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2011



The University of Southern Mississippi

THAT HE MAY RAISE

by

Armond Joseph Boudreaux

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## INTRODUCTION

Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance,  
And there is only the dance.

—T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”

The task of explaining to an audience what one does when one writes fiction is a strange business, at least to me. It feels a bit like explaining how to drive a motorcycle: you have to balance the bike and let the weight of it do the work for you; you lean into the curves, pushing down slightly on the right handlebar when you turn right and down slightly on the left handlebar when you turn left. The explanation does not really enlighten because none of this occurs to the rider while driving or while learning to drive (and if he or she does think of it, the lesson will probably be a disaster). But this analogy is inadequate because the skills and physics involved in riding a motorcycle are completely explicable, while the craft of art can only be partially explained at best. The fiction writer’s job is not really worth doing if it does not remain at least in some sense a mystery.

I confess that rather than offering a tight philosophical treatise, then, I must meander—much like the character G.K. Chesterton describes at the beginning of *Orthodoxy*, a man who leaves Britain on a boat in order to discover a new land and after many adventures abroad returns, unknowing, to his homeland. At first marveling at the new country he has found, he discovers to his astonishment and delight that he has

arrived back home. The place I conceive for myself as a writer and a thinker is somewhat like this man's story (though less romantic). I do not think of my approach to writing as unique or experimental; in fact, if what we mean by "original" is "trying to do something that no one has ever done before," then I admit wholeheartedly that I do not bother about originality in that sense at all. I just write. I write with the conviction that if I make truth my business, then being original will be a happy result of my efforts. But I never put originality first. My hope is that, like the man in Chesterton's story, if I am attentive to the demands of truth and authenticity, if I write my characters compassionately and honestly, I will rediscover home and rejoice in all its strangeness and familiarity.

When Anna Karenina arrives in Moscow by train and learns that one of the watchmen, "either drunk or too bundled up because of the freezing cold" (64), had been run over by a train he did not hear coming, we know that this is more than simply a bad omen for Anna's visit with her adulterous brother and his devastated wife. It is not even simple foreshadowing. Here Tolstoy directs our attention to something true about human life as we stand in the cold, watching Anna and Vronsky draw together into a tragedy of their own making even while a man lies dead on the tracks and his wife weeps hysterically over the body. That this is the moment when Anna first meets Vronsky and when she witnesses the fate she will choose in the end—that is the significant thing. For Anna will return here finally, and in the end, the rest of us return, too. Whether we come back kicking and screaming as captives to our fates or as long wanderers collapsing finally on the hearth after a long journey, we all come around to something: we grow up to be the people we have always dreaded to be; we leave home only to find that wherever we go, it is all the same place.

My own coming around is a familiar and perhaps mundane story. I grew up Catholic in a pious household. We prayed often and went to Mass on every Sunday and most Wednesdays. When I went to college, I didn't quite lose my faith, but I certainly wavered in it. I did not descend into depravity or wander in a wilderness of sin, and many of my old habits did not really change. I only felt a tremendous sense of falsehood lying over all of my daily practices. I probably would have stopped believing altogether if it were not for the influence of two good friends who were both intellectually and spiritually serious. Once I became deeply committed to my faith again, Christianity had a tremendous effect on my writing. Although I had always been interested in literature that takes seriously the complexities and perplexities of the modern world, I became increasingly interested in fiction that acknowledges the bewilderment that honest people must feel towards life and yet still seeks truth as if it can really be found. I began to have little patience for writers who do nothing more than "scream into the abyss" (to appropriate a phrase Rick Bartheleme once used in his graduate fiction seminar).

I pause as I type that word *truth*. It seems hardly worth remarking upon that along the way I have developed the habit of skepticism that usually marks the boundary in a person's life when he ceases to be what he grew up as and becomes an academic. Sometimes I hardly notice, in conversations with fellow academics or in lectures to my freshman students, when I insert imaginary scare quotes around words like *truth* and *really*. This attitude reminds me of the Pilate in Bacon's essay *Of Truth*: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer" (1). Sometimes skepticism itself, rather than the knowledge that healthy doubt can engender, seems to be itself a *telos*. So I hesitate at that word *truth*.

Yet even after Beckett and Barthes and Camus I do not know what to call the thing that Tolstoy does in *Anna Karenina* except “truth telling.” And something about the confidence with which he declares—unambiguously and without any irony—that “happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” reassures me, even now, when the world seems hopelessly fragmented (1).

Something else reassures me besides the confidence that old writers like Tolstoy have in the power of words to arrive at truth. I have pointed out that the skepticism of academics is a quality that we learn by practice. To be sure, an attitude of skepticism, the ability to be a devil’s advocate, is an essential quality of any thinker. We desperately need to avoid being duped. Any humiliation is preferable to allowing someone to hoodwink us, and skepticism seems perhaps the best way to avoid the inevitable disappointment of finding out we’ve been wrong all along about our cherished values. Even as our skepticism warns us of the dangers inherent in taking tradition at face value, we might forget that our skepticism itself has become a tradition. The attitude that Barth, Pynchon, Heller and others held as an earnest response to the real and bewildering state of things in the middle of the twentieth century, an attitude which has found expression in thinkers as ancient as Socrates and as diverse as Buddha, Montaigne, and Foucault, has become the prized value that we have received from our forebears. We learn it, cultivate it, master it. Things come full circle, and that fact reassures my faith in words—the ultimate objects of our skepticism and the very stuff of fiction—because if we must learn our habit of skepticism, then that very habit is no different than the objects of our skepticism.

In this vein I think of Flannery O’Connor’s essay “Catholic Novelists,” where she writes, “Those who have no absolute values cannot let the relative remain merely relative;

they are always raising it to the level of the absolute” (41). That last Chestertonian paradox speaks to a problem that is inescapable to much of modern philosophy and literature. We cannot deny absolutes, for then we undermine our very ability to deny them. Even the claim that we cannot know absolutes cannot be strenuously maintained without finally undermining the credibility of our agnosticism. Whether willingly or not, we will always deify something.

So my coming back around to the Catholic faith with its stubborn insistence on old absolutes has become essential to my writing. Like O’Connor, the first thing I hope to accomplish in my writing is to show that the dead world that modern and postmodern writers have shown us is indeed fragmented, broken, and absurd because it is a world blind to the absolute. It does not recognize the movements of grace--that is, the unmerited sharing of the divine life, a gift that none deserves but may be freely received. The Catholic writer does not believe in a world from which grace is absent, but he or she understands that when people do not see grace active in the world, then the world does become merely absurd. Thus Meursault rages at the chaplain who tries to convert him before his execution; thus John Marcher fails to see his real love until she is in the ground.

On this point I do not think of myself or of twentieth century writers as offering anything new. Writers in the western tradition have long depicted life without grace and moral absolutes as absurd and fragmented—perhaps no one more masterfully than Shakespeare, who showed that a materialist universe is one in which meaning is made by small men who hurt and kill each other for whatever scraps of power are available.

Indeed, as both Macbeth and Lear learn, a life without absolutes is a “tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (V.v.26-28).

But it is easy to show that life is absurd. If that is the writer’s only job then we need not continue in our work. We may simply return to Frank Norris, Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Machiavelli, or Homer if we need reminding that without grace the world is cruel or indifferent. There is no need for new writers to expend further effort. The postmodernist knows this, so he or she tries to create a space in which the reader can form new, individual meanings that are not as easily deconstructed as the old absolutes of faith. Thus Donald Barthelme’s lovely story “The Balloon,” in which each of New York’s inhabitants misinterprets the purpose of the giant balloon the narrator has raised over the cityscape, creating a seemingly endless multiplicity of meanings.

My own approach to the modern condition is one that I have found in O’Connor (and before her in Homer, Shakespeare, Donne, Hawthorne, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky, and more recently in some of Joyce Carol Oates, Tim Gautreaux, and Marilyn Robinson): I labor to show that dramatic conflict—the central subject of imaginative writing—is in some sense a disturbance in the interaction between the material and the spiritual, between flesh and grace. When Viola arrives on Illyria, for example, fate in the form of a shipwreck puts her there as a kind of divine intervention. Orsino and Olivia have become so enwrapped in the rules of courtship and love imposed by their material society that they can only have a kind of unspiritual, counterfeit love. By Viola’s influence, both Orsino and Oliva are able to love; they become in a very real sense more human and less automatons of courtly rules. Or when Sophia debates religion with Raskolnikov near the

end of *Crime and Punishment*, she proves an agent of grace who raises the murderer from his nihilism and depravity, moving him to salvation.

Following Eliot, I think of this interaction between nature and supernature as a dance, one that can only have meaning if there is a “still point” from which to observe the movements of the dancers. Without a specific place of reference, the dance becomes incomprehensible and meaningless. If the dancers are floating in space with no solid floor beneath them, they cannot be truly dancing.

Since I have come back around to Christian orthodoxy, I have found a “still point” in Christian dogma and morality, and my primary occupation as a fiction writer has been to observe the world from this still point—not in order to prove the dogma, but rather to explain the world. In the novella that follows, for example, one inertial frame of reference (to appropriate a term from relativistic physics) from which I observe the world is the Christian understanding of love and the constant warning given by thinkers from Augustine to Lewis that merely human love, unaided by grace, will inevitably turn inward and become the very opposite of love: it will always become an idol and a demon ready to consume the beloved, the lover, or both. My belief in this truth does not change what I observe in “That He May Raise.” Rather, as O’Connor puts it, my faith is the light by which I see (91).

One might object that because the Catholic believes in doctrines that are not provable and yet influence the way he sees the world, he cannot write for those who do not believe as he does. But surely this objection does not hold up to scrutiny. Any consistent reader could name writers whom he or she admires but does not agree with about everything. Nietzsche cited Dostoyevsky as one of his favorite writers, calling him

a “profound man” and “the only psychologist from whom I had anything to learn” (77), and yet no two writers could have disagreed more about Christianity. Many contemporary writers name O’Connor as a major influence, and yet most of those writers are not Catholic. I myself find powerful truth in the works of Ernest Hemingway, Ian McEwan, and Homer; yet I also find in each of these authors philosophies with which I strongly disagree.

Others might object that belief in dogma is a limitation to the fiction writer because dogmas are received truths that must be accepted upon authority, thus limiting the writer’s ability to imagine and create. If the writer is committed to certain truths that cannot be verified empirically, he or she may change the reality of the world in order make it fit his or her creed. This objection, too, fails under scrutiny, however. As O’Connor puts it,

There is no reason why fixed dogma should fix anything the writer sees in the world. On the contrary, dogma is an instrument for penetrating reality. The fiction writer is an observer, first, last, and always, but he cannot be an adequate observer unless he is free from uncertainty about what he sees. (178)

Belief in spiritual absolutes affords the writer a point of reference from which to conduct his or her most important business, which is to observe.

As I write I am aware that what I say may sound defensive, as if I am afraid of the consequences of rejecting the literature of my own time in favor of something better that I find in older writers. I am not—I hope—a reactionary, and even if I am, that does not make me the Lone Ranger. The history of literature in the twentieth century is nothing if

not the story of writers standing in the shadows of their literary parents and *reacting*, if not without outright rebellion, then at least with a cautious reassessment of values. And, conscious of the ideal writer that Barth hopes for in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” I do not simply repudiate or imitate the writers from whom we have all received our literary inheritance, nor do I simply reject postmodernism and return to the truth of some august past. In explaining my own writing as a grasping towards truth I am less rejecting one thing in favor of another than I am simply acknowledging something that O’Connor points out in “Catholic Novelists,” something that perhaps recent discussions in literature have sometimes overlooked: “I think that every writer, when he speaks of his own approach to fiction, hopes to show that, in some crucial and deep sense, he is a realist” (37). Writers who make it their business to tear down all of the constructs of what people call reality—I think, for example, Beckett in *Breath*—do so because they mean to show us how things *really are*.

So I return where I began. In the novella that follows, I hope to present a moral playground where people commit sins against each other and against God; where the dance is disturbed or completely disrupted; where well-meaning people deceive themselves about their own motivations. Some of them reject the grace that is offered to them when they need it most, and their love for each other becomes a hunger. Often they do not know what they are doing. Sometimes they do.

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## CHAPTER I

Lisa lay in darkness, not sure how long she'd been awake. She might have had a nightmare.

She rolled onto her side and faced Ben, who wasn't snoring but made a faint clicking noise in his throat when he breathed heavily through his mouth. No, she had not had a nightmare. At least, she hadn't dreamt anything she could recall now that she was awake. Remembrance brought back the argument they'd had last night. He had just made love to her, and even though it hadn't been the greatest sex, it had given her relief from the swarm of doubts in her mind. The lovemaking meant that he still wanted her—even though she was pregnant and pale, even though she had seen him looking at Emily Mitchell, her best friend who lived next door. After sex, Lisa had gone to the bathroom to clean up. When she came back, Ben was pulling on a pair of boxers. He said he wanted her to go to Birmingham to abort the baby. Her baby.

Now she turned away from her sleeping husband and lay for several minutes without moving, staring at the full-length mirror beside her bed. Her church blouse hung from the top of the mirror frame and obscured most of the reflection, which still only showed vague shapes and shadows. She didn't like mirrors much, but she hated that one in particular. The glass was just slightly convex—not enough to distort things like the unreal reflections at a carnival, but it made her hips look wider. She couldn't get rid of the mirror because it had belonged to Ben's mother.

The ceiling fan, which was off-balance, swayed slightly, and the electric motor hummed. The wooden balls at the end of the pull-cords tapped lightly together. The sound of feet on the hardwood floor padded down the hall, and Thomas's bedroom door

closed. He must have gone to the bathroom. The hound that the Ezells kept penned in their back yard was barking, and Lee, Thomas's German shepherd, answered occasionally. As long as the Ezells had owned that hound Lisa had never needed an alarm clock. Lee's barks seemed to grow louder in his annoyance at the hound. Lisa sat up and put her feet on the floor. The cool wood planks felt good on the soles of her feet. Ben put off a lot of heat at night, and she always woke sweaty. She stood and turned on her lamp, wincing at the light. Ben stirred and pulled the blanket over his head. How could he sleep that way? How could he sleep at all? *It's legal now*, he had said last night. So what if it was legal? This was her baby. Hers.

Even though she couldn't stop thinking about the argument she'd had with Ben last night, it was easy to follow her normal morning routine: she dressed in her housecoat, went to the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and went to the kitchen to start breakfast. While she stood at the sink filling the coffee pot she stared out the kitchen window. Everything outside—the pines, the dog-house, the old wood shed where they kept the lawnmower and the rakes, the dark shape of the mountain cliff that loomed on the far side of the trees—was turning blue-gray as it did just before sunrise. The rock face rose at a nearly perfect vertical angle all the way to the cliff high above their house. The road that wound its way up this side of the valley—which consisted of a single mountain ridge that cut a U-shape into the southern Appalachians and surrounded the town where they lived—followed the cliff.

After she started the coffee, she scrambled eggs for Thomas and Ben. She fumbled a few of the eggs as she cracked them, spilling some of the white down the side of the skillet and onto the stove burner. She cleaned up the mess, but still gray smoke

curled around the skillet from the burner where the spilled egg white burned. The stench made her stomach tighten. She was nearly over the morning sickness, but some smells still got to her. She moved the skillet to another burner and then stepped away and gripped the Formica countertop.

She wondered what the abortion might feel like. Not that she was considering going through with it, but still, she wondered if it was physically painful. Was it like a flu shot, or like having an ingrown toenail out? Would the doctor talk to her? Would he—and it must be a he—tell her to relax, or comment on how bad gas prices had gotten? Would he ask if she had any—other—children? Would he tell her how just and right it was that the government had made this an option? Would he say anything at all, or would he simply let a nurse do the talking while he, in Ben’s words, “took care of it”?

She thought there ought to be some kind of pain involved, a signal that something important and tragic has happened. The growth of a life inside you was a great discomfort, but then there was small, quiet pleasure in that discomfort, like the burn in her muscles the last time she had walked up the slope of the mountain with Emily Mitchell. If pregnancy had a pleasure that came clothed in pain, what did its opposite—the ending of that life—bring?

Baring her teeth in a ferocious grin—because her sister, Mona, had told her it was the best way to suppress the gag reflex, and it worked—she stirred the eggs and poured too much salt and pepper into them. Ben would complain, but Thomas wouldn’t.

Unlike the discomfort and pains of pregnancy, there was nothing to compare birth to, no metaphor or simile, because it was *the* elemental thing. It was the labor to which you compared all other labors, like building a house or finishing a college degree. Labor

and delivery with Thomas had been nearly unbearable, but even that pain had carried a strange and terrible comfort. There was an *end*. This was a labor to produce, and its end was its purpose. The cramps that gripped your insides like an invisible hand; the fear that the child will emerge and be sick or malformed; the fear that you might die in the process; the indignity of spreading your legs to a clean, bald-faced doctor who stared at your vagina, waiting; the blood and water that pours out of you before the child comes startled into the bright world of definite shapes and crystalline sound—these things have an *end*. The odd, unreal sort of joy that can only come when you look into his eyes and understand that for now, just for now, he knows you and you know him—that is the *end* of birth. She had given birth to Thomas with no medication in her own bed in 1957. No one could romanticize away the strangeness and suffering of birth, but then no cynic could explain away her elated exhaustion when she finally collapsed on her sweaty pillow and stared at the face that had seen her from the inside.

But what was this other thing like? There must be pain—for her and the baby—but it was pain for a different kind of *end*, a termination. In her memory labor had been warm and wet, and once she started pushing nothing had entered her mind except to push him out of her, to finally expose him to air and the smell of their house in evening. In her imagination, the abortion would take place in a cold room where everything smelled clean and the light shone like death in her eyes. In birth there seemed to be nothing else but bodily sensation: the slick feeling between her legs, the taste of sweat, the sound of her own breathing. Here in this cold room that she imagined, she knew nothing except cleanness, the bare hint of some kind of antiseptic, and the easy formality of the doctor

who knew more about her insides than she did. She would go to this room full, and she would leave empty. That was all. Simple and cheap, just like Ben had said last night.

After she had cooked the eggs, she left them in the skillet and went back to the bedroom, where Ben was sitting on the side of the bed and putting on his boots.

“It’s ready,” Lisa said.

“I know how you feel,” said Ben. He sat with one foot propped on the opposite knee, ready to slip on the worn boot that dangled from his hands. He looked older this morning than he had last night, but that was true most mornings, she supposed. It was probably too much to think he had changed his mind.

“I shouldn’t have talked to you the way I did last night,” he said. “I know how long you’ve wanted another baby. I just want something better for both of us right now.”

“Better than what?” she said, but she wanted nothing more than for him to stop talking. Her knees shaking, she hobbled towards the door. “God will take care of us.”

Ben puffed through his nostrils, the sign he gave her when she was frustrating him. He put on the boot and stood.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” he said. Sighing, he reached up with his hand and stopped the wooden balls on the fan’s pull cords from clicking together. As he lifted his arms, his shirt rose and exposed a little of his stomach, which had been hard and smooth as long as she had known him. It looked white and hairy and a little soft now. The strangeness of it surprised her. Had she not noticed before now that a slight roll of fat bulged over his belt? She couldn’t attribute the belly to beer; Ben drank only very rarely.

He ignored her pious assurance, which she had known he would do. He went to Mass with her every Sunday, but he had been raised Baptist and would remain one all his

life. His refusal to consider himself anything but Baptist wasn't a matter of doctrinal conviction so much as it was devotion to his family. His parents, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were his religion. His father, Benjamin Sr., had been a proud, stern old preacher well known all over the lower Appalachians, and his mother, Martha, had been a true preacher's wife. She must have given up a great deal for her husband to become the coldly intelligent and intolerably blameless man he was.

Lisa had often admired Martha for her liveliness and bright curiosity, her adeptness with small house maintenance, and her seemingly limitless devotion to her preacher husband. Lisa had even admired the old man for his similar devotion to the congregations he served. They were both dead now. She did not wonder what they would have thought of their oldest son asking her to have an abortion. What she did wonder was whether Martha's devotion would have wavered in Lisa's situation. As far as Lisa knew, the woman had never complained about the long hours her husband spent studying and writing sermons, keeping up the church building and yard, and visiting congregation members. According to Ben, he would often go for several days without seeing his father at all. Martha apparently never complained about it. Was there anything she would not have stood for?

Ben opened a dresser drawer and pulled out the strong cologne that he wore every day, even to work. He doused some on his neck and tossed the bottle back into his drawer. It clinked hard against something else—probably the buckle of one of his several brown belts.

“Don't break it,” Lisa said. “The whole room will stink.”

He turned and stared at her with his eyes half-open like a character in a comic strip. He was covering up his anger by trying to look hurt.

“You’re the one who bought the shit for me,” he said.

“I didn’t mean it like it sounded,” she said. She looked around at the room feeling ridiculous. She tried to focus her attention on something besides him. A pair of jeans lay across the armchair at the foot of the bed. She had worn them for three days already and would wear them again today. Ben’s hunting rifle stood in one corner, its brown stock nearly blending into the ugly wall paneling. “I just meant don’t break it.”

The wooden balls started to tap together again with the swaying, humming fan. Ben crossed the room, pounding his heels heavily against the floor, and stopped them again.

“Remind me to fix that thing or pull it down and find a new one,” he said.

He walked back to the dresser, tucked in his shirt, and pulled a belt out of the drawer where he had thrown the bottle of cologne. Lisa turned off the fan, and in the silence after the hum had stopped, her ears nearly hurt. Her eardrums strained for a sound that was no longer there. She looked at Ben’s reflection in the dresser mirror in time to see him look away.

Thomas’s door opened, and he walked down the hall without speaking to either of them. She had been afraid that he heard them arguing last night, and he certainly would have been able to hear them this morning. They normally sent him to David and Mona’s to sleep when they were going to discuss things that were important, things that might lead to an argument—Ben insisted on it. But Ben had waited until Thomas was in bed, made love to her, and then asked her for an abortion. If Thomas hadn’t been asleep yet,

he would have overheard some of the argument. Would he have known what they were talking about?

“Eggs on the stove,” she said, turning to go out into the hall.

“I really understand,” Ben said. “I know how you feel. It’s not because I don’t want it. I just want to have a good life. And I want it to have a better life than we can give it.”

He stood there in his dark brown work slacks with a hole the diameter of a quarter above the knee. Like the best man at a wedding or a pallbearer at a funeral he laced his hands together in front of his belt. The silly respectfulness of it almost made her laugh.

“How do I feel right now?” she said.

Ben stuffed his hands in his pockets and his lips tightened like it had been the last thing he expected.

“You think I’m a bad man,” he said.

“Your father would think you’re a bad man,” she said.

“I know that you—”

“You know how I feel right now?” she said. “I don’t want to smell scrambled eggs ever again. That’s how I feel.”

In the kitchen Thomas had started frying some bacon. He stood as tall as Ben now, with the same black hair and dark skin, strong shoulders and a long, lean body. He had large, well-muscled hands, hands like Ben’s that were good for working wood into whatever shape he wanted. In the end she didn’t think he would be much like his father, though. He loved books, just as she did, and had been writing stories of his own for a few years. Lisa

had never been a very good writer, but she couldn't help thinking that Thomas had inherited the same desire for learning and knowing that she carried in her. Thomas and Ben had always had a strong relationship, and Thomas still hunted with his father nearly every day of the season and helped him fashion furniture in his spare time. But lately Thomas had been taking up the pencil more than the wood chisel.

Her mom's brother, Uncle Anthony, had been the first and only member of the family to go to college. When Lisa was sixteen, he went to the University of Alabama and got a degree in mathematics. He was only three years older than Lisa, so the two of them had been like siblings their whole lives. When he came home for Christmas break during his second year at the university, Anthony gave Lisa three books: unused copies of *Emma* and *Moby Dick* and a worn paperback *Hamlet*. He confessed he hadn't read either the Austen or the Melville, but he had read *Hamlet* several times. The two of them read the play together over the holiday before he went back to Tuscaloosa. Although Lisa didn't understand much of it, the wonderful ritual quality of the words and the sinuous way in which they became lines and paragraphs had appealed to her. She reread it several times on her own, and she thought she understood some of it fairly well.

These days the only thing she read more difficult than romance novels or westerns was the Bible. She read at least two chapters of it every day, but she also spent a good deal of her time reading books that Ben called "them pornos." (She never mentioned to Ben that she found three copies of *Playboy* in his truck's toolbox.) She knew most of the novels she read were ridiculous, but they were also easy. Sometimes she would pull out *Hamlet* and read a few scenes, and she had read all of *Emma* once, but she had never gotten through more than the first chapter of *Moby Dick*. She felt ashamed for turning to

those cheap, comfortable romance novels. She felt especially ashamed of them because she lived in the very shadow of Benjamin Sr., who had given a whole library of scholarly books to a Baptist seminary in Mississippi when he died. She felt ashamed when saw Uncle Anthony once a year. The families gathered for Christmas in Biloxi where she grew up, and for several years he had greeted her with, “You read all of Shakespeare yet?” He didn’t ask anymore.

It made her happy to think that Thomas might inherit the gift that Uncle Anthony had given her and perhaps make better use of it than she had. She would never go to college, but Thomas’s grades were good enough that he might get a scholarship somewhere. The greatest comfort she had in her life was the thought that something of her would live on in him. He would be better educated than she or Ben—he *was* better educated than either of them. He would have the intelligence and enter a world that was closed to people like her. She would live in him, and in the end he would be much more like her than Ben.

“Morning,” Thomas said. He didn’t look up from the popping grease.

“Good morning,” she said.

He had always been quiet, but he wasn’t the kind of kid you worried about. When he looked at you with his dark eyes—those, she admitted, had come from Ben—you could see that he thought much more than he said. He was thinking now, standing over the skillet and turning over strips of bacon. She stood next to him and tried to take the tongs from him, but he shifted them to his other hand out of her reach.

“I’ve got it,” said Thomas. He glanced at her and smiled—sincerely, it seemed to her—and then put bacon on a plate with some eggs and gave it to her.

“Can I sit with you while you eat?” she said.

It was a strange thing for her to say. He narrowed his eyebrows and cocked his mouth to the side like he did when he was confused or thought someone had said something stupid.

“Why wouldn’t you?”

He made his plate and sat at the table. She sat down opposite him and he moved the vase of tulips in the middle of the table out of the way. Their forks clinked loudly on the plates, and the sound of Lisa’s own chewing seemed obnoxious to her. When she tried to slowly chew smaller bites, her breath sounded like someone out of shape huffing up tall stairs. She put down her fork and stopped eating.

“The bacon too burnt?” said Thomas.

“It’s great,” she said. “It’s just the morning sickness.”

“I thought that was over.”

“I did, too.”

Thomas scraped the last of his egg off his plate. *The hell with this*, Lisa thought. She picked up another piece of the bacon—it was actually very good—and put the whole thing in her mouth.

“What are you doing?” said Thomas. His eyes were wide like she had said something vulgar or made an offensive gesture. Lisa laughed, and so did Thomas.

“It’s really good,” she said. “Maybe you could be a cook someday. Supposedly my granddaddy was a cook for a long time in New Orleans.”

While they talked, she listened for Ben. She didn't hear his boots walking the floor of the bedroom, coming in and out of the bathroom. No water ran; no drawers closed.

After a few minutes, though, she heard his boots coming down the hall. Thomas looked up but didn't greet him when he came into the kitchen. Ben didn't acknowledge either of them. He went to the refrigerator and took out the orange juice pitcher. Lisa stopped eating again. Ben was being too quiet to cover up the sound of her chewing.

After he drank his orange juice in silence, Ben put his glass in the sink and replaced the pitcher. He walked around the table and ruffled Thomas's hair before he left, letting the screen door slam behind him.

They talked a little about one of Thomas's school assignments, but Lisa thought about a scene from *Hamlet*. She could only recall fragments and shadows of it. *Mystery. The heart of mystery.* Her heart stung with the need to remember. She wanted to be like the prince. She wanted a heart of mystery. She *had* a heart of mystery. *I know how you feel*, Ben had said. What did he know about how she felt? It was *her* baby. Could he look into her heart and see her mystery? This baby she carried—who could hear and feel her heartbeat, who heard her voice before all others, whose new fingers and toes could touch her on the inside—knew more about how she felt than Ben did. He had given up the right to the baby last night: *The doctor can take care of it, yes, yes, it's a doctor, yes, it's legal, it's fucking legal, don't you see we can't afford it, no, we can't, it's not my fault that I got stuck working at a sawmill, where the hell else was I supposed to work, I could sell my guns, is that what you want, the thing Thomas likes doing most, you want to take that from him, hell, yes, I'm thinking of him, of course it's about him, and it's about you, too,*

*and we can't afford it.* It was about her, too. Never mind the baby. They had each laid claim to the one that their bodies had come together and made. Solomon had given them his judgment, and Benjamin was the one who wanted the baby cut in half. The baby belonged to Lisa, because she wanted her—she knew it was a *her*—to live. But in what way was it *her* baby? Did the baby belong to her the same way her husband, or the ring that she had inherited from her aunt, or her name belonged to her? Or the way the quilt she had made for her bed belonged to her? Or the way the garden she kept in the front yard belonged to her? What was the difference between *her* baby and *her* father? She decided that the questions were meaningless—decided the way you decide to trust your spouse even though he's been looking too hard at the woman who sits across the aisle at church. It was her baby.

After Thomas left for school, she went outside with her Bible, thinking she would read the Psalms or something else comforting. Instead she walked through the trees for a while, humming “Georgia” to herself and reaching out to brush the rough, dry bark of the tall pines with the tips of her fingers. She enjoyed the shade and the morning light that came down in shafts like heavy rain. After a long time she ended up at the base of the rocky cliff and sat down in the spot where she often sat: a warm, comfortable place where the cliff face was smooth and angled perfectly for leaning back and listening to the quiet, waiting for something. She closed her eyes and wondered at the orange light that filtered through her eyelids. Vague, cloudlike shapes formed in darker and lighter shades. She wondered if this was what it was like to see someone from the inside.

## CHAPTER II

Ben came home that evening two hours late. The sun was nearly gone and Lisa was watering her crape myrtles when he came down the road from the valley entrance in his battered '61 Chevy. Tools rattled in the truck bed and the brakes squeaked as he rolled into the gravel driveway and stopped. He got out and stood by the truck, watching her stand over the young trees, which she had planted herself. After a moment Ben crossed the yard to the spigot and turned it off, leaving her standing with a hose pointed at the trees. Then he approached her slowly, almost timidly. She put the hose down and faced him.

“I wasn’t done, you know,” she said. She tried not to sound angry.

Ben kissed her and put one arm around her waist to stroke the arch of her back. Lisa gently pulled away, but he drew her towards him, pressing her pelvis against his. She put her arms around his waist. His shirt was still damp and sprinkled with sawdust, which he could never brush off completely. His body was stiff. She tried to sway slightly with him—just to let him know that she hadn’t been waiting around to have a fight with him again—but he wouldn’t budge. She could tell he was trying to decide how to say something. She usually felt sorry for him when he was like this, but now she just wanted to pinch him with her fingernails and tell him to spit it out. *I want to keep the baby*, she wanted him to say. *I don’t know what the hell was wrong with me*. An apology would be nice, but she could make do with a simple retraction.

“Tom Bedsole wants me to make him some kitchen cabinets,” he said finally. He had his head on her shoulder. “It’s big job. Good money.” With her chest against his, she

could feel the words vibrating inside him. “It will take up a good bit of time. I’ll need most every evening and all weekend for a couple of weeks. I’ll need Thomas to help.”

He grasped her shoulders and held her at arm’s length, looking into her eyes with his head down so he was level with her.

“But it means I’ll have some extra money to send you and Thomas down to see your folks,” he said. “It might even mean enough that you could start a semester at the junior college, take a few classes.”

It wasn’t like him to try to bribe her. When they fought, they would not speak for a while—sometimes a few days—and then suddenly he would act as if they were newlyweds, stealing kisses from her every time they came close and asking her about whatever book she had been reading.

She shrugged off his hands and walked towards the front door. “We could just save the money,” she said.

“But I know you’ve wanted to go see them for a while,” he said. He walked close beside her so that their arms brushed.

She went inside first and started towards the kitchen, but he grabbed her arm and turned her towards him. They stood by the door, him looking into her face with that unbearably patient face of his. It was his father’s typical look, a look that had been almost endearing on the old man but was completely wrong for his son.

“Please,” he said.

“I don’t care if you take the job,” she said. She wrenched herself loose from his grip again and sat down in a rocking chair next to the loveseat.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, nearly whispering.

Thomas came down the hall carrying the notebook he used for writing stories. He held it in front of him like a gift, as he always did when he came wanting Lisa to hear a new page or two. When he saw Ben still standing by the door, staring at the wall as if Lisa had left an afterglow like a lamp when you stare too long, Thomas dropped the notebook to his side.

“Oh, hey,” he said. “You came home late.”

“Dad’s got a big job he needs your help with,” Lisa said.

Ben smiled, propped himself up on the back of this couch with one hand, and started to kick off his boots.

“What kind of job?” Thomas said. He was trying to sound more interested than he actually was. Lisa admired her son for it, but she also resented him for not telling Ben that he would rather be writing a story or reading a book than spending time with him. But that wasn’t really true, anyway. She just wanted it to be true now. It was true that Thomas loved writing his stories and that Ben didn’t understand it, but Thomas also enjoyed ripping sheets of beautiful birch that Ben used to build cabinets, sanding joints to be perfectly flush and square, and routing the edges of doors. And of course he rarely missed a chance to hunt; he had become a damn good bow hunter, in fact. Thomas had learned all this from Ben, and there was no getting around the fact. But then, whereas he could appreciate the manual skills his father prized, Ben looked at Thomas’s interest in writing with suspicion at best. No matter what Thomas did, Ben would never make fun of Thomas or put him down, but the puzzlement with which he regarded his son’s storytelling was comically obvious. Lisa had seen Ben stand outside Thomas’s closed door, lift his hand to knock, and then lower it. He had stared at the door for a moment as

if studying the wood. When he saw that Lisa was watching him, he looked embarrassed and went outside to hide in the workshop. At first she had been saddened by Ben's inability to understand what Thomas was doing when he wrote, but now it only made her love Thomas more.

"I'm going to go and finish watering the trees," Lisa said before Ben could start to explain the cabinet job to Thomas. "There's a covered plate in the oven for you."

Thomas watched her go. "You okay?"

"Just fine," she said.

He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but Ben cut him off.

"It's a big cabinet job for Mr. Bedsole," Ben said.

She could hear Ben outside the door, but his voice faded as she walked away from the house. Crickets and cicadas groaned and chirped, their sound seeming to fill the valley all the way to the mountain ridge. In that steady, monotonous noise, it was easy to imagine that there was no sound at all. It was as though nature itself pitied her and had bent its powers towards the little house to stifle Ben's voice, to enfold her in the confines of her own mind.

The following morning Emily Mitchell knocked on her door. Ben and Thomas were already gone. Lisa had just opened all the windows and seen Emily walking across her yard in a pair of red exercise shorts and a white tee shirt. She wore a calm, self-assured smile even though she was alone, and Lisa almost admired her for it. Emily had a quiet life with her daughter and son. Her husband, Mark, had died in Vietnam; his parents, who were fairly wealthy, provided for her and her kids. She was luckier than a lot of military

wives in that way, but Lisa still couldn't comprehend Emily's perpetual smile or her easy confidence.

"Let's walk," Emily said when Lisa answered the door. "I haven't seen you out in a week." She put her hand on the doorframe and looked at Lisa like a child.

Lisa motioned for Emily to come in. "You just don't pay attention, then."

"Right," said Emily. "Well, I need to complain about my sister, and you need to keep your ass from getting too big with that baby coming."

She stared at Lisa expectantly. Lisa wondered whether Emily knew that things were wrong with her and Ben. She didn't want to talk about it, didn't want Emily to know that things weren't perfect in her life. She wouldn't do what Ben wanted, but the very idea of it felt like a festering reek in her house. Even though she couldn't know what, Emily surely knew something was wrong. Besides Thomas, Emily was the most sensitive and observant person Lisa knew.

"Well?" said Emily. She tapped her foot impatiently and pointed at it with her index finger. The fingernail was red and shone like paint on a new car.

"Yeah, sure," Lisa said. "I'll get dressed."

While Lisa stared at the only shorts she owned and wondered whether or not they would actually fit her waist now, Emily sat on the couch and waited. Lisa pulled off her pants and slid the shorts over her ankles. They felt too tight over her calves and thighs and hips, but she got them on. They didn't look bad.

"So how is Ben?" Emily said.

Warm tears welled in Lisa's eyes suddenly. Ben would be glad to know Emily was asking about him. She shut her eyes tight. Her face felt hot, so she ran her fingers

through her hair and pulled it back and held it off her neck. This was stupid. Why was she crying? The question had been chitchat while Emily waited for her to get dressed, for God's sake. She wiped her eyes dry and stared at herself in the mirror.

“You okay in there?” said Emily.

“Yeah, just a second.”

The woman she saw in the mirror wore a big tee shirt that hid her belly. She might not be pregnant at all. She only had puffy eyes and cheeks that sagged slightly. Her arms looked too small for her body in her large shirt. The hair that surrounded her face and spilled over her shoulders looked darker than it should. An unfamiliar woman looked out of the glass.

“You make me sick, you know,” said Emily, standing by the bedroom door. Lisa hadn't heard her come down the hall.

Lisa stared at her. Her tears dried and she started to feel angry.

“You look great,” she said, “and I had to kill myself to get the weight off after Jessica was born.”

Lisa relaxed and looked at the mirror again. She hated compliments—they never came off as anything except condescension or flattery to her—but she smiled and tried to look appreciative.

“I wasn't looking at myself in the mirror,” she said. “I mean I wasn't thinking about what pregnancy is doing to me.”

Emily rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

“I mean I was thinking about something,” she said. “You know how you stare without seeing things? I was doing that.”

Emily covered her mouth to hide a grin.

“I’ve been saying stupid things lately,” Lisa said. They both laughed.

Emily complained about her sister, Margaret, while they power-walked up the road that climbed the mountain. Margaret—who was educated and had married a bank manager named Hastings who drove a Corvette and wore a thousand-dollar suit—had called her this morning to tell her about her husband’s promotion. They were going to move into a bigger house in Hoover. Emily should come to Birmingham and see a guy Margaret and Hastings knew; he had money and a degree in chemistry. Margaret knew things would work out. Emily would be happier. Margaret knew a black lady who was good with kids and would keep Jessica and Carl so that Emily could work. Things were different now. Emily shouldn’t stay in Ophion and pine for her lost husband for the rest of her life.

“Can you believe that?” said Emily. “‘Pine’ was the word she used. She’s down in Birmingham with her rich husband and her dogs and she’s telling me to quit ‘pining’ for Rob.”

Lisa’s calves burned. Emily was climbing the hill faster than she would like, but she was too proud to slow down. *Pining* was an ugly word, but something like it spoke to the way she felt right now. *Mourning* was better, though. Pining for a dead husband was just a fantasy. *Pine* was too bright and cute for what you lose when a part of yourself dies. *Mourn* on the other hand—the long ‘m’ followed by the deathly double vowel, the way the word seemed never to end, only to slide through the soft *r* and then the softer *n* and then into nothing—to mourn seemed real and inescapable. Something was already dead—herself, her child, her husband, or her marriage—and the pressure of her uterus

against her kidneys, lungs, and bladder began to feel like an emptiness. Everyone had to mourn something eventually. Not to mourn was inhuman.

“I just wish she could understand that I can be happy here, too,” Emily said. “Maybe happier than she is with her stiff husband and his fancy car and their huge house.”

A fox stood at the edge of the woods on the inside of the road where the pavement hugged the slope. It met Lisa’s eyes and watched her.

“She thinks she knows so damn much,” said Emily. “When I see her she looks at me like she pities me. You know what she said to me when she called me on my last birthday? She said, ‘If you don’t get the hell out of Ophion soon, you’ll marry some mechanic and be barefoot and pregnant again before you know it.’ I wanted to reach through the phone and slap her teeth into her throat!” Her shouting disturbed the fox, which turned and fled into the trees.

Emily stopped suddenly and sat down in the road, which in about twenty yards curved around a rocky bulge in the mountain slope and disappeared from sight. The cliff overhung the hundred-foot drop to Lisa’s back yard. She could see her roof and her garden from here—so small. The little statues that stood frozen next to her row of turnips were just pebbles from this height. The tops of the pines that grew in her back yard looked soft like grass, the two pecan trees in the front yard like young bushes. Her house was small and humble. She might reach out, pick it up, and place it on the other side of Emily’s house. She wondered if anyone could stand next to a cliff like this and not think about what it would be like to fall. It was like a weapon, and she couldn’t help thinking of what it could do.

Shaking her head at the thought, Lisa sat down on the pavement beside Emily, who brushed away tears. It was easy to see her own grief in Emily's hurt. But Lisa had lost no one. What was she grieving?

"I don't do this," Emily said. "I haven't cried in a long time."

"She thinks she knows all about you," said Lisa. "She thinks she can explain everything to you: what you want, what hurts you, what you feel like inside."

Emily nodded, but she patted Lisa's knee and smiled. "We should get up. This was really dumb. Somebody's liable to come barreling round that curve and kill us."

They stood and Emily took a few steps down the slope towards the base of the mountain, but instead of following her, Lisa put her legs over the guardrail and sat down on it. On the street below, a little boy who lived several houses down from Lisa rode his bike. He lived with his grandmother, Mrs. Simmons, who stood on the curb and watched as the boy shouted gleefully. This was the first time Lisa had seen him ride without training wheels. She wondered what he would think if he looked up to the cliff and saw her fly off of it like a dove. Ben would suffer if she jumped. But then he would also get what he wanted: the baby would die, too.

"Hey, be careful," said Emily. She threw her legs over the guardrail and sat down with her shoulder next to Lisa's arm. Lisa could feel her trembling.

"She thinks she can tell *you* what you're feeling," said Lisa. "She can tell you all about yourself."

"I'm sorry," said Emily. She took Lisa's arm and tried to pull her away from the cliff. "You're preggers with the baby you've wanted for ten years, you've got a good marriage, Thomas turned out to be a good kid, and here I am bitching about my sister and

crying over Rob. I didn't meant to depress you. Ben is a wonderful husband, a better husband than I deserve. You've got a good life, and you don't need to hear about all my trouble."

Lisa laughed. It sounded cruel in her own ears, and to cover it up she threw her arms around Emily and held her tight. "No, I'm sorry. You need an ear. I was trying to listen. I just wanted to help."

Something in Emily's voice made her insides turn, though. A creeping fear rolled in her chest like water sloshing in a barrel. When Emily spoke Ben's name, she sounded afraid and . . . and what? It was as if Emily trembled to speak Ben's name to Lisa, but she couldn't help herself. Emily was a lovely woman. Any man would fall for her—crave her, even. The lines of her face were gentle but defined, her eyes full and bright, her jaw a smooth arch from her ears to her chin. Ben used to kiss Lisa's jaw when they made love. Now he seemed afraid to touch her in any way. He never rubbed her legs or her back, never touched her where she wanted to be touched. She knew in his dreams he touched other women, probably Emily herself. And why not? Emily's had a lean, beautiful body. Except for the small bump in her belly and her sagging breasts, Lisa was shapeless and pale, her auburn hair the only part of her she could really call beautiful. Even her blue eyes, which Ben used to say were Lisa's best feature, looked tired and slightly bloodshot most of the time. Her legs and arms were too muscular to be pretty. She couldn't blame Ben for looking at Emily.

She looked across the valley at the mountain on the other side. She had fallen in love here—with Ben, with the green hills, with the mists that clung to the mountain ridge most mornings. She had loved the town, even—this town that drowsed in the mountains

that enclosed it like a womb. But now her eyes fell from the mountains to the hundred-foot drop in front of her and the hard ground below.

## CHAPTER III

In bed that night, Lisa lay facing away from Ben. She could tell by his breathing that he wasn't sleeping, either.

"I was thinking about you taking some classes," he said. "Warren Bishop's wife took some classes down at the junior college. He said she took some literature classes."

He rolled onto his side facing her and put his hand on her shoulder. She could feel his pulse, which was beating harder than normal. He stroked the back of her neck.

"You'll just need to have the abortion soon," he said. "They'll give you trouble about it after you're into your second trimester."

He kissed her shoulder.

"Just think of how much you've wanted to go," he said. "You'll be the first woman in town—that I know of, anyway—who went to college."

"I don't want to go to college," she said.

His arm stiffened and he stopped rubbing her neck.

"I don't believe that for a second," he said. "You always wanted to go."

"People change what they want."

He rolled away from her.

"They don't change like that," he said. "You still read those books. I saw you had that Shakespeare book out earlier today. You don't just give up your lifelong dream one day."

"How do you know it was my lifelong dream?"

The question infuriated him. She could feel his tension in the stillness of the bed. He was controlling his breathing, trying not to sound angry. Her own breath seemed loud in the quiet.

“You said you want the baby to have a good life,” she said. “We can give her a good life—”

“*It,*” he said in his most teacherly, condescending voice. “You don’t know it’s a *her.*”

“I don’t want to go to school,” she said. “I want this baby. We can afford another baby, and you know we can. You build those cabinets and we’ll have more than plenty of money.”

“I don’t want it,” he said. “I don’t want another kid.” He got up and walked to the foot of the bed.

Lisa had been waiting for him to admit the truth. She had known that money had nothing to do with it. But now the admission was more than she could bear. For years she had wanted another child, and after they tried for three years after Thomas was born, Doctor Harrigan told her she would probably never get pregnant again. “Sometimes infertility just happens,” he had said. Lisa had refused to accept the diagnosis, and now she was pregnant again.

“You always said—”

“I know what I always said,” said Ben. “I told you I wanted another one because I didn’t think you were going to get pregnant again. Thomas is seventeen years old. I’m almost forty. You’re thirty-six. Why do you think I would want another one?” He stood

at the foot of the bed in his underwear, gripping the bed post so hard that a thick vein stood out in the white flesh on the inside of his forearm.

“So this wasn’t about money,” she said. “And it wasn’t about me going to school.”

“It isn’t *about* anybody,” he said, shaking the bedpost so that the bed shuddered under her. “I just don’t want another kid. I want to keep doing things just like they are. I’d like for us to have some good times with Thomas while he’s still ours. I’d like to go and make some money doing this job cabinet job and get to spend it on something besides a new kid.” He spoke quietly, but under his voice ran the steady threat of violence. He had never hit her, and she had never been afraid of him. She was afraid now, though she wasn’t sure what she was afraid he’d do. Lying on the bed with only a sheet covering her and him standing over her nearly naked, she felt utterly exposed. “And yes, I wouldn’t mind seeing some of that money send you to the junior college,” he said. “Believe it, or don’t believe it. I don’t care. But if you think you have to go through with it, I’m leaving, and I’ll bet Thomas would go with me.”

He put on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt and walked out quietly. Soon she heard him ease the back door shut. He would probably go out to the shed and work on some piece of woodwork that had been his father’s. They had inherited a gun cabinet from Ben Senior that needed new hinges, a new latch, new knobs, and two new legs. Ben had been repairing it in his spare time, especially when he was frustrated.

Lisa sat up and pushed herself back against the head of the bed. She crossed her arms over her chest. In just two weeks she would reach the second trimester. If she did what Ben wanted, could that be an act of love? No, not if she did it *because* he wanted

her to do it. But if she did it because she wanted to protect the child from a father who didn't want her, could that be love? She could go to a doctor and let him snuff out the life of the girl—perhaps her name would be Victoria, or Virginia—and that could be a mercy.

Mercy.

*Mercy* meant nothing if not an injustice—an injustice that repairs or makes up for another injustice. Justice required punishment for wrongdoing, the repaying of debts. If mercy meant that debts were not paid and punishments were not rendered, then mercy itself was a kind of injustice. The cross itself had been the greatest injustice, a punishment inflicted on the only one who was innocent so that the guilty could escape punishment. Killing the baby would be a great injustice, also. Would this injustice bring about peace? Could the sacrifice of this child—*Victoria*, she must not forget to give her a name—save them?

But how did they need to be saved? Lisa would not be guilty of anything until she had the abortion. Ben was already guilty and nothing could redeem him, but their life together might be saved for the sake of Thomas. Thomas, who was going to be what Lisa could not be—she would live in him and he would be her. If Ben left her and took Thomas with him . . . But Thomas would not leave her, and he certainly wouldn't forgive Ben if he knew what Ben had asked her to do. Let Ben go, then.

Lisa never heard the creak of the shop door opening. Maybe Ben was out back smoking: he did that sometimes, even though he tried to hide it from Lisa. He kept a carton of Camels in the rusty green toolbox that stayed under the counter in the shop and another behind the seat of his truck. He didn't smoke often; the carton in the shop been there for two months, at least. But he had to know that he wasn't fooling her. He never

brushed his teeth or chewed gum after a cigarette, and the reek of it would follow him for a day at least when he smoked.

After a while—it might have been an hour—she heard raised voices outside. Two people were arguing. At first they seemed calm enough, but soon someone yelled. She couldn't understand what they said, but she knew it was Ben and Emily. The need to prove something, to prove the vague suspicion that she had not wanted to admit to herself before, seized Lisa. Pulling on her housecoat, she padded down the hall, avoiding the floorboards that creaked so she wouldn't wake Thomas. She cracked the front door open and slipped out, standing against the wall in the shadows so she wouldn't be seen. The air outside was still warm and humid. Standing on the porch listening, she felt like she had just stepped out of a hot shower. Ben and Emily were in Emily's back yard. Emily hissed at Ben, who seemed to barely contain his own voice. Lisa inched towards the end of her porch so she could see them. By the time she got there, though, the argument had ended, and she caught a glimpse of Ben walking away from Emily and disappearing behind their house. Emily watched him go with her arms crossed, wearing a pair of cotton shorts and a tank top. In the dark she couldn't see well, but Lisa thought Emily had been crying.

Lisa hurried back to the bedroom. Even if she made it back to bed before Ben, though, he would know she was still awake. She couldn't hide her racing heart or the trembling that shook her whole body. But Ben never came inside. She heard the shop door open and after a few minutes, the grinding of a handsaw.

She stood by the window, watching the light through the shop door flicker with Ben's silhouette. There were surely a hundred explanations for what she had seen, though none came to her mind. It was too easy to think of Ben glancing at Emily when he

thought Lisa wouldn't notice. But though she could easily imagine Ben having an affair, Lisa couldn't believe that Emily—her best friend—would betray her. There had to be another explanation.

But images of Ben and Emily together—Ben touching Emily with his hands and lips, Ben kissing that immaculate jaw up to her ear, Ben sucking on her earlobe—played for her in the dark like home movies on a projector. No sound, just flashes of light in which she saw her husband and her best friend tangled together on white sheets. But Emily had been angry with Ben. He had gone to her in the night—it probably wasn't the first time—and Emily had refused him. That's what the fight was about. She might have been deluding herself, but the thought of Ben lusting after Emily, of him finally going to her in the night and trying to get her to sleep with him, and of Emily refusing to betray her best friend gave her some calm—enough that she could stop staring out the window and lie down. Her long-held suspicion was now gone, but a faint hunger that she feared more than betrayal was growing inside her. Now that she had seen that her suspicions had been justified, she was afraid no proof could satiate this new hunger except undeniable confirmation that Ben had been sleeping with Emily. It was not the idea that Emily had been giving Ben the pleasure he didn't find in Lisa anymore that tortured her; it was not even the pictures of Ben and Emily together that swarmed her mind. The fear that she would never sleep, never know any kind of peace at all, until she had proof that the affair had happened—that thought alone made her crave death.

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In the morning when Lisa woke, she was alone. It was raining. She didn't know how long it took for sleep to come, but it had come, probably as a small grace from God.

Mercifully, she had not dreamed anything.

She sat up in bed and listened. Thomas and Ben were in the kitchen. She looked at the clock. It was nearly seven, and Ben would leave for work soon. How long had he and Thomas been in there together? She got up and felt in the dark for her pants. Her eyes burned. She pulled a shirt over her head and felt around for her pants. Thomas laughed about something, and Ben laughed, too. Lisa could smell fried deer sausage. She could not let Ben win Thomas over. He would not take him from her. Could she tell Thomas what she thought Ben was doing with Emily? Not until she knew for sure. She stepped into one leg of her pants and stumbled, grabbed a bedpost, and then fell. Her hip hit the floor first and rattled the mirror and pictures that hung on the wall. The back of her head struck the footboard, and she closed her eyes tight. She saw stars. Then she heard a sound like thunder, but it turned out to be footfalls coming down the hallway.

“Lisa?” said Ben. He dropped to her side and put his hand under her back to raise her to a sitting position. “You okay?”

Thomas came next. He knelt in front of her and held her hand.

“I'm fine,” she said. She laughed, but it sounded fake to her. “I'm fine.”

Thomas looked at her suspiciously.

“Tripped over my pants,” she said, squeezing his hand.

“Well, maybe you should stay in bed a little while longer,” said Ben. “You had a rough night last night. I slept on the couch so you could get some sleep.”

“Funny,” she said. “I thought you went next door last night.”

This startled Ben, but he recovered quickly.

“No, I was here all night. Why would I go next door? Thomas and I took care of breakfast. Let us help you back into bed.”

“I’m fine.” She brushed both of their hands off—she didn’t want to be touched, especially not by Ben—and pushed herself onto her hands and knees. Her pants were still around one ankle. Ben put an arm under her elbow as she stood and she accepted his help grudgingly.

“She probably needs to see Doctor Harrigan,” said Thomas.

“Now lay down and sleep a while,” he said. “We’re fine. I’m about to leave for work, and Mona is going to come to get Thomas.”

“You don’t think she needs to see a doctor?” Thomas said.

“She just needs sleep.”

Hating herself for it, she let him lead her back to bed. She still felt dizzy, but more from sleepiness than from the fall itself, she thought. Ben kissed her on the top of her head as she lay down.

“Just lay there,” said Ben. “I’ll ask Mona to come in and check on you when she gets here.”

She rolled onto her side and covered her face with her hands.

*I hate you*, she thought.

Thomas came and sat on the bed with her after Ben left. When Lisa opened her eyes, he was a dark shape against the yellow light that came through the curtains.

“I had a lot of trouble with your labor,” she said. “You might have died. Me, too.”

She couldn't tell anything about his face. Her eyes weren't adjusting to the light very well.

"Do you want some food? Or a drink?" he said.

"I just want you to be what you want to be," she said. None of this made sense to him, she was sure, but in her mind it all worked out.

"I called Doctor Harrigan, and he said he'll be over soon," said Thomas.

"I'm fine," she said. "I want to say some things to you. I know that you want something different than Ben wants for you. I know you want the same things I wanted to do but never did, but you can do those things."

"I think you just need to be quiet right now," said Thomas.

"You won't ever leave me," she said. Even to herself, she sounded delirious. She was pleading with him.

"Mom," Thomas said. "What are you talking about?"

She was trying not to fall asleep, but Thomas's face kept fading.

"He's not who you think he is," she said.

The wetness that started between her legs woke her from her drowsiness.

Thomas's face became clear and every creak of the house echoed in her ears. She knew at the very moment it happened. Doctor Harrigan had told her that even if she became pregnant, she might have trouble carrying the baby. The greasy feeling ran down into the crack of her rear and spread on her inner thighs.

"Oh," she said. She rolled to the edge of the bed and stood. She had left a trail of drops on the sheet. "Oh, God, no." Her knees felt weak, and she had to steady herself with her hands on the mattress. Thomas ran around the bed and held her.

“What’s happening?” he said.

“It’s my fault,” she said.

“Nothing is your fault. Lay down,” said Thomas, his voice cracking like it had during puberty. He tried to push her back onto the bed, but she resisted. “Mom, please.”

She felt it soaking her panties and running down her leg like a crimson tear.

“It’s my fault.”

“Stop, Mom.” He was crying.

Now Lisa’s head was swimming again. The bed swayed, and the floor seemed to rise up to meet her. She fell to her knees and lay her upper body on the mattress, trying to hold it still. The warm, sticky flow dripped down her thighs and onto the floor.

“I hate . . .” she said.

“Mom!” said Thomas. He put his hands on her side and tried to lift her into the bed, but she couldn’t move even with his help. She pressed her face against the bed sheet and smelled Ben’s Old Spice deodorant there. She needed to vomit, but nothing would come up. She only bled.

“Lisa?” said a voice from another part of the house. “Lisa? Thomas?” It was Mona.

Lisa screamed.

## CHAPTER IV

Several days later, Lisa lay at the foot of the mountain in the warm afternoon. Emily sat next to her, reading the Beatitudes from Matthew to her. They had been doing this most days since the miscarriage. Lisa would lie in the dirt, and Emily would read from Lisa's Bible. Emily didn't know the Bible that well, so a few times she started reading from one of Isaiah's early chapters or Ecclesiastes, and she would stop when she realized that it was depressing. This morning Lisa had told her to go to Matthew 5, the chapter she usually went to for comfort, but she found little comfort in it now. She wasn't sure she even believed in it anymore. If anybody qualified for the blessedness that Christ spoke of, she did. But she felt no blessedness, not now. The sun had risen to the top of one of the huge pecan trees in the front yard, but a thick limb eclipsed it and cast a shadow on Lisa's face. She hummed "Easy Living" under her breath. After a few minutes, Emily closed Lisa's Bible and laid it down beside her.

"What's wrong?" said Lisa.

"I just don't know what to do," said Emily.

"Neither do I."

Emily sighed. From Lisa's perspective—lying on the ground and looking up at her friend—Emily looked a little less stunning: her nose seemed just slightly too large, too pointed for her face, her cheekbones high, her lips a little thin. But her lips looked thin because she was annoyed. Or worried perhaps. She looked on the verge of breaking.

Emily had been a wonderful friend since the miscarriage. On the first day Ben went back to work, Lisa lay with her head in Emily's lap and cried while Emily stroked her hair. Emily had cooked for her every day and made sure that she actually ate. She

read to her. She made her go walking in the mornings, saying sunlight helps everything. All this might have proven that Emily loved Lisa, that whatever Ben might have done, Emily would never betray her. But after Lisa admitted to herself that she had suspicions about Emily and Ben, no evidence could ever prove either Ben's or Emily's fidelity. No amount of love or care could erase Lisa's doubt. This was her hell: that the only way she could ever be sure was to prove that the betrayal had happened. She must live the rest of her life either in this crippling doubt or with the knowledge that her husband had been fucking her best friend.

Like someone working up the courage—or the despair—to pull the trigger, Lisa had been trying to force herself to confront Emily with what she had seen the night before the miscarriage. But she could not do it. She had lost Ben and might lose Thomas. She could not lose Emily, too. The illusion that Emily had refused to give Ben what he wanted might be better than the truth—but she knew that she was fooling herself. The lie that Emily had not betrayed her would never calm the restless idea, the sometimes raging and sometimes dormant thought that her only choice was between lifelong uncertainty and lifelong despair. Not even sleep could relieve her.

“I was listening to you,” said Lisa. “I won't sing anymore.”

“It's not that,” said Emily. She drew her legs up to her chest and propped her arms on her knees. “I mean, it's nothing.”

Lying this close to the cliff face and looking up, Lisa couldn't see the top. The rock stretched up and up, overtaking the tall pines and disappearing into the hazy sky. To fall from that height would be to fall forever. She didn't think she'd ever kill herself that way. After the jump, she'd have an eternity to change her mind, but by then it would be

too late. It would have to be something sudden: a short fall from a chair in a closet, a quick snap, a sharp crack, and then darkness.

“You should leave Ben,” Emily said.

Lisa didn’t answer. Was Emily about to admit the affair? Or did she only want Lisa to leave Ben so that she could be with him? Lisa felt ridiculous. She chided herself for thinking like she might have in junior high, but her heart and lungs felt constricted like something had coiled around her chest. She sat up and leaned against a rock wall, resting her face where a beam of sunlight streamed down and struck the mountain. Even though she shut her eyes, the light stung.

“If I had the courage to leave him, I would have done before now,” she said. “I don’t think Thomas would leave him.” But she didn’t know; that was the problem. “I don’t know what he would do.”

“What he’s done to you is wrong,” said Emily. “You can’t stay with him. You’re just proving to him that you’re helpless without him.”

Lisa stood and paced, her arms crossed. Something like a vibration coursed through her body. She felt brittle like a dry maple leaf in fall, and she thought that if she didn’t move away from Emily she would break apart.

“You used to think Ben was great,” said Lisa. “You know he wanted me to abort the baby? He wanted . . .” She thought if she could just weep, but nothing came: her eyes were as dry as sawdust. “He said he would leave me if I didn’t do it.”

Emily did start to cry, and Lisa stopped pacing to stare at her. These were bitter tears, tears of guilt. Emily shuddered and grabbed handfuls of her lovely hair and pulled. Lisa’s heart thudded. It was coming, now. Certainty.

“He wanted you to have the abortion so that he *could* leave you,” Emily said.

“And he wants to leave you now.”

Lisa knelt down and sat on her heels.

“How do you know that?” she whispered. There was no stopping, not now that part of the thing had been exposed. She had to stare it in the face.

“He will leave you,” said Emily. “He’s only waiting because he doesn’t want to feel guilty about leaving you right after you lost the baby.”

“How do you know that?” said Lisa.

Emily’s mouth quivered and her eyes strained. She was not beautiful.

“Tell me how you know.”

Lisa stood and realized that she had handfuls of grass in her hands. She opened her fingers slowly and let the blades fall by her feet. Emily would have to admit what she had done now. No illusion would satisfy now. Lisa had to know every detail, every caress of Emily’s finger, every touch of Ben’s lips, every word he had said to her. But Emily sobbed quietly, rocking almost imperceptibly, her arms wrapped around her legs.

“*Tell me now!*” Lisa screamed.

This startled Emily, who shook like a gunshot had gone off nearby.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

Lisa screamed at her, the sound hellish even to her own ears. Emily got up and strode towards her house, her little yellow house where she had slept with Lisa’s husband. After a few feet, her long stride became a jog. She held her hands over her face as she went.

*“What did you do?”* Lisa screamed after her, and her voice broke. Her throat burned. When Emily went through her back door and let the screen door slam, Lisa’s knees failed and she fell onto her back. The tears finally came. She rolled onto her side and cried, her muscles in her arms and legs convulsing. After she had exhausted herself, she lay quietly on her back, her head tilted backwards slightly. Thomas would be home soon, so she had to collect herself. Five buzzards flew in a slow circle over the other end the valley where the mountains came together to form the U-shape that enclosed the town. They glided on their big black wings in their usual lazy vortex, sailing easily on the still, moist air of early April. If she’d had a gun she might have shot at them. Nothing about death should be that easy.

## CHAPTER V

Mr. Stevens, the school principal, took Thomas out of American History at 12:40—ten minutes early. He wore a grave look, and Thomas wondered if John Wallace had blamed him for the wad of gum stuck to his locker again. Mr. Stevens was a big man with stone gray hair whose eyes looked huge behind his thick glasses. He walked with a swagger, the large ring of keys that hung on his belt jingling and echoing through the hallway. He led Thomas towards the front corridor, and when they passed the office door without stopping, Thomas said, “Where are we going?”

In answer the principal held open the front door and pointed at a blue car waiting in the driveway. It was Emily Mitchell’s car. Through the glare on the passenger window he could barely make out the shape of her head and long hair.

“She’s here to pick you up,” said Mr. Stevens.

The morning heat was rising. Moisture beaded on Thomas’s skin as he walked to the car. On one of the nearby farms a bull bellowed and a cow answered. He threw his books in the backseat of the car and got in. Mrs. Mitchell’s face was red and streaked with dried tears. Something had happened to Benjamin at work. Another boy’s father had died at the sawmill two years ago, cut in half by a band saw. Now it had happened to his own father.

He stared at her for a long time. Her eyes were shut, and her hands gripped the steering wheel. She took a deep breath as if she had something to say, but she let it out through her teeth. He had seen her mowing her yard this morning when he left for school; she still wore the same white sleeveless shirt and yellow shorts she always wore when she did yard work. She smelled of sweat and gasoline and cut grass.

She put the car in gear and let it roll for several yards before she put her foot on the gas.

“Is it my dad?” Thomas said when she pulled out onto the road. She hit the brake and skidded to a stop. It must be Benjamin, and his first thought was not of the loss of his father. He thought of his mother first. She had already lost a baby. Now to lose Benjamin, too—

“It’s your momma,” Mrs. Mitchell said—nearly screamed—and she covered her face with her hands. “She shot herself. This morning. Just now.”

“No,” said Thomas.

“She tried to tell me,” Mrs. Mitchell sobbed. “I wasn’t listening, but she tried to tell me. I didn’t take it seriously. I thought she was just depressed about the baby.”

“No.” It was all he could say. She had seemed happier this morning than she had since before the miscarriage. She had been reading her Bible when he found her in the kitchen, and she had already cooked breakfast. She had said nothing cryptic, nothing to indicate what she was going to do. She made a plate of pancakes for him and sat while he ate. His father had come out of the bedroom earlier than normal. He made his own plate and sat down with them. They had talked about a fair that was coming to Huntsville. “We should go,” she had said. We should go. His father had even left for work a little late. He said he’d tell his boss his truck gave him trouble that morning. He had been still sitting at the table with Momma when Thomas left for school.

“I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Mitchell said.

The miscarriage had changed his mother—he had watched her change for the last two weeks. Before she lost the baby, Thomas had been able to set his clock by his

mother's routine. She was always already up and making breakfast when Thomas woke. On mornings when he had school, Thomas would wake hearing the sound of dishes and her voice. She sang every morning like it was Sunday, and she usually sang Billie Holiday. If Benjamin had known who Billie Holiday was, he would have made fun of her for singing "black music." But even when she was crooning "Easy Living" under her breath, she could have been singing a hymn for the joy in her voice. Since the morning he had found her delirious in her bed and bleeding between her legs, she had seemed stretched, pulled tight like the arms of a bow. Her few terse sentences, especially in the evenings—"Supper's waiting," "Trash is full," "I need your dirty clothes"—had creaked like the wood of Benjamin's longbow when he pulled the string and anchored the nock of an arrow at the corner of his mouth. She had still sung in the mornings, but only "Easy Living." The lyrics had sounded darkly ironic in her strange mood: "So hush, little baby. Don't you cry."

Mrs. Mitchell wiped her face and turned towards him, though she didn't look into his eyes. "Your dad is on his way home," she said. She breathed out slowly. "I shouldn't tell you this right now."

Looking past her face Thomas could see several people standing outside the school entrance watching them. One of the men started across the front lawn towards the car. The others only stared. A few of the women stood with their hands over their mouths. As the man got closer, Thomas saw that it was Mr. Colson, his math teacher.

"Ben tried to make her have an abortion," said Mrs. Mitchell. "He was pushing her to do it the night before she had the miscarriage."

Thomas stared at her, but she wouldn't look at him.

“She told you that?” he said.

Mr. Colson crouched and stared into the driver’s-side window. He mouthed to Mrs. Mitchell, *You okay?* She nodded, and he said, *You want me to drive?* She shook her head, waved for him to step back, and started driving again. Looking in the side mirror as they drove away from the school, Thomas watched Mr. Colson stand by the road with his hands on his hips, looking helpless.

A fight his parents had had several weeks ago, which hadn’t seemed very important at the time, now made sense to Thomas. As usual, it had happened after he went to bed; if they were going to fight, they always did it when they thought he was asleep. He couldn’t understand much of what they said that night, but at one point Benjamin exploded, “It’s *legal* now! Fucking *legal!*” His parents hadn’t spoken to each other the next day. His mother had talked cheerfully to Thomas over eggs and bacon in the morning, but she was silent when Benjamin came into the kitchen to drink his orange juice before leaving for work early. Thomas looked at the bacon he had burnt and the few bits of egg left on his plate. After Benjamin let the screen front door slam, Momma said, “You’ve got an essay to write this week, huh? I saw Mrs. Bedsole at the store yesterday.”

Thomas had forgotten about the essay. Mrs. Bedsole had asked each student to write three pages about what they want to be when they grow up.

“What are you going to write about?” said Momma.

Thomas stared at a piece of burnt bacon. “I don’t know yet.”

“Well it’s due tomorrow, right?” She smiled, but the skin on her forehead looked tight against her skull. A thin blue vein running up from between her eyes to her hairline was just visible. “You’d better come up with a topic.”

Thomas put the bacon in his mouth. “I will,” he muttered.

Momma pounded a fist on the table and shook the butter knife and fork on her plate, but then she smiled, and the smile was more startling than the violence of hitting the table. “This is important.”

Thomas swallowed without chewing long enough and a jagged piece of bacon hurt his throat. “I’ll get it done.”

Even though he still had half an egg and a piece of bacon left to eat, she took both of their plates and put them on the counter next to the sink. Humming almost inaudibly, she refilled her coffee cup. After she poured too much milk in it—she almost overfilled the cup—she left the carton open and sitting on the counter.

“You’d better leave soon,” she said. “It’s already muggy outside, and you don’t want to have to run to school.” She didn’t look at him.

Thomas nodded, though he knew she wouldn’t see, and went to his room to get his books. When he came back, she was sitting at the table staring at an ad for a crock-pot in *Southern Living*. He put the milk back in the refrigerator, picked up the last piece of bacon, and kissed her on top of her head before he left for school.

Now she was dead. Benjamin had pushed her into it.

“You cannot tell him what I told you,” said Mrs. Mitchell. “But he is responsible for this. Do you understand?”

Thomas didn’t answer. He knew she was right about the abortion.

When they turned onto CR-15—Thomas’s road, the only road in and out of the valley—Mrs. Mitchell pulled over onto the curb and stopped at Curry’s Service Station, which had been closed for three years.

“You could make him pay for this,” she said. “We could.”

Thomas stared at a spot of mud on his shoes. She didn't say anything for what seemed like a long time. Whatever she meant, he didn't want to hear it—though he thought he already knew.

“You left before he went to work this morning, didn't you?”

Thomas didn't answer.

“He always leaves before you in the mornings,” she said.

If something happened to Ben, he might be able to live with Mrs. Mitchell. It would only be a couple of years anyway, and then he could get a job or go to college if he could get a good scholarship. Ben would still be in jail when he graduated from Alabama or Auburn. He would still be in jail when Thomas was teaching school in some place far away from here.

“I wiped off the gun when I found her,” said Mrs. Mitchell.

The gun?

“There is no proof one way or another,” she said. “They've been fighting a lot lately, haven't they? You've heard them fighting every night, haven't you?”

Cows grazed in the pasture across the street. Right in the middle of the pasture stood two old pecan trees. One of them had been struck by lightning and was dead. It stood shorter than the other, and several of its branches had splintered and fallen.

“He is the one who did this,” she said. “It wasn't her fault. Do you understand that?”

“Which gun did she use?”

Mrs. Mitchell frowned. "I don't know. It was a revolver. I don't know anything about guns."

It must have been the .38 Special. Thomas shuddered. The Special would have made a terrible mess.

Mrs. Mitchell breathed heavily for several minutes without speaking. She was waiting for an answer. Thomas had understood her perfectly, but he wouldn't give her any confirmation. He had already lost one parent. Whether or not he did what she was suggesting, he was losing his father. He had already lost him.

After a while, she put the car into gear and started down CR-15. Thomas's house stood near the entrance to the valley. Ahead, he saw his own little white house at the end of a long line of houses. His and Mrs. Mitchell's houses were the last two before the road wound through the valley entrance and followed Walthall Creek until it joined the river. A black car waited out front. A small crowd stood in the yard. Before they got to the house he could pick out the long, white beard of Reverend Thompson, the pastor of the Baptist church in town. Father McGuinness, the priest at St. Joseph's, the old lady who lived three houses down, and Aunt Mona were also there. Benjamin hadn't gotten back yet.

"If I do what I plan to do, it will be really good if you can remember some fights that you've heard or seen," said Emily. "Anything that you might remember."

"My mom's dead and you want him in jail?"

Her eyes flared like cat's eyes and she gripped his arm tight.

"He did this," she said. "You don't know what he's like."

Thomas reached for the door handle, but Emily held his arm and pulled him towards her. Thomas's heart had always swelled in his chest when she touched him before. Now her hand felt cold on his arm.

"I might tell them some things that aren't true," she said. "I might tell them that your dad and I have been . . ." She didn't finish, but Thomas had seen Ben looking at Mrs. Emily. It would be easy to believe that Ben would have slept with her if she had been willing. "Just don't think that I would ever betray your mom. I wouldn't."

"I'll say it's not true," said Thomas. "I'll say it's a lie."

Mrs. Emily touched his chin and gently turned his face towards her. For a second Thomas thought she would kiss him. He licked his lips.

"If it had happened," she said, "you wouldn't have known about it. People are really careful to keep things like that a secret."

He flushed, ashamed that the thought of kissing her had even occurred to him.

"But it's a lie," he said.

"Ben deserves to go to jail. If a lie gets him what he deserves . . ."

Aunt Mona and the rest of the crowd in his yard watched them, waiting for him to get out of the car. Mrs. Emily held up a single finger to them through the passenger window.

"Please," she said, rubbing the back of Thomas's head. "I know this will hurt, but it will hurt more to know that he did this and got off like the victim."

"Did he have sex with you?" Thomas said. He looked at her and waited for the answer he knew would never come. He thought that this must have been the closest his

face had ever come to hers; her nose was stopped up from crying, and he could feel the breath from her mouth on his own. “It doesn’t really matter, does it?” he said.

“Please, Thomas,” she said. “This hurts both of us enough.”

“You don’t know anything about how I’m hurting right now,” he said.

Tears—one from each eye—poured over her eyelids and tumbled down until they dripped from her pretty jaw.

“I might have wondered,” said Thomas. “I might have wondered whether or not you and Ben were screwing.”

She winced, and Thomas was sorry that he had said it that way. He got out of the car, and Aunt Mona threw her arms around him and sobbed into his shoulder. Her fingers dug into his back and she shuddered. He looked over her shoulder at the house. Even on warm days like today, his mother normally opened the house for a few hours in the morning, but the front door and all the windows were closed. She had not even drawn back the curtains.

Thomas held Aunt Mona close for a moment before gently pushing her away. He started down the path to the front door and paused to look when she reached the two stone statues that stood in the garden: two children, a boy and a girl wearing overalls, their heads round and a little too big for their bodies, a fishing hat on the boy’s head. Something had knocked the girl over, and her body had split in half at the waist on the bed of pebbles around her.

“You don’t want to go in there,” said Reverend Thompson. “You don’t want to see your momma like that.” He touched Thomas’s arm with his hand, which was bloated from diabetes. Thomas ignored him and climbed the steps.

“Boy, please,” said the preacher. Before Thomas could reach the door, Reverend Thompson tried to grab him. Thomas dodged the old man and ran to his parents’ bedroom. The body lay on the freshly made bed as if she were taking a nap. A .22 pistol Thomas used to hunt squirrels lay on her chest with her hand drooped across it. Her mouth gaped open, and there was a small hole in the soft skin under her jaw. Blood had leaked out of it and dried in a trickle down her throat. Thomas backed away slowly, staring at the woman’s gray eyes. This wasn’t—couldn’t be—his Mom. She had blue eyes, and this dead woman’s eyes were gray like the storm clouds that rolled over the valley during the summer. But the crucifix necklace that the woman wore was Momma’s; he had given it to her for her birthday with money he had made helping to put up new sheetrock in Uncle John’s house. The stringy hair was hers: no matter how much she fussed with her brush and hairspray, it always looked thin. But the eyes were wrong. This was not her.

Someone behind him was saying, “It’s okay.”

Backing out of the room he tripped on a space heater and fell with a loud crash onto the hardwood floor. The back of his head hit the doorframe.

“Oh, Jesus.” That was Aunt Mona.

Strong hands gripped him under his arms and lifted him to his feet. Aunt Mona pulled him out of the bedroom and towards the front door. “You poor boy,” she said.

“My poor sister . . .”

Eyes stared sympathetically at him. He was someone to be pitied now. He would be forever the damaged one who had witnessed his mother’s miscarriage, who had seen his mother lying on a bed with a bullet through her skull. The old woman and Mrs.

Mitchell stood on the porch looking inside, and both were crying. Deputy Shoemaker had arrived and stood behind them with his hands in his pockets.

“Come on outside,” said Aunt Mona, pulling his hand. “It’ll be better.”

Thomas shook loose and went through the kitchen to the back door. Aunt Mona called his name, and someone else said, “Let him go.” He thought that was Father McGuinness, and he was grateful to the priest for it.

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Outside he climbed the hill to a spot at the base of the mountain where his mother often went in the mornings. She would stretch her legs in front of her, lean against the cliff face, and read. He put his hand on the gray and blue rock face. Cool, green moss grew in patches and fingers that inched their way up the crevasses that rainwater had etched into its hard surface. The stone seemed impossibly solid. Faith the size of a mustard seed could move it, but under Thomas’s hands it stood eternally unmoved. The cool of it felt pleasant in the humidity. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against a bare spot in the rock, but then suddenly remembered the image of his mother’s dead eyes, the hole in her throat like someone had punctured it with an ice pick. Even if he had believed her capable of suicide, he would have never believed that she would have done it this way. His gun. On the antique bed that had belonged to her grandmother. It was cruel, using Thomas’s gun to end her life, and using a gun at all seemed messier than the woman he had known.

“Thomas,” said a voice from the house. He turned and saw Father McGuinness coming toward him with his tall walking stick. He limped on his wooden left leg. He had

had lost the leg while serving on a British battleship during the Second World War. He nearly slipped on a patch of pine straw, and Thomas ran forward to catch him.

“I’m alright, boy,” he said.

The priest put out his arm and leaned on the rock face, breathing heavily. The sun shone through the pine trees on his face. Thomas could see dark blemishes and blue veins in the man’s translucent skin.

“They wanted me to talk you back inside,” said the priest. “I know you want to be alone. I just hope you won’t forget that other people will miss her, too. Your father will need you, and so will your Aunt.”

Thomas stared up through the trees at the sky. Thick cumulus clouds were rolling over the mountain ridge from the southwest, promising rain in the next day or two. His mother sometimes said they reminded her of cows, and they did move slowly like cattle cresting a hill, making shadows in the trees that carpeted the slopes of the valley. Where, what, who she was now, he didn’t want to think. She had become someone he didn’t know the moment she had taken the gun from his dresser drawer. And killing herself on the old, ornate bed that had been her great grandmother’s and then her own mother’s . . .

“Goddamit,” he said, and he sat down.

Father McGuinness was quiet. Thomas could see the vague shape of the old man in the periphery of his vision, leaning on his walking stick. Both hands were on top of the staff and he rested his chin on top of his hands. Thomas had been half looking for a reprimand for using the Lord’s name in vain.

“With some things, that’s all you can say,” said the priest.

Thomas put his face in his hands. He wanted to cry, but his eyes felt dry and hot. He shut them and his eyeballs burned as they had on the day he visited his father at the sawmill and got sawdust in his eyes. The sting and the feel of moisture seeping into his eyes felt both pleasant and mocking. He had spent a week helping his uncle rebuild a split-rail fence last summer. The ache in his muscles when he finally collapsed on his bed every evening had been the best feeling in the world. It had reminded him that there was something to come back to every night; the rhythm of the day's work had been for a purpose. This burning in his eyes was not quite the same, but it had an instructive effect similar to that ache in his body when he finally got rest at the end of the days working with Uncle John. The ache had been pleasurable because it had taught him what work was for, far more than anything his father had told him. The dry sting in his eyes seemed like a lesson, too, but a bitter one. He couldn't cry, and it didn't matter because his mother's death wasn't about him.

"I'll see you inside when you get ready," said the priest.

Thomas lay down in the grass and stared up through the pines. The slow-moving clouds were nearly gone. For a moment, Thomas was surprised out of his grief. There had been so many clouds moving so slowly, but now there was only the sky spread out pale and thin like a painting. He turned his head and watched the old man walk down the hill, watching the ground and carefully stepping over the roots that twisted through the yard like diseased veins. Someone in the front yard—Thomas thought it was Aunt Mona, but he couldn't tell for sure—was screaming hysterically.

## CHAPTER VI

The road home from the sawmill where Ben worked wound through the Appalachian foothills for eleven miles before it finally reached Ophion. Thomas would be waiting for him. Thomas would need him right now.

“You can drive faster,” he said. Scott Sojourner was driving Ben’s truck, and he was driving too slow. “Or pull over and let me drive.”

“Not doing that,” said Scott, but he did speed up a little.

Thomas would have made it home by now. Emily was going to pick him up. Emily. The affair had ended badly, and although he could think of no particular reason not to trust her, Ben couldn’t help feeling uneasy about her having any close contact with Thomas right now.

The plan had been that he would leave Lisa after Thomas graduated high school and move with Emily to Birmingham. After Lisa got pregnant, he didn’t tell Emily that he was going to ask Lisa to have an abortion. When she found out about the baby, Emily didn’t want to go through with moving to Birmingham, so they kept meeting during the night when Lisa thought Ben was outside working in the shop or smoking. Sometimes they would meet during his lunch hour at an abandoned school hidden in the woods near the sawmill. They would park their vehicles in the bus shed and climb through shattered windows into a kindergarten classroom and make love on the floor surrounded by dusty cardboard pictures of anthropomorphic letter T’s and R’s and C’s with eyes, mouths, and hands.

The last time he went to see Emily—the night before Lisa had the miscarriage—he told her that he had tried to get Lisa to have an abortion. That was the end of it.

“You son of a bitch,” she had said. She had been leaning against her kitchen counter in the dark wearing her pajamas: a pair of red cotton shorts that clung to her hips and a thin, white tank top. She crossed her arms as if covering herself for an unexpected visitor and stared at him, her mouth open.

“Don’t give me that,” Ben had said. “Don’t get all righteous on me now. You’re her best friend and you’ve been sleeping with her husband. You’ve been planning to—”

“Not anymore,” she said. “I’m done with you. I’ve been done with you. I just haven’t had the courage to end this before now.”

“Come on,” he said, putting on a comforting voice. “She’s not going to do it, and I only asked her so we could be together.” He stepped towards her, his arms out.

“Stay away from me,” she said. Her hand moved to the handle of the silverware drawer.

Riding passenger in his truck through the mountains, on his way to confront Lisa’s body, he understood that Emily had been afraid of him. Now that the affair was over, she might try to fill Thomas’s head with stories—that Ben had been the cause of the miscarriage, that even Lisa’s suicide has been his fault. She had been Lisa’s friend first. After the way they ended things, she would probably want to turn Thomas against him. In a way he probably *had* been the cause of Lisa’s suicide. In ending her own life she had punished him for trying to get her to have the abortion. She had wanted the baby more than anything else; he had only seen that when it was too late. He thought that given the choice between the education that she had dreamed about since high school and having another child at thirty-seven, she would have had the abortion. But she had been fragile and her hopes had been built too high. The child had been everything—to the exclusion

of him and Thomas. The miscarriage had broken her, taken all the life out of her. With the warnings Doctor Harrigan had given her for years, she shouldn't have been surprised that she miscarried. It had taken her almost seventeen years to conceive again; no one should have expected the pregnancy to last.

In Ben's world everything seemed turned upside down: women had finally gotten the right to abortion and Lisa had refused it as if he were asking her to sell Thomas down the river. No one could rightly blame him for not wanting another child when he was about to turn forty. And had Lisa ever stopped to consider that she wasn't the only one who would have been affected by her having another baby? Had she not even thought about the changes that it would make in Thomas's life?

The hell of the whole thing was that now that everything had happened, he wasn't sure he could have left Lisa—even if she had gone through with the abortion, even if she had never been pregnant at all. He did love her; he had loved her even when he was with Emily. Several times he had come close to moaning Lisa's name while he was having sex with Emily, and not merely out of habit.

"That poor boy," said Scott. "That poor, poor boy." He snorted and turned up the fan. "My momma used to say everything happens for a reason. That's hard to believe about something like this."

Ben strained to hold back his sobs. He couldn't believe that Lisa had done this to them, to Thomas, right now when they were about to lose him, when Ben was about to lose him to books and teachers. Thomas would go to college. He might even get into Alabama—his grades were good enough. But going there and getting a degree and never coming back to Ophion, he would lose everything that Ben had taught him. The boy

could miter a corner almost perfectly—no seam and no rough edges. He could rip an eight-foot one-by right down the center in a perfect line. Give him a good knife and a good block of birch or pine and he could carve just about anything you wanted. The two of them had built rocking chairs together since Thomas was seven. The boy wasn't bad in the woods either. Last year he had stood still while a wild boar charged them and shot it right between the shoulders. He could already draw Ben's seventy-five-pound longbow, and it wouldn't be long before he could hunt with it.

Ben had thought that if he could leave with Emily and start over again, that it might be easier to accept Thomas going away. Lisa had family to go to. She wouldn't be alone. And without Ben and Thomas holding her back, she could read and maybe get a scholarship to go to college somewhere. Thomas would go and do what she wanted for him, and she would be able to live the life she wanted, too: lost in books, lost in her own mind, living in a world made by other people's ideas. It would have been best for all of them for Ben to leave and be with Emily.

But now Lisa was gone, and the boy had loved her a great deal. He'd need Ben now, need him to fill up that space that Lisa had left behind. Was it possible that this had happened so that Thomas could become a man, someone who worked for a living and made things that people could use instead of being the dreamer that Lisa was—had been? Ben's own father, Ben Senior, had been a Free-Will Baptist and had no patience for people who said everything happens for a reason. When Ben's cousin died at ten, his father told him, "Sometimes people get what's coming to them, but sometimes people just die. Sometimes it doesn't have anything to do with God's will. Some people just get cancer and there's nothing anybody—you, me, God—is going to do about it. That's why

Jesus wept—because people die and He knew death is a horror.” But was that true? Was Lisa’s death a complete waste? If some kind of good came out of it—if Thomas became the man he could and should be—then had God’s will not been in Lisa’s suicide? Could suicide happen in order to bring about good for someone else?

But Lisa. The miscarriage had broken her. It had broken Ben’s heart to see her suffer from it. He should have known better than to put her back into bed after the fall. He should have taken her straight to Doctor Harrigan. He had even decided on the way to work that morning that he wouldn’t leave her if she decided to keep the baby. He had planned to tell her that night when he came home from the mill: she could keep the kid, and he would try to be happy about it. They would raise it to be like its older brother. But now Lisa was gone and Ben couldn’t tell her anything. He couldn’t tell her that he had realized too late that he still loved her, that he had been a fool to think that Emily could have made him happier, that even though he had not wanted another kid he could have made sacrifices. Whatever might have happened, however things might have been if she hadn’t had the miscarriage—none of that mattered now that there were only Ben and Thomas.

“She didn’t die for nothing,” he said finally. “God’s going to bring something good out of this.”

“I don’t know what kind of good can—”

“I can do something!” Ben screamed. Scott looked away from the road and came into a turn too fast. He jerked the wheel, and the truck swayed and squealed tires through the curve. Ben slid on the vinyl seat, bumped the gearshift with his leg, and knocked the transmission into neutral.

“Sorry about that,” said Ben. “I just . . .”

“I understand,” said Scott, but he sounded shaken. He didn’t speak for the rest of the drive.

When Scott parked the truck next to the curb, several people stood in the yard: the preacher from the Baptist church who had replaced his father fifteen years ago; the priest from Lisa’s church; Lisa’s sister, Mona; the old woman from down the street who kept the noisy kid; and Emily. Even from this distance he could see that her eyes were puffy and her cheeks red. She looked as if she had been in a fistfight. When Scott killed the truck motor everyone stared. Emily turned and walked away, wandering across the yard without any semblance of purpose.

It struck Ben that Lisa’s friendship with Emily had been an odd coupling. They couldn’t have been more different. Emily had no interest in any of the things that Lisa had loved: books, religion, singing. Next to Lisa, you might think Emily was shallow, but that was only because she was beautiful in a conventional way: blonde hair, tall build, long legs. Lisa had also been pretty, but in a quieter way. Lisa’s attraction had been less obvious than Emily’s, and Ben only now saw that Lisa’s heart and mind had been more beautiful than Emily.

Nearly screaming, Mona ran towards them. Ben got out and met her at the front of the truck. He held her and thought vaguely that she wasn’t much like Lisa at all: she had wider shoulders and a thicker chest than her sister, and she was shorter than Lisa. Would he ever forget what she felt like? Would he always measure other women by Lisa’s dimensions, her temperament, her intelligence?

“Oh, God, Ben,” Mona said.

Ben wept into her shoulder, which was already wet with someone else’s tears—probably Emily’s. It was easy to let himself go, especially when he thought of the smallness of Lisa’s frame when he held her, the smooth skin at the arch of her back, or the way her eyes had shone when he said something silly. He had made plans to take her over to Florence to see a movie, have a nice dinner, and stay in a hotel on the reservoir.

What had she *done*?

“I just don’t understand,” Mona sobbed, and Ben stroked her hair.

The white-bearded preacher crossed the yard and stood behind Mona with his hand on her shoulder. Scott put his hand on Ben’s back and patted it.

“Where is Thomas?” he said. He rubbed his face with his hands and looked around for his son.

“He’s around back, waiting,” said the preacher.

“He hasn’t been talking to anybody,” Mona said. “He said a little to Father McGuinness, and that’s it.”

“Is Lisa . . .” He gestured with his hand towards the house.

Mona’s eyes welled up and she nodded. “She’s still in there. We’re waiting for the coroner.”

Ben left them standing there at the curb and walked inside slowly. When he found Lisa lying on the bed, her eyes staring at the ceiling and Thomas’s .22 on her chest, he fell on his knees. They couldn’t have closed her eyes? The terrible indignity of it startled him—her unseeing eyes, her mouth hanging open as though she were drunk, her pale skin turning gray—and he knew now that he had not been prepared for what he saw. She had

laid herself out like a corpse as though she were dead before she ever pulled the trigger. Her head was perfectly positioned on the pillow, her legs parallel and touching, her left arm positioned neatly by her side. Only her right arm was out of place, its hand and fingers frozen in a ginger caress of the gun. To him that caress looked like a condemnation; it was as if she had loosened her grip on the object that had killed her so that he could take it up himself.

## CHAPTER VII

The temptation was to think of himself too much, but Thomas was aware of it and tried to keep himself in check. Momma was dead. She had shot herself in her own bed. She had done it for her own reasons, and he would never understand. But she had used his gun, for God's sake. She'd had her own rifle, and if a rifle was too inconvenient, they owned three pistols besides Thomas's: a .38 Special, a .45, and a .44 Magnum. Maybe she had chosen the .22 because it would make the least mess. The .38 Special and the Magnum would have probably left her unrecognizable. The .45 might have been okay.

Ben's truck had arrived a few minutes earlier, and now the time had come for Thomas to make good on the unspoken agreement that he had made with Mrs. Emily. He didn't know what he was supposed to do, though, except to not protest when she blamed Ben for killing his mother. Not only was he not sure what *his* own role in the pact was, but he was also not sure what Mrs. Emily was going to do. Would she openly accuse him in front of everyone, or would she go to the police, perhaps anonymously? Would Thomas have to sit back and watch as the county sheriff or someone else came and took Ben away, or would they come to him to verify Mrs. Emily's story? Would his be a sin of omission or a deliberate lie? Either way, Mrs. Emily was right: he would have no trouble lying if it would give Ben what he deserved.

But if Emily was willing to lie about having an affair with Ben, couldn't she also lie about the abortion? Thomas might have misunderstood the argument that he overheard between his parents. He might even remember it that way only because Mrs. Emily had said that Ben had tried to make his mother have an abortion. Maybe the affair *had*

happened. Maybe Ben had ended it, and now Mrs. Emily was trying to hurt Ben by accusing him of murder.

No matter how much he played devil's advocate with himself, though, he could not deny what he had heard Benjamin scream the night he and his mother argued: it was legal now. Fucking legal.

He picked up one the large stones that lay on the ground and threw it against the mountain. It made a dull, metallic sound but left no blemish on the mountain. He lifted the rock again, and it felt a little heavier. He heaved it against the cliff face, this time aiming at a ridge, hoping to break off at least chip. Still not a mark.

“Son?” It was Benjamin's voice. Thomas turned and saw his father walking up the hill, his eyes red and puffy. He wore the same brown button down, brown pants, and black belt and shoes he wore every day except Sunday. Thomas supposed that now he would be the one to wash those clothes every night. “Come here.”

Thomas stood still. This was Benjamin's fault, and he didn't want to touch the man. She had used Thomas's gun, and it was easy to wonder whether she had done it to hurt him somehow, but Benjamin had driven her to shoot herself.

Benjamin climbed the hill, stumbling on tree branches, and wrapped his arms around Thomas. He put too much of his weight on Thomas's shoulders, and they both nearly collapsed under the combined weight of their grief. Thomas breathed some of the sawdust in Benjamin's hair and sneezed, but Benjamin didn't move. He wept and shuddered like someone with a fever. How could a man who had driven his wife to suicide grieve her like this now?

Several people walked out the back door of the house and around from the front yard. Father McGuinness stood by Aunt Mona, who sat down on the back steps and put her face in her hands. The deputy stood by the side of the house. He glanced nervously at Ben and Thomas and then stared at the ground. The old Baptist preacher stood next to Mrs. Mitchell, who watched the father and son with what looked like a mixture of contempt and sympathy. She knew more about this scene than anyone else present—more, perhaps, even than Thomas. That in itself made him uncomfortable.

Thomas's shoulder was wet with hot tears. He had never heard Benjamin sob this way, even when Thomas's grandparents died. The sight of this cool-natured man crying on his teenage son's shoulder, the boy looking over the man's shoulder with an expression probably both dull and astonished, must have been nearly unbearable to the crowd that had gathered at the little gray house that hot morning. The preacher and Deputy Shoemaker looked merely miserable, like two men who had just witnessed something holy and solemn but utterly foreign to them. Aunt Mona, whose makeup was smeared across her face like soot, had stared vaguely at the ground, her tears gone and her eyes bloodshot. He glanced at Mrs. Mitchell, who had gone to her knees and held one hand to her mouth. Her eyes met Thomas's when he looked at her, but he was only able to bear her gaze a few seconds before he turned his eyes back to Aunt Mona. It was easier to look at someone who didn't look back.

The old couple who owned the small cattle field across the road came around the corner arm in arm and stopped suddenly. They looked nervously at everyone else and then at each other as if trying to decide whether to remain where they stood or go back. After a moment, Reverend Thompson joined the couple and conferred quietly with them.

The preacher stroked his beard slowly, running his fingers through its rough, gray and black speckled curls. Each of them stole glances at the father and son standing on the hill together.

“Are you okay?” said Benjamin. He gripped Thomas’s shoulders and held him out at arm’s length. Squinting, he looked Thomas over as if assessing the damage.

The man had leathery, red and brown skin that stretched too tightly against the bones of his face. Tiny red veins split into numerous faint tributaries on his cheeks and reminded Thomas of the maps in his physical science textbooks. His blue eyes, which usually sparkled like blown glass, were dark—almost not the same eyes at all.

“Son?” He lightly shook Thomas as if to wake him from a trance, and Thomas thought he could feel the restraint in Benjamin’s hands. The shake felt like a small tremor that preceded something more violent. But maybe was he only imagining that because he was restraining his own—hatred? disgust? fear? None of those words described the thing that rolled restlessly in his chest, the feeling of dread and anger and mistrust and incomprehensible regret. What could he possibly regret? He hadn’t killed her. Yet what stirred him from the focused gaze with which he met his father’s stare—which he couldn’t label with anything like *stern* or *grieved*—was the feeling that someone besides his mother had done something beyond repair. His mother had used his gun to kill herself, and the image would never leave him. But Benjamin had done something, too. The sin was his.

*You could make him pay for this.*

“There’ll be a bunch of mess here,” Benjamin said, gesturing with his hand towards the house. “I don’t think you should be here for it.”

Thomas shrugged off Benjamin's hands and stepped backwards. Everyone in the crowd tensed visibly. He glanced at the deputy, whose eyes were wide with fright. If Thomas accused Ben, it couldn't be to Shoemaker. The deputy probably wouldn't believe him, and if he did, he wouldn't have the courage to do anything about it. Mrs. Mitchell, who had been about to stand up from her kneeling position, froze with one foot and one knee on the ground. She held her balance with one hand on the corner of the house, and looked like a runner preparing for a spring. Reverend Thompson, who had been saying something to the old couple from across the street, sucked in his stomach and stood like a retired military man with his hands linked in front of his bright western-style belt buckle.

"Listen," said Benjamin, and he started to cry again. "Let someone take you back to Aunt Mona's house. Helen will stay with you."

Mrs. Emily stood and their eyes met. Silently she pleaded with him to just cooperate, to just go along with it when the time came. With surprise he realized that he intended to do more than simply cooperate. He would answer questions when the sheriff or deputy Shoemaker asked, and he would remember things in a certain way. He would point out that an affair between Ben and Mrs. Emily made perfect sense. After all, his parents had been fighting a lot lately. And he had insisted that she go to sleep after she fell and hit her head. And anyone who paid attention could see that Ben had wanted Emily.

"Thomas?" said Ben.

Thomas's feet were pounding the rocky ground before he thought about the decision to run. The pain from stones he stepped on bolted through the arches of his feet and up his shinbones. He was fast; he had been a running back on the junior varsity

football team for two years before he quit playing. Still, the slow, relentless ache that had weighed down his chest expanded like a balloon inside him at the sudden sprint. What breath he could take in tasted dry and bitter and burned in his lungs like the hot, dusty air inside a sawmill.

“Wait!”

He ignored the voice and ran along the rock face until it ended and the mountain base became an earthy slope covered in moss and grass and pine trees. After several yards, the incline became flat enough for him to climb. Before he could reach that spot he heard someone running behind him.

“Stop,” Benjamin said, calmly, even though he sounded short of breath. Thomas felt his father’s fingertips touch his shoulder. He sped up and dodged into the trees early, in a spot he hoped would be too steep for Benjamin to climb. Listening for Ben, who was grunting and falling farther behind him, Thomas grabbed tree trunks and pulled himself up the hill. He risked a glance backwards. Ben barely crept up the hill, while Reverend Thompson and Deputy Shoemaker stood waiting at the bottom of the hill.

Thomas climbed faster, slipping occasionally on the olive colored moss, but he kept his balance and made much better progress than Ben did. The road that wound up the mountain was still another hundred feet above him, but he could reach it long before Ben, who was still far behind. His breath came easier now. The terrible weight that pressed against his heart and lungs was gone; all he had to do was reach the road and he would leave Ben and the others behind.

He glanced back again and stopped. Benjamin was negotiating his way back down the slope to where Reverend Thompson and Deputy Shoemaker waited. Thomas heard the preacher call up the hill to Benjamin, “Just let him go.”

Thomas didn't wait, knowing that Benjamin would probably run to his truck and drive up the mountain road instead of taking Reverend Thompson's advice. He continued climbing, and when he reached the road, he stopped to peer through the trees. He couldn't see the house, even from this height, which he hoped meant that they couldn't see him. Though he knew he didn't want to be anywhere near Ben right now, he hadn't really thought about why he was running. He could have gone to Aunt Mona's house, but he wouldn't be left alone there. Helen, his cousin, would baby him and stroke his hair. She would cry on his shoulder as Benjamin had when Thomas hadn't cried himself. He was her son, and she had killed herself with his gun, and he was the only one who hadn't cried.

Yet now that he stood on the mountain, he briefly thought about running down the road towards the house and jumping from the cliff. Surely the fall would kill him. The crowd would probably still be there. Grieving his mother, they would be witness to his own death as his bones shattered on the stones that lay at the foot of the cliff. He didn't entertain the idea with any serious will to actually kill himself, but the idea of making Benjamin watch him dive head first from the cliff like a hawk diving for a mouse, of making Benjamin hear the thud of the impact and the crack of his breaking bones, of making Benjamin endure the sight of his death when he had been driving to work and listening to Hank Williams or Willie Nelson while his mother shot herself—the thought in itself made his grief seem manageable. This was Benjamin's fault. He didn't *know* the

fact to be true so much as he *decided* it was true. But that wasn't quite right, either. He had carried no animosity for Benjamin up until this very morning, and in *deciding* that Benjamin had done it, he wasn't giving form to a hatred he had harbored for his father. And he hadn't made the decision himself, exactly. Mrs. Michell had forced it upon him; the memory of the arguments he had overheard confirmed what she had said and spoke against Benjamin as if the devil himself pointed the accusing finger.

The sound of the starter on Benjamin's truck turning over the engine—it always took two attempts to start it, and when it did start it usually backfired—roused Thomas from his suicide fantasy. Instead of running up the mountain road, he turned and looked at the rocky hill that rose towards the top of the mountain ridge. He had climbed it before and could certainly climb it again. The trees were dense, and he could easily hide in the dark among them if he climbed high enough.

Like the gunshots you could hear in the distance sometimes during deer season and turkey season, the backfire from the truck echoed across the valley, and Thomas gripped firmly embedded rocks and began to climb the hill. Benjamin's truck came up the hill slowly. Thomas had time to climb high enough to be hidden in the shadows of the trees. He crouched behind a mossy birch tree and watched as the truck rolled up the mountain road. Deputy Shoemaker, not his father, peered out the driver's side window. He stopped the truck at the spot where Thomas had begun to climb, and Benjamin opened the passenger door and stood up, holding onto the door and the roof of the cab.

“Thomas!”

For a second Thomas thought he should start climbing again. He was at least a hundred feet above the road, and if he started now he could stay well ahead of them. If he

could climb high enough he would reach the small community where the snake handlers lived and hide in one of their barns. He knew a young guy named Robert who lived there but worked at a factory in Huntsville making good money. Thomas could get a ride out of town with him. And what would he do once he got to Huntsville? He knew no one there. But his mother had cousins in Biloxi. He could try to make it there.

This was stupid. What was he running from? What if Benjamin *had* driven his mother to suicide? She had pulled the trigger.

Down below, Benjamin sat down in the truck again and shut the door. The deputy turned and looked at him. He said something, and then drove on. Soon the truck rumbled out of Thomas's view, and he started climbing again. As he reached out and touched the chunks of granite that jutted from the earthy slope, the cold hardness of the stone made him think of his ribs shattering against them like uncooked noodles. It wouldn't hurt him. He wouldn't feel anything except the rush of falling and then an instantaneous blackness.

Thomas knew people his own age who sometimes indulged the thought of suicide—not in any serious way, but only as a remedy for their own feelings. A girl breaks up with you, a friend dies, people who seem to matter a great deal reject you—suicide seems the best solution. Kill yourself and then they'll weep for you. Get your father's gun and blow out your brains and they'll remember you like you were their best friend, while inside they'll suffer for whatever wrong they've done to you. Thomas had always thought he knew better. The bitter happiness that you feel when you can see vividly in your mind the grief of someone who only appreciates you because you're gone—well, when you're dead you can't taste the regret of someone who should have loved you.

The incline had become much steeper at this height. He turned to look back and felt suddenly dizzy at what he saw. He had never made it this high before on foot. He could see the whole town spread out hundreds of feet below him. The campus of the high school lay sprawling near the place where the mountains formed a ragged V-shape on the north end of town. The football field, where he had played for three years, looked like a small, well-groomed yard from this perspective. The two churches—First Baptist and St. Joseph’s—stood opposite each other, the huge wooden Baptist church dwarfing the little brick building where he went to church with his mother.

Now that he had stopped, Thomas could barely catch his breath. He found a flat-topped boulder jutting from the slope and lay down on it. The granite felt cold against his sweaty skin. He could faintly hear the sound of Benjamin’s truck, still climbing the mountain road, but the noise was just a faint buzz now, easily lost in the sound of squirrels running along the tree branches above him, the unseen birds chirping, and the breeze that blew through the treetops. He lay in a shadow with patches of light all around him, looking down the slope towards the town. He could see students gathered outside the old brown and white gymnasium waiting for busses.

Thomas had always thought he was above fantasizing about suicide to make himself feel better about some personal hurt, but now he couldn’t shake the thought of jumping from the cliff. He didn’t want to die, but he found the thought of making Benjamin witness his death nearly irresistible. It had all the appeal and ease of a sexual fantasy. Even though she was as old as his mother—as his mother had been—sometimes Thomas had found himself thinking about Mrs. Mitchell a little too long, imagining too many of the small details. *Found himself* was right because he had often been thinking

about her for several minutes before he even became conscious of the fact. Thinking about leaping from the cliff into his yard was much like those fantasies. As he climbed the gray and blue stones that jutted from the mossy, grass-covered slope, his mind swung like a pendulum between the vision of his dead mother's pale mouth hanging open and the sight of the ground rushing up to meet him, the look on Benjamin's face as he witnessed his son's death. Everyone else would look not at poor Thomas lying broken on the earth, but at Benjamin himself. They would know that his wife's death had been his fault. Only after he had been thinking about it for a long time did Thomas realize what he was doing and try to drag his mind back to his dead mother. He didn't do this morbidly, but rather out of some duty or desire to remind himself that there was a person at the center of this constellation of guilt and suspicion and anger. Even so, as soon as he let go of his mother, he heard the rush of air in his ears and the feeling of his hair whipping in the wind as he plummeted towards the earth.

Thomas could hear Benjamin's truck somewhere above, muffled by tree trunks and underbrush. The engine groaned dully as it climbed the steepest part of the road, near the very top of the ridge. Strange that they would drive that far up the mountain; Thomas couldn't have made it that far on foot before nightfall even if he ran the whole way without stopping.

As he lay with the solidity of the boulder beneath him, it was too easy to slip into the thought of jumping from the cliff for him to avoid it, just like the fantasies he had about Mrs. Mitchell. He had often left for school in the morning and seen her in yellow shorts pushing her red Murray lawnmower. The image of her would follow him all day at school. In his mind her long white legs would be covered in sweat and sliced blades of

green, especially her bare ankles where they came out of her scuffed tennis shoes. He could see her pulling her shirt up and tying it in a large knot just under her breasts after she finished cutting the yard. She would take off her shoes at the door and go to her kitchen barefooted, lean against the counter to have a glass of ice water before going to the bathroom and undressing.

Sometimes—not very often—he would try to resist thinking about her. Although he knew from church that lust was a sin, it wasn't really *lust* as a concept that made him occasionally put up a fight. The understanding that he was in some way violating the woman as a person sometimes occurred to him, though the thought *I am sinning* never crossed his mind. The *sin* of it didn't bother him as much as did the ease with which the fantasy took hold of him. Sometimes, just at the very moment when in his mind he was about to have sex with Mrs. Mitchell, Thomas would feel suddenly ashamed—not at the *wrongness* of it but instead at his lack of imagination. It was too easy to put himself and his attractive neighbor into the dark and sweaty images he had gotten from movies and television. It was easy to see himself slipping into her without any effort at all, though he knew from his very little experience that sex was anything but effortless.

On those rare occasions when he tried to resist fantasizing about Mrs. Mitchell, Thomas usually tried to create a setting for a new story that he might write. He imagined himself climbing to the top mountain ridge and looking over the other side to see a new world that no one else had seen before. This place would have a wide valley with low hills on either side like the walls of a corridor, a glassy river like a writhing snake in its center. Patches of gold mixed with light green and brown were fields where strange animals grazed and hunted: large tan and brown horses with long, white tails; a huge,

solitary lion with a wooly mane and feathered wings; red and black birds like falcons with wings ten feet wide and beaks sharper than meat hooks; hairy creatures like moles the size of dogs who burrowed tunnels and emerged only at night to avoid the killer birds. In the center of one field might stand a huge tree rising like a spire above the forest that bordered the river, its gray and brown trunk a thick, unbreakable column. Two moons, one huge and orange and the other a diminutive blue spot overlooked the earth like the strange eyes of a deformed face.

But he could never persevere long in imagining the valley with the flying lion and the fierce birds. Even this fantasy world he tried to create was dimly derivative; he was only combining and modifying things he had seen in the books he loved to read. Tolkien and Lewis had already done this, and they had done it better than he could.

Rather than force himself to create something that was his own, it was easier to simply let his mind take advantage of what that belonged to someone else: Mrs. Mitchell's body. In the same way, it was easier to allow himself to fall from the height of his own imagination to his death than to try to remember what it had been like to help his mother hang sheets from the clothesline in the front yard. When he tried to recall her, or to see the dead woman lying on the bed, only a vague figure without a face came. Where there should have been eyes, gray stains on a blank oval looked unseeingly at him. Even now Momma's body would have begun to show the signs of decomposition, and to see the real woman as she had actually lived, felt, smelled, and sounded took more imagination than he had the energy to exercise. Instead, he let himself fall over and over again. The satisfaction that he might have gotten from really having sex with Mrs.

Mitchell seemed a small, dirty pleasure in comparison. Maybe that was a lack of imagination, too.

As he climbed higher, the woods became denser and the terrain rougher. Old, worn hardwood trees were more numerous up here. Dead branches, fallen logs, and bushes clogged the paths between trees, and rainwater had cut deep crevasses into the mountain. Dead leaves covered the ground. About an hour after he saw Benjamin and the deputy, he came to a split-rail fence enclosing a deep hollow. Many of the cedar fence logs were gone, and in several stretches there were only blackened posts. A log shack with a rusty metal roof stood at the center of the hollow, leaning a little on its frame. A rusty brown Ford was parked out front. Various items hung from the outside walls: NO TRESPASSING signs, pots and pans, several raccoon traps, axes, five-gallon buckets, deer antlers. At the top end of a hollow there was a rusty cattle gate where a narrow dirt drive descended from the woods into the hollow. At the lower end a big plastic culvert cut through the earth. Dead leaves, branches, and trash blocked most of the other end where it dripped dirty water.

Thomas walked around the hollow slowly, watching for movement. As he came to the higher end of the bank around the hollow, he saw a man standing next to two wooden posts, eight or ten feet tall, with a fresh deer carcass hanging upside down between them. The man wore denim overalls and was using a small knife to peel back the hide of the belly to reveal the bright colored muscle underneath. Benjamin took their meat to a deer processor, so Thomas had never seen a deer skinned before. The flesh under the skin was more pink than he had imagined it would be. A brown, muscular dog lay obediently at the man's feet. It looked like a mutt with some pit bull in it.

The man turned suddenly and saw him standing there. He was older than Thomas had thought at first—sixty, at least—and had wild gray hair and glasses. Except for the glasses, he might have looked insane, standing there holding a knife with blood on his hands and hair that stood in bushy tufts like clown's hair. The glasses gave him a strange, almost grandfatherly look.

“You spying for the warden?” snapped the old man, not so much speaking the words as barking them. His voice was phlegmy and rough, like someone who had smoked all his life.

Thomas took two steps back.

“Sherman!” the man yelled.

The pit bull stood and ran towards Thomas, who turned to flee down the mountain.

“Stop, Sherman!”

The dog halted and stared at Thomas for a moment before putting his head down and sniffing dead leaves on the ground. The old man started towards the fence, still carrying the knife.

“Read the signs,” he said, and his voice carried throughout the hollow. Thomas thought of ancient Greeks giving speeches in their in deep, crowded amphitheaters. He pointed with a red, dripping finger at the house, indicating the NO TRESPASSING signs.

Thomas started up the slope again, turning south from the cabin and resisting the urge to run. Somewhere north of where he was now, the road up the mountain turned back towards the south. If he could get out of the old man's sight—and away from Sherman—he might find the old man's driveway again and follow it to the road. From

there, he could follow the road back down the mountain. He might get back into town before dark. He didn't know if he would go home or not. Mrs. Mitchell would be waiting there for him. Perhaps she would have already accused Ben of killing his mother, and would only be waiting for Thomas to confirm her story. Murder was an entirely different crime than simply making someone unhappy enough to kill herself. But no one could really get what he deserved. His mother had deserved the baby she had waited years to conceive. The dead baby had deserved to live. Benjamin deserved some kind of punishment for taking everything away from her. Why did it matter whether he was punished for murder or for something else?

After he had walked far enough to be out of the old man's sight, Thomas looked back down the slope. He could no longer see the town or the valley. Even the mountains on the other side were mostly obscured by the dense trees. Stepping carefully over branches that could give him away and listening for the dog, Thomas started east again, hoping to find the old man's driveway through the woods.

## CHAPTER VIII

Ben and Shoemaker drove up the mountain and found no sign of Thomas. He would come back. The boy had just seen his mother lying with a bullet hole in her head. Any seventeen year-old would run from that.

When they returned to the house, a blue hearse and a county car sat by the curb in front of the house and the number of onlookers had increased. James Colson, one of the nosier teachers from the high school, stood talking to the priest from Lisa's church. Two men who worked for the funeral home stood separate from the rest of the crowd. Ben might have thought that they would be used to this kind of situation, but the three men looked like Baptists who had been forced to attend a Sunday dinner with Jehovah's Witnesses. The preacher and the old lady from down the street had gone. The county coroner stood inside the front door with a clipboard, busily making marks, giving his official certification to what everyone in town probably knew by now.

Emily stood quietly with Mona, the two of them watching as Ben and Shoemaker got out of the truck. Emily's children, Jessica and Carl, ten and eight, had joined her. The school bus must have just dropped them off. Jessica clung miserably to her mother's side, her face streamed with fresh tears. Carl stood apart from Emily and Jessica with his hands stuffed in his pockets, toeing a rock that had strayed from the garden. The boy wouldn't understand just yet. His father had died before he reached his first birthday. Death for him would still only be a vague, dark threat that could never touch him and people who died merely absent.

When Ben was that age, the absence of someone who died always felt temporary even though he knew it wasn't. His grandparents had all died before he was ten, and

although he had grieved all of them, he had never really felt a *loss* for them. His father's parents had lived two counties west of Ophion, on the other side of Florence. His mother's parents had been from North Carolina. When they died, they left no void because they didn't really exist except for when Ben and his parents drove to visit them.

Then Ben's parents had died in a car accident, and the good advice his father had given him would never come again. His mother wouldn't call the night before Lisa's birthday and tell him he had gotten her the wrong gift. He had heard people say that when someone you loved died, it felt like you had lost a limb. When his parents died, he learned that grief wasn't like losing a limb at all. His life and his soul had remained whole, but their death touched everything important: his relationship with Lisa, his work, his faith. Most importantly it had changed the way he saw Thomas. After his father died, he realized how important it was to make sure that the good things that a father had to teach lived on in the son.

Now Lisa was dead, and nothing that had happened before now had prepared him for the feeling of dread, even terror, that she had left him with. He hadn't slept alone in twenty years. He tried not to think about the long nights, about how long before he would be able to sleep again. Most of all, he tried not to think about the abortion, about the morning she had fallen and he had left her, about something Lisa had said to him as they had lain in bed after a fight, not touching and not sleeping.

"There are only two ways I know how to live," she had said. "You can give everything you have to someone you love, or you can put yourself into them, make them into you."

That had been the night before the miscarriage. When he tried to recall her voice, this was the only thing he could hear her say. Even when he tried to remember her singing, he could only hear a voice vaguely like hers, but without some essential quality. These were the words he would have to hang on to, no matter how much they cut him. He didn't even know why they hurt so much. At the time he had thought it a stupid thing to say, and had told her so. Even now he thought she had only been attacking him, trying to make a contrast between the two of them. There was no question what she thought he was doing to her by asking her to have an abortion. But that's what he had done: asked. He had not demanded it of her. As for trying to make someone you loved into yourself—she had certainly tried to do that to Thomas. Ben had offered her the opportunity to go to school and get the education she had wanted, but she preferred instead to see Thomas become what she had wanted to be. Ben only wanted to give Thomas the best that he had to give.

Father McGuiness approached him. "You couldn't find him?"

"No," said Ben.

"He'll come around," the priest said.

"It will be dark before you know it," said Colson. "We'd better get several of us up there looking."

"I think it's a little early for that," said the deputy.

"Thomas just needs time," said Father McGuiness.

"I really think we ought to try to find him before it gets dark," Colson said. He looked at the priest, perhaps seeking an authoritative support, but Father McGuiness simply crossed his arms and attended to Ben.

Carrying the clipboard under his arm, the coroner joined them solemnly. He nodded to the others and put out his hand to shake Ben's.

"I am sorry about your loss," he said, his expression unfriendly. This was a long-suffering man, a man who knew his job was a sacrificial one. "You already know what happened. You don't need me to tell you. I just need you to sign here so that these men can take the body." He indicated the two men from the funeral home, who had moved to the hearse and stood holding wooden stretcher. Clearly miserable among grieving people, they were impatient to take Lisa and leave.

Ben took the clipboard and signed the document, which the coroner had filled with scribbled writing. The coroner thanked him with a bow, looked at the men with the stretcher, and made a jerk of his head towards the house. The three of them went through the front door.

"Seems like a prick," said Father McGuinness.

Colson's eyes widened.

"But you get to be that way when you spend every work day with people who have died," finished the priest. "I imagine it gets hard to pretend you're grieving people you've never met."

Bill Stuckey, Ophion's only police officer, arrived and parked his cruiser behind Ben's truck. He sat with the car running for a minute before he got out and crossed the lawn.

"Sorry about this," Stuckey said to Ben. He squeezed Ben's shoulder and patted it with one of his fat hands. "I was just coming back from taking a woman to jail when they called me on the radio. Damn, damn shame."

Stuckey motioned for Shoemaker to follow him. They walked to the house, talking quietly, and disappeared inside.

Ben walked towards Emily and Mona, who hadn't said a word since he had arrived. Emily shooed Jessica and Carl off to their house. Mona stared at the ground, and when he hugged her she leaned against him but crossed her arms in front of her.

"You okay?" he said.

Mona made a noise that was half laugh, half sob. "Fine," she said.

Emily wouldn't stop looking at him, her face hardened. Clearly she held him alone responsible. Nevermind her own involvement, nevermind that she had been screwing her best friend's husband. It was Ben's fault because of the fucking abortion. He had been waiting for over a year for the chance to leave Lisa and be with Emily. Now Lisa had left *him*, and he could barely stand the sight of Emily. She scowled at him like a spoiled child, her eyebrows furrowed and her mouth pulled tight like a new clothesline. Fucking hypocrite.

"What's wrong?" he said. It sounded more ironic than he had intended.

"Ben, can I talk to you a second?"

Stuckey and Shoemaker stood a few feet away. The deputy was looking at Stuckey like a child who was about to have to apologize for an embarrassing offense.

Ben glanced at Emily, who backed away with Mona, not taking her eyes off of him.

"I'm sorry about this," said Stuckey, "but I've got to ask."

What had Emily done? He looked back at her. She and Mona were walking towards her house, where the children waited on the porch. Emily looked over her shoulder at him.

“Don’t worry about her,” said Stuckey. “I just need to ask what time you left for work this morning.”

Father McGuinness and Colson had stopped their conversation and stood watching.

“You accusing me of something?” said Ben. He put his hands in his pockets to keep from clenching his fists. “My wife shot herself and you’re accusing me?”

Shoemaker started, “I don’t think—”

“I told you I don’t like doing this,” said Stuckey. He frowned. “I’m not accusing you of anything. I just need to ask.”

“I left around 8:15,” Ben said. “Takes me about forty minutes to get to the mill. I clocked in at 8:56. Call them and ask. I called ahead and told them I would be a few minutes late.”

“Why did you go into work late?”

“Lisa has been down lately,” he said. “I wanted to sit with her and have breakfast instead of running off. I wanted to tell her I’d made plans for us to go out of town, just us.”

“They told me at the sawmill that you called and said you were having truck trouble,” said Stuckey.

“That’s what I told them!” Ben shouted.

“Calm down, Ben,” said Stuckey. Shoemaker’s lips were tight as if he was going to cry. “I don’t want to ask you this stuff when your wife just died. There’s a question because the coroner put your wife’s time of death between eight and nine this morning.”

“He isn’t accusing you of doing anything, Ben,” said Shoemaker. “He’s just got to ask to clear things up.”

“You’re not helping things by acting like you are,” said Stuckey.

“You’re asking me questions like I killed her when she’s lying in there with the gun in her fucking hand?” Ben said, pointing at the house. “The last thing she said to me was that she was looking forward to getting away.” Shoemaker winced. “To Florence. I was going to take her to Florence. We were going to stay on the reservoir.”

“You’ve already made reservations?” said Stuckey.

“Go to hell,” said Ben.

“Ben, please,” said Stuckey. “There are just some questions. One of your neighbors heard a noise that sounded like a gunshot this morning before you left for work.”

“My truck backfires!” Ben screamed, throwing his hands in the air. He paced, thankful that Thomas wasn’t here to see this.

“She says she heard it a few minutes before you cranked your truck,” Stuckey said. Shoemaker stepped backwards. He looked like he expected to be punched.

Ben turned towards Emily’s house. She, Mona, and the children had disappeared inside.

“You bitch!” he screamed.

“I didn’t say who the neighbor was,” said Stuckey. “And you need to calm down, Ben. Some people have said you and Lisa were having problems. That you were fighting over the baby she lost.”

Mona had been a part of it, too. His grief was gone and all he knew was rage. Lisa had planned this. This was how she would punish him for wanting an abortion. He had to get to Thomas before anyone else did. Emily had probably already tried to fill his head with lies, but he had run away rather than participate in this lie. The boy wouldn’t betray his father this way.

“There is also some talk that you were having an affair,” said Stuckey.

“Damn you,” Ben said. “Damn you to fucking hell.”

“You just need to stay around town for a few days,” Stuckey said. “Don’t go to see any family, and don’t go to work. Just till we look into things a little more.”

Ben raised his fist to punch him, and two sets of arms gripped him from behind. He swung at Stuckey, but Father McGuinness had grabbed Ben’s arm, and he knocked the priest to the ground. Colson pulled Ben backwards, but he shook himself loose from the teacher’s grip.

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Ben. He stooped to help the old man up.

“You have to calm down, Ben,” said Father McGuinness.

“You’re not making this easy,” said Stuckey.

Stuckey mopped sweat on his forehead with his the arm of his shirt.

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now,” he said.

Ben laughed. “No?” How *could* this son of a bitch have any clue what Ben was going through? Stuckey wasn’t married; he had no children. The worst thing that ever

happened to him was probably having to wake up in the middle of the night to go and break up a pasture party that had gotten too loud.

“I just hate to make it worse is all,” said Stuckey.

Ben looked up at the mountains. The sun was low over the mountain. He traced the mountain road as far as he could see it before it doubled back and disappeared into the trees, but he didn't see anyone walking.

“I'm going to find my boy,” he said.

Stuckey elbowed Shoemaker. “Maybe you should go with him.”

“I'll be fine by myself.”

“Two pair of eyes are better,” said Stuckey.

The deputy looked pleadingly at him. “It would be better for you to have somebody to look while the other drives.”

“You got to keep tabs on me while I'm out, huh?” said Ben.

Stuckey's face didn't change.

## CHAPTER IX

It took Thomas about half an hour to find the old man's driveway again. He turned west on it, hoping it would take him to the paved road and not to another dirt path. He passed a few more shacks and trailers. One had a yard full of old cars, appliances, and scrap metal. A plywood sign on a post sticky with creosote that stood by the drive announced that he could buy the metal for cheap. The sign had long since turned gray with exposure and started to rot. The other homes and trailers had bare yards except for an old Honda motorcycle and some dogs—small, nonthreatening ones, some small terriers and a Labrador—chained to trees or pinned inside chain link fences.

When he reached the paved road, he turned north, which he was pretty sure would take him down. Though there was still plenty of light, the sun had fallen just behind the mountain ridge and colored the clouds bright red and the sky lavender.

Now that he was alone on the mountain and night was coming, he could remember an evening a few years ago, much like this one, when he, his mother, and Benjamin had been on a trip to Biloxi to visit his great uncle and two great aunts. On the way home they had stopped in Mobile to eat supper on the bay. The three of them had strolled along the bay bridge when the sun was low and the air coming off the gulf was cool. Benjamin walked faster than either of them.

“One day you might write about this,” his mother had said. “In one of your stories.” She pointed out the shallow places in the bay where you could see the bottom, a crane that stood motionless in a patch of grass, and a sailboat that was coming in from the gulf. She had stopped suddenly and turned to him with a smile. “Someday write about these things, and let me read it.”

He had never written about that evening on the bay bridge. The scene didn't seem to fit any of his stories. He had tried to imagine a mother and son walking over a wide, blue bay, but he could never write it because he could never imagine describing that evening on the bridge to anyone except to his mother. That was the hardest part about writing: knowing who you were talking to. He wrote every story with an ideal sort of reader in mind, but that ideal reader always turned out to be someone too much like himself to be real. Friends and teachers read the stories for him, and their critiques were usually kind, but they were often unhelpful because in the end he wasn't really writing to those people. The trouble was he didn't know whom he was writing to. He wrote the stories that he wanted to read himself. There had to be someone else in the world who wanted to read the same kind of stories.

*Someday write about these things.* If he ever did write about that evening on the bridge, it wouldn't be for her. Not now.

"She was the one who left," he said. He stopped walking and looked at the sky. He screamed. Tears dripped down his nose and cheeks. He would never write that story for her because she had killed herself. Could she not have imagined that her own suffering might have been temporary, but his would last the rest of his life?

The old brakes of a vehicle squeaked somewhere behind him. He stepped out of the road and onto the grass, and mosquito hawks—ten, twenty, thirty of them—leapt from the ground ahead of his feet. The sound of a big motor rattled down the road to the south. He turned to see an old Chevy pickup roll down the slope towards him. Two girls in homemade dresses and a boy in long sleeves sat on the sides of the bed. The driver slowed and stopped on the road next to him. Thomas wiped his face on his sleeve and

turned to look through the passenger window at a man and a woman about the age of his parents. The man wore a western shirt and tie, and the woman wore a big brown hat. The hands of the man, which rested over the truck's big steering wheel, had tiny burns on them. Welder's hands. The woman had a dark face, deep crow's feet, and dimples in her cheeks. Both of them smiled. One of the girls—whom Thomas now recognized from school—looked over the roof of the truck at him.

“Trouble?” said the man.

“Just walking,” Thomas said.

“I'm Vick Steadman and this is Marie.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“We got a Wednesday supper and service down at the church,” Vick said. “We could give you a lift down there. You could stay for a little while and we could give you a ride home.”

“I'll appreciate the ride,” said Thomas. “I need to head home from the church, though. He'll be looking for me. My dad.”

“Well, stay for something to eat, anyway,” said Vick. “We don't have a fellowship hall, so we do the supper first. That way the bugs don't get to the food while it sits outside.”

“You're from town?” said Marie.

Thomas nodded.

Vick thumbed towards the back of the truck.

“Hop back there and we'll give you a lift.”

Thomas climbed into the truck bed and sat on the side next to the boy, who grunted something like “hey” at him. Thomas had seen all of them before. The boy was a tenth grader and the girls were from seventh and eighth grades. To the other students that Thomas knew, these kids were the ones who go to the “crazy church in the hills”—the snake-handling church. As one of only two Catholic students in a school full of Baptists, Thomas didn’t mind there being someone the Protestants liked less than him. But for him there was an allure to the snake-handlers. Their faith had a kind of authenticity that made the faith of all the others look puny. When you worshipped God by handling snakes, drinking strychnine, and speaking in tongues, your faith was not merely a part of the local culture. You couldn’t be a complacent snake-handler—at least, you couldn’t be complacent and live for long.

“I heard about your mom,” said one of the girls. Thomas thought her name was Judith. He didn’t know how to answer, so he just nodded and retied one of his shoes. A loud grinding noise came from under the truck and then they all swayed as the man started down the road.

“What are you doing up here?” said the boy.

“Walking,” Thomas said.

“And your momma killed herself?”

“Yes,” said Thomas.

They hit a bump. The whole truck rattled, and Thomas’s tailbone collided with the bed. He winced and cursed. They passed a group of houses. A man sat on the steps of his porch with a beer bottle and watched them as they rolled by. Vick stopped the truck next to a group of three men who were walking.

“Vick!” said an old man who wore a cheap looking brown suit. “I was wondering when you’d come along.”

“Hop in,” said Vick.

The men climbed onto the truck bed, which groaned and sank under all their weight. Thomas recognized two of the men. One of them worked at the grocery store in town, and another one worked with Ben at the sawmill. He didn’t know the man in the suit.

The man sitting across from Thomas, one of the ones who worked at the sawmill, looked at him with a cocked head. “Thomas?”

“Yessir,” Thomas said.

“What are you doing up here? Did I hear right about your momma?”

“You did.”

“I’m so sorry,” said the man. He moved across the truck and sat next to Thomas.

“Why ain’t you at home?”

“I just had to get away.”

“Oh, you poor kid,” said the man. He put his arm around Thomas’s shoulders and shook him.

Thomas felt obliged to break down and cry again, as if it were expected of him every time someone called him “poor,” but nothing would happen. He only put his head down. He should have never gotten into this truck.

The man put out his other hand. “I’m Gil.” He gestured first at the other man who worked at the mill—“This is Brad Larrimore”— then at the older man in the suit—“and this is George Hamilton.”

“Sorry to hear about your momma,” said Brad Larrimore, bowing his head respectfully. “She was sure a good woman. Better than most. She was good to Ben. He always said so.”

“Did he?” said Thomas, surprised at how angry he sounded, and the three men blinked at him.

“So why are you up here?” said Gil after a pause. He wasn’t going to let Thomas escape the question.

“I just needed to be alone.”

“So you climbed halfway up the mountain?”

“It seemed like a good place to hide,” said Thomas.

Gil looked both sympathetic and skeptical, but he didn’t press the issue any further.

“You coming to the service?” said the old man named George. “You should come and pray with us.”

“Ben—Dad—is probably looking for me by now. I need to head home.”

They reached a white Masonite building in a small clearing surrounded by three smaller wooden shacks. A sign on the building read LORD JESUS CHRIST FULL GOSPEL CHURCH in bright red letters of different styles and sizes. Teenage boys tossed a baseball on a carefully kept lawn. while younger children chased each other around long picnic tables that waited with covered dishes on one side of the church building. Women wearing mostly homemade dresses stood around the door to the church laughing. A few of them clapped. Several of the men stood in a loose gathering near the wooden shacks.

Two of them stood apart from the others, one pointing at the shack and making dimensional gestures with his hands as if planning a new construction.

Vick parked the truck in a line of vehicles on the side of the road. After everyone unloaded, Thomas shook Vick's hand and thanked him for the ride.

"You can at least stay for some food," he said.

"I'm not hungry," said Thomas. "Thanks, anyway."

"Stay," he said, "and we'll drive you down. Even if you stay for service and let us drive you home, you'll still make it there quicker than if you walked."

Thomas looked at the church with its smooth Masonite siding and its tin roof, at the fresh white paint and the gaudy sign announcing that these people proclaim the "full gospel," and thought that they must be proud of this place. It must have taken them a long time to raise the money for it. They had probably saved the money for a long time and had worked together to build it. He saw the children wearing clothes that were only miniature versions of what the adults wore, women who had walked down the road perhaps a mile carrying covered dishes and smiled when they greeted friends who had already arrived. Here among these people it was easy to imagine that his mother hadn't killed herself, that Mrs. Emily didn't want him to lie and send Ben to jail, that Ben hadn't tried to make Lisa have an abortion, that she had gone on to have the baby and that Thomas had helped her pick out a name for it. He would write a story about these people.

"I'll stay," he said. He was too tired now to walk down the mountain, and he wasn't in any hurry, anyway. He only hoped they wouldn't ask where he went to church. "If you don't mind having me."

"Vick," said Gil, joining them. "Thomas lost his mother today."

Vick's eyes widened, and suddenly he put out a hand and laid it on Thomas's forehead. Closing his eyes, he spoke strangely. Thomas had never heard someone speak in tongues before. It sounded vaguely Middle-Eastern to him, with rolling r's and breathy sounds. What surprised Thomas about it was that it had a strange consistency about it. Whatever Vick was doing, it was as if he spoke real words. This was nothing like what kids did when they imitated speaking in tongues at school.

"Akash lemeth akashka nisi," he said. "Akashka jemaniah nisi sunt."

"Please," said Thomas when Vick had finished. "I don't want a lot of attention."

"You need prayer, and that's what we're all about," said Vick. His eyes shone with tears. Thomas looked down, astonished—and ashamed that he had ever stopped weeping. Why was this man, who knew nothing about Thomas or his mother, crying?

"Let's eat," said Gil. "Service'll start soon. Then we can pray."

It was easy to believe in these people, Thomas thought as he sat between Gil and a pretty woman who reminded him of Mrs. Emily. Thomas talked little, and no one prodded him. They seemed genuine in every way, a perfect family living in a strange Eden on the mountain. George, the old man in the cheap suit—who Thomas took to be the pastor—said a long blessing, and as he prayed several people mumbled "amen" and a few shouted "hallelujah" or "praise Jesus." Everyone smiled. Some told jokes and others laughed. Wives pulled the arms of their husbands and whispered things in their ears. The children got collards and baked beans and spaghetti sauce smeared around their mouths. At one point a man stopped supper to ask everyone to pray for an old man who had been

diagnosed with prostate cancer. “Jesus, cast out that demon!” someone yelled. Across from Thomas sat a man who carried a guitar on his back.

Thomas watched Vick, who sat with his wife across the table and down a few seats from him, for signs that he would mention Thomas or his mother. Thomas hated the kind of attention sympathetic people gave, but he wondered how they would respond to a real tragedy. He wanted the woman next to him to see his reserve as a sign of his deep mourning and the preacher to pray for him and ask God to strengthen him in this terrible time. People always looked at you differently when they knew you had suffered a great loss. Right now he was an anonymous face who had arrived at a Wednesday service; if they knew his mother had killed herself that very day, they might look at him with a different kind of respect.

After about twenty minutes, George stood and walked with four other men towards the church building. People at the tables began to recover dishes, and the two girls who had ridden in the back of the truck walked around with trash bags taking up Styrofoam plates and cups.

“I bet your daddy is tore up,” said Gil, turning towards Thomas.

At the thought of Ben, Thomas’s stomach lurched. Could he go through with what Mrs. Emily wanted him to do? The thought of somehow punishing his father refused to die. He had no more pretensions to suicide. Vengeance would be meaningless to Thomas if he were not there to witness it, and he had no desire to die. As much as he wanted to, he didn’t know whether he could help Mrs. Emily accuse Ben of killing his mother. But his heart would never rest until someone paid for her death, until he could give a face to

the grief his mother had suffered, to make sure that people knew that someone had driven her to suicide.

“My son died a long time ago,” Gil said. They were the only ones left at the table now. He turned and straddled the bench so that he could face Thomas. He might have been a father settling in for a long talk with his son. “Brain tumor. Shouldn’t have happened. He was eight years old. We found out about the tumor, and less than a month later he was gone. In a way it was a blessing that it happened so quickly. We didn’t have time to get our hopes or our dread up.”

While he spoke, Gil wore the same pleasant expression he had worn all afternoon. He leaned back and pointed to a path through the woods that started behind the church building. A month. They’d had a month. How about a few hours? How about an instant? If a month was a blessing, was it better for it to happen instantaneously, so that one minute you’re leaving someone you love at home and the next she’s lying with a bullet hole through her head?

“He’s buried in the cemetery back there if you want to go and look.”

Thomas looked down, not wanting Gil to see how he felt about that idea.

“I was angry at God for a while,” he said, standing up. “Might have hated Him. But not for long. There wasn’t no sense in that. Doesn’t do nobody any good.”

Thomas hadn’t thought to blame God because he wanted to be able to make someone suffer for his mother’s death. The God he was taught at church had already suffered a long time ago, but he needed someone to suffer *now*, not two thousand years ago, and not in some unforeseen future. And blaming God did no good because Thomas wanted justice, and justice had no meaning if God was culpable for the crime.

## CHAPTER X

Fear felt like a drug to Ben. His fear had helped him to build the teetering edifice of his life before now—an edifice that Lisa had weakened to the point of collapse when she shattered her own life. Now fear calmed his rage; it prioritized the dozen obligations and pressures that pulled him like coyotes frantically tearing at the limbs of a deer carcass before a bear arrived to drive them away. Fear had taught him how to be a parent and a husband, and it had failed him only when he had slept with Emily for the first time and had asked Lisa for the abortion. He hadn't known what he feared most to lose, and now he had realized too late that Emily had been wrong for him, that Lisa and Thomas were all that mattered.

Now that Lisa was dead and he faced the real possibility that everything he had wanted for Thomas would be sucked under like survivors swimming away from a capsized ship, he understood that the fear of death was the only reasonable principle for ordering a life. You had to build and build, to shape the things around you so that your stamp was left for others to remember. His only real stay against death was to ensure that he gave Thomas the best that he had to offer, that Thomas would preserve the things that were good in Ben. Lisa had not understood that; she had looked to find life in having another child. Ben knew better, but he had underestimated the depth of Lisa's desire for another child. Now he would work to ensure that Thomas was not damaged by the sins that he and Lisa had committed.

Ben and Shoemaker drove up the mountain slowly, stopping every hundred yards or so to get out and yell Thomas's name into the woods. He could be anywhere. Ben and Thomas had hunted on the mountain together for years, and Thomas knew it well. The

woods were full of caves and hollows—especially in the higher elevations—and Thomas could certainly find a place to hide overnight.

After they had yelled themselves hoarse and driven to where the road ended at a closed and abandoned mining trail, Ben turned the truck around and started back down.

“We need to get some men together to walk the woods,” said Shoemaker. He hadn’t spoken to Ben since they left the house. “We can talk to some of the folks on the mountain and get their help.”

Ben didn’t want to admit that this might be their only option. Thomas was skilled in the woods for a boy his age, but without a weapon, he would be in trouble if he came upon a bear or a wild boar.

“We’ll go back down to Wallace,” said Ben. “I’ll get out and talk to folks to see if he’s been there.” Wallace was a tiny community on the mountain—no stores, just a group of several families surrounding the snake-handling church there. Ben worked with several of the men at the mill. If it came down to a search, those men would be glad to help Ben find his son.

Sunset wouldn’t come for another hour, but dusk covered the valley early. The daylight dimmed rapidly once the sun descended below the ridge of the mountain. By the time they reached Wallace, the sky had turned gray in the east and fiery orange in the west.

They passed a few people walking on the road. Ben stopped and asked them about Thomas, but none had seen him. When they reached the snake-handlers’ church, Ben spotted Thomas with Gil Stephens among a crowd of people who were going into the church building. Ben pounded the brake and parked the truck beside the road.

Thomas wore an expression of mild curiosity, which did not change as Ben ran to him and grabbed his shoulders.

“What were you thinking?” Ben said, shaking his son.

“Thomas has been saying he needed to get home,” said Gil. He put a hand on Ben’s chest and firmly pushed him back from Thomas. “We talked him into having some supper and staying to pray with us for a few minutes. Vick Steadman and his wife were going to drive him home. If you have to be mad at somebody, get mad at us, not Thomas.”

Ben shook Gil’s hand. “Thank you. We’ve all been worried.”

“I’m so sorry about Lisa.”

Ben turned to Thomas, and the boy looked at him like a man.

“I thought all the way up here about what I would say to you when I found you,” Ben said. “Now I don’t know what to say.” He put his hands on Thomas’s face and kissed the top of his head. “I appreciate you looking after him, Gil, but we need to get back home now. Other folks are worried about him, too.”

“Hey, Thomas,” said Shoemaker, who stood by Ben. “You should come on home.”

“I’m staying for the service,” Thomas said, ignoring the deputy. He backed away a step.

“Son, we need to get home.”

“It’s been a hard day on you all,” said Gil. “I don’t mean to get in the middle of this, but you ought to go. You can come back some other time.” He patted Thomas on the back.

Someone began to play a guitar inside. People in the congregation yelled “hallelujah” and “praise Jesus.” To Ben the sound seemed cultish and dangerous. Thomas was in no state to understand this kind of church for the nonsense that it was.

“No,” said Thomas, but he looked at Ben. “I’m going to stay for the service and then go home.”

Between the two of them passed a knowledge that Ben’s authority had dissolved. Aside from occasional boyish lapses, Thomas had grown up an obedient son. That very day something fundamental had changed in him, though, and not even by physical force could Ben make him go home before the church service was done. He was a man now—but what kind of man was he? If Thomas threw in his lot with these people, he would have broken with Ben’s values altogether, with the values that poor Lisa had cherished as well. Ben respected Gil, but he didn’t trust anyone as religious as the snake-handlers. His own father had known the difference between a healthy faith and fanaticism, and what he heard issuing from the church frightened him.

“It’s been a hard day for both of you, Thomas,” said Gil, putting his hand on Thomas’s shoulder. “Maybe you should head on down the mountain with your dad.”

“Thomas, this is getting stupid,” said Shoemaker, affecting a commanding voice. “You’re starting to act selfish.” Ben and Thomas both looked at him and the deputy withered. He crossed his arms and said almost apologetically, “Let’s go get in the truck.”

“Ben,” said Gil, “if you want to go home, either Vick or I will drive him down after the service.”

Before Ben could answer, Thomas turned and walked calmly towards the church door.

“You have to give him some slack,” Gil said. “He’s lost his momma.”

“I don’t need anybody to remind me of that,” said Ben. He left Gil without waiting for a reply and followed Thomas into the church. Inside the air was thick and smelled of damp wood. Some of the women walked around opening windows. A man with a guitar played on a stage at the front of the room. A young girl with a tambourine stood beside him, singing and shaking her instrument. Only a few of the congregation were actually in the pews; most were in the aisles or in front of the altar, waving their hands in the air and singing with the worship leader. The song went on for several minutes, the lyrics simply repeating a single line: “Ain’t no harm in callin’ on Jesus’ name.”

Thomas took a spot in the back pew. Ben stood next to him, and Thomas moved over to make room for him. After a few minutes Gil walked down the aisle and joined his wife, who danced and sang, turning in circles and smiling like a child. The stage was empty of furniture except for a lectern; two wooden boxes with handles made of galvanized pipe lay on the floor. Those must have held the snakes that these pagans worshipped.

The song ended—*collapsed* might be a better word—and several people cried “hallelujah.” In the ensuing quiet, Ben could only barely hear a faint hiss coming from the boxes on the stage. An old man in a dark suit climbed onto the stage—there were no stairs—and placed a large Bible on the lectern. He stood wiping his face with a handkerchief while the congregants moved to the pews and sat down. During the commotion, Ben glanced back at the entrance, where Shoemaker stood leaning against

the doorframe watching him. Ben couldn't read the expression on the deputy's face. He nodded, but Shoemaker did not return the gesture.

"I have only a short word to say to you today," said the preacher. "The Holy Ghost has better things to say than me." Though he spoke slowly and dispassionately, he still excited the attention of the congregation.

"Preach it anyway!" said Gil, eliciting a general chuckle.

The congregation, at first an amorphous crowd ready to explode, now sat down in the pews and waited attentively. Even now, however, they seemed ready to jump at the word of this preacher, ready to run outside and yell the gospel to the town below. Although there were a few elderly people, most of the congregants were middle-aged and younger: rough, working men, mechanics and farmhands and carpenters; some women who looked just as hard as the men; others who seemed gracious and motherly; children who stood on the pews so that they could see over the people in front; babies.

Underneath all the other sounds in the room rose the soft, alien hiss of the serpents. This sound—and not the Holy Ghost—was the energy that electrified the room. Ben shivered. He had never been afraid of snakes, but their presence in a church confounded his every sensibility. This reptilian noise, long the symbol of evil and temptation, was practically the object of worship for these people. Ben could feel the tension as they waited to pick up those snakes with their hands. He would not be able to long tolerate that satanic hiss.

Ben leaned over to whisper in Thomas's ear. He watched his son's eyes for a reaction. "I've been accused of something."

“I already know,” said Thomas. “Mrs. Emily told me what she wanted to do. She asked me to help.”

“That heartless, insane bitch,” said Ben. He studied Thomas’s face, watching every blink and twitch of his eyes and the slight flare of his nostrils when he breathed the room’s warm air. The boy said nothing else, and he didn’t meet Ben’s gaze. He waited, as patiently as the rest, for the preacher to begin his sermon.

“I can’t believe that she would put you in that kind of position,” Ben said.

“Many of us here are suffering,” said the preacher. He spoke softly and dispassionately. “Poor Sister Nicole has her arthritis. She suffers for it, but she still makes beautiful quilts for us to sell in town. Brother Harvey has the cancer, but the devil’s having a hard time keeping him away from here.”

“Amen!”

“Let us keep all who suffer in our prayers. But I want you to know what the Lord has to say about suffering. Turn with me to Job thirty-eight, where the Lord answers Job in his complaints. In verse three he tells Job, ‘Gird up now thy loins like a man.’” Here the preacher took off his coat and dropped it on the floor. He gripped the sides of the lectern and surveyed the congregation, squinting.

“Gird up thy loins like a man!” he yelled.

*The son of a bitch*, thought Ben. This old man was preaching this because of Thomas, because someone had told him what had happened to Thomas’s momma. He thought he could stand on his stage and tell Thomas what he needed to do. The presumptuous bastard. Who was he that he knew what Thomas’s suffering was like?

“We’re leaving now,” said Ben, gripping Thomas’s arm, but the boy wrenched it out of Ben’s hand. Still he did not look at Ben.

“Now turn to Colossians one,” said the preacher, “where Paul tells us in verse twenty four, ‘I now rejoice in my sufferings for you.’” He paused and surveyed the crowd before yelling, “He *rejoiced* in his sufferings.”

“Amen!”

One of the babies was crying.

“What a strange notion,” George said. He returned to the text. “‘And fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake.’ But is there anything lacking in the sufferings of Jesus?”

“No!”

“Then what is the apostle telling us about *his* sufferings? He tells us that his suffering is for the church. And I say ‘amen’ to this word of God. I say *rejoice in your sufferings*.” He nodded to the worship leader, who started a new song. The people stood and started to sing. Thomas joined them.

“These people want to brainwash you,” said Ben. “Don’t you see what they’re doing? They’re trying to get you to join their cult.”

“They’ve been nice to me,” said Thomas.

Most of the people were filing out of the pews, and on stage, several men reached into the boxes and lifted out copperheads and rattlers. The snakes hissed and curled around their arms and hands.

“Look at what they’re doing,” said Ben. “You want to be a part of this?”

Thomas was weeping. “I would rather be a part of them than a part of you. I want you to burn in hell, and I want my mom back.”

He shoved Ben out of the way. Ben’s foot caught on the inside of the pew, and he stumbled into the aisle. Thomas stepped past him and walked straight to the stage, where Gil and several others held snakes in their arms. When he climbed onto the stage and reached into one of the boxes, several men moved to stop him, but they backed away when Thomas held up a brown and gold copperhead like an idol. Gil gently lifted Thomas’s arms, holding them away from Thomas’s body.

“If you don’t stop that, I will,” said Shoemaker, but he sounded afraid.

“You’re a chicken-shit,” Ben said.

The deputy wilted, but he said, “You need to tell him to put that thing back.”

“He don’t listen to me anymore.”

Thomas climbed down from the stage carefully and the crowd made a path for him down the aisle. He brought the copperhead to Ben and held it out to him like a gift.

“You always picked on me about being afraid of them,” said Thomas. “Why don’t you take this one from me?” The snake was wrapped around his arm like a tourniquet, its head hovering over his hand, its tongue flicking and tasting the air.

“Thomas,” said Ben. “You should go and put that thing back. It’s a long way to the hospital from here.”

“Here,” said Thomas. He held the snake close to Ben’s chest, urging it on him. The gold and brown scales glistened as though they were wet, and its eyes shone like jewels.

“Please, Thomas,” said Shoemaker, who backed away slowly. “Go put that back before it hurts somebody.”

Ben trembled and stared at his son. “You *want* it to bite me,” he said.

Thomas stepped closer to him so that the copperhead’s nose nearly touched Ben. A bite in the chest would probably kill him before he could even get to his truck. Unable to stand his ground any longer, he took two slow steps backwards.

“I’m not afraid,” said Thomas, “because I’m innocent.”

“So am I,” said Ben, but he stepped away. “I loved her.”

“She’s dead because of you,” said Thomas.

“I loved her!” Ben shouted. The noise startled the snake. It reared its head and hissed at him, showing soft white flesh of its mouth. Drops of venom hung from the tips of its fangs.

Thomas’s face paled. Sweat had beaded on his cheeks and nose. “Maybe you want it to bite *me*.”

“Ben,” said Shoemaker. “I think it’s time for you and me to go.”

“I don’t want anything but to have her back!” screamed Ben. Only now that he heard his voice echo throughout the room did he realize that the music had stopped and everyone watched them. “I want things to be just like they were. I want for you to be my son again.”

Gil had gotten rid of his own snake and stood by Thomas. “You both need to calm down,” he said. He gripped the snake behind its head and took it from Thomas.

“I was going to go along with Mrs. Mitchell, you know,” said Thomas. “I was going to tell them lies so you would go to jail for what you did to her. But I don’t want to lie, and you’re going to suffer enough without jail. You never loved either one of us.”

Thomas stood dead to Ben, and Ben was dead to him. The boy had become a man, but he was a man that Ben would never know or understand.

“You don’t know anything about love,” said Ben. “You don’t know what it’s like to live for someone else.”

He turned and walked out the door. Shoemaker grabbed his shoulder and tried to hold him back.

“Ben—”

Ben punched the deputy hard enough to hurt his arm up to the shoulder. Shoemaker staggered and covered his mouth with his hands.

“Stay away from me,” Ben said. He got into his truck and squealed the tires as he left the church. When he got home, he would go inside and get his 44 Magnum, and if anyone was left there, he would drive them away with the gun like the murderer they thought him to be. He would leave town and be alone because he had died. They had all died—Ben, Thomas, and Lisa—and death meant nothing if not to be alone.

After he passed through the u-bend where the road turned south, he sped up. In the darkness the town lights dotted the valley below like the votive candles that burned in St. Joseph’s. He might go and light one for Lisa. She would have lighted one for him had he died first.

He slowed down to go through a blind curve, and on the other side lights shone at him. He had time to see two cars parked next to the road and several people shining

flashlights into the trees that covered the slope. They scattered to get out of his way, but he jerked the wheel, and the truck started to wallow on its rubbery suspension. Before he could correct and slow down, the truck broke through the rusted guardrail and started to roll. For a time it seemed that noise had obliterated everything else in the world, but then he knew only silence and night.

## CHAPTER XI

At the beginning of April a line of storms came through and behind them a cold front. On a chilly Monday morning, Thomas woke early for work and found Ben sitting on the porch in the rocker Thomas had built for him, bundled in a blanket. The sun hadn't yet risen above the eastern mountain, and a chilly breeze blew from the north. Mockingbirds and blue jays sang perched in the pecan tree and chattered in the morning twilight. When Thomas sat down next to Benjamin, his father didn't look at him. He only sat shivering in the rocker with the blanket low on his chest, his shoulders and upper arms exposed, his breath a fog in front of his face.

"I can't get the blanket around me," said Ben. He tried to lift it higher with the nub of his right arm, but it only slid lower.

Thomas pulled the blanket up for him and tucked it around his shoulders.

"Are you hungry?" said Thomas.

Ben shook his head, but Thomas knew he was lying. He went back inside to cook scrambled eggs and make a pot of coffee. In the accident Ben had lost his right hand and his left arm from the elbow down. Thomas had dropped out of school and taken his father's place at the sawmill. Gil picked Thomas up for work every morning. Eventually he would save enough money to buy a new vehicle.

After Thomas put on his work clothes, he made Ben a bowl of eggs and a cup of coffee. Ben used to drink his coffee black, but now he wanted at least two spoons of sugar and a lot of milk. He had lost at least fifteen pounds since the accident. His chest was sunken and his arms puny.

Thomas pulled a chair next to Ben's and sat down.

“I already told you I ain’t hungry,” said Ben.

“You have to eat,” said Thomas. He put a spoon of egg in front of Ben’s face, but Ben refused it like a child. “You can’t wait until I get home tonight to eat anything.”

Ben opened his mouth and took the bite.

“I just hate for you to have to do this,” he said.

“Who else is going to do it?”

At that Ben’s eyes watered. Thomas hadn’t had much patience with him at first, but lately he had felt sorry for Ben. Everything had been taken from him. There was nothing for him but to sit and watch cars pass by on CR-15, the people waving at him.

“Don’t do that,” said Thomas. “I’ll call Aunt Mona and see if she will come and visit you.”

Mona didn’t come around much. Ben hadn’t really forgiven her, even though he had no proof that she’d had any part in what Emily had done to him, and she had not forgiven him for her sister’s suicide.

“It’s hard to understand,” said Ben. “My mouth is parched and the water I need burns in my throat.”

“What are you talking about?” said Thomas. He had heard this kind of talk from Ben before.

“People don’t get what they deserve,” he said.

Thomas held the coffee up to Ben’s lips and he took a sip, dribbling some down his chin. Thomas wiped it with his sleeve.

“Nothing’s going to change about that,” said Thomas. “Better just get used to it.”

Emily Mitchell's house stood empty, a faded FOR SALE sign planted in the front yard among thick weeds and tall, sun-yellowed grass. Thomas had meant to go and cut the lawn before now. Mrs. Mitchell had moved out two weeks after the accident. Thomas had told Stuckey and Shoemaker what she had done, and when they had told her she had admitted to lying. She said she hadn't heard a gunshot that morning, and she and Ben had not had an affair.

Thomas had seen her the evening before she left. Through his bedroom window he saw her loading paper bags stuffed with household items in her car, and he went over to see if he could help. When she saw him, she dropped one of the bags and it spilled glass cleaner bottles, sponges, washcloths, wire brushes, and other items on her gravel drive.

When Thomas bent over to help repack the things, she said, "Don't do that." She crouched and pushed his hands away. He thought again about how he had dreamed about her touch, how he had looked for opportunities to feel her hands, offering to take things that his mother had borrowed back to her so that he could hand them to her and just barely brush her palms with his. That excitement was gone, and now he only felt sorry for her.

"I understand what you did," he said.

"No, you don't."

"I do," he said. "I blame him as much as you do."

"It's not just about Lisa," she said, stuffing bottles of cleaner into the paper bag and ripping the sides. She leaned back to sit on her heels and stared at the ground. "The

affair was real. Ben and I were sneaking around for a year before I ended it just a week before she killed herself.”

“I know,” said Thomas. He had known.

She put her hands on her face and rubbed. Her voice trembled. “Ben can justify what he’s done all day long. He can tell you that he and Lisa wanted different things out of life. He can tell you that he just wanted to give her the chance to go and do what she wanted.”

“That’s bullshit,” Thomas said.

“But he can say it,” she said. “I can’t say anything. I have no excuse at all. And that’s why I lied. That’s why I tried to get him in trouble. You can’t understand what I did because it doesn’t make sense. I lied because I thought, Jesus, I slept with him for no reason except I was lonely. He was completely calculated about everything: the affair, the abortion, putting her back in bed and telling her to sleep after she hit her head. He thought all of it through. He had ‘good’ intentions. I just did what felt good at the time.”

She stood, brushed dust off of the legs of her jeans, and strode back into the house, leaving the over-filled bag sitting on the ground. Thomas put it into the trunk of her car and walked back to the house. Ben was standing in the doorway when he climbed the porch steps, his face dark in the light of the moon and the streetlamp.

The next day, Mrs. Emily’s car was gone when Thomas got up for work.

Thomas tried to feed Ben more eggs, but he only took four more bites and refused the rest.

“Well, starve if you want,” he said. “I won’t force-feed you.”

“You *were* force-feeding me.”

Thomas laughed and finished the last few bites of eggs himself.

“It’s not right being a man without the means to do something worthwhile, something of some worth to somebody,” Ben said. “I might as well not be alive, I might as well be in the ground with her.”

Thomas threw the bowl against the porch rail and stood. He gripped Ben’s shirt in his fist and pushed the rocking chair backwards so that his father looked up at him.

“Don’t let me hear you say anything like that again,” he said. “Do you understand?”

Ben blinked, and Thomas let go of him and picked up the bowl and spoon. He brushed some bits of egg off of the porch with his foot.

“It fell again,” said Ben, his voice quivering.

The blanket had slid down to his waist, exposing his useless arms and his skinny torso. Thomas tucked it behind his shoulders again, taking care to push the edges further behind him than before.

“I used to be able to take the cold,” said Ben. “Used to work in it every winter and it never bothered me. It bites me now more than it did before.”

Thomas sat down on the porch steps and waited for Gil to come. Every day would be the same for a long time. He didn’t know why that comforted him.