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The University of Southern Mississippi

SLACKWIRE CALLIOPE

by

Lauren Dale Oetinger

Abstract of 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

ABSTRACT

SLACKWIRE CALLIOPE

by Lauren Dale Oetinger

May 2013

This collection of essays and stories strives to consider questions of belonging and estrangement, family, and the many layers of the human experience. This collection is equally interested in questions of genre, and the potential for genre to stretch its own limits. Above all, this collection endeavors to question what makes a story, and what makes a story good.

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2013

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Approved:

Director

Dean of the Graduate School

May 2013

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Wes and Livia Oetinger. Without their love and support I would not have had the courage to realize my dreams.

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PREFACE

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language.

That may be the measure of our lives.”

– Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture in Literature.

I am not a hero. But I have had the privilege and pleasure of studying a few good writers who are. Not necessarily heroes in the traditional, canonized sense – Faulkner, Hemingway, Pound, etc. There tends to be an automatic categorization of many of the traditionally lauded and canonized author as “heroic.” Admittedly, the term “heroic” can be problematic, and difficult to define. I believe that, in general, academia teaches us to wrongly conflate celebrity with heroism. For Toni Morrison, one of the common denominators involved in celebrity is the impulse to fetishize suffering:

We have to stop loving our horror stories. ... A went mad, B died in penury, C drank herself to death, D was blacklisted, E committed suicide. I hate those stories. Great works are written in prisons and holding camps. So are stupid books. The misery does not validate the work. (Morrison “Heroic Writers Movement” 162-3)

In applauding an author’s hardships, Morrison believes that an author’s work may gain unearned importance. Thus, we sometimes mistake the quality of a work as being directly correlated to the amount of suffering involved. This leads to what I call the conflation between suffering and celebrity. Heroic writers like Morrison do not depend on negative circumstances surrounding either the creation of the work or the author’s life to carry them into renown. Once we “stop loving our horror stories,” and begin to scrutinize the

actual quality of the work presented, I believe we begin to have a better understanding of who literature's heroes really are.

My use of "heroic" is not an exact appropriation of Morrison's term. As I see it, to even begin to stand as a heroic writer, one must substantially contribute to the furthering of the craft of writing through the interrogation of traditional conventions. Though I am not a hero, my own writing consciously engages conventions of linear narratives. In theory and in practice, regardless of genre, non-linear narratives are the most authentic. In "Modern Fiction," Virginia Woolf argued that literature should not be constrained by notions of convention because of its inauthentic nature. Instead, she asserts that literature ought to be allowed to be more like life: "So, that if a writer were a free man and not a slave ... if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot ... in the accepted style ... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo" (287). It is not the cultural possession of convention that Woolf takes umbrage with, but the way in which it seeks to impose artifice – symmetrically arranged gig lamps – onto the art of crafting literature. Instead, Woolf argues that literature ought to be allowed to more closely reflect life as an organic "luminous halo" of light. How an author interacts with convention informs their principles as a writer, and is also indicative of their relationship with the craft of fiction. Thus, how my writing engages the temporal structures of a narrative betrays my politics.

If fiction ought to somewhat mirror life as Woolf asserts, then as writers we must carefully consider our relationship with chronological time. Our physical bodies must always go forward through time – there is no way to physically return to the past – our minds, however, have *carte blanche* to return to the past and project into the future

almost without our full awareness. It is this temporal intersection between the continuous present and ever-present past that many of my stories make use of; it is inauthentic to pretend that one may be had without the other. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one novel that fundamentally – and heroically – challenges the traditional convention of temporal storytelling. *Beloved* allows past and present to fall into direct dialogue through the title character, Beloved. The novel also endeavors to speak for the “Sixty Million and more” to whom the novel is dedicated, thereby allowing the historical past to speak to those in the present day. This paralleled conversation between fictional and actual historical past and present informs how the novel is read.

Most of Morrison's novels engage in some level of non-linear structure.

Morrison, like Woolf, strives for her fiction to closely reflect life. For Morrison, the inclusion of non-linear structures in her writing does just this:

My feeling is that the plot ... is what happened. But the meaning of a novel is in the structure. ... Just write the beginning, the middle, the end is one way to do it. It's not very interesting to me because it's not really life-like. I mean, we don't live lives in plots. We sometimes retell ourselves the narrative of our lives in a chronological way, but it doesn't happen to us that way. We learn something today that clarifies something ten years ago. (Silverblatt 218)

Further, while non-linear structures create a more authentic experience, in terms of crafting a story, life rarely happens in an arc appropriate for a story. Sometimes withholding information that ought to come close to the front of a story until later will not only create an effective story arc, but it can also add depth or resonance to what comes

before it. The question the author must ask is which pieces of information to withhold and which to provide upfront. Ultimately, the manipulation of the story's structure affects the reader's understanding of the story. One of the main arguments against conventional standards in fiction – voiced by both Woolf and Morrison – implicates convention in the creation of unsurprising literature. Non-linear narratives reject narrative stability. When the reader may be given any piece of information – transported to any moment in the narrative's history at any given moment – the reader is continually thrown off balance. This narrative vertigo creates stories in which there are gaps, and things left untold. Robert Boswell's "half-known world" is one in which not everything can be known, not because the author cannot think of the details to provide the reader, but because of the romance lost in full disclosure: "Serious fiction is a medium of implication. [it] succeeds by making you see what is not there" (Boswell 8). In asking the reader to "see what is not there," the author asks for the reader's participation in the creation of the story. I would argue that non-linear narratives require more interpretive spaces than any other kind of narrative.

Some of the most sophisticated storytelling happens just off the page, creating a space for the reader to join in the act of creation alongside the writer. This practice is one for which Toni Morrison is famous:

You don't give [the reader] everything; you open spaces where they can come in. I never describe the characters a great deal – just a mark, an odor, something peculiar to them. I also leave spaces in scenes, particularly sensual scenes. You have to assume that the reader's sensuality is more

sensual than your own. Therefore, you just provide the way in which they can step in. (The World 45)

Asking for the reader's participation in the creation of meaning ensures that the reader is fully engaged in the story. Further, it creates a multiplicity of meanings a single story can have since no two readers will enter the same interpretive space in the same way. In turn, this makes reading an intimate and highly individualized experience. Through entering these interpretive spaces, the reader must engage the story in a way that implicates them in the process of making meaning out of literature. In presenting a narrative out of order – in picking and choosing what to reveal to the reader – in artificially manipulating the narrative arc through structure – the author creates gaps for the reader to make connections, to create their own meaning, and become active participants in the story.

One of the greatest accomplishments of Morrison's interpretive spaces is the full immersion of the reader into the story. At the heart of fiction is an exploration of what it means to be human – a discovery of the human condition. The world of fiction is large, and the range of human experience and emotion is larger still – and yet English-language authors only have twenty-six letters with which to express them: “Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation. Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin” (Morrison “Nobel Lecture” 206). Such are the accomplishments of heroic literature. The heroic writers of our age will inevitably – like Woolf and Morrison – create the conventions of the next, but it will not be without passion. As writers struggle to retain their autonomy over their craft and create meaningful literature, Morrison asserts the time has come for us to band together: “We don't need any more writers as solitary

heroes. We need a heroic writer's movement – assertive, militant, pugnacious. . . . If just one resolution comes from this Congress, let it be that we remain at the barricades where we belong. We must be more than central. We must be sovereign” (Morrison “Heroic Writers Movement,” 163). If writers must assert their autonomy, so too must literature.

The mark of truly great literature is its ability to live off of the page. All of the best stories continue to live on after the book is closed. In “A Room of One's Own,” Woolf asserts that in order to be successful a writer must have a place where the pressure to “sparkle” is lost. To be a heroic writer is to lose interest in this sparkle and to invest time and energy into craft, push the boundaries of what writing can do, explore the human condition, and the creation of that which is alive on and off of the page. What conventions of fiction will face the next generation of writers? One need only look at the innovations being made today to find them.

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CREATIVE NONFICTION

CHAPTER I
DENSITY AND SPACE

1. This is the part where I tell you that I hate my breasts.

When I try to remember the day I realized I started to hate my breasts I can't find it, like I'm missing a cable channel. But I remember sitting in the bathtub at my *abuela's* house complaining of sore spots on my chest. I remember how she said I was just growing up, filling in, that they were growing pains, and that I'd be fine. And if I blink I remember nothing else about them until after the eclipse of adolescence.

But when the memories are steady, and I can focus again, the distaste for my breasts is already there. So I guess I don't have an answer, which is fine – I'm fine.

2. I must be 5 or 6, because we're at Stride Rite and I'm up on the bench and you're bent in front of me tying my shoes and pushing down on the toe and you keep asking me, "Do you have room?" I'm not listening to you. Bent down in front of me the way you are, I can see down your shirt. I am mesmerized by the crease of cleavage, by the round fullness, by the white bra they're hidden in. Maybe you knew I was looking and didn't care because one day you assumed I'd have them too.

This comes years later: "Men only like women with large (insert simultaneous hand motion here)," my *abuela* says. Maybe I'm 9. Maybe I've just started growing into a woman. Maybe a year from now I'll be in a regular bra with underwire and lace and have tampons in my summer camp backpack because it will be too hard or too embarrassing for me to explain to my male counselor why I can't go swimming.

3. Mammograms with gray hair and wrinkles that have seen time and wars and bills paid and unpaid and children raised and grown with children of their own, grandbabies, and pregnant stomachs and sleepless colic nights. Mammograms of retirement planning and laugh lines and timeshares; of middle age and trading in that unreasonable piece of shit car for something to take the kids to soccer in. Mammograms see through the bullshit and the Chanel, through the acrylic and the pantyhose until a woman is only a black and white image of density and space.

4. Why are there so many damned men here? This is a gynecologist's office for goodness sake. They really shouldn't let men come here. They don't belong here. I feel them looking at me, and they probably figure I'm knocked up.

I'm here for my yearly exam, ("because it's the responsible thing to do," my mother says). But it never fails, the one day a year I show up in this office it's a constant parade of pregnant women and their male significant others. I know they don't want to be here either – this is not a place for men. You don't see me hanging out around colonoscopy waiting rooms do you?

The doctors in this office have seen the anatomy of every female in my family for four generations. Not only have these doctors seen between the legs of my foremothers, but they've delivered every child in my family for the last thirty years. They know my history here, that is, where I come from.

This probably makes me a prude, but there is something unsettling to me about all these men knowing that I'm here for a limited number of reasons, all involving the

anatomy between my legs. I wonder how pissed the nurses would get if I put up a sign on the door that says VAGINAS ONLY!!! Stamp it in stone. Make it law.

They call me back before I have time to put this into action. They know trouble when they see it.

5. After the age of 14 they never got any bigger. My *abuela* is not alive for this lack of development. Would she have thought me less of a woman? Would she have waved a hand at my chest and said it must be my father's *gringo* genes?

But I'm 10 and my mother is escorting me through the department store. I need a training bra, and I'm holding one white bra in every style this store has. We're walking to a fitting room, and when we find one, we both squeeze into it because my mother still comes into the dressing room with me. I remember slipping my arms through the straps, and my mother hooking the back for me. It was tight and foreign. I pulled the material any which way I might to get a little room, a little air. But my mother's mouth is set in a line and she tells me to stop fidgeting while she adjusts the straps. She tells me to lift my arms, to move around and see how it fits.

Up until now I'd been enamored with the idea of a bra. I'd seen them in the laundry room my entire life. The bras of the women in my family were like a coat of arms that I'd been waiting to inherit. But now the grip around my ribcage seemed more a shackle than a statement of independence.

6. After playing voice-mail tag for three days, my doctor's office unceremoniously left me a message lasting approximately 31 seconds. Long enough to say I'm fine. Long enough to say they want to keep an eye on things, but that I'm fine.

I should tell you this now, so you will know how this ends. But really, I'm fine.

7. Here's a riddle: Is a person without hair and without breasts a woman?

8. I've been compulsively smelling myself all morning.

Lifting each arm as discretely as possible and taking a deep whiff. I am 23. Last night I scrubbed under my arms in the shower until my skin was pink. I shaved the stubble of hair, and figured any traces of deodorant must be gone. I patted my underarms dry. They itched all night. I was alone.

My mother called, "Are you alright?" she asked me.

"I'm fine."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No, I'm fine."

"If you're sure. I mean, are you sure? I don't mind going."

"Really, I'm fine."

"Te quiero, mija."

"I love you, too."

But this morning I woke up earlier than usual. The sun was still a dream when I rolled out of bed and stood in my living room breathless. I went from room to room in my small apartment without turning on the lights. I was alone.

I imagined that to someone looking through my windows my pale skin in the light coming off of the streets must have made me look like a ghost; that I am removed from myself. I am just the transparent outline, the untouchable form without soul.

9. I have an unhealthy preoccupation with death. Specifically with when my time will come. I expect bad news. I've been preparing myself for years for the moment the doctor will tell me that what I have is incurable, that I should get my affairs in order and travel the world. I have letters in my apartment to the people I love in the event that one day I don't wake up. I wonder who will come to my funeral, and if any of them will be thinking of me or if they'll be thinking about the football game they're missing, or the dirty dishes in their sink, or their pantyhose digging into their waists.

10. Mastectomy, chemo, hair loss, pink ribbons – I don't even like pink, walk-a-thons, survivors, non-survivors. But I'm fine.

October is breast cancer awareness month (I never knew that, before). But this is not October.

I am fine, but how many are not?

11. The steering wheel is sticky under my fingers. I can't remember if the day was chilly or if the sun was out, but I know that my heart barely moved. I know it was noon, and that I'd been up since before the sun came up. I know I was alone.

The women behind the counter are looking at me strangely, and I guess they're wondering why I'm here, I don't look old enough to be here. I'm in the waiting room for

half an hour before they call me through the door. The nurse holding my chart is pretty and she smiles.

Inside the room she asks me to lie down and locate the problem for her. I point there, just there, on the right side. She squirts warm lubricant onto the spot. Movies, TV shows – they all said it would be cold. But I've never seen a sonogram of a breast on television, maybe it's different. I expected my skin to pimple from the chill, but the room is warm.

I wish I knew how to tell you what she did next, but I'm not watching. I'm looking at the screen in front of her. I'm looking at the black and white images that were supposed to indicate mass and tissue composition.

Inside I look like static television without sound.

12. This might be the 143rd name I've neatly painted onto a tile. I'm bent over and my hand is cramping from holding the paintbrush too tightly. I swear that my stack of tiles is impressively tall, so tall that those who walk by no doubt gawk in wonder at my accomplishment.

Okay, it might only be the 20th, but it feels like more, and the stack of tiles that need to be completed gets bigger every day. The girls I work with have done more tiles than I have, so I know I shouldn't complain. To be honest I'm not a great candidate for this project because I work too slowly. Don't be such a perfectionist, my boss tells me, it doesn't have to be perfect.

I work at a small pottery shop that smells like warm coffee beans and vanilla. There are days where this is the only place I feel welcome. On occasion, organizations in

the community ask us to do projects for them. Schools, churches, non-profits– they make walls out of tiles that we paint for them. There’s a new mall up the street and there’s going to be a wall there for breast cancer victims. I want my tiles to be perfect, because I’m writing more than a name on a tile with a pink ribbon on it. It feels like I’m carving their tombstones by hand. I try to remember the names, try to retain them in my memory so they can live on past a glance, but I can’t remember them for much longer than it takes to paint them on the tiles because there are too many.

When the wall is completed I plan to bring flowers but never do.

13. I’m sitting on the examination table in a thin cloth robe made to fit women of all sizes –it leaves little to the imagination. My doctor guides my head back onto the pillow at the end of the table. She lifts my right arm, parting the robe down the center. She asks me questions about other things – school, my niece, anything – and I hardly feel her hands working in slow methodical circles.

Now she does something she’s never done before. She opens the other side of my robe without closing the first side. She’s stopped talking. She takes my hand and leads it to my right breast.

Feel this, she says.

And I do.

Do you feel it?

I do.

A slight swelling under the skin, something that isn’t like the tissue around it. Small, but noticeable. The words sonogram and mammogram and biopsy are thrown at

me. That because my mother, and her mother, all had breast lumps I ought to get it looked at.

I'm told not to worry.

I'm told it's just a precaution.

I'm told to rest easy.

But I don't.

14. Here's another: Which would I hate more, the presence or the absence of my breasts?

15. For this is my prayer: Give unto me, Oh Lord, the tranquility to see this through. In this let my soul be purified through the flame of fear that casts the shadow in the valley I stand in. For I will praise you in the storm.

My healer, my redeemer, I praise you in the storm, Lord.

Show me the path, Lord, though it be dark and narrow. Put a compass in my heart that will lead me Home.

I see one set in the sand, Lord. And I thank You.

16. Technicians cannot give results.

I'm still on the table when the sonogram technician hands me a hand-towel and tells me I can clean myself off. She's left me and I'm sitting on this table still staring at the screen, now blank. The room is silent wanting even the noise from other patients walking through the halls. I'm insulated, isolated.

There might be literature on the walls, or pamphlets, but all I see is a sign typed out with even margins and bold font.

Technicians cannot give results.

I wonder if they used Garamond font, everything seems to look nicer in Garamond.

I'm thinking back to the self-addressed envelope I filled out. I'm thinking about what they will send me. I'm thinking it might be pictures, that like a mother I may hold them to the light and say this is growing inside me.

Technicians cannot give results.

But really, I know I'm fine.

CHAPTER II

OF MOTHERHOOD

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise. ... One day this woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. ... "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." ... "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." (Morrison 198-9)

*

Sitting on my mother's back porch, the Florida sunshine burns my feet and lines my forehead with beads of sweat. Haloed by cigarette smoke, the women of my family flame the ends of their Marlboros.

My mother begins, "Listen to this: Wes and I leave Lauren's and didn't call her to tell her we got home. She calls frantic, 'Why didn't you call? Are you dead in a ditch?' She was upset we didn't tell her we made it okay." She spreads her fingers over her eyes; her mouth stretched in a smile, her shoulders lifting with laughter.

Almost 60, my mother is still as beautiful as I remember from my childhood: slender fingers, petite wrists, high-arched feet; creamy skin, large brown eyes, impeccable bone structure; whispers from the other PTA moms and slack-jawed young boys "that's your *mother*?" My mother is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I look like my father.

“You know where you get that from, right?” asks my sister, Gina. She points to our mother.

“You come by it honest,” she admits.

“You really are getting to be just like her,” says my sister, Ashley.

“There are worse things,” my mother says at last.

But I’m not so sure.

*

To the Lighthouse is one of my favorite novels. Mrs. Ramsay’s presence in the novel haunts me, and fills me with the idea that the archetype of the Mother hides in corners, even after death. Though childless, Woolf was also obsessed with motherhood. Critics say she modeled Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay after her own parents – the aloof and erratic father, the adored, beautiful, and capable mother – but Woolf lost her mother when she was hardly 13. The real-life summer house in Cornwall she modeled the setting of the novel after is said to have fascinated Woolf even into her adulthood, as did the visage of her mother. In Mrs. Ramsay is the archetypal Mother, sure and nurturing, masterful and in control. But Woolf’s fixation leads her to see the woman underneath the archetype, to peel away the exterior shell to the woman within:

No, she thought, putting together some of the pictures [James] had cut out – a refrigerator, a mowing machine, a gentleman in evening dress – children never forget. For this reason, it was so important what one said, and what one did, and it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that

was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well, not even to think.

To be silent; to be alone. (Woolf 62)

Though she adores her children (all eight of them), she also feels the immense pressure of her presence in their lives. Everything she does, even the very words she says, impacts them in ways she is keenly aware of. Expending such large amounts of energy leaves her ready to escape this meaning and impact – to simply exist in a space where her every movement cannot take on meaning. There is another side of this, though. Mrs. Ramsay is perfect, and kind, and loving, but it is her family which holds her up from the inside. When they are gone, she is a shadow. Who is Mrs. Ramsay when she is “herself, by herself?” We don’t know, and maybe that’s the point.

My mother is also mythical. It’s eerie how right she can be, how explicitly she sees through the fog and the bullshit. Like Mrs. Ramsay, my mother filled every nook and cranny of my childhood. Even when not in the room, she watches me over my shoulder and tells me to wash my hands, make my bed, and eat a banana instead of cookies for breakfast. Even when she isn’t here, she is.

When I was growing up my mother knew exactly what made us sick and how to heal it; knew when our Band-aids needed to be changed or left off. She mended holes we did not know were there, removed the stains we puzzled over, and could tell in a glance if we had grown or gained weight. Halloween costumes were homemade, and our own vacations to the beach lacked sunburns and boredom.

She knew who liked the Wonder Woman plate, and who needed to have the Cookie Monster cup, and who only ate with salad forks. She picked the olives out of the right salads, and put extra butter on the right rolls. She knew all of our teachers by name,

and the names of all of our schoolmates and their mothers, knew what they did for a living and where they lived. She could tell you the exact location of every item in our home. How can one woman do all this? She is real – I’ve seen her bleed.

She existed outside the house, certainly. If I cannot separate home and my mother, it is because she never *left*. She didn’t go out with girlfriends to happy hour, or go out to movies with old friends. There were no book clubs, or any real outlets for my mother. When I think of what she must have given up, when I think about all of the Friday or Saturday nights I fell asleep with my head in her lap, I wonder how she did it. Three young girls would be enough for anyone to hire a babysitter. Not only were we always underfoot, always needing her, something from her, for her to give, give, give us more. Who was my mother when she was “herself, by herself?”

I’ve never thought to ask.

“But mothers are only human” (Cashdan 27). And yet, I’m convinced if someone shot my mother in the back, the bullet would bounce off of her spine.

In my childhood memories my mother is an unusual, alarming mixture: she is Sunday morning kitchen cupboard slamming, school lunches with notes scrawled on napkins, first and middle name yelling, and bedtime hugs. In my memory she smells of *Finesse Extra-Hold*, *Kool Lights*, and her favorite perfume, *Sierra*.

Even her name is unusual: Livia. Not Olivia. Just Livia. It is both harsh to the ear and beautiful in the mouth. This, I think, is exactly her.

*

“But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it” (Woolf 82-3).

My entire life I have spent circling my mother in the barbed wire of motherhood. Her identity outside of this cage of my creation is unfathomable. What she has done with her life is raise me and my sisters, give up college and a social life. She is human, and inhuman, too. She has done much with her life, but nothing at all. She buried in me her dream of seeing a high school graduation, because my sisters dropped out. Then she needed a college graduation, needed me to carry the torch she had to put down to care for us. And then – and then – and then. In my sisters she's buried the dreams of eternal beauty, domestic happiness, children, and stable lives. If I were her favorite (which I'm not), perhaps something different might be buried in me.

*

In the spring of 2011 I had five three-week-old kittens living in my spare bathroom. They were found in a cardboard box behind Lowes in Hattiesburg, MS and taken to the local shelter, where I became their foster mother. They meowed me awake in the middle of the night because they had no other mother. That is, they had a mother, but she abandoned them.

Cats who will mother their litters are often willing to adopt kittens from other litters, but Momma cats were in short supply with more kittens already than they could reasonably feed. At the time there were over 100 kittens in Forrest County foster care, but the shelter I was helping was maxed out – the next box that came in would have to be put down – and though I saved one box full of kittens, the next box always comes in. My kittens came from three different litters. Three different cats that refused to mother their offspring.

If the mother is young enough (looks enough like a kitten), she is fixed and adopted out. Older cats that abandon litters, however, are almost always put down. Males last longer.

I don't know if a cat has a choice in any of this. Cats go into heat, and their wails echo off over-turned trash bins. Physical desire aside, the male cat has a bifurcated penis that separates after penetration, holding the female in place. Though her biological cycles tell her she wants it, the anatomical realities of the male lead me to believe that to some degree it must be forced upon her – she must be held in place. So perhaps we cannot blame the female for pushing away kittens blindly crawling toward her in search of swollen, milk-filled nipples. Their paws kneading her belly, their claws releasing into her skin.

Can we – can I – really blame a woman for rejecting her young? Can we blame her for resenting the children who claw at her to give, give, give, leaving nothing left for when she can be herself, by herself? Is this biological? Behavioral? Can it be learned and unlearned? They say that love is chemical – so is a lack of love a chemical imbalance? Or is the impulse toward affection the imbalance?

*

My mother never wanted children. We were problems to fix, stomachs to feed, lunches to pack, runny noses and tangled hair. She never wanted to stay in Tampa, never wanted to be tied to a stove, or a job. She wanted California sunshine, a college degree, and wealthy men to support her while she modeled on magazine covers.

The myth of my mother's beauty: she hushed crowded rooms.

I believe she resented us, at least at first. I believe she had to learn to love us. I believe we put the gray in her hair and the stress lines on her face. I believe we have resulted in sleepless nights.

*

The memory of children is complex but resilient. This is why the talk of the lighthouse occupies so much of *To the Lighthouse*. The lighthouse for Mrs. Ramsay's youngest son, James, represents a fairyland he cannot reach, because his mother says he can and his father says he can't. Even though Mrs. Ramsay knows the weather will, in all likelihood, not be good enough for them to depart the following day, she tells James it will. She resists reality in believing that things will go according to plan. This resistance wants to keep the lighthouse real for James, instead of the impending rain, until at last she must revise their plans: “‘And even if it isn't fine tomorrow,’ said Mrs. Ramsay, ... ‘it will be another day’” (Woolf 26). Another day – a day which will only come after World War I, and her own death. In attempting to keep the lighthouse attainable for James, Mrs. Ramsay hopes to diminish her son's disappointment. That, though tomorrow will not be fine, the next day might.

*

Truth: If abortion had been legal in 1968 my eldest sister Gina would not be alive.

*

It's always the mother's fault. Psychologically it is the mother that has the most bearing on the development of selfhood: “Maternal directives (‘Don't stuff your mouth’) are increasingly replaced by self-directives (‘I shouldn't overeat’). As a result, control by others becomes increasingly replaced by self-control. These changes herald the

development of an autonomous self and sense of ‘I-ness’” (Cashdan 28). Maternal care and direction such as these are internalized by the child until eventually the mother’s caregiving becomes self-care. In essence, our mothers are always present in us, even when they’re gone or dead.

According to Sheldon Cashdan, development is psychologically difficult for children, especially the negotiation of the human ability to be dually filled with both good and bad. They cope with this duality by “mentally ‘splitting’ the mother into two psychic entities: a gratifying ‘good mother’ and a frustrating ‘bad mother.’ ...Over time the two maternal representations ... are psychologically ‘metabolized’ and become transformed into good and bad parts of the child’s developing sense of self” (Cashdan 27). Mentally, then, in recognizing that our mothers can exhibit both good and bad behaviors and attributes, we learn to recognize the duality of our own personhood. Cashdan further asserts that the child’s negative character traits, however, are always attributed to the mother, while the positive attributes always go to the father. We learn to recognize ourselves as reflections of our parents, but in compartmentalizing good from bad, we also compartmentalize the mother. To examine this culturally, we need only consider a woman’s horror at the discovery she has become her mother.

Like I said, it’s always the mother’s fault.

The mythical and prominent role of mothers in literature and in life “pays homage to the pivotal role that mothers play in the genesis of the self” (Cashdan 28). The archetype of the Mother is not just important to literary development, but also to psychological development. There is, of course, no perfect mother. Even Mrs. Ramsay, a

near monument to maternal perfection, must be “herself, by herself” once all her children have gone to bed.

*

This part is new to me, this *missing*. This missing my mother, this is foreign and strange and so *new*.

This is no family secret: My mother had me for my father. She said to me once: “I looked him in the eye and told him, if we don’t work out she’s your problem. There was never any question about whose child you were. You were always his.”

I’ve always loved my mother in a thin, transient way you care for someone or something you know you’re meant to care for, or about, but don’t really know why. But something has shifted somewhere I cannot put a finger to. This shift is deep and bone-bending. It thickened my love to something substantial and genuine, has left invisible traces on my skin clear as day – brandings that belong only to children who have learned to love their mothers, and to be loved by them.

When I moved away from home my mother rarely called, and I hardly came to visit. When she did call, it was to ask if I’d done something I was supposed to do, and to reprimand me if I hadn’t. She never saw my dorm room at the University of Florida, or the University of Tampa, and she never came with my father when he’d drive up to feed me a dinner that didn’t come from a cafeteria. She didn’t help me pick out my first car, or come to the scene of my first serious car accident. These were my father’s burdens.

Sure, I’d call to let her know the big stuff (broke my foot, have the flu). She offered the obligatory “call if you need anything,” but I never did because I knew both of

us were acting out of obligation. I had to tell her I'd gone to the emergency room in D.C., and she was obligated to care.

And then one morning almost five years ago I woke up with what the doctor said was strep throat. But three days later I woke up unable to swallow. In my panic I called my father – but my mother picked up his phone. The sound of my thick-tongued voice must have bothered her, because she came to see me.

She looked down my throat with a flashlight, “Lauren, this worries me,” she said. She brought soup and crackers, ginger ale, sherbet and ice cream. I'd be fine, I said. What I meant was, “Go away, I don't need you.” She left, satisfied she'd done her duty.

My mother came over every day after work, soothing me, bringing something else that might make me feel better – because in spite of five doctor's visits, diagnoses, and prescriptions, I was only getting worse. She stayed with me for hours every night, only to go home to a messy house and hungry stomachs who needed her. I know her hands cooled my forehead, that she changed my sheets and brought me towels warm from the dryer, that she dried my hair when I was too weak to do it myself. This was my life for over a month.

It all cleared up one day, leaving as mysteriously as it had come. Still, it took three months for my digestive tract to return to normal, and six months to lose the funny taste in the back of my mouth. There were times when I wondered if that was how death began.

Even after I was better, my mother called me every day. I started going home to see her. There was a warmth in her voice, and a pull in her hug that pulled me up from

the dark. And I began to miss her. This missing business, it was bizarre at first. Even now it's fresh and strange.

*

The kittens are all sick. Of the seven I've had in a single week: three are sneezing, two have blood in their stool (Moose and Stalin), two have eye infections (Ella and Yoda), one (Yoda) has become diabetic and keeps having seizures, and one (June) has stress-induced separation anxiety from her original litter. Yoda and June are back at the shelter so they can be treated. They were replaced with two new kittens (Strawberry Jam and Little Foot), but the dynamic is different now among them – I can feel it.

“It's nothing you did,” the girl from the shelter promises me over the phone. “You're taking good care of them. A lot of them don't make it when they're separated from their mothers this young. They're susceptible to disease.” They will all go to the vet in the morning. If it is as the girl from the shelter predicts, more than one of them may be put down.

But it feels like I've managed to kill them all.

*

“Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died – and had left all this. Really, [Lily] was angry with Mrs. Ramsay” (Woolf 149).

Mrs. Ramsay dies in the middle of *To the Lighthouse*, but she never leaves the page. She lives on in the memories of those she mothered. But when the Mother is gone, anger must follow. No matter how perfect or whole mothering is, its absence is abandonment.

Mrs. Ramsay, though archetypal, must die; the Mother must die. Woolf's characters must renegotiate their plans; they must live their lives another way. Tomorrow will be rainy, but the day after might be fine; always tomorrow.

It seems to me my sisters are wrong. I *can't* become my mother – our problems are too different. I feel too much for her hard lines. She is all skill, and I am all heart. My mother gives, gives, gives, and when she is dead it will be the only rest she's ever had.

*

It's night and we're on the porch in the dark. She says: "The three of you have always been so gracious about not being wanted." Her words boomerang in my head until I have to walk inside to get away from the sound. I know she loves me now, but how can you devote your life to something (or someone) you don't love? How did she wake up every day and know she had us on the other side of the door, waiting to completely consume her until our eyes closed and she might be "herself, by herself" for a few short hours, if then?

*

"Passion is never enough; neither is skill. But try" (Morrison 206).

*

"[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]" (Woolf 128).

Mrs. Ramsay's life, against the backdrop of World War I, is reduced to the parenthetical. Not only is her death glossed over, but it is through the lens of Mr. Ramsay's wanting and reaching. Mrs. Ramsay gives everything of herself – even her own

death. But in her death she is not gone. She still lives for the characters in the beach house they return to at the novel's end. Just as Woolf is obsessed by her mother, so, too, are her characters still obsessed with Mrs. Ramsay. Just as I am obsessed with the figure of the Mother.

When my mother dies I wonder how I will manage to remember her, to remember the way she adjusts the waistband of her pants front to back, the way she meticulously cuts her food and then eats so slowly, the way she washes dishes twice, and how her mouth crinkles into a small point when she's concentrating, or a frown when she's angry.

*

The night my mother went into labor with me she calmly paced the patio. It was a muggy August evening. She fixed dinner, cleaned the kitchen. Children got baths, and bedtime stories. The house was put to rights.

She took a shower; washed her hair and shaved her legs. She dressed. She dried her hair, styling it just so, keeping it in place with hairspray. She plucked her eyebrows. She put on her make up: the foundation, the eyeliner, the eye shadow, mascara, blush, and finally lipstick. She packed a bag, and walked out to the living room where my father had fallen asleep in his armchair watching television. I imagine she said, shaking him calmly, "Wes, it's time."

*

Upper respiratory infection and worms. Apparently all of the kittens in the shelter have it. My five troopers came home covered in fleas and their own feces from being caged all day, but they came home. De-wormed and with antibiotics, the kittens were bathed and fed.

Of the two who left last weekend, June is recovered and Yoda is dead. Before she died, they promised that when she was well enough I'd get her back. Now Yoda will never come back. I was going to adopt her and the little white kitten I've named Moose. I remember how her ears ticked back with each pull of formula, and how her sleepy eyes found me, and the way her whole body shook when she purred in my lap. I only fostered her for three days, but I still cried when I heard. Now I've formed new attachments and so have the kittens. They're paired off – Moose has taken to Little Foot. Just when I think I'll adopt him, too, he dies. It was quick, sudden. He died in my arms, warm, and loved.

Maybe that's all anyone can hope for.

*

Fact: In a family of vocal, assertive women I am the wallpaper. Perhaps one day I will have mastered my mother's art of voice. Livia is the kind of woman that people listen to.

*

In 2010, my mother came to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to help me move. My father worked while my mother and I hung pictures and grocery shopped. We cooked dinners that made the strange apartment smell like home, and hung curtains in windows. We arranged and rearranged furniture. My mother and I touched every surface together.

For us, this was a milestone. This is the first time she's helped me select a home, and helped me move in to it. We watched movies together. We went out to get coffee and gossip about movie stars – I never knew she liked to gossip. We ate ice cream and watched bad television. It is my mother who took me to get my Mississippi driver's license and license plate.

The night before my parents left to drive back to Tampa, I sat beside my mother while she embroidered. I watched her make each stitch with such careful precision. I arranged her threads for her by color, though they're meant to be arranged by number. She didn't correct me and I was glad. In the morning I crawled into bed beside her, while she watched the very same morning news network as my father in the other room. I lay there and watched her get up, pack their suitcase. I watched her put on her make up. I followed her out to the kitchen, and on to the porch to watch her smoke. I packed a few snacks for them in a plastic bag and shoved them wordlessly into my father's hands when he went to the car with the suitcase.

I followed them out. I held out my arms to my father.

"Goodbye, my girl," he said, kissing the top of my head.

I walked around the car to my mother. No sooner than my arms were around her than I involuntarily sniffled. She squeezed me.

"I'm going to miss you," I say. We're quiet for a moment; my father is in the car, and the engine is started.

"This is harder than I thought," she says at last.

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FICTION

CHAPTER III

TIME OUT

Joshua Matthews's nephew asks him if he will go to career day, because his own father is out of town on business. His sister, Kate, says it would be a huge favor to them all, if he'd go. Joshua agrees, for Michael's sake rather than any desire to share with a room full of 5th graders what it is he does for a living.

It is a Tuesday and it is cold outside. He will remember later that the sky looked anemic, though there is not a single cloud to cover it.

He takes the 12:15 train and is standing in front of a long blackboard covered in times tables at 12:45. He is wearing his most serious suit, and his most serious tie. He knows he looks ridiculous, but hopes the 5th graders won't.

My name is Joshua Matthews, he begins, and I work for the Historical Integrity Bureau. It is my job to make sure the past stays as it always has. To ensure that history is not changed.

How? Freckles and snagged teeth.

I'm a historian; I went to school and studied history. I know how it is and how it isn't supposed to be.

Why? Pigtales and dimples.

Because we can't change the past, if we did then we'd alter the present in horrible ways. Who cares? Glasses, braces, and an early on-set of acne: the adolescent holy trinity.

When your parents decide they'd like to see Mozart's symphonies conducted by the man himself, there is risk involved. When you go with your aunt to see Jefferson's plantation, or Babe Ruth hit a homer, there is risk involved. What if you did something that triggered something that triggered something that meant you were never born? To enjoy the benefits of Timing Out, we must be diligent in our efforts to preserve our histories.

Even Joshua admits he sounds like a uptight HIB safety brochure. But he is frustrated, and he wonders if this generation will learn to understand and knows if they don't they'll pay the price. He knows they will not be ready for the sum of the damages.

Which is your favorite Time? A pinstriped suit, fourth row. He does not look ridiculous.

This one, Joshua answers.

*

It makes the paper in the morning. Joshua sees it over his bowl of cereal and coffee. Sees his own name in print, sees his department photograph with the feature. It's in the back with the wedding announcements and obits.

It reads: HIB SPECIALIST'S TIME RECORD IS BLANK. It highlighted the contents of Joshua's career day speech. No he has never Timed-Out, no he doesn't think he ever will, because he is happy where he is thank-you-very-much. Joshua remembers the suit in the fourth row. Remembers the pinstripes that couldn't mind their own business. It must be filler; must have been a slow news day. The article is too glib to be a human-interest piece, but lacks the bite required of political scandal. He folds the paper

and puts it in a drawer and thinks one day he'll show his kids, if he ever gets around to having any. He gets ready and takes the 8:00 AM train into work.

Kate calls around 11. I saw the story, she says. Of course you did. She always reads the entire paper, a habit she picked up from their stepfather.

I didn't even know. Her voice wants to be confused. We Time Out every year, why don't you come with us? How can you do your job? He laughs into the phone. You're being as ridiculous as they are, Katie. It's just a story, he says, no one will remember it tomorrow.

When he gets home that evening he re-reads the article. He examines it for misrepresentation, for a loophole, but he doesn't find one.

*

Thursday at lunch time a reporter calls Joshua's boss and asks for the HIB's statement on the matter. It's a small paper that no one reads except in the grocer's check-out line. Joshua's boss, Martin Phillips, has not seen the article in yesterday's paper. Phillips only reads the front page.

At 3 Phillips calls. He wants to discuss the problem. One reporter calling isn't a problem, Joshua says. Matthews, that isn't how we do it, Phillips says. If they smell blood they'll bite down. I'll have Wilson spin out a Time Out record; it's easy enough to fabricate. This'll go away like a sting. What will go away, sir? Phillips' voice is higher than normal. Matthews, I don't think I need to tell you that this needs to go away quietly. And I don't need to fabricate anything, Joshua says, because it's not a big deal. Do you ever wonder if we're doing right by history in all this? His conviction is tangible. Phillips excuses him, for now.

*

Joshua Matthews' first memory is from a time before his sister's birth. He is four years old and his mother is four months pregnant. Her stomach has just begun to swell under her dresses. He thinks perhaps she is getting fat. He does not understand that there is life inside of her.

He sits at the kitchen table. It is long and rectangular and pine colored. Mother didn't like table cloths, but Father insisted on the burnt orange ceramic fruit bowl at the center of the table. Not too much fruit in it; he said it went to waste. Joshua sits at a chair near the center of the table, nearest the fruit bowl. He colors in the lines like Miss Mallory showed him. His mother put goo in his hair that morning and combed it to the side leaving plow lines in his hair. It crunches when his fingers pinch the strands.

A knock comes at the door and Mother answers it. Joshua sees the outline of a man. He thinks the man must be a missionary. The man wears black pants, a white shirt, and thin black tie. He wears a black hat like Father's. He has no facial hair. His eyes are clear and green and remind Joshua of the color of cat's eyes. He wonders why the man stays for dinner. They are Catholic. They eat wafers in church and stand and kneel and sit and stand and kneel and sit in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

The missionary man does not ask to say grace, but Father does it like always. *Father, bless this food*, and it is the only prayer Joshua knows. The sounds of scraping silverware are the only sounds Joshua remembers. He knows that he looked up and saw the man and Father looking at one another. Knows Father's eyes were filled with tears, knows Father had stretched one hand out to cover the hand of the man. He does not remember if Mother saw.

*

By Monday the story trickles into the blogging sphere. Going from print to web is a dangerous leap, Kate says. It means that individual people in their homes care enough to join together digitally. Sounds contagious! Be serious, Josh. I am.

Phillips wants to speak with him first thing. Instead: Joshua answers his emails, files away the stack of papers that have been sitting on his desk for two weeks, rearranges the chairs in his office, and tidies up his pen cup.

At 10:30 he walks down the carpeted hallway past three doors to Phillips' office. Joshua knocks on the open door. Martin Phillips motions for him to have a seat across from him. Phillips isn't a man who enjoys foreplay: the calls are getting more persistent. The other newspapers in town are starting to sniff us out. They still want statements, Phillips says. They're questioning our integrity because one of our top specialists hasn't ever stepped a toe out of Time.

Joshua's job requires only the barest familiarity with the actual Timing Out process. They both know this. Joshua understands that someone is given accurate Time clothing. He knows that travel takes less than five minutes, even in the heaviest of Time traffic. He understands that the government has to fix tourist botch-ups all the time – he is the man that orders them. But more than this he knows that people want to treat the past like a theme park: a place to spend the day, take pictures, and then go home without a backward glance.

It's like having a baker who doesn't eat sweets, Phillips says. Joshua nods. We've told them it doesn't matter, but they won't print that. They'll let it go, this is just a novelty, sir. Matthews. Sir?

There are people talking in the hall in hushed voices heavy with information.

*

It's a trickle-up effect: informants living in Time report back to those out of Time. They research the information, detail the risks, and do the leg work. The file floats on desks: does the action matter? What are the ramifications? Does a correction need to be made? By the time the file gets to Joshua's desk the matter is usually of import. Only highly elevated situations get any real attention.

When the government first decided to sanction Time travel and open it to the public, an expected set of corrections had to be made: people were thwarting the assassinations of Archimedes, John Lennon, Emmett Till, and Marie Antoinette. The untimely deaths of Janis Joplin, Joan of Arc, and Anne Frank. Successful prevention of 9/11 (9 times), Christopher Columbus's third voyage (4), the sinking of the Titanic (1). But these were the kind-hearted. There were murders, too: Hitler, Mussolini, Bundy, public figures, private figures, nobodies. In the interest of historical integrity these events were to be corrected, no matter how painful their correction might be.

Joshua views his job as an editorial position. History was a living book that needs tweaking on a constant basis. He knows every page, every line of history and of Time.

*

Phillips approaches Joshua on Tuesday with the request that he Time Out. Go anywhere, even for just a few moments, he says. The problem is only getting bigger. Conspiracy theorists mostly, Phillips admits. It's just Timing Out, he says. Take one for the team.

Joshua tells Phillips he'll think about it, and they both know it's an empty promise but it satisfies them.

He goes to Kate's house for dinner after work. Michael is at a friend's house for a sleep over and her husband is out for the evening. It is nights like this that Joshua comes over.

Kate makes meatloaf – Mother's recipe – from a cookbook she salvaged from their mother's kitchen after her death. Kate does not know Father's face, because he died when she was too young to remember him. Joshua has always felt guilty because he was 8 and old enough to remember him while all Kate has had are photographs and stories.

Mother raised them on a secretary's salary and sold the house and the table and the fruit bowl Father loved. She sold them all and they moved to an apartment where Joshua and Kate shared a room until he was 12 and she was 8. That's when Mother met Fredrick and they married and moved into a house in a different neighborhood. Joshua had to change schools, but he never minded Fredrick. Fredrick who had a bland personality, who outlived their mother, who still calls on holidays. Joshua hasn't seen him in nearly 10 years. Kate keeps in touch on behalf of them both. Joshua supposes that their stepfather might be more of a real father to Kate than anyone else.

Kate joins Joshua at the table. She serves him meatloaf and green beans and mashed potatoes. She heaps his food high until he tells her to stop.

Josh, I'm going back to work, Kate says. Back? Where to? Kate's last job is where she met her husband, Paul. I found a job at a firm down the street from the HIB. That's good, he says. You've been in this house too long, Katie. It's time you got out. Michael's almost 11, now. He'll start lower school next year. But that's not all. Oh?

I'm leaving Paul. Michael and I are leaving. Joshua's fork falls against the plate in a dim tinkle. Paul's Time Out report for the last three months? He's visited Viola nine times. Looking at her from the corner of his eye, he asks: You and Michael, where will you go?

He is careful to say where and not when because he cannot think of losing his sister to Time.

You've got all of those extra rooms in the house, she says. I thought we'd use a couple of them if it's alright with you?

Kate gives Joshua the paperwork after supper, but it shows that Paul's visits to Viola have not resulted in a Timeline change. Viola is, by all accounts, still dead. Joshua reads the lines of code, the location markings. I can't compete with a dead woman, Katie says at last.

Do you think if Mom could have gone back to see Dad she would have? This question gives Joshua pause. Kate's questions about their parents, especially their father, have died over the years. I think seeing Dad die once was enough for her. If you could see him again, would you? He thinks about this, about the feeding tubes, and the cancer, and the bible his father kept by his bedside even when he was too weak to lift it.

No, he says, I don't think I would.

Joshua gives her the paperwork back. Don't worry about it, Katie, you and Michael come stay with me a while. As long as you need, see? It'll work out. Katie nods and Joshua sees her 10 year old face across the table again, sleepy and sad that her dreams are over because she's awake now.

*

When the missionary man leaves, Mother and Father embrace in the kitchen. Joshua plays on the floor with blocks and plastic soldier men. Father's hands are on Mother's small stomach. They kiss and Joshua looks away.

Father comes to him, gets on the floor like he is not a man but a boy. Father scoops Joshua up into his lap. Mother watches with a smile on her face and a hand on her stomach. Father is laughing. Things are going to be just fine. You'll have a sister soon, a sister named Kate, and you'll be best friends and you'll always love each other and care for each other. You must promise me, Josh. Promise me you'll remember that I love you. That you'll always love Kate.

Joshua wrinkles his nose. I don't like girls and I don't like Kate.

But you will, Father says, you will.

*

Joshua paces his office. He is losing focus. The phone calls, and web articles, and now more print articles in bigger places of the paper don't stop and Phillips calls more meetings. We can't let this get too big, Matthews, he says. I understand. Just Time Out, damn it. Sir? That's an order.

*

Joshua is able to delay it another week. It's enough time for him to move Michael and Kate into the house. They paint the walls a sunshine yellow that makes Kate smile. There is never quiet in the house now, and Joshua is sleeping better than he has in years. But the pinstripes start waiting on the steps outside of the HIB. There are a dozen of them. He has considered resignation, coming down with the flu, and chaperoning the 5th

grade field trip to the planetarium. Joshua realizes it's gone as far as it ought to, but it won't go any further.

He sits at his desk and opens his favorite history book. It is thick and weighty and it smells like it has lived a long life. Joshua selects a page to open to at random. He sees he can walk into the pages of this book, that it can become tangible. This is his father's book and his grandfather's before. His grandfather was a historian, too. He flips through its pages diligently, carefully. He turns the book to the 18th – the Enlightenment. He knows a good informant stationed in February 1756. Seems as good a Time as any.

At exactly 3pm he leaves his office and walks down the hallway to the elevator bank. He pushes in the round button and watches it turn an orange shade of light. He adjusts his thin black tie – another suit, equally ridiculous. As an afterthought, just before he left that morning, Katie pulled out Father's old black hat. You look sharp in it, Kate had said.

He places the hat on his head just as the elevator doors open. He takes the hall in front of him down to the Time pods. He opens the two doors that lead to the interior room where everyone will be waiting. He wastes no Time, but lets his feet carry him to the center of the room, into the middle of the chaos.

Before long he's stepping into the pod with the operator. The doors shut and the room is quiet. When to, son? the man asks him. Joshua smiles and tells him the Time – 1756. The man is old and his smile is warm like Arizona sunshine and the creases around his eyes remind Joshua of the ironing board Mother used on Sunday mornings to press Father's clothes.

His hat is in this hands and something tickles at the back of his brain. He turns the hat over in his hands, sees his reflection in the pod doors, and he wonders how he missed it. Wonders how he didn't see it before.

Joshua stops the operator. I'm sorry, he says. I've told you the wrong Time.

*

He stands on the road that bends to the left and then goes straight into the rounded cul-de-sac. The mailboxes are all white and straight and the cars in the driveways are washed. It's dusk when he walks down the street to the yellow house, third from the left. And there she is in the doorway. He hasn't planned what to say. He only says, hello, and her eyes open up wide. She stumbles backward and opens the door.

Walter! Someone is here.

His footsteps are coming down the hall and before Joshua can rethink this, Walter is there in the door frame, and Joshua feels he is looking into a mirror of his own face 20 years from now. He doesn't remember Father's eyes being so green.

They are at the table now and the boy across from him is pushing his food around. And Joshua finds he cannot eat but stares into Walter's watery green lagoon eyes. After dinner when they sit in Walter's den. Son?

I can't really tell you.

But you're okay? Right?

Kate and I are fine.

Kate?

And Joshua realizes this is harder than he thought it would be. That's her name, you name her Kate. You call her Katie. He takes time to regroup, he isn't sure what to

say next. I'm here because you won't always be. I wanted to see you how you are now. Walter thinks and seems to understand what Joshua isn't saying. How long do I have? Joshua is silent. Walter seems resigned, as if he already knows he will die of cancer. Does your mother remarry? Joshua gives a short nod. He's a good guy. But Mom never stops loving you.

Walter pauses with his hands over his favorite history book, the book that is sitting in Joshua's office. He remembers this moment so later he can touch the book exactly as his father does now: with his finger tips in a delicate caress. Joshua finds himself wishing he could stay – what would be the harm? He wonders if anyone will come looking for him if he doesn't come back. Wonders if he can watch his father die again. He stands suddenly, knowing it's Time for him to leave. I have to get back.

Don't forget to kiss your mother goodbye.

At the door to the house Mother and Father are there. They're at the door and they're watching him walk away, down the road and past the white mailboxes. He turns and waves for a moment and he thinks he sees Mother blow a kiss.

Father puts his arm around her shoulders and they go back inside the house.

CHAPTER IV
A PROJECT WITHOUT HOPE

1. January 4, 1993 (Palm Town, FL) – Yesterday afternoon two teens found guilty of killing an elderly woman were sentenced after a four-month trial.

Evelyn Davis (70) was found brutally murdered last July. Autopsy reports revealed that the elderly Florida woman sustained more than 20 stab wounds.

Rebecca Garcia (17) lived in the other half of the duplex Davis had occupied since the 60s. During their investigation, police discovered that Garcia did not act alone. Julie Wilson (17) was charged as an accessory to the crime.

The prosecution brought forward evidence to suggest that Garcia had tormented Davis for years. The state provided dozens of complaint records for the prosecution.

Although Garcia confessed, the jury's deliberation took two weeks because of her age.

Davis' murder led to initial public uproar, and has turned the community's attention to the plight of the elderly.

*

Maybe the leaves on the pathway crunched under her feet that night.

Maybe the air is damp and cool on her skin, and her arms are covered in chill. A voice calls – does she turn? No, she calls for her dog – Merlin! Merlin, come here.

Maybe the short one grabs her arms, and the tall one grabs her legs. Maybe her glasses fall from her face, and maybe she can see the blurred outline of a sneaker crush them walking forward and out of the garden. Maybe she asks them to stop when they drop her. Maybe they slam the door, and Merlin stands outside barking.

The metal of the dog chain would have been cold on her skin, as cold as the night, and her skin already chilled. She sees black spots in between reality, and gasps, and she knows these are the last faces she will see in this world.

Maybe she is already dead when the tall one takes out the Stanley knife and stabs her chest, her arms, her stomach, her breasts. The carvings come later, the careful cross-shaped cuts on cheeks, nose, lips, chin, forehead, and hands. Maybe they dig out the eyes from their sockets and maybe they don't.

They return home, smelling of whiskey and crawl into bed with their Mother – she is both of theirs, now. They want eggs, and bacon, though it's the middle of the night. Maybe Mother gets up and feeds them. Maybe she does not see the streaks of red on their hands, their clothes, their faces. The youngest hums. Her cheeks smudged with an old woman's blood, she says, "I've done it."

*

The first day of school at a new school – high school – and Rebecca was nervous. It was before first period and she was reading, trying to settle in before class. She'd changed six times that morning. She'd begged her mom to borrow her brown boots. Now they seemed stupid.

The desk beside Rebecca scraped a little as someone sat.

"This is English, right?" came a voice from beside her. It was a girl.

Rebecca glanced up and nodded.

"I'm Julie," she said. Rebecca looked again and saw all she needed to – blonde hair to her waist, electric green eyes, and a \$5000 smile. Pretty. Popular.

Rebecca kept reading.

“What are you reading?”

Rebecca took a deep breath in and lifted the cover enough for the girl to see.

“Never heard of it.”

“I’m named after her,” Rebecca blurted. Smooth.

“Who?”

“The author.” It was a lie.

“Oh.”

They were quiet while their other classmates filtered in filling the seats around them. Their teacher shuffled in, called roll.

The school semester settled in quickly after that first day. She made friends, had people to sit with at lunch, she kept out of trouble.

The desk beside Rebecca scraped the floor as someone sat. It was late in the fall, and Rebecca was half awake.

“Hey, West,” Julie said, her voice low. “I was out yesterday, can I borrow your notes?”

Julie had fallen in with the “it” crowd and hadn’t spoken to Rebecca since their first day of school. Rebecca had heard Julie was dating a senior boy from the baseball team.

“I’ll give them back tomorrow,” Julie said.

But Julie wasn’t in school the next day. Friday morning when Julie swept into the classroom, Rebecca didn’t look up from her book.

“Can I borrow your notes from yesterday?” Julie asked.

“That depends,” Rebecca snapped. “Are you actually coming to class on Monday?”

Julie laughed. “The guys from the baseball team wanted to ditch with their girlfriends, what was I supposed to do?”

“You could’ve come to school,” she muttered to the book in her hands.

2. January 3, 1993 (North Lauderdale, FL) – Early this morning Rebecca Garcia was sentenced to 15 years to life in prison for the murder of Evelyn Davis. After an open and shut trial, the courtroom was quiet as Garcia and her accomplice, Julie Wilson, were brought in for sentencing. Before Judge Michael Gibbs issued their sentences, he reprimanded them for their actions, calling them “the evil product of a modern age.” Both girls will be up for parole by 2008.

This case concluded just three weeks after two teenage boys in Georgia were convicted of killing their three-year-old brother “because he wouldn’t stop crying.” This string of teen violence leads to larger questions about the issue of violent youth in America.

*

Or maybe they wait all night in the garden, hidden in shadow. They snatch her, covering her mouth and pushing her further into the night. The tall one binds her hands with rope, the other binds her feet. They push her over and they laugh. She smells the beer on them, sees the bottles that litter the ground. The tall one has one in her hand, and she drinks from it. “Old woman,” she says, “would you like some?” When she won’t answer, they push the bottle past her lips and into her mouth. She gags, and vomit fills

the bottle. The tall one screams, and throws the bottle to the ground. Beer and vomit and rotting underbrush fill her nose. They will not let her go, not now, she sees it in their posture.

Maybe then they take out the Stanley. Falling forward onto her hands, the tall one kicks her in the stomach, barking orders for her to get up. And Merlin, where is Merlin? Are they really so well hidden?

They stab her in the back, near the left shoulder blade. They take turns drinking from the remaining bottle. It is a slow business, this. Perhaps the final blows come one after the other. Perhaps they slit her throat to make faster work of it.

Or – the short one takes the neck of the broken bottle and slowly drags the sharpest edge along her cheeks, along her collarbones, down her arms. She is calm; drink has steadied her hand. There's money in the old woman's purse – \$40 – and it's worth it. They leave the back door wide open, and Merlin must be nowhere to be found.

Maybe in the morning they look proud of themselves if not a little heavy from too much to drink. Maybe mother will make them coffee and toast, and the tall one will turn to her as calm as a windless pond and say, "We've killed Evelyn Davis."

*

It was nice not to be the new person anymore.

"West!"

Rebecca closed her eyes, and she felt like a freshman all over again. Julie was beside her then, all summer-sunshine blonde and beach-tanned skin.

"Didn't you hear me calling you?"

"I guess not."

Over in the next locker bank was the new senior football quarterback holding both his and Julie's book bag. "I think he's waiting for you."

Julie glanced over her shoulder. "Oh, Doug? He's nice. Justin wanted to stay together – he got a baseball scholarship to Florida, you know – but I told him he needed to worry about baseball and getting trashed and screwing sorority girls."

"That makes sense." It was a lie.

And Julie was gone in a rush of floral perfume.

Rebecca zipped up her bag and headed to first period – chemistry.

*

"The movie was just so romantic. I mean, he's her bodyguard, but you can tell he really loves her," Jessica said.

"How can you buy into that crap?" asked Maria.

Rebecca chewed. It was lunchtime and the cafeteria teemed with students.

"Oh, come on. You're telling me the sex wouldn't have been hot?"

Jessica and Maria always got into it.

"Like you've ever had sex," Maria jibbed.

"The costumes were out of this world," Tina said.

"I hate that song," said Rebecca. "It gets in my head."

"It's the best love story I've ever seen," Jessica said.

"Are you going to finish your fries?" Maria asked Tina.

"No way, I've gained, like, 2 pounds this semester."

"Try drinking nothing but juice, you'll drop five pounds in a week guaranteed."

Rebecca stopped chewing. Julie was sitting between Tina and Maria.

“I did it to fit into my homecoming dress,” Julie offered.

“Thanks,” Tina said. “I’m going to try that.”

Walking to their lockers after lunch, Julie walked beside Rebecca.

“I’m failing English,” she said.

“Oh?”

“My parents are pissed,” Julie said.

“Oh.”

“Can I borrow your notes?”

“I transferred into honors English.”

“But you can help me, right?” Julie stopped beside Rebecca’s locker. “You’re the only person I know to ask.”

“I can try.”

But when Rebecca got to Julie’s house they weren’t the only ones there. Most of the football team and their girlfriends were gathered in the kitchen and living room. It was only five, but there were already open cans of beer.

“Everyone, this is Rebecca. She’s the coolest person I know,” Julie said. She got some nods, some lifted hands of greeting.

“I thought we were going to study,” Rebecca’s voice was low.

“We are, the guys just came over for a minute.”

“Where are your parents?”

“Out of town, I think. Or maybe they ran away and left me,” Julie’s smile was infectious.

They did study, but the football team was still there when Rebecca begged off and left. The next Wednesday Julie asked her to come over again, and the Wednesday after that, and the one after that. The house was never empty of jocks or beer. Julie's grades never made it very high, but she passed – and that's all she seemed to want.

3. January 5, 1993

Patricia Garcia heard their voices before anything else. She wasn't going to let anything kill her buzz – she deserved it – so it wasn't until the first rock came through the front window that she knew anything was wrong. Up from the sofa, Patricia went to the window. Out on the lawn there were people with flashlights, and cars with their headlights flooding the front of her home. There had to have been three-dozen people from what she could see. All at once, Patricia saw them move like one person. The rocks that hit the house made noise like hail. She heard an upstairs window break.

She felt heat on her left arm, and she stumbled back a step. Touching her arm, Patricia's fingertips came back red.

She opened the front door and stepped onto the lawn. The crowd hushed for a moment. This time, the rock struck her in the head and took her down.

*

But maybe the night is hot – sticky – damp heat. The girls are inside the house. Mother is scolding them.

“Who drank the last beer?” she says.

Two shrugs. Two quickly glancing pairs of eyes.

And so maybe they are tipsy and driven out into the night. Or maybe Mother sends them with pocket money for more drink. Passing their neighbor's back door, the girls peek inside the window.

"That bitch is always watching TV," one of them says.

"Let it be, let's just get the beer and go home. It's hot."

The tall one looks on, deaf or mute or both to the other's pleas.

"What are you doing?" she asks. She yanks her arm away and it stings. Her sweat sticks to her forehead and neck.

Maybe the tall one knocks, and the woman in front of the television comes to the backdoor. House dress, robe, house shoes, confusion yapping at her heels. Maybe she opens the door without looking, or maybe she sees them there through the windowpanes lining the doorframe.

They grab her then, the tall one pulls her by the shoulders and takes her arms.

"Get her feet!" she barks, and the short one complies.

Swaying and facing the ground, she is taken from her home and out into the garden. The short one is surprised when the other lets the woman's arms go and the front part of her body falls to the ground. She releases the woman's feet. The tall one's foot is on the woman's back, holding her down. She is angry with them, ordering them to leave her alone.

But where did the knife come from? One of their pant pockets? From the inside of a boot? And yet, she must have watched the tall one stab the woman over a dozen times. And if the knife is so easily explained, how can the scissors? The short one watches the scissors materialize into her own hands, and then they are in the woman's flesh in the

small of her back. Or she cuts the woman's hair off. Or the woman's nightgown. Or the woman's fingertips. Maybe they are her own scissors now deep within her own dead body, growing cold in the summer night.

They run home without going to the store. When they stand inside the doorway with their backs pressed to the wall, Mother rages around the corner. Their hands are empty of anything but blood.

She grabs the short one by the hair and drags her into the next room. The tall one wedges herself between them, but Mother's hand still has the other's hair. The tall one shows Mother her hands. The blood stops Mother's rage, she lets go of the other's hair.

"I've killed Evelyn," and her smile tells the story.

*

That summer was the best of Rebecca's life. She and Julie spent almost every day together, going to the beach, driving around town, going to the movies, eating ice cream. Julie had done to Doug what she did to Justin.

"And when you go to college, what then?" Rebecca asked her. Julie had come over to celebrate her singlehood.

"I plan on singlehandedly sleeping my way through every fraternity on campus. But only with the cute ones."

Rebecca admired Julie's gumption. She knew what she wanted and didn't seem afraid to take it.

"Can I stay the night with you?" Julie asked.

"I'm not sure you'll like my mom, she can be a little different."

“It’ll be fine, I just can’t go home and face my parents right now,” she had said.

Meeting Patricia had been a little bit awkward for them both.

“Mom, this is Julie.” Rebecca said that night.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t real,” Patricia said. “It’s no secret that Rebecca isn’t exactly drowning in a social life.”

Rebecca’s face was warm.

“Are you kidding?” Julie said. “Everyone loves Rebecca. She’s easily the smartest girl in our grade. Top of our class. Brains are hot, all the guys want her.”

Rebecca’s eyes got large, but Patricia seemed pleased.

“Well, maybe she’s a little like her mother, after all.”

When they were alone in Rebecca’s room Julie burst into laughter.

“That’s your *mother*? I thought for sure you’d been spawned by some scientist or lawyer. And I didn’t expect the tattoos.”

But the summer drew to a close, and Rebecca grew serious again. She had to study for the SAT. She was taking AP and honors classes. She had to get into a good school, she had to get out of this town and away from her mother.

“We’ll do it together,” Julie promised.

But then she met Danny the first week of school, and she didn’t hang out at Rebecca’s as much.

“It’s not like I’m ditching you, Danny’s clingy. All men are when you get down to it.”

“Oh?”

“I’m having a party tonight, you should come.”

“I have to study,” Rebecca said.

“We’ll study between shots.”

For the first time in her life, Rebecca didn’t study. Julie put drink after drink into her hand and she drank them. The heady feeling the beer gave her made her brave. And in the morning she woke up and stretched. She and Julie had made it to bed, at least. She laid still, listening to Julie breathe, waiting for the alarm clock to go off. She drifted back off to sleep, and when she woke the room was full of sunlight.

Rebecca was up, pulling on her clothes. “No, no, no, no.”

Julie rubbed her eyes, “Pipe down, huh?”

“I’ve missed the test.”

“Is that all?”

“Is that *all*? Julie, I’ve missed the test. Mr. Harris is never going to let me make it up.”

“Then what’s the rush?”

Rebecca stopped cold, looking at Julie’s sleepy expression. Julie smiled at her, “Come on, West. Let’s go back to bed. Tell him you came down with food poisoning.”

Rebecca got back into bed, as though her body were not under her own control anymore. Julie slung an arm over Rebecca’s stomach.

One by one these stolen summer days took a toll on Rebecca’s grades. It wasn’t hard to convince her that they could make up the work, that they could go back whenever they wanted. Danny stopped coming by. Soon it was just Julie and Rebecca. By spring break, they were living in an endless summer.

4. July 18, 1992

The lawn man finds her body. The police are at Patricia's door by ten, but she's still coming down from last night's high and nothing makes sense.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." He flashes a badge. "You didn't happen to hear anything last night, did you?"

"No," Patricia says.

The policemen look at her and at each other.

"Ma'am, you would mind if we came in for a moment?"

Patricia opens the door wider.

"Where were you last night at approximately 9PM?"

"Hard to tell. I was out with some friends after work to have a drink or two."

"And you didn't notice anything unusual when you arrived home?"

"No, but we keep to ourselves."

They make a note of it.

They walk into her kitchen where she left the rest of the pot on the counter.

Patricia and the men see it at the same time. And it's into custody and charged with endangering two minors and possession of enough marijuana to be considered a threat of distribution that Patricia tells police what she knows about the night before.

"Listen," they say. "We'll cut you a deal."

Patricia is listening.

"Tell us what you know about last night, and we let you off with a slap on the wrist."

"And if I don't?"

“This is your third offense.”

“Ok,” she says. “I’ll talk.”

*

And maybe Mother, Blonde, and Dark sat together around the television with the lights off. Maybe the dog next door would not stop barking, and Mother finally slammed the remote control down.

“Does that dog ever stop yapping?”

And they watch in silence a while longer.

“That bitch never shuts that damn dog up.”

“Mom, knock it off,” Dark is nervous.

Mother and Blonde are the only two that exist in the room, there isn’t enough air left for anyone else. So Dark leaves them and goes out into the night for air.

And then the woman emerges from her home. Maybe then they grab her, drag her out into the garden. A shoestring around her throat, one around her wrists. The knife – they take turns. Maybe they think they have solved a great problem. Maybe in the night after it’s done, Blonde whispers to Dark so only they two can hear, “We’ve done it. We’ve killed Evelyn.”

5. January 19, 1993 (Palm Town, FL) – Evelyn Davis will be laid to rest tomorrow at the Queen Anne Cemetery at 9AM. She was the only victim of a sinister crime, but the community has decided her death shall not be in vain.

“She was a true daughter of God,” Pastor Rivels told us. “Though we mourn for her, she is Home, and we will all see her again when the Lord calls us Home.” A

memorial service will be held after the burial service at Prospect Rd. Methodist. They welcome believers and nonbelievers alike to remember Evelyn and pay homage to her life.

*

Maybe it is as simple as it seems. Two young women drunk and high and in love with their own sense of freedom and power went out into the night. They happened upon their neighbor in the dark. They carried her inside, wrapped her dog's chain around her throat. They found a knife in her kitchen and they stabbed her until they wore her blood. They laughed and they thought they'd never be found out. Their fingerprints are everywhere. Maybe by then they searched her house, found her money, her vacuum cleaner, and her radio and took them to make it look like a robbery.

Maybe they giggle when they get back home, and they play the woman's radio as loud as they can all night long. Maybe they kiss and maybe they don't. Maybe they watch "The Wizard of Oz" as sobriety takes them over and they sleep. Maybe in the morning they sing together over breakfast, "Ding, dong, Evelyn's dead."

*

July 19, 1992

Rebecca and Julie are interviewed separately after Patricia tells police what she knows.

"Ms. Garcia, what do you know about Evelyn Davis' murder?" the investigator asks Rebecca.

"Where is Julie?"

"She is being questioned."

“Oh.”

“Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No.”

“Would you mind telling me where you were last night?”

“Julie and I were home. We watched a movie and we went to bed.”

“Did you kill Evelyn Davis?”

“Shouldn’t I have a lawyer here?”

“Could you explain to me the nature of your relationship with Ms. Wilson?”

“Where is Julie?”

“Have you two never had intimate relations?”

Rebecca flinches.

“Look, Julie has already confessed to her part in the crime.”

“Oh?”

“She says it was your idea, and that she got dragged into it.”

“She told my partner that she tried to leave you because she didn’t love you. She said you killed Ms. Davis in a rage.”

Rebecca’s face is white.

“She doesn’t love me?”

“Did you kill Evelyn Davis?”

“She didn’t ever love me?”

“Did you kill Evelyn Davis?”

“It was all a lie?”

SLACKWIRE CALLIOPE

CHAPTER VI

BANJO LIGHT

He hadn't meant to die, just to leave. The morning he left he had bread in his pocket, had every dollar he'd ever saved in his wallet, and didn't say goodbye to his mother. If he said one word it would be fifteen and she would know.

Luke James III knew he had to leave the farm when the government pulled his number the way they'd pulled Ben's and Frank's and his father's. His mother thought they'd understand that he was all she had left and wouldn't take him, but since the old man's draft Luke and everyone else knew the military was desperate. After Pearl Harbor it was personal.

He'd heard of ways to avoid going, but they mostly required proof and the ones that didn't wouldn't do well in small towns like Nowhere. He'd leave and come back one day when the war was over and his mother would understand. Luke couldn't risk his life on the generosity of the government, so he had to leave. The impulse to flee was an itch in the arch of his foot, and he was fifty miles from home before he thought to second-guess himself. It had seemed simple in the pre-dawn light: he would just leave for a little while, and then he'd come back. It wasn't until the sun started to set, the bread gone, no town in sight, that Luke started to wonder if maybe he'd been too rash. His mother always said he was too rash. She always said one day his skin would blister before he realized he was in the fire. But Luke's nineteen years left him feeling wise, and he ignored the gnawing that told him to go home. He hadn't even left a note; he'd write his mother when he got wherever he was going. He'd never been outside Nowhere,

Wyoming, and around noon he'd passed the wooden fence that marked the furthest he and his brothers had ever wandered away from home. But Ben and Frank were much further than the wooden fence now. Luke tried not to see them in their uniforms and helmets holding guns in a trench. Tried but failed.

He knew that west was the Devil's Tower and that north was Montana, but they were only words, places that other people had been, dots on maps he'd seen in school. He didn't know what he'd do when he got where he was going, but it was better than going to a war he didn't know anything about, a war that wasn't his and wasn't his father's or his brother's. A war they'd been told was to defend the honor of a country that hadn't helped them when they needed it, when the cows had all been sick and food was scarce the whole town through. This country said nothing could be done for them, but demanded their aid without even the nicety of choice.

And if it was a world war, why did so many of them have to go – wasn't there a whole lot of planet left over? Couldn't they do some fighting, too?

No one had told him why they needed so many, because they didn't have to. The government that had turned its back on three generations of James men on the farm had taken his brothers and father for cannon fodder. But they wouldn't take him.

Lying on the cold grass under a tree not far from the road, Luke stretched out to sleep until daylight broke and he could see again. This had to be better than war. He had bet his life on it.

*

Dear Ma – I'm gone but I'll be back. I couldn't tell you I was going because you're the only person that could make me change my mind. I guess I don't rightly know

when I aim to be back. After the war cools its heels maybe. Pop will tan my hide for deserting the farm, but maybe you can make him understand. You always said I would leave one day, but I don't imagine this is what you meant. When I come home I'll tell you my adventure stories, and they'll be just as good as Ben's or Frank's. I'll send this when I get somewhere.

*

Luke had taken to walking by day and sleeping by night for a week when a policeman pulled up beside him just outside a town he'd stopped in. Luke kept his stride as the car slowed beside him and the window rolled down.

"Where are you headed to?" the policeman asked.

"South," Luke said. He and the car slowed to a stop.

"Where's your family, boy?"

Luke didn't know where the cop's line of questioning was going, but he didn't like it.

"Don't have one."

"No family at all?"

"Just one cousin."

"Where is he?"

"South."

Luke felt the cop's appraisal, held his gaze, prayed for the best. After a long moment the cop gave one terse nod and left Luke behind in a cloud of tan-colored dust. He wasn't the last cop, either. So Luke took to walking at night instead, but it was cold and the going slower than walking in the day. One night he'd wandered too far from the

road and couldn't find it again in the dark. Luke had decided he was cold enough and tired enough to sleep until the sun rose and to take his chances under the sun another day.

But then he heard the music.

It was only a wisp at first – the catch of melody the mind determines was not actually heard but only imagined or wished for. And then he heard it more fully, a single guitar sounding from deeper in the woods. Luke stepped hesitantly toward the noise, picking his way through the woods. His eyes made out the light from a campfire before he could make out the rows of tents on the other side of the tree line. It was a settlement of some sort, or a large encampment from what Luke's eyes made out in the dark. There was one large campfire several tents down, the guitar player's back to him. These were more than tents, though. They were big enough to be actual dwellings.

Luke crept between the tents, peeking in through cracks and open flaps. All he needed was a corner to rest in. Surely with this many tents, and the numbers they implied, one lone sleeper would go unnoticed.

Luke found a supply tent and lay down behind a rack of costumes and feather boas, and closed his eyes. He only needed to rest them for an hour or two.

“Oy, tell Lamar I got a gaucho.”

Luke's eyes opened. He didn't remember falling asleep, but now there was a dark figure in predawn light standing over him. Luke worked quickly to rise to his feet, to get his words in order, to get the story straight. In the light of a lantern over the tent's entrance Luke could see his rouser wasn't any older than he was. Luke's eyes focused then, and he flinched. The man seemed to take it all in and sighed his resignation. There was something wrong with the man's skin.

“What’s your business about?” his voice reminded Luke of gravel.

“I didn’t mean no harm,” Luke backed away.

“I’m Lizard,” the man offered.

“I just needed a place to sleep was all.” The tent’s fabric was under his fingers then, the flap he’d come in by.

The tent’s entrance filled with the silhouette of the tallest man Luke had ever seen. He looked from Luke to the man called Lizard, and with skin like that Luke supposed he knew why.

“This be Ringmaster Lamar,” Lizard offered.

“This is the ringmaster,” the silhouette corrected.

Lizard took off his cap. Lamar stepped toward Luke then, out of the doorframe and into the dark of the tent where Luke had retreated.

“State your business. What are you about?”

Luke whirled the unsecured fabric up and flung himself forward and out of the tent. The spring air was cold with winter and paralyzed his lungs, but the burning in his legs kept him upright and going. They were behind him, the twigs and underbrush crushed like echo beacons that were in a moment underfoot and under cheek all at once. He couldn’t feel the man on top of him; his feet still thought he was running. Yanked up with hands around either arm, Luke’s legs kicked out, his feet still running as a feral thing. Lamar took his face between his hands, held the tremors still, and the world slowed. Fifteen men or more surrounded them.

“Afraid of circus clowns are we?” Lamar let his face go.

When Luke's eyes focused he distinguished features in a montage of body parts: men with growths on their faces and backs, one with a wooden leg, not all were malformed but not a one of them like a man Luke ever saw. Lamar stood a foot or more above them all, his shaved head adding height in the mind, his skin from neck to ankle covered in tattoos.

"Let me go, I didn't mean no harm."

"Any harm."

"I just needed to sleep."

"Who are you running from?"

"I don't know nothing about running."

"Anything about running."

"Let me go."

"How old are you, boy?"

Luke's mouth pressed into a thin line. He was old enough to fight, and since he wasn't that meant questions. Luke had been traveling long enough to know that much. He'd also learned something more: questions were dangerous.

"If you don't have an age, do you at least have a name?"

"Luke James," he said, but it sounded like a question.

"Any other bible books in there?" And the company laughed.

Others had joined them, filling in the spaces behind the staggered line of men. Luke saw a girl no more than five slip between two men and tug on a leg to be lifted up. The women were exotic in the dawn light, in their bed clothes and mussed hair that looked nothing like his mother's. Luke James had never seen women like this with eyes

that looked through him like he was cattle in a grazing pasture. He was used to being something special in Nowhere. He didn't want to get around like Frank, but Luke wasn't usually lonely. But they also didn't have the dull eyes of a farmer's daughter – there was a spark in each of them that made him feel small.

“Look around you, Luke James. Do we look like the kind to cast stones?” With a single hand gesture, the men released Luke's arms. Luke could only assume he had convinced the man called Lamar that he was no threat.

The one called Lizard approached with the sack he'd left behind in his hurry to flee. Lizard handed the sack to Lamar.

“Nothing but letters to his ma and extra socks, boss,” Lizard reported.

“I won't be no more trouble to you.”

“I run a tight ship with an open tent policy. Anyone willing to do their share is welcome in my company. Stay or go: the choice is yours.”

Lamar turned and walked back toward the encampment with most of the company trailing behind him. Lizard was at his side then.

“Breakfast'll be colder than what, if we don't hurry.”

“What was he saying about clowns?” Luke muttered to himself.

“This here's the best traveling circus you've ever seen.” Lizard's chest puffed with pride. “Took me in when no one would even look at me, Lamar did.”

“The circus?”

“Three rings, a proper sideshow too.”

“He wants me to join the circus.”

“About sums it.” Lizard handed Luke back his sack. “Don’t them letters need to be mailed?”

Luke looked at the bundle in his hands. “These can’t be sent.”

“I can smell the fires – are you coming?”

Luke felt very sure he was standing at a crossroads. He could go it alone – sleep by day, travel by night, pray like hell the cops didn’t find him on the road and ask questions, writing letters he could not send, setting traps for rabbits and squirrels and hoping his luck held out. Or he could take a chance and come along with the circus, even just for a day or two. Just long enough for a belly full of food he didn’t kill himself, and a bed under a roof and maybe even a blanket. He’d only stay a little while, he promised himself. Just long enough to get his bearings, get his head sorted, and figure out what to do next. He promised his mother an adventure story, after all.

“Ok,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“You’ll find no better place,” Lizard clapped him on the back. “No better place.”

*

Now that he could see it in daylight, Luke saw Tent City for what it was. The grouping of gray tents behind the large yellow and white-striped big top housed the entire company – some 300 men, women, and children, Lizard told him. Tent City was always alive. Even in the dead of night music wrapped Tent City in a fog of life. It had been that music that had drawn Luke out of the woods and into the unsecured tent. The daytime commotion hid an outsider more easily than Luke could have hoped. He felt glances and heard their stares when they picked him out, but Lizard’s nod sent the glancing eyes away.

“We’re smaller’n most. Lamar don’t like a fuss made and that’s what you got when too many folks get to living together too long,” Lizard said.

He led Luke through breakfast, but Luke strained to hear him over the commotion and talk. Luke tried to find a place to put his eyes, but everywhere there was a man no higher than Luke’s thigh, or a misshapen face, or a woman with a beard. Lizard found them a place to squat among the others. In the growing morning light Lizard’s skin was less alluring than it had been in the lantern light. Lizard caught his eyes once too many and shrugged.

“It’s not catching or nothing.”

“Bothersome?”

“In the cold, after a bath mostly.”

“You don’t look like a lizard.”

“I do my face up green-like for shows.”

“Are all of you?” He paused. He’d never been afraid of words before.

“Different?”

“No more than you are. Same insides, different design.”

“They don’t take to outsiders much.”

“We got reasons to be cautious. Once a reporter snuck in, tried to put our pictures in the paper.”

“Didn’t think with so many of you together you’d spook so easy.”

“They like you alright, between you and me. But the fastest way to them is to compliment the cooking.”

“You got another name?”

“Eddie Strom, but I’m Lizard Man to most everyone.”

It was a fast friendship, though Eddie got along with everyone. But one night, some two weeks later, Eddie got to asking hard questions.

“How’d you end up so far south?”

“I left home.”

Eddie let out a low whistle. “Leaving’s for peace-time boys. Slackwire needs adjusting.”

He’d been trying to say goodbye when he sat down next to Eddie. He’d been trying to find the words to thank him for sharing his tent, for waving him over to sit by the campfire each night. They’d traveled a hundred miles or more south toward warmer weather. Luke figured it was time he left. But Eddie stood and turned to him, waiting for him to come along. They were almost ready to leave for the next town, and standing to join Eddie to ready the Big Top for performance night, Luke decided he’d stay until they reached the next town worth staying in.

What could it hurt?

*

Ma – I woke up this morning and thought I was at home in my own bed. I thought I heard you at the stove frying bacon, heard Pop at the table reading you the paper. Thought I heard Frank’s snoring and Ben’s sleep talking. It’s been a while since I’ve been so disappointed to wake up somewhere else. The thing is, the people here are a family. None of them knew each other before they came here, but somehow they’re all one family. I thought by now they’d have gotten used to me, but some of them still spook when they see me. It’s like getting to watch a family eat Christmas dinner together from

outside their window. I'm close enough to touch them, to talk to them, to make them smile, but I don't get to sit at their table with them. Lizard's an OK guy, but he talks a lot. He's closest thing I've got to a friend, but he'll talk to anything. You'd like him.

I'm clearing out of here soon. They're nice enough, but I'll always be on the outside of the fence. Didn't mean to stay so long but time has a way of slipping out from under feet here. Like that story you told me once about the man who lay down at the foot of a tree to rest his eyes and woke up three hundred years later. What was his name?

I'm going to go to Georgia and work the farms there. Lizard says there are farms for days there and they always need hands, especially with warm weather around the corner. By the time I'm done picking peaches, maybe then I can come home.

*

The men of Tent City liked to play cards on nights when weather was nice and they didn't get caught up in music or women or telling stories and drinking and dice. But they played one night after the drinking and the dice which meant tempers were already hot and tongues loose. Luke hadn't played dice, but Eddie put the cards into his hands and told him to cut the deck. The camaraderie was tangible on these nights, making Luke more apt to play along. It was harder to remember he was an outsider when he dealt the cards around the fire. There were moments, brief though they were, when Luke forgot he had another home with a mother waiting for him to come home and a sack full of letters.

But this night they'd all been playing for too long and drinking too much. Richard worked with the animals and was particular about his gambling, and he thought Luke, who had won three hands in a row, was a cheater.

“You deal yourself rather pretty cards, gaucho,” Richard said, looking at him sideways.

“Cards are luck,” Luke said.

“No one is this lucky.”

“Leave it alone, Richie,” Eddie said.

“You’re going to let this boy take your money and rob you blind?”

“It’s just cards,” Eddie said.

But the tension around the campfire was rising like steam. The other men around the circle – four all told – had the beery wisdom of too many hours in the bottle and too much money lost at dice. Luke had enough of his own liquid courage to numb the edge of fear down to a vague inclination that something might be wrong.

“Take your damn money back if you’re so worried about it,” Luke spat. “But you lost fair and square.”

Richard’s fist made impact with the side of Luke’s face before he got all of the words out. One of them – maybe Eric or Steve – held Luke’s arms to steady the target for Richard’s blurred aim.

“No outsider is going to come into my house and take my money and my women and think he doesn’t have to pay the price.” Richard was near to roaring.

There was nothing to be done but let Richard’s anger coast out. Though later Lamar would chastise them for having held Luke’s arms, the men of Tent City settled their affairs with their own law and code. But Luke wore his bruises like badges and didn’t complain. Whatever Richard may have said, that night seemed to ease the tension

between Luke and the people of Tent City. The next week they went through a sizeable city. But still Luke stayed on.

*

Eddie offered to take Luke on the advance team if he could clear it through Charlie who never minded having extra hands. Sent out a day or two ahead of the rest, the advance picked their way through towns, down well-worn roads, and through fields and forest when there wasn't one of either. Eddie was the arrow man, and it was his job to leave markers for the rest of the company to follow. The days were long, but Eddie showed Luke how to leave the markers and it passed the time.

“Used to was we could leave them in the open. But people got ideas about the circus now, so we got to be real sneak like what we're about,” Eddie said. He tied a piece of red cloth to a post on the side of the road. It wasn't always flashy, most anything could do: a symbol in dirt or clay, rope tied around a tree, or pieces of torn programs. Eddie only used the easy markers when it could be seen from a distance like a lighthouse.

Luke preferred the steady pace of the advance to the stop stop go that came with traveling with women and children and animals. And when they got where they were going it was the advance that put up the big top and most of Tent City. Building the circus was tedious work, but at the end there was something to be shown for it and Luke liked that.

Luke and Eddie were helping with the last of the tents when they heard a car engine. The encampment was far enough from the road, the twilight quiet enough, their nerves frayed enough that the sound was out of place and every back of the advance went straight. Luke and Eddie reached the edge of the city in time to see Charlie striding out to

meet the Cheyenne police car. If twilight had been quiet, the city was now silent with ears straining to hear what the tall man stepping out of the car had to say.

Charlie's outstretched hand and smile seemed to put the law at ease.

"What's this you've got going up in my city?" the officer asked. His shake seemed too brief to Luke.

"Circus, sir. I've got the papers." Charlie always had the papers.

"We've already got a circus in town, started yesterday or the day before."

"I've got the papers."

"Don't know that a city needs more than one circus."

"Why don't I set you up with two of the best seats in the house opening night? You and the missus can come see whether you do or don't."

The cop stood there, watching Luke and the rest of the advance stop their work to watch him. Luke wondered if the cop realized he had just become the sideshow.

"I'll get your tickets," Charlie said.

"These are able-bodied men, why ain't they fighting?"

"We run a clean show."

"Bunch of queers?"

"We've got pachyderms all the way from India."

"Circus is the only place for people like you."

Eddie shifted closer to Luke, leaned in to speak, but Luke was already gone. He didn't have words, didn't have a coherent thought save the sound of his heart in his ears. He walked the perimeter of the city, heard the song of pans. Supper would be ready and he would have to do something. Standing outside reach of the lantern light, Luke

trembled. How had he thought he wouldn't get caught? He knew the penalty, but it wasn't until this cop, in this town, on this early evening at dusk stepped into this circus that Luke James had any concept of what he'd put himself at risk for.

It wasn't until supper was gone that the men began to settle back in to their own skins. It wasn't unusual, Eddie told him, for them to get a little harassment now and again from the cops. Didn't mean it didn't rattle them. They could take anyone for just about anything, and there wasn't much Charlie could do. If one of them was taken it had to wait until Lamar got to camp, and even then sometimes the law had made up its mind and the circus had to resolve not to return to that city again.

"They figure most of us is criminals, or could be. Don't think about it much. The world's too big for Uncle Sam to find you here," Eddie said.

But when Luke's heart settled to a rhythm that didn't shake his voice, he sidled up beside Charlie.

"Don't stick your neck out for me," he said.

Charlie's gaze locked on Luke's face.

"Company will be here tomorrow, and Lamar will be none too happy there's a damn dog and pony show across town."

"Lamar knows what I done. Did. Am doing."

"Get some sleep, Barnes."

"Barnes?"

But that was all there was to it.

*

It was the first town they'd seen in months that had a movie theatre and two restaurants.

"This place's a bona-fide goddamn metropolis," Eddie said as they walked through town.

When they got close enough to a real city like this one, the people of Tent City tended to keep less to themselves than when they were in more remote towns. So it wasn't a surprise to Luke when he found his feet taking him in the direction of town one afternoon before the show. He sat at a service counter in a restaurant – something he'd only done a handful of times in his life – and ordered a milkshake from the pretty brunette waitress.

"Haven't seen you in here before." Her smile winked at him and Luke could tell he was back in the same kind of world he had come from.

"Just rolled in," he said.

"Well you should have come next week," she confided, leaning closer. "This week the circus is in town." Her penciled eyebrows lifted.

"Who doesn't like a good circus?"

"There are just so many freaks in them," she said. Her voice was hushed but clear enough so she was easily overheard by anyone sitting at the counter.

"I bet they have elephants," he said. "And popcorn."

She put his milkshake in front of him. He was trying to make her smile, but her lips stayed in their stained red line.

"Well you won't catch me there. They probably pick everyone's pockets anyway."

“You’ve got funny ideas, lady,” Luke said. His tone was sharper than perhaps he’d meant it to be.

“I just think it’s unnatural is all. So many freaks in one place. Like the gathering of God’s mistakes.” Luke knew girls like her back home. They rehearsed their ideas half-borrowed from their parents and added a spray of racy perfume and thought they were smart thinkers. Luke couldn’t pin point why, but he slammed both hands palm-down onto the counter.

“Ever think maybe you’re the freak, lady?”

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

He took the straw of his milkshake into his mouth, raised his eyebrows.

“We don’t serve your kind here.” She yanked the glass from his hand, but the condensation on the glass made it slide right out of her hand. It fell and shattered on the floor. If everyone hadn’t been staring before, they were now.

Luke and the waitress stared at one another, like lawless cowboys at high noon. Luke shook his head and stood up from his barstool. She wasn’t worth it. None of them were.

In his anger Luke almost missed Lamar from across the restaurant. Almost missed the way his left eyebrow raised and head tilted forward. Luke paused a moment at the door, then pushed it open so the bell that hung on the doorframe smashed into the glass.

*

Eddie came over in a rush holding a newspaper. Eddie pointed to the bottom of the page, the obituaries, holding it in front of Luke’s eyes to see.

And there it was:

Funeral services for Luke JAMES III, 19, of Nowhere (WY) were held on Tuesday morning. He is survived by his mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Luke JAMES II, and one brother, Frank JAMES. Mr. JAMES' body was found in Sibley Lake early last week; cause of death is unknown.

He felt snuffed out from the inside. His mother thought he was dead. A body – whose body? – found in the lake and they thought after all this time he'd fallen in and drowned?

“How in the hell did you get your hands on this newspaper?”

“Lamar said it was your mail.”

“He read it first?”

But then he was reading the whole thing again. His father and Frank were still alive, then. But no mention of Ben. Ben hadn't known where they were sending him before he left, and no clear sense of what they expected him to do when he got there.

“You're free, man,” Eddie said, putting an arm around Luke's shoulder.

“I'm dead.”

“Luke James is dead. When was the last time anyone called you that?”

“My mother thinks I'm dead.”

“You can go anywhere, do anything.”

“I don't have papers,” he said, but inside his chest hope filled each nook.

“Papers ain't the problem.” Several of Tent City's denizens could forge anything for anyone for a price.

“Somehow I thought I'd go home when the war was over,” Luke set the paper down.

Eddie snorted. “Work to do, Barnes. Slackwire won’t hang itself.”

*

Ma – I should send this one. I should send them all. I should send them so you know I’m alive, so you know the man they pulled from the lake isn’t me, but it’s ok to let everyone think he’s me because I ran away from home instead of going to war and I’m not sorry for it. All I’m sorry for is hurting you the way I imagine I did. And now you think I’m dead. Maybe I am dead and the circus is heaven or hell – I can’t tell which right now. I will come back one day, but it’s going to be a while isn’t it? I will come back from the dead. I just hope you’ll understand. But you always do.

*

Luke sat in the afternoon sun and wondered which was worse: to know your son was a wartime dodger, or to think he was dead. He chewed it until the two didn’t look so very different. He realized then that leaving home had always meant not going back, and wondered where Ben was. Luke Barnes considered the paper. The want ads asked for farm hands, clerks, companions, bankers. There were spaces in the world for him outside the city. But the sounds of the calliope warming up, the smell of supper cooking, the screeches of children in the weeds bathed his nerves in a thick kind of honey never tasted but felt, and knew he would stay.

CHAPTER VI

CONJOINED

Summer hadn't hardly started when Maria Barnes began to wish it were over. Della had only been gone a handful of hours at most and already Maria was bored. Worse than bored, Maria felt alone.

Sitting on the floor of the costume tent, Maria was surrounded by performers and their electric buzz of energy as they made ready for that night's performance. Georgia, the woman who rode the elephants and horses, was making the loudest commotion because her costume wouldn't zip up.

"It must have shrank in the wash," she moaned.

Maria turned – not for the first time – to Della's empty place beside her. It was habit. Their mother always said Maria laughed at the wrong things. Seeing Della's face let Maria gauge when the "right things" happened. Without her there, Maria stared at the sequined boa in her lap, worrying her hands over the feathers. It was a double blow: this was the first summer since their mother died. The people of Tent City were being careful with their words around her, she could tell.

In only nine days Maria and Della would be eleven and their father promised Maria she could learn to swallow fire. But Della was away at sleep-away camp and didn't care that Maria didn't want to go with her. She had said them being apart was the point.

Luke Barnes entered the costume tent, his cape's clasp broken.

“What’s this?” he exclaimed. Kneeling in front of Maria he took her by the chin and raised her face to look at him. “It’s only an hour until show time and my best assistant isn’t ready yet?”

Maria’s right shoulder lifted and fell, her eyes finding the floor.

“This won’t do,” he said.

Maria swallowed at the growing lump at the front of her throat.

“Don’t you want to perform tonight?”

“Della isn’t here.”

“She hasn’t done a show in months,” her father said.

“Ten months,” Maria said. Finally she met her father’s eyes.

Maria watched her father’s face take on the same tight expression it always did whenever anyone mentioned it.

“Yes, Lady Bug, I know.” His voice was softer so only she could hear. “I miss her, too.”

And then, just then, the most beautiful woman Maria had ever seen entered the tent.

“Who is that, Papa?” Maria asked. The frenetic energy in the tent fell flat. Maria saw them looking at her out of the corners of their eyes. But it wasn’t their eyes that gave it away – it was the sequins.

Maria stood up like a shot.

“It’s been ten months,” her father said. He tried to catch her by the shoulders, but she slipped between his fingers. “We had to find a replacement.”

“You’ll never replace her.”

*

Della and Maria were exact copies. They did not have so much as a stray freckle or mole on their porcelain skin to mark them; any perceived difference was illusory. This was their amazing talent. Their mother taught them a few dance steps, taught them to turn perfectly in time, to smile the same way. They mostly served as assistants for other acts – to hand their father his cape, to hold the Sword Swallower’s hat, to pull the sheet off of the box to reveal whomever went inside it to be disappeared.

But under the Big Top was the only time Della and Maria were anything alike. Della and Maria wouldn’t wear matching outfits. From the moment they understood they could have preferences of their own, the only time the girls matched was when they wore their costumes. They had never, in the course of their lives, pretended to be the other. Not that it would have worked; the people of their father’s circus knew each of them on sight. Except for those outside the circus, Maria and Della had not once been mistaken for the other. To strangers, to the world, they were the same – interchangeable.

The story went like this: when they were born their father took them to the big top to show the world his new family. They had come along late in life, and he was proud of them. His wife Jane was the high wire act. She hadn’t minded staying on the road with him, bringing the girls and let them grow up on the road, in Tent City, in the circus. They were: The Incredible Reflective Girls; The Amazingly Exact Twins From Beyond; One Girl In Two Bodies; Daughters of Ringmaster Barnes and Slackwire Calliope – circus royalty.

Maria and Della loved each other, played together, stuck up for each other, fought, and made trouble together, but they wanted to be different from each other. The

people of Tent City had a deep respect for that. They knew that to the outsiders the girls were not girls, but spectacles, just like themselves. To those who knew them, and loved them, they were as different as wool and silk.

*

Della,

You told me not to write. What is camp like? What is it like for people not to know we're twins? Do they know about me at all? I bet they don't.

I wanted to write to you about Christine. She isn't even a real blonde. They could have at least made her costumes without sequins. She does alright, but she's no Slackwire Calliope. Her footwork is lazy. Momma hated lazy footwork.

Happy birthday, too, I guess.

*

The first home Della and Maria ever lived in was robin's egg blue. It was a large two-story with a full wrap-around porch and white shutters. Their mother and father's room was down stairs, tucked away behind the living room. There were three other bedrooms upstairs and two bathrooms. The staircase was pine and worn with age – the house was at least 15 years old – and on the wall beside Della's closet were penciled in tic-marks with names and dates beside them. Two of the rooms shared a bathroom, "Jack and Jill" their mother had called it. They were seven.

"Look, Papa, a little girl lived here once. She was very tall," Della said pointing to the marks on the wall. She stood up beside them, running her hand over the top of her head and flipping around to see where she measured up.

Her father came over and put his hands on her shoulders, studying the marks with her. “So she was. We’ll paint over those marks so you can put up some of your own. I bet you’ll be twice as tall.”

“I don’t want to paint over them, that doesn’t seem fair.”

Her father chuckled. “Well, we could always get a frame and glue it to the wall over it and paint around it?”

“Any color I want?” Della jumped in small excited hops.

“Yes, Cricket.”

Maria walked in, dropping a box of her things on the floor. “You can paint half of it your color. I get to pick the other half.”

Their father chuckled. He turned to Maria and knelt down to her face level. “Lady Bug, there are three rooms up here. You don’t have to share with your sister. Wouldn’t you like a room all to yourself?”

Maria met Della’s eyes. This was part of it, wasn’t it? This was what Della wanted. Normal families didn’t all live in squashed together in a one-room trailer. Maria was supposed to have her own room. That was normal, wasn’t it? she thought.

Della nodded, “You can have the room over there through the bathroom. You can be Jill and I’ll be Jack.”

“Can I paint it green?” Maria asked.

“We can paint each wall a different shade of green if you like, Lady Bug,” said their father.

She picked up her box and walked through the bathroom into the other room, her room, and put the box on the floor. “It’s big,” she said.

Their father left them then, as the movers pulled up with their van to deliver their brand new furniture.

Della walked through the bathroom to Maria's room. She stood beside her and took her hand. Maria's room had a large picture window overlooking the front yard. They looked out of the window at the men lifting new furniture, cursing at its weight. Their mother fluttered around them, pointing and ordering and hovering. Their father helped where the men would allow. Their voices were muffled, and the absolute silence of the house made their ears buzz. Della hummed softly under her breath.

"Girls," their mother's voice came from behind them. "Tell these men where you'd like your things to go."

The men grunted and cursed. A bed, a dresser, bedside tables, a desk. A twin set, one for each room. The girls moved to sit on the window seat, hands still locked. After the men had gone, they turned to look at Maria's furniture.

Without the picture window, Della's room looked smaller. The furniture fit the same, though, and each girl unpacked her things into drawers while their mother put new linens on their beds.

That night they stood at their bathroom sinks – there were two – brushing their teeth.

"Keep the door open?" Maria asked.

Della nodded and spit out her toothpaste.

Maria lay in her new bed, in her new house for the first time that night. Something was creaking, and the room was too warm. And the quiet – her ears were full of it. She moved her feet to hear the sheets rustle. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

But an hour or so later, Maria woke up. She tossed on to her side, and then the other, and onto her stomach and back again. She sat up and swung her feet over the edge of the bed until they touched the floor. She shuffled through the bathroom into Della's room. Maria lifted the covers and nudged Della over, lying down beside her. Within minutes, both were deep in sleep. In the morning their father came in to wake them up, but found Maria's bed empty. It was his quickened footsteps into Della's room that woke them up.

"Maria? There you are. What are you doing in here?"

The girls rubbed their eyes. Maria stretched, Della yawned.

"I don't know," Maria said. "I don't remember coming in here."

"I do, you pushed me over," Della said.

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Smell anything?" asked their father.

Della's breath was audible through her nose. "Bacon?" Her eyes were wide.

"Blueberry muffins?" Maria sat up, and jumped over Della.

"It smells like Christmas morning," Della said.

Della and Maria ran ahead of their father down the stairs. He stopped at the door to Della's room and looked back at the bed pillows, where the indentations of two small heads were still impressed. He shook his head. It was normal, he thought, for this to happen. Maybe they should have settled down sooner, he thought. They're young, they'll settle in quick, he thought. And the staircase took him down to where his wife was piling eggs, bacon, and muffins onto plates. Della and Maria sat on opposite sides of the table.

Jane served his plate and put it at one end, and hers at the other. They all sat together then. Luke Barnes settled his weight into his chair and looked at his family, at his house, at his roots creeping from the soles of his feet into the hardwood floor.

He watched his daughters scoop eggs into their mouths, bite off pieces of bacon and smack the grease from their fingers. Maria tore the top of her muffin off and handed the bottom half across the table to Della. His Cricket was the only child he knew who preferred the bottom of a muffin to its top – but then, she had always been remarkable. Both of them had. He watched Della chew, the way her nose scrunched slightly before she swallowed, and thought – have I done something wrong? Della was anxious, Maria was not. Della didn't want to live in the circus, Maria did. Until now he had dismissed Della's wants as passing complaints. Had he missed the bigger picture?

*

Luke had been hunting for Maria for ten minutes before he found her tucked in a ball, fast asleep, on the sofa in his study. His posture relaxed and he scooped her up into his arms. He carried her carefully upstairs and laid her in bed beside her sister. He covered them up and kissed them each on their forehead.

The night before, he and Jane had been in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner when they heard the scraping of something heavy across the floor above them – Maria's room. Luke took the stairs two at a time and found his daughters pushing Maria's bed with all their might.

“Girls, what are you doing?”

“I want my bed somewhere else,” Maria said.

“But we just re-arranged your room last week,” their father said.

Maria shrugged, and she and Della kept pushing. Luke reached out and grabbed the bed and pulled in the direction they were pushing in. When Jane finished in the kitchen she came upstairs to see what was taking Luke so long. She found the three of them pushing Maria's dresser across the floor.

“Again?”

Luke shrugged, and pushed.

Later that night they lay in bed when the house was quiet and calm. They had rearranged Della's room, too. Jane sat propped up in bed reading a book. Luke rolled over to face her.

“When do you think they'll settle in?” he asked.

Jane marked her place and put the book aside.

“It's only been a few months, they'll settle in soon.”

“Maria hasn't slept more than a handful of nights in her own room. The girls rearrange everything constantly. I thought you said having a house would be good for them.”

“It is good for them, but they need time. Just be patient,” Jane ran a hand over her husband's arm. She leaned down and kissed him then and turned out the light. “Who knows, maybe one day we'll find Maria sleeping on the roof.”

*

“Something feels different,” Maria whispered one night.

“Nothing is different,” said Della.

In two months their mother will be dead.

“Annabelle saw Momma’s future, I heard her telling Lizaveta today. She said our family was going to get split up.”

“That could mean anything,” Della yawned.

“You’d never leave me, would you?”

“Where is there to run? Most kids run away *to* the circus – not from it.”

“Swear it, Della. Swear you won’t leave me.” There was a terrible look on Maria’s face.

“You’re making me anxious.”

“Just swear.”

“I swear. Happy now?”

“Quit hogging the covers.”

“Get in your own bed.”

Maria sighed.

Della pulled the covers higher up under her chin.

Maria pushed the covers down around her stomach.

The too loud sound of silence filled their ears.

*

Della,

Okay, so camp sounds fun. Not the nature trails, or the bug bites, but the other stuff. Maybe you were right to go. Momma would have wanted you to.

Papa has a new tent. We stay in the City most nights, though Papa doesn’t sleep in the tent mostly. I usually find him by the fires. He says he never got used to sleeping in a bed, and now that Momma’s gone he says it makes him miss her less. I didn’t know what

he meant until last night. The house is full of her. I didn't notice it before, but last night Papa brought me home instead of staying in the City. Everything smells like her. Everything is exactly where she left it. Her clothes are still in their closet, and her book is still on the bedside table.

Papa didn't sleep in their room.

I only dream of Momma at home. But it isn't home anymore, not really.

*

Della got it into her head, the summer before she and Maria began the third grade, that she wanted to go to a regular school. She wanted to wear a uniform every day so she would look like everyone else, she wanted to be in a big classroom with girls her own age and learn all the same things as them. She wanted to wear two long braids, and she wanted to take lunch in a brown paper bag. She wanted to have different teachers, and classrooms, and desks and chairs – just like she saw on the T.V. at Aunt Amy's house. When she told Maria, hoping to persuade her that they might go together (their parents could surely not deny them both), Maria looked horrified.

“That sounds terrible.”

“That's how people are supposed to learn, Maria. It isn't normal to learn in a tent sitting on cushions, with five other kids in four different grades.”

Maria huffed. “I don't want to be normal and I don't want to go to school.”

“Fine.”

“That's it?”

“I'll go alone.”

“What’s so great about a normal school? I bet they won’t teach you how to juggle, or let you watch tiger taming at lunch time.”

“We’re just normal kids.”

“No, Della, we aren’t.”

“I am.”

Though Maria still refused, Della went to their mother that evening and told her what she wanted. Within a week it was announced that Ringmaster Barnes and Slackwire Calliope would be buying a house, and that, nine months of the year, the circus would grow roots.

*

Maria knew by heart the story of the morning she and Della were born; everyone in Tent City did. Slackwire Calliope was three days past her due date when her water broke in one great rush just before Ringmaster Barnes went on stage. The Sword Swallower took the Ringmaster’s top hat and gave the good people of Santa Claus, Indiana, a show they’d not soon forget. It was a story their mother loved to tell.

“What a place to go into labor!” Jane would cry. “Everything was Christmas. We pulled up to the Santa Medical Center and I looked at your father and I said, ‘Oh no you don’t! I’m not having my children *here*.’ So he drove me to St. Jasper, and it felt like it took forever. Contractions the whole way there.”

They were admitted, given a room, and then a lot of nothing. “It was a lot of waiting around for something to happen.”

After the show, the Tiny Woman took off her rhinestone-encrusted costume and put on her favorite brown cotton dress, her favorite brown slippers. She removed the

bright blue eye shadow, the red lipstick, the shocking pink rouge, the too-brown foundation. Even her eyebrows came off in two solid black lines. She removed her contact lenses and put on her large glasses, round lenses rimmed in brown. She took out her long brown hair extensions, and combed out her short salt and pepper hair. She put on her favorite brown felt hat, and emerged from the tent as Ms. Madelyn, ready to see Jane and the babies. The Tiger Tamer agreed to drive her (though without the eyeliner and glue-on handlebar mustache he was just Daniel).

“But when she got to us, not a single thing had happened! Oh sure, a lot of contractions, but not a single baby. But Madelyn was a midwife before Papa found her. She’s still a midwife. I should have known better than to go to a doctor.”

Luke and Daniel waited outside, while Madelyn marched inside the room and began giving orders.

“Really,” Jane said. “I’d never seen anything like it. She said jump, and those nurses just about lost their heads trying!”

Within an hour Jane was preparing to deliver. She pushed for over two hours and nothing had happened. The doctor was afraid the babies were too big, or in the wrong positions. He said Jane needed a cesarean section.

“Madelyn looked that big old doctor right in the eye and said, ‘You’re not cutting anyone open tonight, young man.’ Can you believe it! A pair of steel!”

The doctor consented to let them push for another hour. “You wouldn’t believe it, but she made me get up and walk,” Jane said. Before the doctor returned, Della was born. After Della’s first cry, Madelyn wiped the child off, cut the umbilical chord, checked for fingers, for toes, for genital abnormality, and only then handed her to a nurse for

evaluation. Jane pushed for her second baby. She pushed, and pushed, and nothing happened.

But when the doctor examined Jane, he told her the second baby wasn't moving.

This was when Jane's voice always got serious, and her eyes got large. "Madelyn pushed the doctor aside felt for the baby, and she said the doctor was right. She said the baby was dead. She said I'd birth it eventually, maybe in another hour, but that it was dead."

Their mother would sniffle then, swiping under her eyes. Jane had waited. She refused to see her husband, refused to see the first baby. Only Madelyn was allowed to stay in the room with her. When the time came Jane whispered that she didn't want to push. "If I push now," she said. "Then it's over, and my baby's dead."

But she gave a great push, and then another, and Maria was finally born. She was still, and quiet, and the nurse wanted to take her away. "But Madelyn wouldn't hear of it." She inspected Maria, removed the fluid from her lungs, and put an ear to her chest.

Madelyn, Tent City's Tiny Woman, spanked the bottom of Jane's youngest child and out came a cry that shook the walls. Della stopped listening after her part of the story. That Jane always cried when she told the story made Maria feel a little silly, like she could have stopped it from happening. But it was the end that always embarrassed Maria: "My little miracle, Maria. I couldn't have lived without you."

*

Maria stood in her parents' closet. It was the middle of the night and she couldn't remember actually getting out of bed and walking down the stairs, past her father sleeping on the sofa, into their bedroom and into the closet. She was at the back of the

closet where her mother's clothes gathered dust. Running her fingers over silks, cottons, and tweeds, Maria's fingers found purchase on the teal sequined costume that was Slackwire Calliope's trademark outfit. Maria slipped it off the hanger and sank to the floor, holding the costume with both hands. She didn't know she needed to cry until the first sob tore up her throat. It both deepened the stabbing pain that had no direct location and soothed something fractured inside her. The second sob felt even better, pushing up and through the blockade of unspoken pain in her throat. Her fists closed around the sequins, and buried her face in the fabric. And there was another pain – a phantom limb severed – that left her feeling half a girl. One girl in one body.

*

Della,

It's been three weeks since I wrote and I haven't gotten your reply. The mail is in one giant pile on the kitchen table. Papa pulls out the bills that have to get paid but leaves the rest. I wonder if he missed your letter. I should go through everything and find it. I don't know why I haven't.

I had a dream you were back at the circus with me. You were up on the slackwire and I was screaming your name but you wouldn't look down at me. I guess you couldn't hear me. I don't know what I was trying to tell you, and anyway you weren't listening.

I walked closer to the center ring and stepped on something noisy. It was your paper bag. I picked it up, and tried to tell you I was sorry for stepping on it and that I'd get you another, but you still couldn't hear me. And the louder I shouted the further you got, like the top of the tent kept growing and took you with it. I screamed and screamed

until you were just a tiny dot. I threw your bag at you, and it flew up, up, up – but it never came back down, and neither did you.

CHAPTER VII
SLACKWIRE CALLIOPE

The music carried over the crowd with the chilly October air, and settled around their shoulders like the arm of a friend. Bright fluted trills and a cello's throaty ring spoke over the crowd's dim hum. The first act of champagne and toasting had warmed their cheeks and loosened their lips, puckering ever forward toward a kiss they would not find. After three glasses, the lighting seemed too bright against the yellow fabric draped from the walls of the Big Top. The bright lights were dimmed and the banjo light was raised, washing them all in dreamy rosy light.

Thick white arrangements of flowers clustered at the apex of each tent flap and around the tent's center ring, they spilled onto tables bearing heavy platters of fruit, and spied between bowls filled with the sources of silky steam and filling smells. Women plucked them from vases to put in their hair but left no hole behind, another flower pushing forward to take its place. And there – just there – was the effervescent pinch of laughter, the rustle of beaded fabric, the gathering of sighs into a collective.

The chairs held coats and purses, but the seats were not for sitting. The crowd bumped and bustled, and churned skin to skin. The women carried long black feathers and gestured with their glasses, white teeth and flushed cheeks. The men for their severe black wear could not escape the tuck of color in a breast pocket, or in a bowtie.

The second act was fast approaching: a favorite song, a neatly timed dance, a delicate tumbling juggle. In the center ring circled by flowers and looked at by women in wispy silks, men in rarely worn suits – she held court above them all: the main act, the center attraction, the Ringmaster's wife, Slackwire Calliope.

On her perch atop the makeshift stage she caught the light and shone through gold flourish and careful jade lines. As each person took their turn to honor her, the air around them grew thick until each felt they had expanded in the chest somehow and had taken up more space than they had before. But she had a way of filling people up, of making them more than they were or had thought to become.

The first swell of silence fell as the Ringmaster came forward, shifting his hat from hand to hand. All good acts, they say, must come to an end. He cleared his throat and finally looked up at nothing, his eyes too bright, his laugh too rough along its interior. For a moment he looked young again: just a kid with a mind to dodge the war with nothing in his pocket but loose change and half-realized dreams. But when the lines settled back into the corners of his eyes, the graying hair at his temples losing color ever faster, the Ringmaster was just one mourner among many.

And when the food was cold the crowd gone home and the music finally quieted to a single guitar some distance off, the Big Top was an empty shell of bruised roses and trampled feathers made hallowed by a single urn on the stage in the center ring of a circus tent.

*

Tent City didn't have many rules. Their code of laws was the life's breath that held them together on days when the world looked at them and saw nothing but misfits and nobodies. Luke never cared one way or the other what they took from the outside. It was stealing from those inside Tent City that broke the covenants of brotherhood. That any of them would need to steal anything was beyond them all. What one had they all had, what one cooked was cooked for all with stomachs that needed filling. If not done

for necessity then, stealing within Tent City was done out of greed. Spite they might have forgiven. Greed could not be fixed.

It was clear to everyone that Luke stood to inherit their outfit when Lamar gave up the circus ghost for sturdier shores, and in him was born the figure of center ring and law in one. But without Jane, Luke was law without compassion and entertainment without flourish.

The only prohibition in Tent City was uninvited violence. The men –and sometimes the women – were fond of handling their differences through blows and Luke was happy to let them. It was the surprise left hook, the lurking jab, the hidden attack that broke their code. There was something dishonest in the element of surprise outside of the main spotlight.

They had no rules for marriage or divorce, few married legally in a place where law had no grasp. They had no concept of money or of time, as they had little use for either. Children belonged to them all: all tents were open to them for rest and all fires open to them for food. And if Luke was the pits that kept the fire in check, Jane was the flame that danced ever up, up, up into the night's air that kept them warm and gave them light.

*

As a child the Great Farini had been Jane's idol, and when she realized he'd died from the flu it made her bold. A man who had crossed Niagara Falls on a slip of rope died from something she got every winter. She taught herself to float in the air using a rope in her backyard tied between two trees. Jane was seven when her mother came outside and

caught her standing perfectly still four feet off of the ground and ten when she attempted her first somersault but fell and landed on her wrist.

But Jane was sixteen when she was sent to Florida to visit Aunt Mabel for the summer. Visit, that's what they had called it, but to Jane it felt more like exile. Her older sister, Amy, would be going to college in the fall and as she had so kindly put it, they didn't need her antics ruining her planning. The summer would likely be an endless parade of social gatherings requiring hairspray, slips, girdles, pantyhose in Charleston's one-hundred degree humidity, so Jane was happy enough to get away. Still, though Jane knew it was Amy pushing her out their wide mahogany door, it was Jane's mother who stood in the foyer and silently watched.

When Jane got to Florida, the grass in Aunt Mabel's front yard was higher than either of them liked, but her aunt wouldn't hear of Jane mowing the lawn. "The neighborhood boy" would do it, she said. The neighborhood boy turned out to be Kyle Lawson who wasn't much of a boy at all but a college freshman home for summer, mowing lawns for cash to go to the drive-in with his buddies. Jane saw him through her aunt's front bay window, standing in the lawn with his hands on his hips. The mower was beside him, and from the darkened underarm rings staining his white shirt tucked in to dark blue jeans Jane knew they weren't his first house of the morning. He reached out a hand toward the rope she had rigged up in the front yard between two support beams of the carport. The back yard had the garden and clothesline and Aunt Mable said that left no room for Jane's "neat little trick" out back.

Kyle's single raised hand moved Jane's feet, and she was at the front door.

"Don't touch it," she said.

“Well what in the hell is it for?” He wiped at his slick face impatiently.

“It isn’t in your way,” Jane said. The Florida summer’s heat was nearly tangible and it was only 9 o’clock.

“But what is it?”

“It’s a tightrope,” she said, her eyebrows raised, her posture tilted sideways with one hip opposite the hand that gestured.

Kyle chuckled. “Are you any good?”

“Of course not.” Jane stopped and Kyle could see her mentally grasping the words back.

“Circus is coming to town in a couple of weeks, my old man got me a gig working their shows. Tickets and sweeping and stuff.”

Jane nodded her understanding.

“It’s women’s work but money is money and my old man didn’t give me much choice.”

“Please don’t take the rope down,” she said, turning to go back into the house.

“Sure, sure.”

He was only meant to come by once a week, but three days later she stood on her tightrope when a horn at the end of the drive startled her sideways and into the grass.

“Hey tightrope,” he called. “We’re going to the drive-in. Get in.”

Jane peered around Uncle’s Buick and saw Kyle’s coal-black car. In the backseat were two other boys about his age, and in the front seat was the prettiest girl Jane had ever seen. Aunt and Uncle were at a dinner party for the evening and wouldn’t be back until after 10. Jane ran inside to write them a note and grabbed a sweater and her

pocketbook, rather than change out of her cotton capris pants and sleeveless collared button down blouse and Keds. Jane waited by the passenger door while the beautiful brunette slid across the bench seat closer to Kyle, which seemed to suit them all fine. He drove with one hand on the steering wheel, a cigarette clutched firmly between his pointer and middle fingers. The other arm was stretched along the back of the bench seat around the brunette, but his fingertips barely grazed Jane's bare shoulder.

The drive-in was already crowded with kids their age. The boys huddled around the hoods of cars, feet shoulder-width apart, hands in pockets or crossed and tucked under armpits. The girls took up tables with milkshakes and baskets of fries for sharing, sneaking glances at the boys and their cars. There was only one screen, but the diner at the back of the lot seemed to be the bigger attraction for them all. The brunette – Dawn – gestured for Jane to follow her over to where the other girls were. Several waved to her, called her name. She lifted a single hand and smiled like she was Miss Florida.

Standing beside Dawn, Jane felt like she did most of the time next to Amy – washed out. Her pale blonde ponytail looked frizzy and erratic next to Dawn's dark brown sprayed-in-place perfect lift-and-flip all the girls were wearing. Dawn's peaches-and-cream complexion made Jane feel like her ivory skin looked sickly, and where Jane was still slender, Dawn's figure had filled in closer to a woman's. It was enough to make Jane walk a step behind Dawn so she didn't have to be a direct side-by-side comparison. They went to the service window and each ordered a milkshake.

Dawn found her group of friends, but when the first feature started she made no move to go back to the car. No one really did. It was a Western, and because Jane had seen only a handful of real movies she snuck back over to the car and slid into the

passenger seat, taking the speaker beside her window and letting it sit in her lap. The sun was setting before anyone else joined her.

“There you are.” Kyle’s face was in the driver’s window. “Dawn said you’d slipped off.”

“Isn’t the point of a drive-in to watch the show?”

Kyle laughed and opened the driver’s door. “They sure do have funny ideas where you’re from.”

“Charleston.”

Dawn, Carter, and Lawrence came back in time for the second feature. Jane was a little sorry they had come back, because now the car was crowded with warmth and smoke from too many cigarettes and not enough moving air. They sat in silence mostly – the second film was a science fiction thriller that made Jane jump. Dawn snuggled closer to Kyle. Looking into the other cars around them, Jane saw other couples doing much the same or more. It made Jane feel like an intruder and she couldn’t stand it.

“I’m thirsty,” she announced abruptly. A flush ran to her cheeks. “Anyone want anything?”

Carter and Lawrence both shifted toward their door. “Yeah, we’ll come with you.”

Dawn looked up in pretended alarm, but looking at her as the door shut between them the quirk of a smile caught the corner of her mouth.

Out of the car Jane could breathe. Carter and Lawrence – Jane wasn’t exactly sure which was which – weren’t interested in talking to her. They found a table and she

sipped soda at one end. They chain-smoked at the other. Kyle found them when the show was over.

When the show was over, they returned to the car. Kyle was still there but Dawn wasn't. Carter, or maybe Lawrence, leaned his forearms against the ledge of the driver's open car window and raised his eyebrows.

"Tracey's taking Dawn home. Girls."

The ride home wasn't uncomfortably quiet, but no one said much. Kyle pulled up in front of a one-story peach stucco with ferns and rock landscaping and Carter and Lawrence got out. Jane suspected something more had gone wrong between Kyle and Dawn.

"I'm sorry about Dawn," she said when he pulled up to Aunt's house.

"Nah."

She nodded and opened the door. His car was still at the end of the driveway after she'd made it inside and to the bay window.

After the drive-in Jane started to watch the clock for 6 every afternoon because more often than not, Kyle pulled up in his black car. Sometimes Carter and Lawrence were there, but mostly it was just the two of them. June had passed into July and Aunt and Uncle were starting to ask about when school started for the fall. And then Kyle didn't come for three days and Jane thought maybe it was for the best. If she was honest she was starting to like him and what good would that do? But that didn't make those evenings by the bay window while Aunt and Uncle watched their television programs go by faster. The next day was Thursday, though, and at 9 o'clock like every other Thursday

morning Kyle strolled up with his lawn mower and started pushing rows through Aunt's yard.

Seeing him in the yard made her bold. She started down the porch steps without much mind for who might be around to listen.

"Where have you been?" She closed the space between them in even strides that made her feel taller than she was.

"Circus is in town."

"And did you think I'd just be waiting by the door when it left?"

He stopped mowing and looked her full in the face at last.

"Wasn't sure it mattered."

"Guess it doesn't then." She'd never felt so flippant.

"Guess so."

So she turned to walk back inside the house. It was best.

And then his mouth was on hers.

"Come with me tonight." He smelled of fresh-cut grass.

"Tonight," she agreed.

And in exchange for selling tickets for an hour before the show one of the stagehands gave her a yellow ticket.

"Side standing only, Miss," he said apologetically.

She took the ticket and went inside. Kyle found her just after the show started, but Jane was gone from her body. She floated in the middle of the Big Top, let the show circle around her; each beat of music her breath, every jump of applause her heart's momentum. The performances drew a flush to the apples of her cheeks and made her skin

tingle, and when the woman in teal sequins took her place on the tightrope far over their heads, Jane didn't have enough room in her chest for breath. Kyle slipped his hand into Jane's, and for the briefest moment she looked away from the tightrope walker and into his face. The woman on the tightrope spun in a circle, flashing her long slender arms outward, graceful as a ballerina on land. When she did the first somersault Jane gasped out loud, clamping one hand over her mouth, then laughing nervously when the teal feet were firmly back in place.

*

With her feet on the slackwire, she was invincible in absolute vulnerability. So far up from the ground her only companion was the spotlight that traced her path from one post to another and marked a spin or somersault or arabesque. The crowd's breathless silence or collective gasp anchored her to the rope, and the calliope urged her into movement. If there was ever a moment when she should have been afraid, the calliope laced its notes between her ribs and gave her courage of daring.

In the beginning she focused on the audience, let their reaction guide her. But the night she became a star was the first night that she might have been the only person in the Big Top.

When she was younger, when she and Amy still got along, her mother took them to ride horses. She marveled at how unrestrained she felt in the moment she and the horse were not on the ground but gave themselves to the air. But she had not – could not – have known what it was to give herself to the air before she went to the high wire. It was the feeling of heavy existence and evaporating into dust all at once – ethereal and solid.

If she looked down she would fall, fall back to ground. The rope, the air, sensed fear. To ride the air, one had to master fear. To master fear one had to accept death.

*

The day before the circus left Florida that dusty summer she was sixteen, Jane brashly marched into the Big Top, through the rehearsing performers, and to the man she had seen every night perform as Ringmaster Barnes. Without his costume on he looked taller, more imposing. His wide muscular shoulders and lean hips connected to lanky legs. His natural complexion was golden, Jane realized then he must put on lightening make up, must draw on the black eyebrows where the sandy blonde brows were now. The mustache must also be an illusion from the two-day stubble on his cheeks and chin. His hair was darker but not much. The curly mop of black hair under the Ringmaster's top hat must be a wig. The over-sized dinner coat he wore each night gave him the appearance of being heavier, even doughy. It was his posture alone that made Jane march up to him, but she had not anticipated how heavy his steel blue gaze would feel. It was only then that Jane felt she didn't even know where to begin, but he had turned, had spotted her, had seen her determined approach. She wouldn't turn away.

She was supposed to go home in three weeks. And while Amy would be away at school, Jane knew she would be no less of an embarrassment to her parents. Amy would come home from college and Jane would be in the way again. Though her mother loved her, Jane knew she was too weak to keep Amy's venom in check. Though her father doted on her, Jane could not completely recall the last time she had seen him for more than sixty consecutive minutes. She was the wrinkle no ironing could fix. So in the dead of night lying in Aunt's house, Jane decided to join the circus.

“Ringmaster?” She sounded much younger to her own ears. Jane tried to square her shoulders back, to bring herself taller than her five feet, nine inch frame. Even still, he towered over her.

The day Jane Roseharn thrust herself into his center ring Luke Barnes was exactly twenty-seven years and three hours old and had one hell of a hangover.

“We’re closed.”

“You leave tonight. I want to come with you.”

“Do your parents know you’re here?”

“I’m not a kid.”

“We don’t have any room for more performers. Line up’s full.”

“I can sew,” she offered. It was a lie.

“Anything else?”

“A little tightrope.”

“Line up’s full.”

“I won’t be a problem.”

“Go home.”

Jane felt the steel in her spine weaken. She hadn’t figured he wouldn’t let her come. Somehow she had imagined the circus to be some kind of merry band of thieves, prepared to take on any willing hand. She saw his weight shift, recognized the motion from years of having someone impatiently wait for her to explain herself and not being able to make the words come out fast enough or right. He took her gently by the arm, walking her out the way she came.

“How did you know you belonged here?” she asked. They were out of the Big Top, over by the makeshift stables. She went the stall of a tall dark brown horse with a white muzzle, reaching her hand out.

“I sort of fell into it.”

Jane felt him beside her when she found the sugar cubes and the white muzzle knickered thanks. She pressed her cheek against the long nose.

“The people here are the best I’ve never known,” he started again. “But they don’t take to outsiders.”

“Everyone is an outsider until they aren’t.” But Jane’s voice was soft with resignation. She would have to go home, would have to forget this fool’s errand.

“You have a home to go back to?”

Jane nodded, but did not meet his eyes.

“They’re good to you?”

She nodded again. “I got switched at birth I think. I’m not the right Jane Roseharn. I can’t make the pieces fit together right.”

She turned and sat on the dusty Florida dirt, her back against the stall door. Luke eased down beside her.

“It’s not just the tightrope,” she said. Something inside of her was leaking, pushing forward toward the crack to get out. “I’m not enough for them. I try to be, though.”

Jane couldn’t read his expression, the way he was looking at her then. She imagined how she must look to him, all frizz and humidity-stained cheeks and perspiration beads.

“Sounds stupid, right?”

“Three month trial.”

“Really?”

“It won’t be easy. We travel hard, and everyone does their share.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“If you’re serious, be back here tonight before midnight, that’s when we pack up and clear out.” He stuck his hand out, helping her up. “Luke Barnes.”

She took his hand as hard as she could, pulling herself up into her height again.

“You won’t even know I’m there,” she swore.

“Somehow I doubt that,” he muttered to no one.

*

Watching a woman shave her face is something that ought to be reserved for really special occasions. Jane had been with the circus almost two years – had just turned eighteen when she watched the Bearded Woman lather her face with shaving cream she borrowed from Richard, the Incredibly Skinny Monk, who was a firm believer in shaving his entire body once per day so as to reduce his size by every means possible. But he was more than happy to loan some shaving cream to Annie who was going on a trip to Vermont to see her family, who believed she was a part of a prestigious theatre troupe. They would not understand her beard, she told Jane. They would not let her inside the house; she would have to take the taxicab back to the bus station and sleep there.

“Why can’t families just love us how we are?” Jane asked. She sat on an upside-down bucket and watched the Bearded Woman through her reflection in the mirror. “I miss them sometimes, though,” Jane admitted.

“My mother would cry if she saw me now.”

“I’ve never seen you without your beard.”

“My family has never seen me with it.”

“I hate that you have to hide it from anyone.”

“We all hide our inner freak, little duck.”

“But you aren’t the freak – they are if they can’t see the you behind the beard.”

Her face was still covered in lather, making it look twice as round as it normally did. Jane saw each patch of the Bearded Woman’s olive skin revealed with a swipe of the razor pressed against the froth. She’d watched her father shave, and the Bearded Woman used the same strokes. Patch by patch, the slender structure of her face was revealed. Jane watched the Bearded Woman lean over into a bowl of water and rinse away the foamy excess. When she turned around to face Jane, the Bearded Woman let the towel fall to reveal Annie Morris from Connecticut. Jane thought she might never had seen such a beautiful face: Annie’s large almond-shaped eyes, smooth olive skin, her long black hair fell into curls around her rib cage. Her jaw line was sharp, her chin rounded, her lips were full – these things were never seen. Jane stared.

“Well, how do I look?” Annie smiled, and her smile lines creased.

“Strange,” Jane said, reaching out a hand to caress her cheek like a lover.

Annie laughed. “Yes, I suppose I do look a bit odd.”

And Jane asked: “You’ll grow it back, won’t you?”

*

Jane went to every show for two weeks. Kyle picked her up, they did their work, watched the show hand-in-hand. He took the long way home, put his arm around her,

stole kisses when she'd let him. Neither wanted to talk about it. They knew how it ended: he went to college in the fall and she went home. Summer would end, and so would this – whatever this was.

The circus' last night in town was a Thursday, but Jane wasn't at Aunt's to meet Kyle. When he got to work that night he found her and grabbed her arm, pulling her to the side.

“Where were you today?”

“I have great news.” His hand gripped her upper arm too tightly. It would be a faint bruise that Jane could not place.

“I waited. I even knocked on the door.”

“I'm going with them.”

“With who?”

“Them,” she waved a hand impatiently toward the Big Top. “My stuff is already here.”

“You're serious?” He let her arm go and ran a hand down his face.

“I'm going.”

“My parents expect me to go to college.”

“We weren't talking about you.”

“I'm not going with you.”

“I didn't ask you to.”

That night under the Big Top, Kyle held tightly to Jane's hand as the teal slackwire performer spun over their heads, sequins catching the spotlight and leaving

glittering spots in their eyes. And for a moment, just a moment, he thought he saw Jane's smile on the woman's face.

*

"Jane?"

"In here," she called. Jane stood at the stove in their three-bedroom two-story dream.

Luke stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame. Jane sniffled over her teakettle.

"You can't shake that cold, can you?"

Jane poured the boiling water into her cup and dipped a teabag in.

"Hybrid between what the girls brought home from school and whatever is going around the City."

Luke kissed her forehead.

"Warm. Call the doctor today, hmm?"

"It's a cold, Luke. No one dies from colds."

"If you're warm it's the flu."

She opened the flap of his jacket. "Where are you hiding your stethoscope, doctor?"

He took her cup from her hands and put it on the counter to wrap his arms around her, pressing her into his chest.

"I'll get the girls from school. Rest."

"I'll make dinner first."

"I can boil pasta."

“Della has a spelling test tomorrow.”

He pushed her out of the kitchen and toward the staircase.

“Maria’s soccer uniform is still in the dirty wash.”

He led her to their bed and held the covers open for her.

She smiled. “Yes, dear.”

He sat beside her a while, a hand on her knee while both of hers gripped her teacup. Jane watched him hesitate, settle back into himself to hesitate again.

“Do you regret this life?” It was little more than a whisper.

“Not a moment,” she said. “Now go away so I can get better.”

His footsteps shuffled down the hall.

“Don’t forget to check their math homework,” she called after him. His footsteps came back up the hall, and the bedroom door shut.

*

If Jane thought it would be easy to adapt to circus life, she was quickly corrected. Luke hadn’t been kidding when he said the people of Tent City didn’t take well to outsiders. In her first days there, Jane wondered if maybe Luke hadn’t been right to turn her away. There was always plenty to eat, but Jane found herself alone with her bundle of possessions while the others huddled around fires, ate off each other’s plates, shared the day’s closing together. It was two weeks before Annie, the Bearded Woman, agreed to share a tent with her – and Jane knew it was only at Luke’s urging. Annie had made that perfectly clear:

“I don’t know why you’re here, you don’t belong here and you should go home. But people are sick of watching you sleep by the fire like some cinder girl. He had to tuck you somewhere and guess who lost the draw?”

“One day I want to walk the slackwire,” Jane’s hands were spread out in front of her.

“This isn’t a summer camp for bored spoiled rich girls, this is my home,” Annie said.

That night, tucked into the furthest corner of Annie’s tent, Jane lay on a small cot that had materialized. Light flickered in from the tent’s loose door flap, and Annie’s low snore mixed with the sounds of talking three or four tents over. Clutching her fists to her chest, Jane let Annie’s words replay in her head. Let Kyle’s words find her. Let the way her mother’s mouth set when she got worried fill her mind’s eye.

She wondered if she had made the right choice. It had been easy to leave, to let adventure pull her along. Jane had been sent away for the summer so her sister could prepare for college in the fall – they didn’t want the “odd” Roseharn child getting in the way. Because that’s how it had always been: Amy was perfect, and Jane was a series of mistakes that eventually made her feel like one. Maybe Annie was right, and she was out of her depth. Maybe she wasn’t in love with the slackwire, but with the idea of belonging somewhere. Luke had given her a three-month trial – at the end of it she could go home if she wanted.

What took the longest to get used to wasn’t the constant moving from town to town, or the rough accommodations – it was the noise. Tent City was never quiet, not even in the dead of night when the world was miles away. Music, voices, the rustling of

fabrics or pots and pans wove together no matter the time, but waking hours were even noisier. The only time a semblance of hush fell over Tent City was during a performance.

*

One month later, despite what Luke had said about a full line up, Wanda the slackwire performer actually agreed to let Jane come to her practices to watch her. Not that Wanda acknowledged that Jane was there. But Luke had been at the door of the tent that morning after Annie had gone to breakfast and told her she was free to attend practices whenever she liked. She was not, however, allowed up on the high wire. Her feet were grounded for the time being, he'd said.

In that time she'd sent a dozen or so letters home to her mother, assuring her she was having the time of her life. Something had taken hold in Jane that made her determined her parents shouldn't know she lay awake at night wondering if she had done the right thing. Sometimes when she watched Wanda, it didn't feel like such a lie.

Jane sent her mother their travel program so she would always know where she was. It was part of the one-sided deal Jane made with her mother. And though Jane would never admit it, sometimes she prayed that her parents would come to the Big Top one night and demand she come home because they loved her and missed her and they were her family. The others always got mail, though Jane wasn't sure how it managed to find them. Though Jane sent letters home, none ever came back. And so even though at the end of the three-month period Jane hadn't even set foot on the slackwire, and even though Annie had only just started speaking in multiple syllables to her, and even though none of them called her more than "girl," Jane decided to stay with the circus, rather than go home. Because somehow Jane would rather be an outsider among the warmth of Tent

City, the noise and chaos and hard work, than be an outsider among stone faced diplomats and place settings with too many forks and rules.

Jane lost track of the days.

*

On days when there were no performances, Tent City felt like one long lazy Sunday afternoon. On these days there were no rehearsals, no costumes to be mended, no chores that extended beyond the mundane, the everyday. Jane kept outdoors on off days, which suited everyone fine. She especially liked spending her time with the horses. Her favorite of them all – the brown horse with the white nose – was always happy to see her, and the apple she always brought him.

“His name is Churchill,” Luke said.

Jane was usually alone in the stables. Luke’s voice caught her off guard. She looked up from the book she was reading. Being in the circus didn’t pay much, but in the last town they passed through Jane had had enough to spare to buy a couple of books. Jane watched Luke ease down beside her.

“Glad you came?”

“I will be.”

“So you’ll stay?”

Jane wanted to hear the upward note of hope in his voice.

“For now,” she smiled.

*

One evening before a show six months after her arrival, Annie took Jane’s hand.

“Such a young girl to run from the world.”

“I’m not running,” Jane sniffed.

“Don’t you miss home?”

“I don’t know anymore.”

“You won’t ever belong here.”

“So you keep saying.” Jane’s fists balled at her sides.

Annie turned towards her mirror and began to pin her hair into place to put her wig over it. “The people who come here have nowhere else to go.”

“What makes you think I do?”

“You could go home anytime you wanted.”

Jane began to stuff her things into her bag. She turned her back to Annie, shoving things into every available corner of the bag so it might hold.

“At least wait until the morning,” Annie said.

“I’m not spending another night in this tent.”

“Suit yourself. I saw a motel as we came into town.”

“Don’t look so pleased. I’m not leaving.” Jane pushed out of the tent, and out into the night air. The performance was starting, and an unnatural hush had settled over Tent City. She would have time alone to think and find a place to sleep. She might even fall asleep before the show was over. She stewed with all the things she had wanted to say but didn’t. They dripped from her mind.

“Jane?” Came from behind her.

She whirled around expecting to see Annie; the venom was at the edge of her lips when her sister’s bright blonde hair caught the firelight. Jane squinted – was she real?

“Amy?”

“A very rude young man selling tickets told me I’d find you here.”

Jane closed the space between them, taking her older sister into a deep hug.

“Why aren’t you at school? How did you get here?” The questions couldn’t be stopped. Amy stood stiffly, was the first to break away.

“I’m here to bring you home.”

Jane’s heart pushed up into her throat. At last! They missed her and loved her and they sent Amy after her. But when Jane’s eyes actually saw her sister – the cool expression, her remote body language, and the giant diamond ring on her left hand – Jane’s stomach went in the opposite direction.

“Where are Mom and Dad?”

“I’m getting married.”

“You came all this way just to tell me that?”

Amy shook her head. “Jefferson’s parents are important people.”

“I know who they are.”

“It will look odd if you aren’t there.”

“You didn’t come all this way just for that.”

Jane dropped her bag in the grass. Amy didn’t need her at her wedding, society like Jefferson’s parents could explain away anything to anyone. Amy reached down for the handles of Jane’s bag. Jane wrapped her hand around the handles and yanked the bag backward.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Jane said, though it didn’t sound like her.

“Don’t fool around.”

“Go home, Amy.”

And there in the dark Jane thought she saw the faint iridescence of tears in her sister's eyes.

“But we took the train all the way just to get you.”

“This isn't about the wedding, or Jefferson.”

“If you don't come with me, Papa says you're dead to him.”

This stopped Jane's breath in her chest.

“Dead?”

“Mom thinks you need this. Papa thinks you need to be sent to military school.”

And then the tears in Amy's eyes weren't just in Jane's imagination. “They've been fighting for weeks. About you. About this.” Amy waved her hand toward all of it.

Jane closed her eyes. That her mother would stand up for her at all was a surprise. Jane had the feeling that she was about to make a very important choice. She could go home with Amy, go back to her old school, slip back into the routine of homework and ripped pantyhose and endless formal dinner parties. Or, she could stay with the circus and work harder than she ever had in her entire life, struggle to belong among people who didn't take kindly to strangers, and make her own way in the world.

Though it pained her to allow the thought to take form, Jane knew it wasn't really a choice at all.

“Tell Mom I love her,” Jane said.

And Amy was gone.

Jane could not rightly see where she went, tears blurred the outlines of things in the dark. Annie's form stood some six feet behind her, and Jane pushed past her and into their tent. Annie entered the tent behind her, steered her to Jane's cot. Annie took the bag

from her, set it aside, guided Jane's knees to bend when the first gasp of heartbreak came from Jane's throat. There was a primal release in it, in the sense of having lost everything.

Had either of them paid attention, they'd have seen the hidden wisp of black wig or the sheen of an oversized ringmaster's coat, watching.

*

The night of Jane's first performance was the happiest of her short seventeen years. Wanda was sick and pushed her costume into Luke's hands at her tent door. "The girl will have to do tonight." She and Luke stared at one another a beat too long before Luke huffed and turned away.

Luke peeped his face into the tent, motioned for Jane to come out. He handed her the leotard.

"It's your night, kid," he said.

"But I haven't practiced today," she said.

"Improvise."

"Is this real?"

"Only one way to find out."

She knew her grin was too big, but looking up into Luke's face she found no judgment. He leaned in a touch too far. "Be careful," he said.

Inside the tent Annie went to work on her. Annie pulled the zipper up the back of the teal sequined costume.

“It’s too big,” she said. She went to the back of the tent and riffled through a trunk of brightly colored silks and sequins and beads. “You can’t be up a million feet in the air trying to flip flop and twirl without dying if you can’t catch the air right.”

Annie produced a silky violet long-sleeved leotard and threw it at Jane.

“It’s not sequins and lace, but it’s going to at least get you through the show.”

“Thank you.” Jane’s voice was hushed. She shimmied into the borrowed leotard.

“You’re so high up that no one can really tell whether you’re fancy or not.”

Jane forgot what color her costume was waiting down on the ground, waiting her turn to be harnessed and given the OK to climb up to the slackwire. She smelled burnt popcorn, heard the shifting of the audience in their seats, felt sweat pool under her arms, felt the air around her like a second skin. The adrenaline pushed blood into her cheeks, tingles into her fingertips, and bile up her throat. She choked it back in time to be given the all-clear.

She had only ever practiced during the day -- had always been able to see the ground below her. She couldn’t even make out the audience, but she could hear them. The calliope’s music lifted her up to the platform above their heads. From the moment her feet hit the slackwire, there was nothing else.

*

But Jane didn’t get better.

Her cold turned to the flu that settled in her chest. The pneumonia took it from there. By the time Luke realized Jane was in danger it was much, much too late.

After, her ghost was in every shadow and doorframe of the house he had bought for her, in the blonde braids of the daughters he had never known to dream for, in the

very fabric of the Big Top. And for the first time, Tent City grew quiet to remember the Ringmaster's wife. The silence wrapped its fingers around Luke's ribcage and never quite let go. For the very first time, Luke Barnes from Nowhere felt utterly alone.

*

When Jane had been at the circus three years, Wanda decided it was time for an early retirement. She moved to Boca to be near her parents who had moved to God's waiting room and had an extra bedroom. The first night Jane was the circus' only slackwire performer she passed Luke on her way up to the Big Top.

"Be careful," he admonished quietly to her. His fingertips grazed her violet arm. Jane had fallen during practice that morning and Luke had threatened to take her act out that night.

"I don't need you getting hurt," his voice had been rough.

"Better to fall in practice," she'd said. The afternoon was wearing thin and it was time for rest before the show. She had moved to go past him, but he had taken her hand and turned her to face him.

"You snuck onto my line up after all," he smirked.

"Is that your idea of congratulations?" She poked a finger into his chest.

But that night – her first night as the only slackwire act – Jane lifted herself up into her height and kissed him. The heat of his skin and the scratch of two-day stubble under his false mustache and white stage make up tingled. "If I fall – if something happens – I wanted to know how that would feel," she said.

Jane didn't fall that night, but Luke Barnes shook as he watched her.

*

But Jane did fall, one night, with nothing to protect her but a rope around her waist. They had ordered a net for the Big Top but it would be months before it would actually get installed. She had approached the slackwire like she did every night, but tonight something Luke had said before they went on stage had stuck in her mind and was churning over and over. They'd only been married three months but he was starting to get edgy. It didn't take much to set them both off.

“Divorce me – go ahead. But consider this: if you do, you won't be welcome here anymore.”

“The circus is my home, this is my family.” She stared slack-jawed at his smile.

“You never belonged here,” he said. It was the only thing he could say to hurt her.

“Where I don't belong is out *there*.”

She misjudged the air and missed her footing. She looked like a ragdoll limply hanging so high up by the waist. She refused to see the faces of the crowd, the face of the calliope player. She focused on the ground below her, and waited for someone to lower the rig she hung from. Jane heard Luke before she saw him, but then there he was in the center ring, and she was being lowered towards his outstretched arms. He untied the rope around her waist and lifted her into his arms – her feet never touched the ground. The crowd applauded, but Luke carried his wife back to their trailer behind the Big Top and held her with a bone-freezing fear.

Luke undid the clasps of her costume, peeled off the tights and unhooked her hairpiece. His movements were hurried and rough; he tore the hose, and pulled part of her hair net. They were silent but his hands screamed his relief, his guilt. When he had her undressed he inspected every inch of her skin. A bruise was forming around her waist

where the rope had caught her fall when she failed to land the backflip. He kissed the raised purple marks, ran his fingertips over them as though to erase them. Naked and lying in their bed, Jane cried. In the moment she realized the slackwire would not meet her feet, she had thought – this is how it ends. But with her husband’s hands on her skin, and the rough scratch of his ringleader’s jacket against her skin, she felt alive.

*

Picking a name had been the hardest part for Jane. She was stuck on Olga. It was a name that sounded like it had authority, meaning, weight – something to lend authenticity to the slender figure more girl than woman. Olga the Enchanting, Olga the Mysterious, Olga the Treacherous.

“You’re a physical act, use it to your advantage,” said Annie.

“Tightrope Tessie?” Jane wrinkled her nose. “No.”

Annie clucked her tongue. “That sounds like a sailor’s nickname.”

“No one on the inside calls it a tightrope,” Luke interjected from where he stood brushing Churchill.

“But the audience isn’t inside,” Jane reasoned.

“Part of the act is fooling them to make them feel like they are,” Annie said.

“Slackwire Sal,” Jane muttered under her breath. “Sal sounds so frumpy.”

“You need something with sex appeal,” Annie said. Luke snorted.

“Not sex – beauty,” Jane said. “The slackwire is beautiful, like the music that plays when I’m up there.”

“The calliope?” Luke asked. “That suits.”

“What?”

“Slackwire Calliope,” he said.

“I don’t know,” Annie said.

“It sounds like a riddle,” Jane said.

“Then it’s perfect.”

CHAPTER VIII
DEATH OF A RINGMASTER

The phone call to Eddie the Lizard Man Strom went something like this: Mr. Strom? This is Della Barnes – I’m calling about my father. – Yes, it has been a long time since I saw you. – 10 years? – I should have called. But you understand, you always understood. – But Mr. Strom, the reason I’ve called – Okay, Eddie, it’s just that – Maria? Yes, still identical. – My father? Well, you see, that’s why I’ve called. He’s dead.

*

What Della Barnes remembered most about the circus were the lights under her father’s large yellow and white striped big top. Standing in the ring’s center, the lights showing Della only the stage, only the other actors; the audience bodiless, faceless – only an unexpected gasp, or the roll of collective applause. She remembered the itch of sequins against her skin, the smell of sugar and of popcorn, the heady adrenaline prickling her cheeks.

Once when they were in rehearsal the elephant, Lola the Enormous, sat on the lion tamer by accident; his chest had nearly been crushed. On that day Della’s stage fright escalated into hyperventilation, and the only word her mother could understand from her daughter was ‘Lola.’ Performing had given Della, at the age of 4, an early onset of chronic anxiety. She didn’t want all of those people looking at her, she told her mother. Didn’t want them looking at her and at Maria.

One afternoon that same week, her mother took her by the hand into the center ring of the circus. The spotlights were on, and the floor was illuminated. Look, Della, her mother said. Can you tell me where Papa is? Della’s eyes lifted to the raised platforms,

expecting her father's form to materialize because she had wished him to. She looked and looked, but could see nothing. If she couldn't see the audience, her mother told her, then they weren't really there.

Daughter to Ring Master Barnes and Slackwire Calliope, and sister to Maria the Mirrored, Della the Double had never been in love with the circus she called home. Until Della and Maria were almost eight-years-old they had no other home but their trailer and Tent City comprising the homes of the other performers. Their father's circus traveled the country, never staying in one place very long; Della and Maria had been to every state in the continental U.S. twice before the age of five. Their father's circus was a small, nameless affair with an ever-changing cast of characters. They went from pillar to post and back, renting whatever venues they could find – fairs, auditoriums, fields large enough for tents.

*

Della was seven when her mother tucked her inside a winter coat and led her to the car. They were in South Carolina, just outside Charleston.

"We're going to go visit your Aunt Amy," her mother said as the car pulled away from the encampment. "Just us girls."

"Who is Aunt Amy?"

"My sister."

"You have a sister? Like me and Maria?" Della turned around in her seat and watched the big top get small as they drove away.

"Well we aren't twins like you two. Papa has brothers."

"And you have a Mommy and a Papa?"

“Of course I do.”

“Where are they?”

“They live in Ohio. Dreadful place to be from, Ohio.”

“Don’t they like us?”

“What do you mean, Della?” Her mother’s eyes appeared in the rear view mirror.

“I don’t remember them. Did we ever meet them?”

“No, you’ve never met your grandparents.”

“So they don’t like us.”

“It isn’t that they don’t like you, dear. They’re just terribly busy.”

“Were your grandparents too busy to meet you?”

“It was different when I was a girl. But think of all the people back at the circus; they’re your family. They love you an awful lot.”

Aunt Amy’s house was in a Charleston suburb, and when her mother pulled the car into the driveway a small woman with platinum blonde hair came outside to meet them. The woman looked like Della’s mother, only her nose was sharp and her mouth was painted on in direct red lines.

“Jane,” the woman said, arms outstretched. “It’s been too many years.”

“Della,” her mother said at last. “This is Aunt Amy. This is her house, isn’t it pretty?”

“Hello, Della,” Aunt Amy said. “I’m afraid there aren’t any toys, but there’s a television in the guest bedroom you can watch.”

“Who else lives here?”

“Just my husband, your uncle Carl, and I. Come inside and I’ll show you around.”

“But it’s so big.”

“Why, haven’t you ever seen a house before?”

“I didn’t know only two people lived in them.”

“Jane, don’t tell me you’re still letting Luke get away with his trailer nonsense. It isn’t right, living in those tents the way those people do.”

“It’s good for them.” Della’s mother smiled at her. “You’ll have to show her how to use the T.V.”

Her mother and Aunt Amy were sitting in the kitchen, and Della could hear their voices. She had been put into the guest bedroom, and the television had been turned on. From the few times Della had ever watched television she wasn’t sure how long she was supposed to sit there, just watching. It seemed strange to her that people could sit and sit and sit.

She left the bedroom and peeked around the corner. Aunt Amy’s living room reminded Della of the time they had gone to an art museum. The large formal white couch had large over-stuffed gold cushions. A large plush rug was underfoot and looked as though it could have belonged to a Czar – the Amazon Woman (Lizaveta) had told her about them – with its blue gold brown white swirls and flourishes and patterns. A long glass coffee table stretched in front of the sofa, with a gold vase in the center filled with cream-colored flowers. On the walls hung paintings of flowers, lakes, bridges, and buildings seen as though through a haze.

The rug was soft under her feet. It struck Della that Aunt Amy lived here every day, and these pieces of furniture probably always stayed where they were now. Why

couldn't they live like that, too? It would be nice to live in a house. Maybe Maria would like it, too.

She could stand in a living room like this one that would always be there – and the elephant on her chest lifted for a moment. She'd seen it in movies, too. She and Maria could wake up and run into their parents' room and jump on the bed and then they'd have pancakes and bacon and eggs for breakfast. Papa would read the paper and go to work in a suit, and Mother would do laundry in machines hooked up to the house and they would all play in the backyard – they could even have a tree house. There would be other children in the neighborhood, and they could play in their backyards, and their tree houses. She felt light, and calm.

Della shuffled to the kitchen, where her mother was in midsentence she spoke.

“Mommy? Can I stay here?”

“What was that, Della?”

“Can I stay here, and not have to move around, and have my bed always be in the same place?”

Her mother's face showed alarm. Aunt Amy looked at her, and a small smile crept across her severely red mouth.

“No, you can't stay here. Papa and I would miss you terribly if you left us. Go watch some more T.V., I'm almost done.”

As Della turned to go, she heard Aunt Amy's lowered voice, “See, Jane? You need to get Luke to get his head out of his ass and set down roots. Poor girl doesn't have a notion of living in a room that doesn't have wheels.”

“Well,” Jane said. “Maybe it's time.”

*

On the autumn morning of her father's funeral, Della's hands would not stop shaking. The tremor began before her first cup of coffee, and became a nervous jolting of her hands and arms as the sun rose. Of all the days for her nerves to get the best of her. They'd all remember her, the nervous twin, the twin with a brown paper bag fixed to her mouth. She had gone out and done something different – she wanted them to look at her as the strong one, the one who got away to something better, but knew they wouldn't.

Della's father had been known to the world as Ring Master Barnes From Far Away and Exotic Places (though he was really Luke Barnes from Wyoming). His crew was restless, and so was he. He found them in casinos, video arcades, pawnshops, and the occasional Laundromat. He made ugly men beautiful, made poor women rich, and made common school girls from Ohio into tightrope walkers.

*

Della was nine the first time she tried to run away from the circus. They were in Tennessee and Maria found her dragging her bundle behind her on the perimeter of Tent City. It was the middle of the day, the quietest time of day for them. Della had almost made it out of the encampment when Maria, who had wanted to show her a new trick she'd taught their father's horse, found and followed the drag marks in the dirt her bundle had left.

“Don't you know you're supposed to cover your tracks?” she said when she got close enough not to have to shout.

“Oh,” Della said dumbly. She looked at the long trail she'd left behind. She picked up the bundle and put it on her back. “Thanks,” she said.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to live with Aunt Amy in Charleston.”

“Then why isn’t Momma driving you?”

“Because she doesn’t know about it.”

“Does Aunt Amy know?”

“No, but she will. And I’ll get my own room with a television and I’ll go to school and never have to move again.”

“There’s no way you’ll make it to Charleston alone.”

“Oh yes I will, you’ll see.”

“What did you pack, anyway?”

“Clothes, books, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

Maria whooped with laughter. “How much money you got?”

“There wasn’t room.”

“You didn’t bring any money so you could take a book instead?”

She threw the bundle down.

“Won’t being alone make you nervous? You didn’t even pack a paper bag.”

“I won’t need one when I’m in Charleston. I’ll never have to be nervous ever again.”

“What a freak you’d be, hyperventilating on the side of the road.”

“I’m not a freak!”

“Won’t you miss me when you run away?”

“I can’t run away, I messed it up.”

“You’ve got a family here.”

“Momma and Papa have you, they won’t need me.”

“You’re my best friend, Della. What would I do without my best friend?”

“I am?”

Maria picked up her bundle. “Come on,” she said. “Churchill is waiting for you. He’s got a new trick to show you, he thought it up just for you.”

“He did not.”

“Sure he did, he told me so.”

*

Madelyn Williams? This is Della Barnes. Oh, so you already know? Will you be able to make it? I know he would have wanted you there. I think he died in his sleep, though you can never be sure with Papa. Yes, Ms. Madelyn, I know it’s bad to speak ill of the dead. I was only joking. Maria? She isn’t in town yet, but she will be. We’d love it if you’d say a few words at the funeral. I’ll see you soon, then.

*

They each had their own announcement to entice someone walking by; the Lion Tamer, the Sword Swallower, Lola the Enormous Elephant. This was the part that made Della’s anxiety spike: “Step right up! Step right up! Never before have you seen such a spectacle of wonders. I have been to every corner of the world, and been under every rock, and never before have my eyes beheld such a thing: two girls so exactly made in the other’s image that they are the same person. They are one person in two bodies!”

After the show Della and Maria imitated their father’s announcements, while their mother hung up their costumes and wiped the stage makeup from their faces.

“Step right up! It’s the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen!” Maria would say. She was best at it. She held up anything she could reach, a toothbrush, a slip of dental floss, an eyelash curler. “Look at the way the world beyond calls to you from this handful of sponge curlers!”

Their mother clucked her tongue at them. “Now don’t make fun of Papa, it isn’t nice.”

“Why not?” Della asked, particularly cranky. “He makes fun of us all the time.”

At night before they went to bed, the girls lay in their beds and whispered to each other. They whispered nonsense, they told stories, they gossiped about people they knew, about the other children, about their parents. They told secrets and made wishes and dreamed about absolutely nothing at all. This was their favorite time of day, and usually the only time in which they were left completely alone.

*

Standing at her father’s wake Della remembers his favorite suit: it was modeled after a fancy tuxedo, but it was emerald green. It was made from the kind of fabric that turns black when you look at it wrong, giving each movement of his arms a spectrum of colors. But no matter the suit, he always wore his top hat, which had been Lamar’s. The edges curled up, and it was too high, but he wore it to every show he ever performed.

*

Della checked her lipstick in her rearview mirror seven times on the fifteen-minute drive it took to get from her apartment to her father’s. When she called her father to tell him the news, to make the arrangements for Luke Barnes to meet his soon-to-be son-in-law, she had hoped he could be talked into meeting at a restaurant, or at a sporting

event – neutral territory. If Della expected her father to do anything but what he did – dig in his heels and demand Matthew meet him on his property where he could shoot him, or feed him to the tigers if he liked – then she had been away from home too long.

Della had tried to prepare Matthew for meeting her father. But Matthew, like everyone else she had ever brought home, thought she was exaggerating. Her father's ranch sat outside of city limits, and ran about 7 acres circled by fence. The house the Barnes family had set roots in was at the front of the property, off of a dirt road. It wasn't until after Della's mother died that the circus workers were allowed to move Tent City onto the property. Now, the expanse of land was littered with trailers, tents, hammocks and open fire pits, clothing lines and trash heaps, and the people that Luke Barnes loved more than his own daughter.

Pulling up the road to the front of the house, Matthew took Della's hand.

"It'll be okay," he promised.

They stood on the porch side-by-side as Della reached out to ring the doorbell. Luke's voice thundered from somewhere inside, and a stampede of booted feet followed. The door was unceremoniously thrown open and Luke Barnes waved them inside quickly before walking away. Della and Matthew were quiet, looking at the open door. Della moved first to go inside, slowly as though there were landmines under the hardwood.

The house was silent, except for Luke's bellowing somewhere near the kitchen, and a calming female alto that could only belong to Ms. Madelyn. A faint smell partway burnt, partway savory, met Della's nose as she closed the door behind Matthew.

They were in the kitchen when they finally caught up to the Ring Master. Ms. Madelyn stood calmly at the stove, looking every day of 300 years old, stirring a pot of something delicious.

“Watch your temper, Luke. It’s just a bit of chicken,” she clucked.

“Papa, I’d like you to meet,” Della began.

“The fiancé, yes, I know,” he waved a hand dismissively toward them both. Ms. Madelyn’s response was more favorable.

“Come in, you know how he gets,” she said, rolling her eyes in her tiny head.

“Do you need any help?” Matthew offered.

“No, Matthew, go sit down in the living room,” Della began.

“Chop those,” Ms. Madelyn ordered with a gesture toward the island where a mound of onions, peppers, carrots and celery sat.

“You don’t have to,” Della said. But Matthew had already rolled his sleeves up.

“Come on, Della, everyone’s doing it,” and he winked. How could he not be fazed by this? He, who had lived his entire life in a placid home, with cooks, and maids, and Harvard friends, stood there and chopped celery without complaint. Della had thought this would be beneath Matthew. Did she really know him at all? Her heart rose for a moment, and Della held on to the hope it might be the beginning of whatever it was she needed to feel normal. Even the hope that it might be a kernel of something made Della’s face flush. And a small part of her, a very small part that she dared not give name to, thought that perhaps parts of her two lives could touch.

*

Around her fourth cup of coffee Maria scolded her, not for the first time, for taking on too much. “If your anxiety starts up you won’t be any good to anyone, Della. Let me help.”

“I don’t need your help,” she retorted. “My anxiety is fine.”

Della spent the 5-hour car ride calling Maria, but Maria didn’t pick up. After a fight on the telephone the week before, they hadn’t spoken. First Della called every half hour until she was off of the turnpike; when she hit I-75 she called every 15 minutes. Standing in their father’s driveway in Carrollwood Village, she had been stiff and exasperated. She would tell Maria on the voicemail, then, if that’s what she wanted.

“Maria, why in the hell won’t you answer your phone? Can’t you see I’ve got to tell you something? I’m not calling you for my health.” She paused, swallowed, tried to find her breath. She felt pinpricks in her neck. “Call me back.”

She couldn’t tell her in a voicemail, mad as she was. So she waited for Maria to call her back. As it turned out, Maria didn’t call until the day before the funeral.

“Why in the hell didn’t you call me again?” Maria demanded.

“I told you to call me back. I told you it was important. I wasn’t going to tell you Papa died in a voicemail, Maria.”

“You could have tried harder. You were going to let me miss the funeral.”

“You’re wasting time talking. Just get here,” Della said.

So Della had done the planning, the cleaning, and the calling (and there had been many, many people to call) all alone.

*

Della held a mirror up to examine the back of her head; they were waiting in the foyer for her. They should leave now or the guests would be there before them. Suddenly she was the one making them late, when just a moment before she had been the one waiting. As she turned and held the mirror high, light from the vanity flashed into Della's eyes. Blinded momentarily she blinked the dark spots away. She couldn't leave them waiting – Della's father had been all things to all people except to her. Her rejection of the circus and her father's freaks had been a rejection of him. By the time they were in high school Maria had also strayed from the family business to pursue age-appropriate things, like boys and prom. The line around Della had already been drawn, though. Maria's branching out into adolescence had not been betrayal, but normal and tolerated. The girls tried intermittently to close the gap between them, but failed.

*

Six years ago, shortly after the miscarriage and divorce, Della had made the mistake of answering her father's call.

"I understand you managed to lose your husband and your child," he said. His matter-of-fact tone had made her feel small, incompetent. Della had never directly discussed either of these with her father, but she knew he knew, and he knew she knew he knew, and now he thought was a good idea to air it out.

"Yes, sir."

"What a spectacle you've made."

"I haven't done anything."

"But you've made it all the same. Step right up, see the amazing girl who's lost everything," he boomed.

“It wasn’t that simple. It was the baby, I did everything the doctor told me to.”

“Well, what did you do?”

What had she *done*? Without a response she had been silent. She was sure this was the longest thirty seconds of her life.

She sent her father a birthday card the next month, but didn’t call. After that she didn’t even send cards. The gap had never been bridged.

*

The funeral was the next morning at a respectable funeral home in Lake Magdalene. Originally, Della had planned for only family to attend the burial. But her father’s former employees had flown in from all over the country and were holding a wake in Ybor City. Tampa had been taken over by the circus, and Della knew there wouldn’t be a way to keep them all out.

“Della, they keep calling. They want to know if we’re going tonight,” Maria said. One hand covered the mouth piece of the phone.

“You go, I want no part of it.” Della did not look up from her newspaper.

Maria’s glare bored straight through Della’s head. “Hi, Eddie? Still there? Good. Della and I will be there – with bells on! We can’t wait to see everyone. I’ll even see if I can’t talk her into wearing one of our old costumes. Okay, we’ll see you then. Of course I know where that is, just down from the Green Dragon, right? See, I told you. Okay, goodbye, Eddie.”

The clatter of the phone hitting the old fashioned hook was the only sound in the house.

“Why did you tell them I was going?”

“Because you are.”

Maria looked at Della with the look she used to give her when they were kids and she got what she wanted.

“Don’t look at me in that tone of voice,” Della said. She used to have it pegged, but it had been a long time since she’d tried out the old humor she and Maria shared.

Maria smiled. Walking behind Della’s chair she put her hands on her shoulders and shook her slightly. “Don’t be a baby. It’ll be fun.”

So Della had exactly two options: hide in her room all night, or go with Maria to Ybor City’s narrow brick-paved one-way streets and bright neon lights.

*

When they pulled in it was clear they were not the first ones there. They didn’t seem like they’d just arrived, but as though they had always been there. To see the crowd filtering inside from the road, no one would have known the peach stucco building was a funeral parlor.

They had all worn black like she had requested, some of them had even managed to dress conservatively. There was something strange about seeing them all in one uniform color, something Della couldn’t name.

One woman wore a heavy evening gown, though the Florida humidity was like a second skin. Those who had known her father in his less performative lifestyle were noticeable among the sequins, silk scarves, hats, birdcage veils, feather boas, and elaborately constructed dresses and suits. No one looked like they were mourning – they were buzzing alive with conversation and laughter. It was the white noise Della remembered from her childhood.

*

“There’s someone in a Tommy Bahama shirt saying he’s the pastor,” Maria hissed.

Della nodded.

“Why would you get a pastor to serve at an atheist’s funeral?”

“I’m covering his bases.”

Maria’s mouth made a tight thin line. “He can’t be here,” Maria said. “It feels really, really wrong.”

“Then tell him to leave,” Della said.

*

With the mirror out of the light, Della saw her hair would do. It was only a funeral, after all. She wasn’t supposed to look glamorous, just put together and appropriately mournful. Though she wasn’t sure how upset she could reasonably be about the death of a man she hadn’t spoken to in six years. Dropping her arm to rest the mirror on the counter, Della’s hand forgot its purpose and simply let go mid-air. She watched the mirror fall without extending her arms to catch it. She heard the crash of the glass, heard the rush of feet down the hall, heard her sister’s voice outside of the door, but none of it registered. Della peered over the broken shards, her reflection fragmented.

*

For Della’s father’s 70th birthday party, he invited everyone he knew, invited everyone he had ever known, and invited people he wouldn’t know from Adam or Eve. Because of the city’s noise ordinances the stationary Big Top wasn’t an option. Without any immediate neighbors around the property, that made the Barnes Ranch a prime, and

only, venue choice. Della had offered to help plan, had offered the company she worked for at a discount (which meant Della would pay the ‘discounted’ part), but no one would hear of it.

“Papa, this is what I do for a living,” Della cried over the phone. It was the third time she’d offered and had been refused.

“This isn’t just another one of your parties, Della.” By the tone of his slur, Della guessed he was six drinks in.

Maria was handling it all, but that didn’t stop her from frantically calling Della for help on occasion.

“Della, Papa says he wants green table cloths. I didn’t know this many shades of green existed. When I tried to show him fabric swatches he bellowed.” So the twins had met up and Maria showed Della everything she had so far, and together they selected the perfect shade of green. And did Della know of a catering company that would make all of their servers wear circus masks? How many people sat at a round table? Did they need to rent an entire set of silverware for each place setting when most of them would eat with their hands anyway? And on it went until the night of the event arrived. Matthew, though invited, had caught the flu. Della insisted he stay at home.

“Every time I cough it feels like my head’s going to split open,” he whined.

“You have a doctor’s appointment first thing in the morning,” Della said. “Just drink this tea and take an aspirin every three hours. I won’t be home late,” she promised.

Matthew sipped the herbal tea that had more years of history behind it than even Della fully knew. It was the same thing that had been brewed for her ailments as a child.

Smelling them together brought back memories of cool hands on her hot forehead, and the murmur of someone keeping her awake.

Even though the citizens of Tent City were not put upon to cook for the feast, Luke had asked them to play the evening's music.

"No one but circus folk get it right," he boasted. "They really know the meaning of living, and that's what music is."

Della heard her father's voice above the din, stepping off of the back porch and onto the grassy expanse Maria and a team of magicians had transformed into a beautiful nighttime oasis. A thrill of colors surrounded the guests, tables carefully put in order, a dance floor, a stage, a cake table – the works. Finding Maria, Della and her sister circulated through the crowd together. People found it amusing how alike they still were, though so obviously different. But one hand stopped her in her tracks.

She felt the calloused hand before she saw it. It yanked her back, bringing Maria along. Jason's face in the staged lighting looked unnatural. Holding her left hand he looked only at the engagement ring that sparkled even now, in the dusk and falling night.

"So it's true," he said.

Maria got between them. "Save it, Jason." She pinched the back area of his arm just over his elbow. He scowled.

"I didn't think it would still hurt," he said.

Della blinked, but he was gone.

*

When Della and Maria had finally returned to their father's house at 3am, they were drunk and smelled like sour air. Maria had, in fact, woken up hung over; Della

heard her retching. Her heart was already racing, and the pinpricks were already in her neck. She was sick to her stomach and her hands shook, and shook. It was time to get dressed, time to put on the black dress she'd laid out on the bed; time to put on her best face for the performance she was entering. If her father taught her nothing else, it was that everything was a performance. Della's long hair swung around her ribs. She smoothed it from the scalp and gathered it together. It was soft in the way that hair can be after too many years of color processing; the kind of soft that chemicals can give back to hair. Unsteadily, she twisted her hair into a long column like a tornado. Then she wrapped it around itself at the base of her neck, wider and wider to accommodate it all. Della reached for pins, dropped three, found two and they went into the bun, scraping the scalp and pulling hair. She'd done this a million times, but today she couldn't get her hands to work right.

*

Maria had left to greet those she recognized. Della would have sworn several of them looked to be in costume, as though they were playing the part of mourner. Or perhaps the big top had made its way into this funeral parlor, in the middle of Tampa. They walked slowly, silently, as one person up to the altar. They only separated when their toes touched the edge of the flowered shrine. The noise outside the parlor in the foyer was increasing – people must have still been arriving. Maria produced a photograph (how had Della not noticed?) and laid it at the edge of the shrine.

“What did I do?” Della asked softly, finally.

She was silent then. Each turned to look at the casket, as though they could not quite believe it was there.

When her father had retired to God's Waiting Room, Florida, Della was already living in Boynton Beach. Maria moved to Orlando to perform for Disney a year or two later. It felt odd that one state held them all so separately for so many years. And now she was kneeling on the cold tile floor of a funeral home in Tampa, in front of the casket of a man she felt no love for, looking at a photograph she couldn't remember sitting for.

Della heard Maria's heels clicking up the aisle, heard them stop just behind her. Della stood.

*

Della walked into the center of the throng in the foyer and let her eyes rest on each face individually. She listened to their words, focused on their gestures. Her face was wet with tears, her vision blurred and the people around her become one large mass. The lights were on, and she could not see the faces of her audience. It was time to start the show. Her father's show always started on time. The daughter of Ringmaster Barnes From Far Away and Exotic Places stood in the middle of his mourners and began to shout:

Step right up, step right up! Today we have a spectacle of wonders, ladies and gentlemen, the likes of which have never been seen before, nor shall ever be seen again. Right this way, don't be shy. Step right up! Step right up!

*

It was not a picture Della remembered ever taking: her father was in his best suit, her mother in her beautiful sequined costume. They smiled, and held each other. In front were two small girls of five or six – exact copies – only one wore a white dress, and the other wore blue. Della remembered the blue dress, but she did not remember taking the

picture, or why she looked so happy. The girls were smiling, holding each other's hand, looking for all the world like ink blotted symmetry.

“What did I do?” she asked the image, which had no reply.