seemed as if I could barely even remember it, let alone describe it. From the back, Mama shouted really loud, “I know you’ve never seen him do it Shelley! You’re in that house all day, why would you know what your son does?”

“Boy? Why didn’t you do like I said?”

“I’m sorry Papa.”

Papa’s right heel started tapping the floor. Saturn sat by his food bowl, watching the shoe rise and fall, his tail flipping over itself. Guilt and anger were debating inside my head. Neither one seemed right to feel. It wasn’t my fault for what Alex did... but then again, maybe it was. In a way. I didn’t know. I hadn’t done anything, but thinking that felt as bad as if I had. And then there was the way she’d shook, that fast breathing. Sparks of pain in my palms made me realize I had them clenched into tight fists. Slowly, I forced them apart. They came away sticky with sweat and rain.

“You think I’m going to whoop you?” he asked.

“I guess.”

“I don’t know if I should or not. You’re mama wouldn’t like it since you didn’t fight, but I don’t like it that you let your sister deal with that boy when you were there. You’re a big boy Bent. You need to know when to fight. You aren’t afraid of fighting are you?”

“No. No sir.”

“Look at me.”

I did. He wrinkled his nose, scratched at the faded red dots on his ear lobe where he used to wear ear rings. His expression wasn’t giving anything away.

“What’d I tell you?” he said, “I told you that stuff like that, rough housing, that scares your sister. I told you that. And I told you to watch out for her. What have I got to do to explain that to you?”

I didn’t say anything since I had no clue what a good answer would be by this point. He went on.

“I’m not going to say anymore. Your mama’s going to be mad at me for scolding you after you didn’t fight. But Bent, look at me.”

I turned my eyes back to him from where they’d been drifting away towards Saturn and the kitchen. It was hard to do but I kept them on him.

“The next time you don’t stand up for your sister, I don’t care what Mama says, I will whip you. You understand me?”

I said yes sir.

“Ok.” He stood there a minute longer, thinking, looking at me. He nodded and went back to the sofa. Saturn came over, sniffed my feet before trotting off behind the kitchen counter.

My mouth felt scrunched up into itself and my eyes were hot, but whether from guilt or anger, I couldn’t tell. Was Papa right or was he being unfair? I still didn’t know. I left the living room before Papa saw me and got onto me for crying.

I started to go into my room, wanting something to get my mind off Papa’s scolding. Mama’s voice was muffled, telling Alex’s mama that she’d call the police the next time one of her windows turned up broken. I stopped to listen, relieved that Mama wasn’t mad at me too. The door to July’s room was across the hall from mine. A tiny sliver of white showed through the crack between the door and the jamb. Without

thinking, I pushed it open, looking back into the living room. Papa was watching the TV. I went in and shut the door almost closed behind me.

July's room smelled flat. There was an odor of her peach-shampoo and Dove soap, but dull, as if the smell were spread thin. She didn't have dolls or plastic animals or ribbons hanging everywhere like a lot of girls from school. She had some books sitting on her dresser drawers and a little plastic mirror, chipped at the corner. Papa had brought in a desk from Grandpa's old house, after cleaning all the dust out of it. The top desk drawer hung open, a bunch of pens and pencils stacked on each other inside. Her school books were in a pile on the desk, handmade labels with the subjects written on them in purple and green taped to the spines.

I moved to her dresser drawers and looked at the books she had sitting on top of it. They were all from the public library, big books. Two of them had pictures of jungles on the front. The other one had a picture of the Earth, really bright, as if the sun were shining right on it. There was a torn frog book marker in the one with the world on the front.

Pulling open the top drawer quietly as I could, I saw stacks of pink and white cloth inside. Tightly balled up pairs of socks on the right side, a pair of pink pajamas on the left. In the middle, July's white underwear. They looked so different from the kind I wore, like they were built for an entirely different purpose. *They are idiot*, I thought. The fabric felt soft and silky, very different from mine. Small pictures of pink bunny ears covered the waist band.

"Like I'd want your stupid underwear," I said. Weird that July wore something so cute and girly. The way she was, how quiet, how she snapped at me, the plain room; I

was surprised to see bunny ears on her underwear. But then there was that high pitched voice she'd screamed in, when Alex grabbed her. I once couldn't imagine July scared; she was too tough for that. But looking at such a soft piece of fabric, I could almost picture her here in her room crying, holding her books away from her so she didn't get them wet. The idea made my stomach twist.

I shoved the drawer closed.

A Peculiar Arraignment

Kory arrived back at the old dorm around nine o' clock two nights before the end of summer break. Aside from a few kids playing Frisbee under the arc lights, Philips Boarding School felt empty with no cars in the parking lot and only a spattering of lights in the dormitories. Inside, the loudest noise came from under the Resident Assistant's door, soft jazz with a distinctly heavy bass. There was already a new girl stretched out in the other bed, the one Kory's old roommate used last year. Brand new, white sheets covered the rectangular frame, and a quilt that looked homemade sat folded up tightly at the foot of the bed. The spotless sheets made Kory ashamed; she never changed her bed sheets out and even after getting them washed over the summer, an ugly yellow outline still crept across them.

The girl was about sixteen, had to be since they were rooming together. She had an odd facial structure, really smooth. No blemishes on the forehead or in the hollows of her cheeks. The way her mouth was set made her look like she was always smiling, so it was hard to tell whether she really was or not when she said hello.

Kory struggled to form a greeting. Her lips felt like a set of braces against her teeth. All of her little physical imperfections seemed to glow; the quiet after the girl's first "Hello" felt somehow insulting, as if Kory were being silent to be rude. She managed a "Hi," but by then, the girl had stopped looking at her. The girl was lying on her bed, reading through a paper clipped stack of paper. The front sheet had no writing on it and the inside sheets looked covered in tiny print, too small to make out. Kory retreated to her bed, dumping luggage on the stiff new mattress. The hole she'd wallowed out in the old one from last year was gone, replaced with a squeal of fresh springs and green plastic.

The girl didn't say anything else and Kory let the silence build up, afraid to break it. Every once in a while she, the other girl, would turn to a sheet softly. The only other noise was the late night Frisbee game outside, the occasional whoop as a catcher tumbled in the grass. The room felt full of stage lights, hot and close. Kory stuffed her clothing into the wardrobe on her side of the room, grimacing whenever the metal coat hangers scrapped against the steel bar. When she ran out of clothes to hand, she began arranging toiletries in the drawers at the bottom of the wardrobe.

The girl's bed popped and metal snarled as she hopped up and stepped to the window. She flipped back the locks with some difficulty. The window took even more trouble to raise; Kory couldn't remember a time when she or her old roommate had tried to lift it. Flecks of stuff, paint or dried wood or dust, fell to the floor; warm air drifted in.

"Can you keep a secret for me?" the girl asked, picking up her backpack and unzipping the small front pocket. Kory shrugged. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess so." A small white box emerged from the front pocket, the front decorated with what looked like a set of gold arches. It looked like a pack of playing cards, but the girl flipped the top open and removed a cigarette. She pointed at the small white cylinder, holding it lightly between her ring and middle finger.

"Don't tell ok. I only smoke one a day."

"Ok," Kory said after some hesitation. Turning, she pointed towards the small, white box attached to the ceiling just over the doorway. "But there's a smoke detector."

The girl kept digging through her backpack until she found a red and green lighter. She set it and the fresh cigarette on the window ledge and then added a box fan, the smallest size Kory had seen, to the ledge as well. She had to scrounge around behind the computer

desk to plug the fan in. It kicked on as soon as she did, letting out a high, fluctuating whine, rocking back and forth.

“That’s what this is for.” As the girl leaned on the ledge, she flicked the lighter, applying the hot orange flame to the end of the cigarette. Immediately the white tip glowed hot red. She let the cigarette hang out the window in the open air and blew smoke outside, where the current of the fan caught it up and took it away into the dark. “I’ll try to find some other place to smoke, but I just got here today. Don’t know my way around. I’m Ally by the way. You’re Kory.”

“Yeah,” even though it wasn’t a question. The fan wobbled rapidly, its plastic clacking against the wooden ledge until Ally hit the top of it with the palm of her hand, causing its oscillations to steady again.

For the first few weeks of school, they spoke very little. Alli was often out of the room, except on weekends when she’d hold up inside, flipping through stacks of clipped papers. Kory didn’t know if they were all different stacks or if they were the same one; each stack started with a perfectly white sheet, with each following page typed in the same tiny font. She wondered what was written on the pages and what they were for but never asked. Very slowly, the faintest trace of smoke filled the corner of the room near the window, but Kory didn’t say anything. Not about the smoke anyway, but she did ask Ally to watch for bees getting into the room.

“You allergic?” Ally asked. The fan, sitting at the head of her bed, whipped hair around her eyes and made the pages in her hands flop like fish tails. Kory said that she was,

very allergic, and opened one of the drawers of the computer desk to take out her EpiPen. The fat instrument felt very heavy in her hand. She'd only had to use one once before.

"It looks like a permanent marker," Ally said, "It sting."

"Yeah. But bees are worse."

"I'll bet. Just don't freak out if you see one. That's what makes them sting you."

Kory didn't say anything. When she put the EpiPen back in its place and closed the drawer, she heard it, rolling around against the wood.

Late in August, it rained for a full week. Alli stayed in the room then, not going out much. She liked to be on the grounds when the weather was nice, Kory discovered, after seeing her all over the campus, reading on the benches, eating under the trees, writing behind the utility shed. So long as there was light, Alli stayed out in it. One day, during the downpour, Kory was using the computer, an aged Dell the school had provided, running XP at a leisurely pace, the hard drive's stomach growling. Alli lay across her bed, flipping through her papers. She never made any marks on the papers nor did she write anything down, not that Kory saw. Just flipped from one page to the next, then back to another page. Sliding pages and the computer were the only sounds underneath the rain and to break the noise seemed rude. But being stuck with only 500 words on a 600 word history assignment, Kory needed a distraction. Without turning around, she asked her what she was reading.

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"They're notes."

"Like school notes?" Kory asked.

“Yes. From my last classes. I use them to refresh my memory from time to time.”

Thunder rolled lazily over the yard. “Should you be on the computer right now?”

Ignoring her question, Kory said, “You must get really good grades. I don’t study unless I have to. Tests, quizzes. You know.”

“Yep,” Ally said. “I do.”

“You never talk about them.” When she didn’t respond Kory looked around. Ally was stretched out across her bed, ankles crossed, elbows resting just above her stomach. The tiny font of the page looked like an insensible black wall. It made Kory’s eyes hurt trying to take it in. How was her sight not damaged from that small print?

Kory asked, “Why do you print your stuff in such a tiny font? Seems hard to read.”

Alli slowly repositioned the paper so that Kory couldn’t see the print anymore, hiding it in front of her chest.

“Have you looked at my notes?” she said, not accusing but it made Kory feel guilty just the same. She shook her head.

“No, I just can’t help but notice the font size is all. It’s so small and cramped. Why?”

“I write a lot down,” Alli said, “And I do not like to use a lot of paper.”

“But doesn’t it hurt your eyes?”

“It does not.”

“That would kill mine,” Kory said, “You should get a jump drive and save all your notes on that. Then you can bring it up on the computer and read it there. That’s probably a little better for your eyes. Maybe.”

Alli nodded, flipped a page. More of the same, an almost solid black of text from end to end, sheer black, the tiny pieces of white in between sentences more like mirages. Then she repositioned the paper again, hiding the writing.

Rolling out the top desk drawer, Kory pushed around the pile of pencils and her allergy shots, looking for her old Sandisk jump drive. It was far in the back, crushed up against the wood by a stack of sticky notes. She paused to take out one of the stacks. They were old notes that Sissi had written last year and stuck all over the desk. Random things she'd jotted down: a meeting with a friend, where she was at, a quote from a book. Kory'd saved them, taking them all up and making a stack out of them, keeping them without really thinking about it. Her hand reached to take them out, wanting to see Sissi's handwriting, to pretend she was still there, to feel the old fortitude. Instead, she reached past them, pushing the notes aside to get at the jump drive beyond. The white writing on the drive had faded, now just ghostly drops evaporating off the black plastic. Leaning back in her chair, she reached out to tap Alli's shoulder with the drive. Alli looked at it blankly, maybe-smile on her face.

"Here," Kory said, thrusting the drive at her, "I don't use this anymore. Put your stuff on it. That way it'll be safe but you can read it without having to strain your eyes. As much at least."

For a minute she just stared, as if she were as unsure about this as Kory felt, then reached out and took the drive.

"Thank you," she said, "I will do that I think."

The driver went into her pocket where it stood out, a raised square of fabric over the curve of her hip. Most likely, it would be back in the drawer within a few days. Kory knew

she'd find it again, unused. Instead, she was surprised when she saw Alli around the campus, holding the drive between her forefinger and thumb, rubbing it slowly. She never actually used the drive while Kory was around, but still, the fact that she'd kept it made Kory feel good.

Kory jumped as Alli forced the window open, the frame still tearing against the runner even after being open and shut at least twice a week. Bright sunlight and the last hot air of August came in as Alli began to set up her usual tools on the ledge. Kory watched her, her math work book spread out on her knees.

"It's too early for a cigarette isn't it?" she asked. Alli had to hit the light a few times to get a flame. The fuel had gotten too low, the flame was pathetically small. When she finally got the cigarette lit, Alli threw the lighter across the room into the trash can next to the computer desk. It clanged loudly against the side, causing the can to spin rapidly in place. Kory thought it would tip over and reached out to steady it. She said, "Someone'll see you, you know."

"I'm fine," Alli said, "I can't get all of this stuff we're doing in chemistry. I just need a break." Bright clouds silhouetted her head in the window frame. She looked older than sixteen, though that was probably because of the cigarette between her lips. Every half a minute or so, she hit the top of the box fan to stop it from shaking itself off the edge of the ledge.

A fat, black dot darted in the window by Alli's head. She jumped back, hitting the corner of her wardrobe. Loud buzzing could be heard over the wobbling of the fan as the bee drifted into the center of the room, zigging up and down. Kory cried out and pushed herself

back to the far end of the bed. Her hand slipped on the edge, sending her to the floor. Pain lit up her left shoulder as she fell on it. The buzzing overhead at first grew louder then fainter as the bee moved, searching for a way back out of the room.

Alli grabbed her chemistry book off her bed and, wielding it like a baseball bat, swung at the bee. It moved at the last second, causing the book to collide with the frame of Kory's bed. She swung again, this time making contact, knocking the droning dot to the floor. Kory crawled up, still looking around, cringing away from the dark spots that kept filling her eyes. Acrid smoke seemed to fill her head, and she rubbed her nose to insure she hadn't landed on it when she fell.

The bee squirmed on the hardwood floor where it had landed in front of the door. Alli dropped her chemistry book on the insect and then stomped down on it with her bare feet. Her yellow teeth clenched tight together. When she breathed, Kory could hear saliva hiss behind her teeth.

The smell of smoke had gotten stronger. Both girls turned to see grey, airy curls rising from the trashcan. When Alli had hit the wardrobe, her cigarette had slipped between her fingers and fallen into the trash can. Kory couldn't remember how long it'd been since she'd taken the trash out, but she knew that tissue paper, paper towels, and discarded loose leaf pages were in that bag. Plenty to catch fire.

Pushing off the floor, she tore the cover off her bed. "I'll smother the fire," Kory said, "try to direct the smoke out the window." The trash can was a small one with no lid, and Kory jammed her bed cover into it, pushing it down with her feet to smother the flames. She felt as if she were stepping into newly dried clothes. Sharp edges poked dully at the bottom of her cover, tickling her foot.

Alli fanned the smoke towards the window with a stack of her notes, spreading the pages out like cards in her hands. She fanned too hard at first, causing back drafts that sucked the smoke back towards her. “Not so rough,” Kory said, kicking into the trash can, even though she could feel that the growing heat had died, “Not so rough.” Pulling a shirt from out of her wardrobe, she joined Alli in fanning the smoke away from the detector.

“I hope you’re happy,” Alli said, “I hope you’re happy.” She laughed and thrust her arms out. The smoke was caught in the breeze of the shaking fan and pushed out the window where it became indistinguishable from the clouds.

A Perch

Avery Mont's office window overlooked the park downtown. In the evenings, when the sun set behind his building, he could, if he wished, look outside and watch the people walking the dirty concrete paths between the trees. But he never did. Instead, Avery liked to stand at his window and look out at the balcony underneath it.

It was a design element only, not accessible through his office nor any office in his building. The balcony was about ten feet wide, ten across, the top covered with packed gravel where he'd walk if he could get out to it (his window was covered in layers of paint decades thick, nearly sealed to the frame). Low white rails, faded on their tops by pigeons' feet, lined the edge of the balcony. At least once a day, a bird would fall into view, landing on the hollow rails to preen, rustle, or rest. Some left behind feathers, most just shook off dust. As Avery stood in his office, he watched a crow swoop down onto the north rail. It scratched at the white paint, button eye looking over the gravel.

A knock at the door. Sophia Winsell, the firm's secretary, leaned inside. Avery could only see the shoulder of her blouse and one silver button near her neck before the rest disappeared behind the faux-oak door.

"I finished installing the new wireless network for the computers boss. All that's left is to connect your personal one." She pointed across the room at the dust-covered Dell cornered at the back of his desk, half-buried by papers. "Do you want me to do it now?"

Avery took out his watch and checked the time. He made a grand show of it, holding the pocket watch (bought at a gas station in Las Vegas) away from him, twisting his hand as if there were a glare on the glass. It was already past five.

“No,” he said. “No no, don’t worry about it. We can update that thing later, there’s no reason for you to stay over tonight working on it.”

“It wouldn’t take five minutes. Really. I already got Mr. Adder’s computer connected. I even sent all the documents for that Brewford case to him without being connected to the internet. Makes things a lot easier.”

Avery frowned. He waved his hand vaguely towards the door. Behind him, the crow, as if scared by the slow gesture, took off, talons scratching the paint on the rail even further. Avery began to push his watch back into his pocket, but the cover didn’t close. It hung on his hem, tearing the fabric.

“It’s fine Sophia. Go home. You’ve done enough work already.” He looked at the rip in his pocket. The cover of his watch refused to close now, the hinge misaligned. “Go home.”

Sophia smiled and backed out of the room. Avery turned away from the window and walked over to his computer, wiping slants in the dust on the monitor with his fingertips. When he tried to turn it on, he couldn’t get it to work. He checked the power cable and the other, snaky wires that he wasn’t sure the use of. Rattling the cables sent electric smelling dust into his nose. After several moments of jabbing the flat power button with his thumb, he remembered Sophia telling him he had to hold the button down for it to work. He pressed it down for two seconds, until a logo and a loading bar lit up the screen.

The computer was already two years old, and Sophia and Adder, his partner, kept pressing him to update it. He'd allowed them both to get new models for their offices. Sophia was especially vocal about keeping the equipment up to date.

“Wired and routed,” Avery said, quoting something Sophia had told him once, “Everything is wired and routed. Come on junk, start up.”

It took two tries to remember his password. The desktop was the same as when Sophia first installed the computer. He still had the default background with the Windows logo surrounded by swirling patterns, the icons still lined up in a block on the left side of the screen.

After moving the Microsoft Word icon around for a few minutes, Avery turned the computer off and threw his jacket on. He stepped to the window and looked outside. The park trees bent in a strong wind, so he buttoned the jacket up tighter.

Avery lived alone on the other side of town. His mother and father died decades ago, when he had just started the firm, leaving him the house and what little money their insurance policies brought. Despite his firm actually growing after Adder joined, pushing him out of lower middle class and into the upper middle percentile, Avery still kept the house the same as it was in the sixties. All the phones were old cable models with fish eye spin dials. The stove had bare metal heater coils, crusted around the side from spilled water and grease that always smelled like fat when he cooked. Even the wallpaper of the kitchen remained a nasty green and purple checkerboard pattern that he had come to associate with the sound of boiling water.

The only addition that had been made to the house was the introduction of a flat screen TV that sat awkwardly in the entertainment center built for older, fatter models, and a computer in the master bedroom. This last was even more out of date than the one in his office, and Avery used it even less. The only reason he had it was to keep a backup of any important files from the firm, though he often failed to make backups.

After fixing himself a dinner of chicken and rice, as well as allowing time for a drink in front of the TV, the telephone beside Avery's yard-sale recliner began to ring. He looked at the clock across the room. It was about seven. That meant the caller was Charles Vinner, the only friend Avery continued to talk to. Charles was an old friend from college, once married and now with a daughter, Gracie Vinner. The two had studied law together, but only Avery made a living out of it. Charles ended up choosing civil service, getting lost in the Maine wilderness to deal with broken families. His calls in winter often complained of the Northern cold he still couldn't get used to. Avery picked up the phone, his fingers rubbing the plastic spin dial. He'd worn grooves in the dial over the years, stretching out the holes.

"Hello. Charles?"

Charles' rough voice, cultivated by a life of cigar smoking, rolled down the line. "Hey Avery, how are you?" It sounded rougher this week. He'd been growing more grizzled over the past couple of months, another sign of the onset of Maine winter.

As they did every week, the two old men talked like house wives, discussing law and politics rather than local people and events. Charles spent several minutes complaining about the snow clogging his drive way every day, forcing him out into the cold to clean it. When snow storms knocked out his telephone lines, Charles would send emails that Avery never checked. Avery's lack of computer use usually came up in their conversations.

“I’m buying my daughter a laptop now that she’s about to graduate. Get her one of those cards that lets her get online anywhere. Real helpful stuff. You should think about getting one, a laptop I mean. You can take it outside, do work in the sun. Feels good.”

Avery walked in circles around the telephone base, brushing the scruffy underside of his chin with the cord. He could smell the old plastic, hard in his nostrils.

“I don’t need it. I’ve got a girl who does all that stuff for me. She can work in the sun if she wants, but I prefer paper and air conditioning and ceilings.”

“Well everything can’t be done on paper anymore. You should at least start using email you know? I sent you one last week, just to see if you’d started checking it. Did you get it?”

“I don’t know.” Avery shrugged as if Charles was in the room with him. He took his pocket watch up from where it had been sitting on the side table and tried again to get the hinge realigned. “You know I never look at that thing. I don’t want to have to take the time to turn that machine on every day just to see if I’ve gotten a chain letter from you.”

The line was quiet for a moment. The watch’s spring made a scraping noise and the cover grew even harder to close, so he tossed it back on the table. Avery wondered if he’d been disconnected. It had happened before. Then, Charles came back on.

“Well you’ll probably have to start soon. I don’t think I’ll be able to keep calling you after this.”

Avery stopped, the cold cable on his chin. He let the cord go; it snapped back tight, making the base shake and sending a loud *ding* through the room.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I haven’t told you yet because until last Friday I didn’t know for sure, but I’m going to be having surgery pretty soon. On my throat.”

The chill of the cable seemed to linger on Avery’s own throat. He went to sit down on the couch against the wall and the cord wouldn’t reach. The phone base fell off its table and hung in the air, suspended between the handset and the wall jack. Avery didn’t notice.

“Jesus,” he said. “Jesus Christ Charles. Why didn’t you tell me you were having health problems? What is it? What’s the surgery?”

“Throat cancer. My doctor says that we can probably cut it out, but the problem is, surgery’s going to damage my ability to speak. I’m going to have to get one of those Stephen Hawking boxes. After that, talking on the phone won’t be too easy for me.”

He spoke so calmly about it that Avery wasn’t sure how to react. “Are you sure it’s going to happen? What if they’re able to get it out without hurting your throat?”

“No. Doc says I’m definitely going to lose my voice.” A pause. “Jesus. That hurts a lot more to say than I thought it would.”

The cord connecting the handset to the base suddenly cracked and flew out. The base hit the floor and Avery fell back in surprise. He shouted at the base, running over to jam the cord back into it. The end had been damaged when it came out and wouldn’t go back in place. Several seconds of pounding forced the plug back inside, but when he put the receiver to his ear, Avery could only hear the sound of night birds around his house and traffic on the road. He hit the phone base with the handset a few times, causing both to splinter and chip.

He had another telephone, a wall one, in the kitchen. He went to use it, but when he put the receiver to his ear, he just heard the faint emptiness of an open line and realized he’d forgotten to put the living room phone back in its cradle. After going back to place the

handset where it belonged, he tried the kitchen phone again. Free. He dialed in Charles' number, but only got a busy signal. He hung up and waited, but Charles didn't call back.

Giving up on the phone, Avery went into his bedroom and examined his computer. Like the one in his office, it was also dusty. He got a rag from the bathroom and wiped the screen clean; the white rag came away nearly black. When he had the monitor clean, he powered the machine up. A much slower start up followed, with the loading bar taking twice as long as the one in his office to fill. Avery kept his ears up for the phone ringing.

Just like the office computer, the desktop was the same as it had been for years. Most of the icons on the screen had never been clicked. Gripping the mouse, hating the weird rubber of the roller bar under his middle finger, Avery double clicked the icon for his email program. At first nothing happened. He thought it might be broken or froze up, but finally, after nearly half a minute of warming up, his inbox opened.

Despite never checking his email, Avery's inbox was fairly empty. Only a dozen emails were inside. The top five had Charles' name attached to them. Each email looked foreign, as if written in a language that used the same words as English but attached different meanings to them. He moved his cursor, hovering it over the latest email, thinking he should open it and at least see what Charles had sent him.

As he lingered, still listening for the sound of the telephone ringing, a new email appeared in his inbox. Avery started in surprise, having never actually seen an email arrive in his inbox. Charles' name was at the head of this message too. After poking his cursor at the new message for nearly a minute, he double clicked it open.

The message was brief: “Guess I lost connection with you. I could only get a busy signal when I tried again. If you read this, just click ‘reply’ and email me back. Like I said, I’ll probably be using this more often after my surgery. It’ll be a lot easier this way.”

No signed name at the bottom. The two had communicated by letter before, and they always signed at the bottom “With some type of feeling, Avery.” Here was just a brief note and nothing else.

Outside, two cats yowled and thrashed in the bushes. Avery moved the cursor to the “X” at the top right corner of the screen and closed the program. He sat for several minutes staring at the computer screen, until the screensaver came on. Then, he went into the living room and unplugged his broken telephone, making a mental note to see about getting it replaced.

The next day, Saturday, Avery took his father’s car into downtown and stopped at Radio Shack. Soft jazz music fell down on the boxes of modems, routers, and external hard drives, all of which seemed to shift and shiver as he passed them by. Every part looked foreign-made. He wondered if the computer in his home were nothing more than a conglomeration of exports from every other country in the world but his own. He stepped into the telephone aisle.

Almost all of the phones were newer models, cordless, mostly off-white, some with nubby antennas on the top. There were a few with cords, but none that he liked. They all had the dial keypad on the handset itself. The few that didn’t were decorative and shaped to look like other objects. This one a football, that one a cat’s head, this one a cigarette in an ashtray. That last Avery took a moment to turn the cover image down on the shelf.

“Mr. Mont.”

Avery jumped, turning. Sophia Wensell stood at the end of the aisle, holding a small box in one hand and her cell phone in the other. She smiled and rattled the box.

“New car charger. My old one burnt out or something, I don’t know. Just stopped working. Think you can count this as work related and mark it off for me?”

Avery made an effort to laugh, trying not to appear as out of place as he felt. The young woman came forward, running the knuckles of one hand along the telephone boxes. It wasn’t often Avery saw her outside of the office. He would have expected her to have a child with her. He couldn’t even remember if she had a child, he’d just always assumed she did. She was of the age where, when he was that young, most women had begun to go the family way.

“We’ll say it burnt out on you in a business call,” Avery said. “Made you lose a client to some competitor. Might even get away with saying it almost caused you to crash, and then we’ve got a lawsuit.”

In another aisle, a child made a chortling sound right before something heavy hit the dirty tile floor. A man’s voice hissed soft and low. Sophia continued to poke the boxes with her knuckles.

“Shopping for a phone huh?” She scratched her neck with her cell. “Is it for your office? Are you finally updating that old switchboard to something newer?”

“No, just need a new one for my house. The old one finally bit the dust. Of course, they don’t carry any of the models I like. Look at these.” He picked up the cat phone and rattled the box. The heavy plastic base inside thumped against the bottom, pushing it outward. “It’s a toy. Not a phone at all.”

“You should get one of these then.” Sophia tweezed one of the cordless phones off the shelf, using her elbows instead of her full hands. “It’s plain, and this one’s real cheap too. I think my brother goes with this brand, I don’t know.”

Avery waved and shrugged, not sure of what to say. Sophia waited, expecting him to give some disregarding remark. Her elbows grew sore so she shuffled the box back into place. Avery looked at the box, the image of the hard tower of the phone plastered on the front. He imagined it would be very cold to his cheek if he were to use it.

“Oh,” Sophia said, knocking her cell phone lightly against her head. “I forgot to mention this yesterday at work. We need a new printer.”

Avery started, looking back at her. Sophia continued, not really looking at him but at the phones on the shelf next to him.

“The one we’ve been using doesn’t connect to the new network. It’s out of date. We’re going to have to replace it, and pretty soon. I’ve been looking around through office supply websites to see what would be a good one to get. I can get you a list made up before Monday. So you can compare prices. Would you like me to send you an email with the list when I finish?”

“A new printer, huh?” Avery’s eyes focused on the box in her hand. The picture of a snaky phone charger looked back. He couldn’t even remember when they got the printer they were using now. Probably Adder had picked it out.

He shrugged. “I don’t check my email. Just give it to me at work Monday. You can print it out.” He paused and considered that last statement before laughing. “Or well, I guess you can’t huh?”

Sophia giggled childishly. The charger rattled in its box as if hungry for the phone in her other hand.

When Avery returned to his house, he came back in empty handed. Where the phone used to sit by his recliner was just an empty square free from dust or drink stains. At the foot of the table, he saw a red piece of plastic chipped off the phone's base.

He considered trying to call Charles again but instead diverted into his bedroom and sat down at the computer. He'd forgotten to turn it off after its brief use last night. The bedroom smelled charged and electric. The fan sung loudly in its housing. Avery opened up his email and checked his inbox.

The email from Charles that he had opened last night was now a soft tan color, while the other, unchecked emails glowed white. There was a new email above the one from last night. Charles' name adorned the beginning of this one too. Avery opened it up.

"Forgot to mention. Surgery is next week. Friday. I'll let you know what's what soon as I get out of the hospital. Gracie will probably call you for me."

Again no sign at the bottom. Avery sighed and scratched his chin. His watch was still on the computer desk, still refusing to close. Light from the computer reflected off the glass. The light looked sickly, pale, and Avery shut the monitor off. After a few seconds, he also bent down and unplugged the power cable to the CPU.

The new printer came in that next Friday, delivered by one of the local supply stores. It was a huge thing, though quite small compared to the king cab truck of a machine they'd been using before. Avery stepped out of his office as the delivery boy set it up, Sophia giving orders from behind her desk.

“Not too close to the desk,” she said, shooing the boy, a pale Chinese kid about sixteen, away from her desk. “I don’t want to breathe in toner dust all day. Hurts your lungs.” She noticed Avery stepping in and smiled. “What do you think? Look as good as advertised?”

“Beats me,” he said, shrugging. “I don’t even remember what the picture looked like. Is this the right one?”

“Oh yeah. It’s the right one. Hey,” Sophia said to the boy. “Careful of the cords. Don’t set it down on them. You’ll damage them.”

Avery turned to go back into his office but was stopped short by Sophia.

“We still need to hook up your computer to the main network. You keep putting it off but if you want to print something, you’ll have to let me put your computer in now.”

At the far end of his office, the distorted image of a pair of birds played on the inside of the glass of his window. They looked long and thin, as if someone had tried to wring their necks but only succeeded in stretching them out. Sophia, thinking he hadn’t heard her, got up and followed him into his office.

“Boss? Did you hear me? About the computer?”

“Yes, I heard you.” Avery’s watch sat on the desk, the cover gone. Lent from his pocket covered the smooth glass. When he went to pick it up, the lent tickled his palm. “How long will it take?”

“Just a few minutes. I keep telling you that.”

“Alright. Just let me check my email first.”

A look of surprise crossed Sophia’s face, followed by a smile. She nodded and turned, peeking out the door to watch the Chinese boy’s progress with the printer while Avery

powered up his computer. It seemed to take much longer to load up than before. He tried to get on the internet, wondering if there would be an email from Charles' daughter. He'd forgot to ask what time the surgery was. After getting an error message on his screen, he remembered that he couldn't check his email without access to the internet. And Sophia was running the internet through the new network. He turned to Sophia.

"Forgot. I'm still not plugged in." Sophia looked at him for a moment then lit up in realization, having forgotten as well. Avery laughed. "Get over here. Make this thing up-to-date."

Sophia took the rolling office chair behind the computer like a captain taking over a sinking ship. The knuckles of her hand shone a bright red above the black of the mouse as she clicked it loudly. Windows popped up on the screen, rapidly changing or spreading out of each other into other windows. Avery turned from the computer and looked out onto the balcony. The pair of birds, pigeons, was still there. Now they were off the railing and busily scratching in the dirt, kicking the tight gravel around as if expecting to find worms underneath. One made a peck between the rocks and pulled out an old Milky Way wrapper. The foil reflected the sun into Avery's eyes, making him squint. He thumbed the locks on the window, wondering how cold it was outside.

The phone rang. Sophia jumped up out of her seat and grabbed it before it got to the second ring. "Mont and Adder." Gravel ticked against the window as the birds began to scratch again. Sophia looked at Avery. "It's for you. A woman named Gracie Vinner."

Avery started. Leaning over the desk, he took the phone. On the other end, Charles' daughter sounded faint, as if they were talking with two rooms between them.

“Mr. Mont?” Gracie said, speaking up when he said he couldn’t hear her. “My dad told me to call you when the surgery was through. He just got out.”

“And how is he?” Avery listened hard, trying to pick up the girl’s voice from across the long distance. “How’s his throat?”

“Better.” She stopped and he could hear her collecting herself. “He’s better. God it’s so weird though. To hear him talk. It’s like there’s a hole in him somewhere.”

Avery grunted an affirmative sound. Behind him, Sophia continued to make the mouse click and scratch across the monitor. She opened a Microsoft Word file, one of Avery’s older cases, and, after another few seconds of clicking, the printer in the outer office charged to life and began to print. Sophia smiled.

“You are connected boss.”

“I see,” Avery said into the phone. “How long will he be in recovery?”

“I don’t know. I only just arrived. My plane was delayed cause of snow. I’m going to talk to the doctor now but dad told me to call you and a few others as soon as I knew the results. He thought you’d want to know.”

“I’m glad to hear he’s ok.” Avery picked up his watch and rubbed the hard metal of the back against his neck. “Tell him that. Tell him to get better soon.” After the girl said she would, Avery brought the hard plastic away from his ear, slowly, as if he might have more to say, before resting it on the base. His knuckles rapped the wood of the desk. Sophia waited, expecting him to ask about the computer, and when he didn’t she said, “You want me to go ahead and send you the documents on the other cases that you haven’t covered yet. They’re still on my computer. I can get them to you now with you on the network.”

“Yes,” Avery said. “Yes, please do that Sophia.”

After waiting for more, Sophia stepped back into the outer office, pulling the door half-closed behind her. Avery turned to the window and placed his fingers on the glass. The pigeons on the balcony hopped away from him, but they didn't take off, continuing to tear up tiny bits of trash that had found its way onto the balcony and between the gravel.

Avery thumbed the paint-covered locks holding the window in place. He tweezed them between his fingers and tried to pry them back but the paint held them tight. He returned to his desk and took a letter opener from the top drawer, jamming the metal blade between the lock and the window, pulling on it like a crowbar. The lock groaned loudly for a moment before cracking free, sending up a shower of paint dust. He inhaled it, smelling old construction work. He popped the other one. In the outer office Sophia heard the noise.

“What was that? Did something break?”

“No. Just these birds scratching around outside.”

Avery bent over and tried to lift the heavy window up, but the paint continued to make a seal. He pushed the blade of the letter opener into the groove between the window's bottom and its frame, scrapping the paint away along the groove.

Sophia stepped into the office. At first she didn't see him, bent down behind his desk. When she came around the side of the desk, she stopped, watching him work.

“Boss. What are you doing?”

Avery scrapped the last of the paint off the seal and tried to open the window again. It held for a long time, until finally, his old muscles straining under his shirt, the seal snapped free. The window slid open with a rattle of dry paint being scratched away. Outside, the pigeons took flight, running into each other in their need to escape. A hard wind whipped through the open window, making the paper on his desk fly off into the outer office.

“I’m stepping outside for a few minutes,” Avery said. Bending down, he climbed through the window. His shirt caught on the uneven bottom and tore. The exposed skin shriveled in the cold wind.

Gravel crackled under his feet. Avery made little divets with his toe, kicking some loosened pebbles over the side of the balcony. Sitting down on the scarred railing, he began to pick up rocks and toss them over the side, watching them fall into the long grass and bounce off the brick steps.

Advertisement Space

The pastor failed to recognize Cormac after the initial greeting. Not that he could blame the man for forgetting him; he'd chopped his long hair and spent time on the coast, trying business deals that all washed out. A heavy tan still lingered on his skin, concealing the bumps the sun had given him just above the elbow.

“Cormac Baxley,” he repeated, leaning closer as if the pastor were hard of hearing. “Jeff Baxley’s kid. I always told you ‘enjoyed it’ when I left on Sundays, remember?”

The pastor nodded absently. Pastor Roland, nearing seventy, was not prone to reacting until he'd thought over every word he might say. Telephone conversations with him typically consisted of the other party asking “Are you still there pastor?” over and over, which is why Cormac had decided to visit Roland in person. His memories of the Southern Heights Methodist Church were few and far between, mostly of vacation bible school. He hadn't been in the building for six years, since leaving home after his father's death to go south. The building looked faded, though that was mostly because of the tan paint that had been added over the red brick.

Roland's nods accompanied a tight scrutiny of Cormac's face. “Of course, I remember Jeff. I think I recall his son too. Very short. But you...” He gestured vaguely with his hand. “Sorry son. I just don't see Jeff in you I guess. But I believe you when you say you're his, sure. Glad to have you back in town. You already going to a church? Not going to the Baptists are you?” The preacher laughed to show he was only joking.

“No sir,” Cormac said, “Actually I've been trying to start up a business. A barbershop. I tried to get hired on in Florida. You know, in those shops you see in the outlet malls by the

beach. None of them were taking.” The pastor bent over and lifted up a bag of fertilizer next to a wheelbarrow. This he turned and thrust at Cormac, forcing him to take it. The ropey canvas burnt his palms. They stood outside the pastor’s house, a pointed brick cottage by the church. Two other bags of fertilizer sat on the ground beside the wheelbarrow, an old domed scoop laid across them. Roland took out a knife and cut open the second bag, dumping it into the wheelbarrow.

“That’s a shame,” Roland said, “Glad to hear you’re trying again though. Got to keep at it.” A tight-lipped sneeze interrupted him. Phlegm rimmed the pastor’s nose and he wiped it away, leaving brown dust on his cheek. “Where are you set up at?”

“At the Four Squares strip mall. Where Movie Gallery used to be.”

A moment of silence as Roland shook the bag clean. Then, with a lack of surprise, “Oh really? Well that’s good then.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that actually. I remember that the church had a weekly bulletin with advertisements for local businesses in it. I was hoping you could help me get a spot on that. No one knows about my place yet. I’m not on any main roads.”

Before he’d even finished Roland shook his head. Cormac waited for him to speak but the older man lifted up on the splintered handles of the barrow, pushing it to the far corner of his lawn, beside the road. Cormac followed, still carrying the bag of fertilizer. When they reached the edge of the lawn, Roland went back and got his shovel. He returned to the barrow and took a moment to consider the fertilizer before saying, “It’s all full at the moment. We don’t use a full page like we used to so there isn’t as much room. We try to keep it to just people in the church.”

“I knew that,” Cormac said, “And I know I’ve been away a long time but I’m still registered with the church. That’s got to count for something right?”

“Well why don’t we ever see you on Sundays then?” The old man looked at him and made a noise in his throat. “You did say you’d been in town for a while. Long enough to at least come by for a visit. A little rude to just ask for advertisement at a church you don’t even attend, right?”

Cormac couldn’t think of anything to say. Roland began spreading the fertilizer over the lawn. His first sweep of the shovel ended with some of the mulch in a fan across Cormac’s shoes.

On a good week, Cormac averaged forty customers, mostly people who live close to him. This didn’t provide enough income to cover the shop and an apartment, so he’d made a makeshift living space out of an empty area of the strip mall. For equipment, he had only the basics. Two chairs, a sink for each of them. Nothing for perms, so he rarely got any older woman, who comprised the bulk of his lost customers. The shop had been used for a barbershop before, so the sinks as well as the wall-to-wall mirror were already well worn. The mirror was chipped and missing its corners and the second sink leaked. A large yellow starfish grew across the floor under it that he couldn’t do anything about but cover with a mat. Some customers complained about the smell so he made sure to spray a lot of hairspray around the shop before opening up.

Two days after his meeting with Roland, a woman walked into his shop right after opening, a six year old boy trailing her. She looked ready to collapse; eyes very dark, hair in a stringy pony tail that must have been done up too quickly. Deep wrinkles covered the black

blouse she wore. She was tall enough to brush the top of the door frame. Her abnormal height seemed familiar, and after a few seconds of thought, he remembered seeing the woman before.

“I know you,” he said, smiling to welcome her, “You used to go to church at the Methodist place right? You sat in the front row.”

The woman frowned, squinting at him through puffy eyes. The boy broke away and stood in front of the wall mirror, fingering a large crack. His nail made crystal noises against the glass.

“Who are you?” the woman asked, “Have we met?”

“Only in a roundabout way. I used to go to the same church as you but we never spoke. I only remember you because of how tall you are. It was easy to make you out that way.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Who are you? Nicky.” The woman clapped the side of her leg as if to call a cat. The boy stopped scrapping at the glass and returned to his mother, flicking his thumb nail. “Stop that. You’ll get a splinter.”

“I’m Cormac Baxley. I sat in the back so you probably never saw me.” He laughed. “Sorry, I just realized how creepy this sounds.”

“It’s fine. Can you give him a trim in ten minutes? We forgot to get it done over the weekend and the other shops don’t open until after eight. I actually figured you were closed when I didn’t see any cars out front.”

Cormac withheld mentioning that that was because he didn’t have a car, instead spinning the seat around to put a child’s seat in the chair. Nicky didn’t wait, hopping in only to shrink beneath the back of the chair.

“Can you hop up? I need to put this there so you can sit on it.”

The boy didn't move. His eyes stayed on his reflection in the mirror as he shuffled around. His feet banged the underside of the chair.

“Hey, I need you to hop up ok sport? Let me put this there for you.”

“Nicky,” the woman said without any conviction, “Get up.”

He lifted himself up on the chair's arm rests, giving enough room between his butt and the back for Cormac to slide the seat in. The child size covers were one of the things he'd forgotten to order, so he threw one of the adult green ones over him and just used a safety pin to get the neck tight enough. Nicky bounced, testing the stability of his new seat. When Cormac sprayed his hair, he threw up his hands and rubbed his face vigorously through the cover, shaking, getting cold droplets in Cormac's eyes.

“How do you want it?”

“Short. Off the neck. Above the ears.” The woman slipped by him and sat down into the second chair hard enough to make it spin. “Just hurry.”

“Ok. I'll have him out in five minutes.” He got the 5 inch shears and small comb with the chip where his forefinger went. Nicky's hair was almost silken, slippery so that strands kept falling through his grip. It didn't help that the boy began to move after a few seconds, bouncing against the child seat again. The old wooden seat began to pop.

“Going to need you to stop moving, ok kid?”

The woman looked up from her seat. “Nicky, stop.”

He obeyed, concentrating on his reflection in the mirror. Cormac tried to correct some uneven cuts Nicky's bouncing had caused.

“Mind if I ask,” he said to the woman, “what’s your name again? I don’t remember if I was ever told.”

“Wendy Roland. My dad was the brother of the pastor of that church.”

“Really?” Cormac looked up, “You’re related to Pastor Roland?”

She nodded and shrugged, as if dismissing the question. Nicky began to bounce again. The child’s seat had some spring to it, giving his bouncing more and more energy. Cormac had to force him back down with one hand. However, he was only partly concentrating on the boy’s head of hair. “Why’s your name the same as him though? Aren’t you married?”

“Divorce. Nicky stop moving, let him finish.”

“I never even knew you were married. I guess I never saw your husband.”

“He hated church. Found it boring.” She stretched back and yawned silently. When she stretched out her leg, her high heel clipped a small stand with some flower pots on it, making the whole thing shiver and drum against the wall mirror. “He couldn’t stand the way my uncle preaches, and my uncle couldn’t share one kind word with him in return. I think my divorce was the only one Uncle Roland actually supported.”

“Ow.” Nicky reached a covered hand towards his head. “You’re pulling too tight.”

“Sorry,” Cormac mumbled, not turning, “So do you get along well with your uncle? Are you close?”

“Yeah, I guess. We go eat with him every week. He’s the only member of my family still in this town.”

“I was at his house the other day actually. I’m looking to get into the church bulletin so I can advertise. You can tell my customer count is low, so I’m trying out ways to draw some attention.”

“What are you doing?”

“Well right now getting an ad in the bulletin is all I can think of.”

“No,” she sat up and spoke more anxiously, “What are you doing to his hair?”

Cormac looked at her then at Nicky. The boy’s hair was jagged and uneven, uncut and long in some places, trimmed short enough to see some of the scalp in other. As if sensing their eyes on him, Nicky reached up and patted his head with his hands.

“What happened?” he said, “What’s wrong? Mama, what’s wrong?”

“Oh God. This is great. This is so great.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry,” Cormac said, starting to put down his scissor but then changing his mind and turning back to start cutting again. “I’ll straighten it out ok? Jesus I’m sorry. Just give me two minutes and I’ll straighten it.”

“You’re done.” She rose, stumbling on the plastic mat under the chair as she did.

“Nicky get up. We’re going.”

The boy hopped up, still rubbing his head. He started to walk out with the hair cover on, and when he tried to remove the pin he couldn’t reach it. Cormac moved to help him, delaying them to apologize again.

“I’m sorry. It was his bouncing. He kept jumping on the seat, probably because it’s so springy. I mean, it’s real old and all. Just give me a minute and I can straighten it out for you.”

Wendy didn’t stop to listen. She got to the door, propped it open, and snapped her fingers for her son to follow. He ran outside, shaking his shirt collar, picking at stray pieces of hair stuck in his clothing. Cormac followed them out. The sun reflected off the gray

asphalt right in his face, blinding him so that he could only see Wendy's blouse retreating towards the silhouette of her car.

"Listen," he said, "If you want you can bring him back by after school. I'll work this out free of charge. Believe me this doesn't normally happen. I'm very careful, especially with kids. I'm sorry."

Two car doors slammed. Cormac retreated off the asphalt onto the stoop to get out of her way as Wendy gunned backwards and swerved out of the lot onto the main road. When her car took off down the road, she slipped onto the shoulder for a few seconds, sending up whirled plumes of dirt and grass that blocked Cormac's vision. But he still heard the tires ripping against the pavement, growing fainter and softer until finally they were gone.

The following Tuesday, he went to Moore's clothing store and bought a collared button up and a pair of khaki pants. The collar was too stiff and high, making him feel trapped in a cotton neck brace. He still put the shirt on and tucked it into the khakis Sunday morning, following the dress code his mother gave him in childhood. The store had no belts his size, so he went without.

The parking lot in front of the church filled up long before Cormac arrived. A side lot, further away from the entrance, across a muddy grass strip, still had some empty slots under a dying oak. As soon as he put the car in Park, an acorn bounced off the roof. He saw it, a brown dome, big as a nickel, roll down the windshield and catch on the wipers. When he got out, he took a second to toss the stray nut into the empty grass.

Roland stood outside the doors to the sanctuary, greeting people. Solemnly, he shook the hand of every woman and patted the shoulder of every man, sometimes nodding. The open door behind him created a vacuum sucking out the air of the church. The force of the wind kept the pastor's hair lashing out. The interior smelled heavy with vanilla candles.

When Cormac made it up to the pastor, he offered his hand. Roland shook without seeming to recognize him.

"Hello again Pastor," Cormac said, then jokingly, "Remember me?"

"Of course, of course," Roland said, "Surprise to see you on my doorstep."

"Yeah, after I talked with you last time, I decided I might drop in and see how things have changed. But I guess you've been holding down the fort all these years huh?"

"The bulletins are on that table." Roland turned and gestured with his head towards a mahogany side table in the entrance hall. "Help yourself if you want. But I'm afraid you won't find much space in them."

Cormac felt snubbed and Roland said no more to him, ending the exchange by turning to the woman behind him. Inside the sanctuary, Cormac ignored the bulletins and tried to find a seat at the back but all the back pews were filled up. None of the faces looked familiar. Most were young to the point of pimples. Several children crouched over hand held games; all of them had short hair, the ends flat and raw from recent trimmings. He stood alone in the middle aisle, looking for someone he recognized.

At the front of the church, a doorway into the stairwell that led downstairs to the kitchen and the Sunday school rooms opened up. Wendy stepped up into the church, having to duck slightly to go under the doorframe. She looked even taller today, rising above the crucifix at the altar. Beside her, her son kept stepping on the backs of her high heels. He wore

a stiff rimmed fedora along with a dress shirt and tie that hung down below his belt. This piece seemed to bother him the most as he kept flapping it against his stomach. Wendy grabbed Nicky by the shoulder and twisted him in front of her, directing him down onto the second pew. Cormac shuffled around the back of the church, scuffing a few heads with his elbow, to come up beside her.

Wendy had her head against the pew in front of her, her hair making a blind around her eyes. Nicky placed a note book in his lap. He took a broken pencil from the pew ahead of him and started drawing with it.

“Excuse me,” Cormac tapped her shoulder. She didn’t raise her head but she did pull back her hair and squint at him through the gap. “It’s Cormac. The guy from the barbershop.”

He expected some hostility, but she surprised him by simply nodding wordlessly. Thrown off, he stammered for something to say and asked, “Mind if I sit with you?”

“Huh.” The noise wasn’t really an affirmative or a denial, but she rose up and let him squeeze by. When he passed by Nicky snagged one of his belt loops and yanked on it.

“You don’t have a belt.” Turning, he prodded his mother with the broken pencil. “He’s not wearing a belt. I told you I didn’t need a belt.”

She’d returned her head to the front pew. Cormac also noticed that both her and her son’s clothing was covered in deep wrinkles and ridges, just like the last time he saw them. When his mother didn’t answer, Nicky poked her again for a response. Cormac decided to come to her rescue.

“I couldn’t find one to wear,” he said, “The store didn’t have any in my size. I would have put on one if I could. You’re dressed pretty sharp though. What’s the occasion?”

“Cause you cut my hair wrong.”

Cormac blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Yeah,” Nicky nodded, bouncing in his seat, “cause my hair’s all messed up, Mom wanted me to wear this hat. She said I couldn’t wear a nice hat and not wear nice clothes to go with it. It’s a disguise.”

Cormac felt his cheeks warm. A large man squeezed into the pew on the opposite side, sitting close enough to Cormac that his elbow kept bumping him in the back. The sensation of being trapped made him anxious to move.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said to Nicky and then to his mother, “I really am. I don’t know what happened. If you haven’t gone to see someone else about it, I could still take him in anytime and straighten it out for you.”

“Nicky, stop bouncing.” Wendy said from under her arm. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Up close, he could see they were darker than he had originally thought. When she looked at him, he wondered if she could even see him clearly. “Listen, it’s no offense to you. I know you didn’t mean to do that. But could you just let it go? Whenever I find time to I’ll take him to get it straightened out. Otherwise, it’ll grow back.”

“But I could run by the shop right after this. I could make it a special case.”

“Please,” she held up her hand to quiet him. A deep throated hum ran over the room as the first note was played on the organ. The instrument slowly built up into an almost recognizable hymn, tolling out notes as members of the choir leaked into the loft above the altar. More people were coming in, making it harder to hear, forcing them to speak louder.

“I work at the school,” Wendy continued, “so I don’t have a lot of free time to take him to get his hair cut. That’s why we were in such a rush last week. But please, just let it go. It was a one time thing and you don’t have to keep apologizing for it. I’ll fix it.”

“I understand, but I could...” He didn’t know what he could do but at the moment he felt like promising anything. Part of it was the fact that this woman knew Roland so well and could put in a good word for him. But mostly, it was just the sense of failure. He wanted to do anything to get rid of that feeling.

Wendy shook her head and rose.

“I need some water. Nicky stay here.”

It took a few moments to squeeze out into the aisle. She passed by the organist, who drummed along the gray keys with only one hand, towards the door she’d come in through.

Cormac looked at Nicky, who’d returned to bouncing. “I’ve really made your mom angry huh?”

“Nah, she’s tired from school. She’s always like this at the beginning of the year.”

“Still.” He stopped and looked up. A heavy noise came from behind the door Wendy had just walked through. The organist quit patting the keys and looked first at the door Wendy had gone through and then into the congregation, his old cloudy eyes searching the various faces for confirmation of what he’d just heard. Cormac rose from his seat. Nicky stopped bouncing and looked up at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Stay here.”

He jostled by the boy and the other people on the pew, scuffing an old man’s knees on his way out. The senior mumbled some explicative after him. The organist had risen from his seat, but he moved slowly, one arm balancing him against the instrument, the other curled up against his side, the apparent aftermath of a stroke. Cormac beat him to the stairwell door.

He almost fell into the well when he put his foot down on one of Wendy's red high heels. She was sprawled out in front of him on the steps, a hand holding onto the bottom of the stair rail. When he bent down to help her up, he saw that she'd chipped off three of the nails on that hand, leaving their ends sharp and white.

It took a minute to get her back to her feet. She wasn't unconscious, but she still moved slow and uneasily. Before she could stand back up, the door opened again and Roland came inside. Even worried, he took a moment to speak.

"What happened? Did she fall?"

"Yeah, I think so. I heard her fall right after she came in. So did he," Cormac pointed at the organist, shaking in the doorframe behind them.

Roland shook his head, making a sucking noise between his teeth.

"That drop off," he said, "That drop off right when you step in. I knew it would do this someday. Someone had to trip from it eventually. Is she bleeding? Wendy, are you hurt?"

More coherent, she looked at him and shook her head. She had one arm around Cormac, her nails gripping the back of his shirt and pinching his skin. When she'd steadied a little more, she let go, turning to look at him, frowning as if she couldn't remember him.

"Sorry," he said.

"Stop. Stop saying that." She looked at Roland. "I'm ok. I'm just tired is all and I forgot about the step."

"I know hun. Want me to help you back to your seat?"

"I can manage."

She picked up her shoe that had come off and slipped out of the stair well. Her wrinkled red dress swayed down the aisle and returned to where she'd been before. Nicky's bouncing head, his fedora rising just above the pew in front of him, stopped moving when she sat down. Cormac turned to Roland, who was staring at the step down below the door which had caused this problem in the first place. As if aware of being looked at, the pastor turned around and smiled.

"Well, that was one way to start a service. Did you get a bulletin? Take a look at the center page?"

"No sir. I took your word for it not having as much room as I remember."

Roland nodded. "Yes, we had to cut back I'm afraid. Just not as much room as there used to be. There's no room for you, sorry to say. But if you'd like to stay for church either way, you're more than welcome."

"Thank you pastor," Cormac said, "I think I will. I'm just going to go grab some water first. The kitchen is still downstairs, in the back right?"

"Yep." In the sanctuary, the organ roared back to life, this time accompanied by the piano, the signal for the start of service. The congregation went quiet. Their sudden silence seemed to leave the air standing still. "Right at the back. Can't miss it. Hope to see you after service."

He turned and walked out of the well, stepping into the music of the sanctuary. When the old man had gone, Cormac walked down the stairs and passed into the church's cavernous kitchen. His footsteps echoed, just audible over the music. The choir began to sing, some song he thought he might remember if he could hear it better. But instead of listening,

he made his way to the back door of the church and walked out, having to pull the door shut behind him before he left.

Critical Habitat

At the end of the 70s, Marcia Newman's father, Alexander Newman, still owned timber land in North Carolina. It wasn't much, amounting to a blue green comma of trees north of Henderson on the map. Bits and pieces had been taken by the government or lost to low income. He'd bought too close to the Kerr Reservoir so there were swampy patches on the east side where nothing but duck weed grew. Despite its size, it was all Alexander had. He'd moved his family there shortly after his wife passed away, working the timber full time.

Marcia enjoyed the land only because it was not the city. The absence of animal noise in the city kept her awake at night, the sound of cars scaring her more than the chattering of bobcats.

She came home on holidays, taking the time off to practice with her equipment. She was studying to be a land surveyor. She sat in her father's rocking chair, pulled up to the oak coffee table on which a variety of metal parts lay on a purple beach towel. In the center of the towel was her theodolite, a land surveyor's telescope-like instrument. Marcia used tiny tools to remove the pieces, wiping them all with an oiled rag, making them gleam. Her hands shook viciously, leaving long, winding skid marks on her fingers from the oil. The door to the patio was open, letting in smoldering air and the hammering of a woodpecker.

At the back of the house, metal groaned as her brother, Timothy, got out of bed. Timothy had been struck by a car in the third grade, when they still lived in the city. His lower spine was nothing but shrapnel and he could not walk. She tracked his progress through the house by sound, able to hear him wheel into the bathroom, the metal frame of his

chair gritting loudly as he pushed himself onto the toilet. A flush, then he squeaked down the hallway to the den.

Marcia held up the scope of the theodolite and looked through it. The lens was out for cleaning, but she aimed at the glass figurines of birds on the mantel, almost invisible in the shade of the chimney. She sighted a hummingbird and pretended to shoot it. The woodpecker stopped ratcheting.

Timothy wheeled himself beside her. “Why’d you break your telescope up?” he asked, “It won’t work right now will it?”

“No. I know how to put it back together so it’ll still be precise.” Marcia picked up one of the lens to lay it back in but it slipped through her shaking fingers. She squeezed her thighs together, catching it in her lap. It was very warm against her skin.

“How will you know if it’s right or not?”

“Cause I know Dad’s land well enough without one I can make sure my measurements are accurate.”

Timothy continued watching her as she twisted infinitely small screws into holes the size of periods. Wheeling back, he worked his way into the kitchen. “Did you cook any breakfast?” His wheel bounced off the hardwood and began to grind against the linoleum. “I heard you banging around in here at six. You know some of us sleep in?”

“I didn’t cook you anything.”

“Thanks,” Tim said.

The front door opened. Marcia’s father and a blast of hot, wet summer air pushed in. His hairline was rapidly receding, and the pale skin of his head was drenched in sweat. Taking a rag off an antique hat rack with lion’s feet for legs and an eagle head at the top,

Alexander swept his scalp. His eyes, red with restlessness, peered beneath the edge of the sopping rag.

“Marcia,” he said, “Don’t put that thing on the coffee table. The metal could scratch it up and that oil gets everywhere.”

“I’ve got it covered.” She lifted the edge of the frayed beach towel. “I do this on my desk at the dorm all the time and it never gets scratched.”

“That’s fine for a beat up desk at school but not for a table I had to pay out of pocket for. Take it off.”

She kept twisting one of the wire-thin screws into place. Alexander watched her the whole time, his breathing the rough sound of wind through a burlap sack. When she had the screw tight, Marcia gathered the towel around the theodolite and lifted it up. Metallic twinklings like broken wind chimes came muffled from the towel. She walked through the kitchen, towards the back porch. Timothy was holding himself up in his chair, trying to put a piece of bread into the far side of the toaster. The bread kept hitting the side, the crust starting to fall to pieces.

Outside, the back porch of the house looked over the land her father had spent his wife’s life insurance on. Trees like Roman pillars marched out towards the hills on the left, and down towards the swamp of the reservoir on the right. She’d measured all of this land before, in her first year at college, going around with her pawn shop equipment. Her new tripod, supplied by one of her teachers, sat under the eave of the roof. She spread out the towel on the patio table, rearranging the pieces by size.

The door to the kitchen was still open so she clearly heard metal squeal as Timothy knocked the toaster off the counter.

“Tim, you okay in there?” Alexander said from the other side of the house. The toaster hung between the silverware drawer and the one that held the pot rags, suspended by its short black wire. Timothy removed his toast from the rusty slots before setting the toaster back up. “I’m fine,” he said, dusting crumbs off his pants.

Marcia saw a bird flying from one tree to another, poking its beak at the branches each time it stopped. She held up the theodolite to look through but the bird flew away.

Her father returned, sitting down beside Timothy, spreading an aged map on the table. Timothy leaned forward, a few bread crumbs falling on the map.

“What are you looking at?”

“Remember Barry Phillips who owns the land next to us?” Alexander pointed at a green dot on the map. Timothy chewed. “He’s lost his land.”

“Why?”

“Damn birds. Marcia, if that junk keeps making that racket I’m going to break it. Understand?”

Marcia had been tightening an adjuster into place, the knob clicking as it was screwed back in. The sound echoed loudly in the quiet morning emptiness of those hills.

“I have to get it back in Dad. Otherwise what good is it?”

“Well you shouldn’t have torn the damn thing apart in the first place. You aren’t a mechanic are you? All you do is point that thing at a tree and tell the one who owns the land not to build past it.”

“Jesus Christ Dad, do you want to add how much of a whore I am while you’re at it?”

Alexander rose, hovering over the map, his knuckles planted into the table. Marcia kept twisting until it tightened.

“Happy?”

Instead of answering, Alexander pointed at the map again, turning back to his son.

“Birds,” he continued, “Some endangered species was found in a tree on his land, so the government declared it all a national preserve. Almost got some of our land too.”

“What kind of bird? Given this area...” Timothy thought for a moment, lifting himself to straighten his pants, “I’d say either a red woodpecker or some kind of chickadee.”

Alexander looked at his son as if his words had not reached him.

“Woodpecker,” Alexander said, “Yeah some kind of woodpecker. God knows they’re all over these hills.”

“Not if it’s the one I’m thinking of.” Timothy reached for his drink, almost knocking it over. “It’s a red... a red something woodpecker. There aren’t that many around anymore.”

“Well there’ll be even less if I find them around here,” Alexander started folding up the map, forgetting which way it went. Marcia, watching them out of the corner of her eye, slipped on her hold of the screwdriver in her hand and dropped one of the screws. It struck the wood of the patio. Bending, she couldn’t see it. It must have fallen through the cracks.

“Damn it.” She searched, patting the floor, hoping it had just rolled under her chair.

“I’m going down to the line between my land and Phillip’s,” Alexander continued, the map folded into a lumpy rectangle in his hands. “See if any of those birds have nests in the trees on the border. If they have, I’m going to shoot them and bury them, in case the government decides to check my land next.”

Timothy choked on his milk for a moment, backing from the table to follow his Dad across the kitchen.

“You can’t. They’re endangered species Dad. It’s against the law.”

“Hey Dad,” Marcia called, standing, hitting her head on the patio table. “Ow, shit.”

“It’ll be worse if there are any of them on my land. Besides, they can just breed the ones on Phillip’s land anyway.”

“Dad it doesn’t work that way.”

“Jesus, Dad, wait,” Marcia was trying to scoot out from under the table, rubbing her head. Her father was already out of the kitchen. She followed him but Timothy backed up into her, knocking her into the counter. In the living room, her father took his hunting rifle out of the umbrella holder and walked out, slamming the door shut behind him. Marcia thought to call for him again but knew he wouldn’t hear her through the thick door.

“Hey,” Timothy said, slapping her on the arm. “Mind not standing on my wheel?”

She hadn’t notice her shoe was caught between his spokes. It took a bit of wiggling to pull it out, and the spokes were crooked after. “Sorry,” she said. “Hey, do you know if Dad has any screws around the house? Tiny ones I can use?”

“No, why? Is that what you were shouting about?”

“Forget it.”

Marcia returned to the patio and folded up the towel, using a piece of string to tie it in a tight bundle around the instrument inside. She had spare parts but had left them back at the dorm.

Alexander was gone for the rest of the morning. The walk to the boundary between his and the Phillips land was a good thirty minutes (he left the car behind to save on gas) and walking from one end of the border to the other would take several hours. The heat settled on the house, thickest in the kitchen as the only AC came from three window units, one in the living room, and one in each of the two bedrooms.

Marcia had taken her father's sports rifle out of his gun cabinet and was playing with the scope. The delicate work of slowly turning the small dials, able to see the effect in the lens, calmed her.

Timothy's chair creaked as he wheeled himself onto the patio. The rubber hummed against the wood. He had a National Geographic magazine in his lap, the cover page torn on the top corner, revealing part of a cat's ear. Pulling up to his sister, he opened the magazine to a picture of a white and black speckled bird perched on a tree trunk, a bug in its beak.

"Here's the bird Dad was talking about," Timothy said. "A red cockaded woodpecker. They live mainly in pine forests. I think they've died out up north, so the south's the only place you'll find them."

"It's black and white," Marcia said. "Why's it called the red woodpecker?"

"Cause of this red streak it has on the side of its head. There's not a picture of it or I'd show you."

"Lot of fuss to make over a woodpecker." Marcia turned back to the scope. She'd already realigned it and sighted several trees, two squirrels, and a pine cone. When each came dead center in the scope, her hands felt so steady. Bored, she laid the gun on the table and took the magazine from her brother's lap.

“That idiot better not shoot any if he finds them,” Timothy said, wheeling up to the patio railing and leaning his chin against it.

“Why? What’s the big deal about them?”

“They’re already dead up north. What’ll happen if we kill them down here too?”

“They’ll be extinct? So what? It’s a bird Tim. Would you rather Dad lose his land?”

Timothy didn’t respond. He looked at the trees, as if expecting one of them to contain the bird causing so much trouble. Several bluebirds were gossiping on a limb hanging over the side of the house, but nothing else.

Looking over the picture of the woodpecker, Marcia remembered the sound she’d heard that morning.

“I think I heard a woodpecker near here, right before you got up.”

Timothy lifted his chin off the railing.

“Really? Where at?”

“That way.” She pointed to the left of the patio, towards the hills. “Knocking on wood. Course what else would it be doing?”

Timothy looked up towards the hills. Turning himself around, getting caught against one of the patio chairs for a moment, he snatched his magazine back. A small, triangular piece of the corner stayed in Marcia’s hand.

“Hey! Just ask for it Tim.”

“Come on. Let’s go see if we can find it.” He was already rolling down the ramp his father had built on the side of the patio, rubber wheels gliding down into the grass with a scratching sound. “If we see one, we may be able to scare it off so Dad doesn’t have to shoot it.”

Marcia watched him go for a moment before grabbing the rifle and jogging to catch up. She slung the rifle over her shoulder, resting the hard metal against the curve of her neck. “It’s probably just a regular woodpecker. I doubt one from Mr. Phillips’ land would fly up this far.”

Timothy stopped when she got alongside him.

“Why are you bringing the gun?”

“You said you wanted to scare it. How else will we scare it off?”

“I don’t want to kill it Marcia.”

“We won’t. You want to throw rocks at it? This’ll scare it off even if it’s built a nest. I think.”

Timothy stared at her for a moment, long enough for Marcia to think he would make her take the gun back. She was struck by how much taller she was than him. She hadn’t thought about it before, but his legs were short, as if they’d been pushed together like an accordion. Even on his feet he would have been shorter than her.

“Yeah,” Timothy said. “Guess we will need something to scare it with.”

After five minutes of walking, Timothy began to lag behind. His pushing on the wheels became strained. Dark moisture spread down his shirt towards his belly. Marcia handed him the rifle and started pushing. The butt of the gun clicked against the chair’s arm rest.

They were half way up a small foothill, the trees thinned out in that spot, when Marcia heard the knocking again, only closer.

“Hear that?” Timothy asked, twisting his torso around to try and spot the source.

“Of course I do. Jesus, those things are real loud.”

“Go that way,” Timothy pointed left with the gun. “I think it’s over there.”

Instead of going, they waited, both listening. Other noises crowded in. Chirping and shrieking birds, pine cones hitting the hard earth, wind. Then it came back, steady and rhythmic, very close by. Marcia dug her feet into the ground and pushed the rest of the way up the hill.

At the top, they listened again. Then both jumped as they heard a very distant but distinct crack of a rifle. The sound rolled up the hills to them, then fell back from the higher hillsides, washing down through the trees. Timothy raised the gun and hit it against his arm rests.

“Damn it. I hope he missed. Dad never takes the time to think for a-”

“Shut up. Look over there.”

Marcia pointed across the hill to a tall pine. The branches hung low, shrouded in dirty green needles, but a nest was held in plain view about mid way up. A black head peaked out of the top of the nest, long, sharp peak twitching left and right to scan the horizon.

“I think that’s one,” Marcia said, “I think that’s one of them.”

“I can’t tell. All I can see is the head. Can you see anything else?”

Marcia reached down and began to lift the gun off Timothy’s lap. Feeling the rifle moving, he grabbed it.

“Remember,” he said, “just scare it. It’s probably just a regular woodpecker like you said anyway. So just scare it.”

“I know.”

“Aim for the branch, not the bird. If you hit that branch, it’ll probably fly off.”

“I know Tim.”

“What if there are eggs in the nest though? Dang I didn’t think about that. Maybe we should wait.”

“Tim, if we don’t scare it now, Dad’ll shoot it anyway.”

Timothy let the gun go.

Taking the rifle up against her shoulder, Marcia looked through the scope. The aroma of oil rose up from her hands. She could see the bobbing head of the bird as if it were on her shoulder. Her hands trembled.

She fired, hitting both nest and bird. The nest disintegrated into a cloud of debris. The bird’s body hit the ground quietly, among the roots of the tree. The report of the gun followed the one of their father.

Neither of them said anything. Timothy rolled under the bough of the tree. He leaned over, holding himself up on his arms making them strain.

“Is it one of them?”

Timothy relaxed back in his seat, shaking his head.

“It’s red. Red all over. It’s a regular woodpecker.”

Marcia walked over. There wasn’t much blood. Just a red woodpecker, one wing half unfolded, white feathers underneath. She laid the gun in her brother’s lap, grabbing the handle of his chair and wheeling him back around. Timothy held the gun, trying to stop it from hitting against the arm rests.

When they were half way down the hill, she apologized.

Updating Payroll

Theodore Soles visited his mother on most Sunday afternoons at the Coving Nursing Home. Eliza Soles, seventy four, could never remember when her son came to see her, but if he missed a Sunday, she would tell all the nurses that her boy was starting to forget about her.

Eliza's roommate, Margaret Thorn, a bedridden woman with full, beautiful hair rarely moved. She was connected to oxygen equipment that let out brief gasps every once in a while. Theodore sat upon his mother's red walker. The oxygen machine hissed.

"Your sister came by to see me you know? She did, she did," Eliza said, pressing her hand against her son's knee. "She came by yesterday. Brought me that dog over there, see it? Pretty isn't he?" She pointed at a blue and red tie dye dog sitting on the TV set. The dog had been there eight months, the fabric on top of its head stringy and thin, rubbed raw by Eliza. Theodore nodded.

"I know mom. It's a nice dog. You know it's been here a while though, right? Lissie sent it to you a few months back. Remember?"

His sister, Elizabeth, was somewhere in California, working in realty last he'd heard. She didn't call or email. The dog had been mailed to the nursing home with no letter or card attached. Margaret's machine hissed and Theodore popped his knuckles. The old woman grumbled and made an effort to roll over.

"I'll go home and cook for her pretty soon," Eliza said. "Yes I think I'll go back home and fix your sister something good to eat. She doesn't get any good food with that boyfriend of hers does she? Are you still taking care of the house, Theodore? It's still in good shape isn't it?"

"Yes Mom. I'm still taking care of it."

Eliza smiled. Her teeth white and gleaming, better than his own. She patted his knee vigorously.

“Good boy. That’s my boy. You always were mine. Not your mean old dad’s. You were my boy. Your dad got your sister and I got you.”

“Come on, Mom, dad wasn’t mean.” Theodore looked at his watch. He’d been there ten minutes. Margaret’s machine had hissed barely five times. “He was just strict. You know that.”

“He bought us that house forty years ago, you know?” Eliza nodded to herself. “Forty years ago. You know I didn’t want to move there either? I said the schools were bad. But he bought it anyway. Said it didn’t matter about the schools. But it was a good house. You’re still keeping it clean, aren’t you?”

“It’s still clean Mom. Mom, you know no one lives in that house any more don’t you?” Theodore leaned forward. His mother’s eyes wandered, going to his before flitting off to the dog, then to the window, then her own hands. “I can’t live there. I’ve got a house. And Lissie’s out west somewhere. You remember that don’t you?”

“It’s a good house,” she repeated. “When I go back, you and your sister will come help me clean it. I’ll bet it’s got just as much dust...” She patted his knee, her hand shaking so that his pants leg trembled. “But we’ll get it cleaned up. Your sister can clean good, when she tries.”

Theodore laid a hand on his mother’s, trying to steady it. It felt like old government papers. “You live here now. We aren’t going back to the house remember? You live here with Miss Thorn, right?” He pointed at the old woman, who was licking her lips.

Eliza looked at Miss Thorn then, after a few seconds, frowned. “I do?” she asked, shaking her head for a moment. “Why, for how long? I’m only staying over here the night, aren’t I?”

“No. You live here now.” Theodore jumped at the oxygen machine’s kick. “I’m taking care of the house but you live here. Ok? Do you remember now?”

She shook her head, looking around the room emptily. She made little noises, “Well” and “That” but didn’t say anything else for a long time. Theodore’s phone vibrated in his pocket, but he ignored it. His mother clutched his hand tightly and he noticed how well kept her fingernails were. They looked like the edge of a penny, flat and tan.

Eliza’s eyes grew wet. “I ain’t been here that long have I?”

“Sixteen months Mom. You’ve been here sixteen months.” He patted her hand gently, afraid the simple touch would bruise her. “Miss Thorn’s been here the whole time. You and her are roommates.”

She shook her head. “No. This isn’t my house.” After that she wouldn’t say anything else. Her eyes lit around the room, and she wouldn’t speak. Theodore had asked the nurses before about how his mother acted when he left. Fifteen minutes after he left, she’d be talking the head off whoever came by about how her son loved to spend time with her. Eventually she’d forget when he’d come by.

Walking back to his car, Theodore checked his phone. The last call wasn’t from the city as he’d suspected but from Malcolm Timbers. He redialed, hoping Malcolm would still be by the phone. As he waited for the phone, he unlocked his car and sat down. The sun visor hit him on the ear.

Theodore pushed up the visor and rubbed the spot where it clocked him. “Hello?” came after the fourth ring.

“Malcolm? Hey sorry I missed your call. I was visiting Mom.”

“Oh yeah, Sunday. I forgot about that. My mistake. I was calling to see if you’d heard anymore about the changes in payroll the board was talking about.”

Theodore shook his head silently. He worked for the city, as a bookkeeper, one of his tasks being to keep up with the payroll for city employees. This included Malcolm, who was the head of Parks and Recreation. The mayor and the board had been talking about an across the board cut, to save jobs. After the highway that passed through town was expanded and moved outside the city limits about a decade back, Covington had been in a depression. The summer crowd no longer brought their dollars through downtown on the way to the beach. The city had already been hit with a pay cut before, one that luckily came after Theodore’s dad passed away. He didn’t know how he would have managed the funeral if his father had lived two more years. His sister had fled the state by then without even a cell number to call, so there’d been no help from her. She didn’t even show up for the funeral.

“Still no word. You know how the mayor is. He puts this stuff off till the last minute, then surprises us with it.” He turned the key and heard a dry click. Cold air filled the car, making him wheeze. When he tried the key again, the engine fired.

“I know. It’s starting to show in our employment record too. I can’t afford to pay the P and R guys like I used to. I’m having to hire cheaper, and it’s starting to show. But anyway, how’s your mom? She doing any better?”

“She’s the same. She’s fine until she brings the house up. Then she shuts up. You can’t talk to her about the old wreck.” He groaned, relaxing back into the stiff seat. “Don’t know why I always try either. She’ll never really remember.”

“You ought to sell that house.”

“I tried. No one bought it. You can’t sell anything anymore, not with the way the town is.” As he was backing out, Theodore clipped the curb, jolting the car. He groaned, glanced in the mirror before driving off.

The house that Theodore’s mother couldn’t let go of was a blue wood dwarf back in what would be called the suburbs in a larger city. Here it was just a few neighborhoods of cheap houses with broken tricycles and tiny trees rising out front. The Soles house was at the end of its road, Brooklyn Street, adjacent to what used to be the Little League field before they moved the official field up above the school.

Theodore parked his Honda half on the dirt curb, half in the street. The mail box stuck out at an angle a few feet ahead of him, canted over the road, the red flag on the side hanging down. He tried to lift it up but the screw holding it in was loose and it swung back down again.

His footsteps echoed out from under the porch when he walked up the steps, coming back hollow and heavy. A dozen dirt dauber nests and two tennis ball size wasp nests hung under the eaves of the porch, all thankfully vacated because of the cold weather. He checked his watch, about one thirty. He eyed the old rocking chairs but didn’t sit in them, afraid his weight would break them.

After about ten minutes of puffing into his hands, Theodore watched a shaking Ford pickup pull up on the other side of the mail box. The Ford had a long silver line down the side where it had been keyed and one of the hubs was solid black missing the dirty wheel cover of the others.

The Ford switched off with a bang and Avery Mendol stepped out, stumbling a little from the height of the cab. Avery was a short sixteen year old, a little kid with long spry hair that stuck up everywhere as if weightless. He maneuvered out of the monstrous Ford like a monkey swinging on vines.

“Hey Mr. Soles,” he shouted, his voice coming back through the weeds. “Damn it’s cold. Sorry I made you wait out here. Had to tease the truck to get her to crank.”

Avery was the boy Theodore paid in the summer to mow the lawn, as well as some odd jobs in winter. Theodore pointed up under the eaves, gesturing at the nests. “Good thing for the weather though. These bad boys don’t like it.”

Avery stepped up on to the porch, his footsteps hardly making a whisper. He had on shoes too big for him with laces that cracked the floor when he walked. He examined all the nests then looked at the warped floor of the porch, lifting his feet.

“Worst ones are underneath here probably.” Avery scratched his palms. “I know I saw quite a few of them flying around towards the end of summer. Made me nervous cutting close to the house.”

Theodore reached up and scratched at a lower dirt dauber nest. It felt like paper mache. The dried mud crumbled, exposing an empty hole. “Think you can clean them out? Should be safe to do it now, with the cold. Main thing I’m worried about is wasps and they shouldn’t be around now right?”

“No clue, Mr. Soles. I don’t know what bugs do in the winter. But I can go around and knock them down for you. That way they don’t have some place to come back to. You going to try and sell it again in the spring?”

Theodore said nothing. Avery lifted his foot and stomped the floor twice, hard.

“Well I’ll tell you what Mr. Soles,” Avery said, hitching up his pants so high they pushed up past his belly button. “I can come by and knock everything down on the outside. That’s no problem. Say ten dollars. But the stuff under the porch and under the house--” Avery shrugged. “I don’t want to get down under there and find out that wasps just, I don’t know, hibernate and then they get in my face. So for the stuff under the house, that’ll be a little more expensive.”

Theodore leaned against the porch railing. It groaned loudly so he backed away, just resting his hand on it. He considered the money in his pocket, the money in the bank.

“I’ll pay you... forty for the whole thing. Top to bottom. How’s that?”

Across the road a truck pulled up to the baseball field, towing a trailer behind it. A city truck, yellow bubble lights on the top.

“Fifty’ll work. I’ll do it for fifty, all total.” Avery said, nodding as if Theodore had agreed. “By the way, I wanted to go ahead and ask you about this spring. Guess you’ll want me to come by like I always do, right? Spruce up the house.”

Theodore kept his eyes on the truck at the field. It was definitely a city truck. A man stepped out that he thought was Stephen Cane, one of the newer city workers in Parks and Recreation. “What about it?”

“Well my mom says you guys are having payroll cuts again. I just wanted to go ahead and ask, if that does happen, will you still be able to pay me for the usual spring cleaning?”

Avery still had his pants hitched up to his belly. He was leaning against the blue wood of the house, footprints in the dust on the porch all around him, Avery's tiny feet and Theodore's massive ones.

"No, I probably won't be able to if we get a cut in pay. It's hard enough now as it is."

"That's a shame. But you've got to do what you've got to do to make it I guess." He patted the side of the house and smiled. "At least she won't have any wasps nesting on her come spring right? That should mean something."

Avery lifted a hand in salute and walked back to his truck, revving several times before driving off. Theodore flicked at a dirt dauber nest built on the side of one of the poles holding up the porch. He shook his jacket tight around him and walked across the street to the baseball field.

Behind the city truck Stephen Cane was pushing a riding lawnmower off a trailer. Other tools sat in the trailer. A weedwacker, a few different sized garden shears with bright red grips, a hole digger with the handles different lengths, one brown and the other yellow. Stephen didn't hear him approaching so Theodore, still a few feet from the truck, said loudly, "Hey Stephen. Cold day to be out with city equipment huh?"

Stephen jumped. His lips moved constantly, as if he were silently reciting math equations to himself. It gave his voice a severe stutter.

"Mr. Soles, hello, hello," Stephen said, nodding heavily, jamming his chin down against his chest. "How are you?"

"What are you doing out here? The Little League field ain't in use."

"Not yet, but it's gonna be." Stephen flipped the seat of the lawnmower up, exposing part of the engine. He took up a blue oil canister and poured some into the engine, spilling a

good bit as he did, creating a shining black puddle. “I heard the boss talk about it. Mr. Timbers said they’re going to open the field up as a practice field in the spring. He asked for it himself. All the kids gonna be out here.”

“So what are you doing out here now? Why mow it in the winter?”

Stephen leaned forward, spilling more oil, and winked. “Don’t tell Mr. Timbers. I’m cutting the weeds as a surprise. It’ll make it easier for him this spring.” He laughed, wiping the oil off with the hem of his shirt. The lawnmower’s seat clicked as he pulled it down. A dog somewhere started barking.

Theodore looked around the neighborhood, seeing only empty clotheslines and a broken bird fountain. Avery’s truck had left divots in front of his mother’s house.

“Stephen, you think you could do me a favor?”

Stephen twisted a can of grape soda out of his jacket pocket and jammed it into the cup holder on the side of the lawnmower. His lips moved and it almost looked like he was saying a “Hail Mary.”

“What’s that, Mr. Soles?”

“You ever have to clean out bug nests or wasp nests for the city before?”

“No sir. Not that I remember. I ain’t been on that long though.”

Theodore pointed back across the street to his old house.

“The porch of that house has a lot of bug nests in the eaves. There’s more under the porch and under the house itself.” Theodore turned back, twisting the zipper of his jacket, running the teeth against each other so they growled. “If you wouldn’t mind could you go over sometime this week with a broom or something and clean out all the nests? I’d do it

myself but I'm afraid if I crouched to crawl under the house I wouldn't be able to stand back up."

Stephen took his soda and popped it open. He flicked the edge of it against his teeth, his lips moving around it but never stopping to drink as he looked at the house. Then he smiled and shrugged. "Don't see why I can't. Not too much else to do in the winter. Don't you got to smoke out wasps and bugs like that though?"

"You shouldn't have to. The bugs should all be dead cause of the cold."

"Oh yeah oh yeah," Stephen nodded eagerly again as if this were the wisest thing he'd ever heard. He upended his can and drank. His Adam's apple hardly moved at all. "I'll take care of it, Mr. Soles. No problem. Should be able to do it Monday."

Theodore smiled and said "Thank you," but Stephen had already cranked the lawnmower, spraying dirt and dead grass from underneath it.

That night, Theodore called Avery and told him not to worry about taking care of the wasps. He'd hoped the boy would be relieved. He wasn't.

"You're not going to do it yourself are you?"

"Oh definitely not. I'd end up in the hospital if I tried that."

"So, did you get someone else to work for you or something?"

Theodore considered telling him about Stephen, but he didn't like the idea of anyone at the city hearing about using city employees to work on personal jobs.

"Yes, a nephew of mine who's flown in from out west." He lied quickly, finding the lie fed itself with mechanical ease. "I didn't even know my sister had had a kid, but he came

by to visit yesterday, we got to talking about the house, and he offered to help me out with it. So at least you don't have to crawl under there with all those bugs."

Avery's voice was clipped. "Yeah. Guess so. Well, I kinda wanted the money."

"Ah, you'll find something to work on. There's always someone hiring kids your age."

"Not in this town there isn't."

Theodore didn't know what to say.

After getting off the phone, he took out a blue file of papers about the house from the bottom drawer of his computer desk. The deed to the house, written on in both red and black ink, receipts he'd saved for services done on the house, photos he'd used before when advertising it. These he spread out on his desk. They were ordered oldest to newest and he could see a progression of the house from the home he used to live in to the dusty wreck it was now. He took a new picture of the house each spring, for use in local advertising, and each year the blue paint grew chalkier, the cracks widened like opening mouths. The lawn always resembled a crew cut, thanks to Avery.

He picked up one of the earliest photos, a family picture he used most often when he first tried to sell the house. In it, he and his sister were seated on the front porch, both in their twenties, their hands held between their knees, sneering at the person behind the camera. The house had working lights on inside.

A number, written in blue ink, was on the back of the picture. It was his sister's old phone number, from when she first moved. It hadn't worked for years. He'd tried calling, once or twice a year, hoping to get a new owner and see if he could find where his sister had gone, but the line was eternally disconnected.

He tried to remember why they'd taken the photo in the first place, what the occasion had been. He started to put the picture back in its place, but then crumpled it up and tossed it onto the edge of the desk.

Theodore was in his office the following Wednesday afternoon, organizing the list of city employees in preparation for the new change in pay. The salaries beside most of the employees' names, including his own, were already low.

A series of heavy steps proceeded down the hall, making the snow in the globe on Theodore's desk tremble. Malcolm Timbers walked in. A severe, stiff man, Malcolm stood at a perfect right angle to the floor at all times. He'd had a rod implanted in his spine after a car accident, but stiffness had always been a quality of his for as long as Theodore had known him.

"Malcolm," Theodore leaned back in his chair, drumming his pen against the arm. When the pen cap flew off, he didn't bother to pick it up. "How's it going? Want to come in, sit down? You look worn."

Malcolm, yellow sweat stains at the neck and arm pits of his shirt, stopped in the doorway and dug his hands into his pocket, rifling the contents for something. He had long arms, the elbows forced out to the side with his hands in his pockets. He was panting, his tie missing and the top three buttons of his shirt undone.

"No, not right now. Theodore, talk to you a second?"

Someone in the back of the office building shouted something and a door slammed. The constant noise of fax machines jingling and printers humming drowned out what the words were. Theodore nodded, tossing the pen aside. Malcolm shuffled in, swinging himself

through the door with a pivot of his hips. He stood behind the chair in front of Theodore's desk, his hands resting on its red leather back, an unwrapped sucker that he'd taken from his pocket between the ring and middle finger of his right hand. This he drummed against the leather, making a soft beat.

"Remind me of something," Malcolm said, curling the edges of the sucker wrapper. "Your mom's house was the one near the old Little League field right? On Brooklyn Street?"

Theodore's computer had slipped in sleep mode and he knocked the mouse around to get it back on. A message had popped up while he wasn't looking, a memo from the central office. He took a moment to open it but didn't read it, his eyes skimming over the black text.

"Yes," he said. "I took over ownership for Mom when she went to the home so I guess technically it's mine now. She didn't want the nursing home to get it you know? Why?"

The memo's subject line had been collapsed so he expanded it. It read "Employee Pay Updates." Malcolm made a gruff noise in his throat, flicking sweat from his eyes with his middle finger. He unwrapped the sucker but didn't eat it, curling up the wrapper in his hand.

"Did you ask Stephen Cane to do some work for you on that house?"

Theodore looked up at Malcolm. The fax machines and printers seemed to stop humming. Someone's office radio was playing "Ave Maria" from the Fantasia soundtrack.

"Stephen Cane?" Theodore said. "Why do you ask that?"

"Walter and Cedric just had to go pick him up out in front of your house and take him to the hospital. He says he was under the house, cleaning out bug nests and must have

disturbed one that was still alive. They got all over him before he could get out, stung him everywhere.”

“God.... Is he ok?”

“He’s tough enough.” Malcolm laid the sucker on his tongue and took it into his mouth. He didn’t make a sound, barely even seemed to suck on it. Just let it rest between his teeth, a small red stain spreading down the length of the stick as the sucker dissolved. “But he wasn’t hurt on the job because I know I didn’t send him over there to clean out wasp nests. So insurance isn’t going to cover it. Which is why I’m asking you. Jesus Theo, why’d you ask him to clean up a God damn wasp nest under your house? You hire professionals for that, not Stephen Cane. The man can barely cut a lawn without breaking something.”

“Ave Maria” ended. Malcolm shuffled, switching his weight from foot to foot. His right leg was longer, so he’d fall nearly an inch in height standing on his left leg, making him look like part of him was sinking.

“I didn’t ask him,” Theodore said. “I mean, I didn’t go up to him and say, ‘Hey could you clean my house out?’ I saw him cutting the Little League field so I went over and talked to him a minute. I ended up mentioning I had a bug problem. He offered to clean it out for me. I didn’t know he was serious, Malcolm.”

“He said you asked him to do it. Specifically asked him to.”

“I swear I was just joking. I have a kid for that sort of work.”

“Jesus,” Malcolm shook his head, biting down on the sucker so hard the stick bent over his bottom lip. “And right when the pay cuts are supposed to come in. You heard anything new on that yet?”

Theodore shook his head, not turning his eyes to the computer. “I’m sorry Malcolm. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

Before he could go on, Walter Kelsey stuck his head in the door and banged a hand against the wall. Theodore’s hand hit the mouse, knocking it off the desk where hung down the side, the cord pulled tight as a noose. Malcolm hardly moved.

“Hey, Malcolm, we’re going to pick up Stephen from the hospital. We need you to come with. Mayor’s going to want to talk to you.”

Malcolm nodded but didn’t move from behind the chair for a moment. Finally, seeming to shake himself loose, he walked out of the room, his footsteps running back as he moved further and further away until they settled into the general noise of the office building, as if Theodore could still hear him walking even after he’d left the building.

The memo was still on screen, but Theodore pulled his mouse up and minimized it.

Thursday night, Theodore drove up in front of the house. It was an outline against the dark, something felt rather than seen. Stray light clipped off the windows, making pinpoints of gleam, but other than that there was little to see. No dogs were barking; he couldn’t hear any cars. It almost felt like sound was waiting on him.

He took a football-sized box out of the backseat. Inside the box was a smoke bomb, a gray oblong with a long white safety sticker covering its side. He’d bought it after work the day before, unsure of what size or brand to use, just buying the cheapest. He’d also picked up a flashlight and a pair of gloves, the flashlight because he knew he’d be doing this at night, when the wasps were asleep. At least he hoped they would be, but then again, he had thought they’d be gone with it being winter.

Theodore slipped his gloves on and took his box under one arm, flashlight in hand. He kicked his car door open, and immediately heard a metallic shriek, a wooden snap, and then a crash. He jerked backward, hitting his back against the gear shift. All he could see in the dark was his door, bouncing from whatever it had hit.

The mailbox lay in front of his car, snapped off directly at the ground from the force of the door hitting it. He bent over, lifting it up. It felt incredibly light. The red flag squealed and swung as he tried to sit it back on the broken section of the post, but the box just fell over again, landing on its face in the road. The driver door now had a shiny blast mark below the window. He shut it and turned towards the house.

There was a crawl space below the guest bedroom window, beside the backdoor steps. It had no lock, just a plywood panel, already pulled away from when Stephen had been in the other day. Theodore crouched by the opening and clicked on the flashlight. It was much brighter than he'd expected, blinding him for a moment. Swinging the beam around the dark of the underside of the house, he looked for the nest. It didn't take long to find it.

It was about ten feet away, built against one of the support poles. It was monstrous compared to the others, bigger than a baseball. Tiny dots of light kept reflecting back to him off its surface and it took Theodore a moment to realize that those were wasps. He wondered why Stephen had even gone in with something that big there.

A small pain shot through his back, forcing him to stand and stretch. His spine gave a small pop. Ducking back down, sweat on his brow chilling him in the night air, he put the light on the smoke bomb and tried to set it. It took a couple of attempts with the gloves. When he had it set for five minutes, he rose and stretched his back again, then crawled under the house.

The change in temperature was immediate. It was warm under the house, almost to the level of spring. He began to sweat. The crawl space forced him on all fours, dragging his knees through the muddy dirt, tiny bits of debris stabbing his pants and gloves. His hand came down against a nail, almost going in, making him stumble. He kept the flashlight on the nest, watching for movement, listening for the hum of wings.

Within five feet of the nest he considered putting the bomb there, but maybe it wasn't close enough. There were other beams resting on the support pole the nest was on, making tight angles against the floor of the house, the perfect size for holding the bomb. He crawled forward, reaching out towards the beams, trying to slide the bomb in. Dirt fell from the ceiling. He heard rap music move down the road, closer and closer to him, before speeding away.

The bomb touched the beam and, with a push of his finger tips, slid in. The dots on the nest fluttered and Theodore jerked up to try and run, hitting his head on the floor. He stumbled back, rolling over himself and falling into the dark. The flashlight left his hand and he came to rest, against the wall of the house. More dirt fell from the ceiling, making the whole underside of the house echo with the sound of wasps in flight. Blind, he scrambled up, twisting, trying to find the hole he'd come in through. He swung his arm out in the dark, his hand banging the walls of the house before slipping through empty space and landing in grass. Behind him, he heard a heavy, low thump, more of a pressure against his chest than a sound. Smoke filled his nostrils, making him cough. When he finally found his feet and stood up, his back tightened painfully, forcing him to stay slouched over, gripping his spine. He shuffled towards the road.

Safely back at the mailbox, he stopped and turned to see the results of his work. The smell of smoke was everywhere, but he could hardly see any. A thick puddle of it gathered on the side of the house where the crawlspace entrance was, pushing out from the opening he'd come through. Otherwise, there was no sign of the smoke bomb.

He opened the car door and fell in rather than sitting down. His back felt mistuned, the nerves pulled too tight. He remained slouched over his knees, panting. The smoky smell grew stronger but it was a pleasing smell now. He breathed it in deep.

His shoes were growing easier to see. A soft glow fell on them, lighting the splotches of dry mud. He thought it was his eyes adjusting to the dark, but the glow kept increasing, the air growing brighter around him. The smell of smoke was getting stronger.

He looked up and saw a dull glow coming from the house. The windows were backlit by orange light. He could see it clearly, a hazy orange coming from somewhere in the hallway. The glow was spreading, getting bright. It was now behind the bedroom windows, behind the kitchen windows. The smoke was getting thicker and thicker.

Sunday, Theodore walked into his mother's room. As always, she was seated in her chair, rubbing her hands vigorously against one another. Miss Thorn wasn't in her usual spot, the bed she occupied empty and flat, the covers pulled tight.

Eliza Soles looked up and smiled. The tie die dog that Theodore's sister had sent was in her lap, lying at an angle with its face towards Theodore. He couldn't tell if it was smiling or not.

"Hey, Mom." Theodore pulled up the red walker, tripping as he did because he'd forgotten to unlock the wheels. "Where's Miss Thorn?"

“They came and took her out just a little while ago. She’s awful sick. But I’m sure she’ll be back before I leave. You want some food? I can go make you some lunch.”

“No, I’ve already eaten. You just sit there.” Theodore rested his hand on his mother’s shoulder as she started to push herself up. The room felt heavy without the sound of Miss Thorn’s breathing.

“Your sister called me. Just this morning.” Eliza nodded firmly. “She said she’d made it out to California just fine. That’s good. I get so worried when you two are on the road. I can’t stop thinking about all the things that’ll go wrong.”

“That’s...” Theodore hesitated before patting her leg. “That’s good. I’m glad to hear she’s ok. What’s she been up to out there?”

A young nurse with her right arm in a sling came in and took away an empty plastic glass of water sitting on Eliza’s bedside, leaving a new one behind. She smiled at Theodore as she left. Eliza stopped rubbing her hands and started on the dog. She clawed at its scalp, digging her fingernails in.

“So hateful,” Eliza said, shaking her head towards where the nurse had been. “They don’t talk to you or listen to you. Such hateful people. Your father would have put them in their place. He was a mean man but he didn’t let anyone hurt his family.”

Theodore stared at the dog as Eliza scratched it. The sound of her nails on the dog’s “skin” reminded him of Miss Thorn’s breathing. He wanted to make her stop.

“Oh,” Eliza started, holding out the dog. “Have I showed you this yet? Your sister sent it to me in the mail. That’s why she called, to see if I’d gotten it. Wasn’t that nice of her, thinking of me all the way out there?”

A flake of fur fell off the dog's head and whipped down to the floor. Theodore reached out and took the dog. He squeezed it, the stomach dimpling, the arms coming up towards him, the legs spreading out. Someone had cut the tag off that would have told where the dog had been made.

“Yeah, it's a nice dog Mom.” Theodore smiled, handing it back to her. “He's a nice dog.”

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