
All ETDs from UAB

UAB Theses & Dissertations

2017

Blackbird in Flight

Holly Watson

University of Alabama at Birmingham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/etd-collection>

Recommended Citation

Watson, Holly, "Blackbird in Flight" (2017). *All ETDs from UAB*. 3284.
<https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/etd-collection/3284>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

BLACKBIRD IN FLIGHT

by

HOLLY WATSON

JAMES BRAZIEL, COMMITTEE CHAIR
KERRY MADDEN-LUNSFORD
DANIEL SIEGEL

A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty at the University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2017

Copyright by
Holly Watson
2017

BLACKBIRD IN FLIGHT

HOLLY WATSON

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Set in the fictional town of Raynham, Alabama in the Tennessee Valley region, *Blackbird in Flight* opens with the voice of Fenton Knox as he reminisces about the day four-year-old Molly Sutherland drowned at the drip hole where he and his family were picnicking with the Sutherlands. Fenton, who was fifteen at the time, sees a snake in the water and inaccurately assumes it is a cottonmouth. In an attempt to catch and kill the snake, Fenton is bitten. As the remaining adults attend to Fenton's wound and successfully eliminate the snake, Molly wanders out into the water unsupervised and drowns before being pulled out by Ellis Knox, Fenton's father. Recognizing his role in the accident, Fenton is forced to face his own guilt as he attempts to reconcile the death of this young girl with the presence of a God he senses through his relationship with nature.

While Fenton serves as the primary protagonist of *Blackbird in Flight*, the novel also incorporates the perspectives of two other characters, Molly's parents, Adler and Nell Sutherland. As a result of their daughter's death, Nell and Adler become isolated in their own grief, creating an irreconcilable chasm between the two characters. Nell ultimately finds solace in an affair with Ellis Knox, Fenton's father, leaving Adler alone and alienated from his family.

Blackbird in Flight is primarily concerned with the loss of a child and the implications of such a loss on the relationships of those who remain. As Fenton navigates this grief-stricken existence through his observations of both Nell and Adler, his connection with nature serves as a stable force through which he interprets death. By exploring the themes of grief, guilt, and spirituality through Fenton's relationship with the natural world, *Blackbird in Flight* offers a unique perspective on Southern attitudes regarding family and loss.

Keywords: South, death, grief, isolation, nature, child

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER	
1 FENTON	1
2 ADLER	26
3 FENTON	52
4 FENTON	75
5 NELL	94
6 NELL	111

Chapter 1—Fenton

The summer waned early that year, the nights bringing with them a dry briskness we weren't used to seeing so soon in September. The air wasn't cold enough to chill you, but still it was enough to creep into your bones and fill them with a dull cool, making you feel alone and empty. I remember it all because it was the year Molly Sutherland drowned down at the drip hole, twenty years ago now. We were with her and her family—her mama and daddy and older brother, Hayes. They were all there to see when my deddy pulled her body out of the water.

It was the last Saturday before the schools started back, and we were down in the hollow like we always were the last weekend of summer. Molly had just turned five and was about to start kindergarten. I was a fifteen-year-old boy who figured he had no need for teachers or books. My mama and deddy were old friends with the Sutherlands. They'd all gone to school together back in the day, but, come to think of it, everybody had gone to school with everybody else in a town like ours.

The drip hole was tucked down in an old rock quarry in the middle of a river. The river ran smooth and steady for a ways then opened up right there in a wide pass at the quarry where the flow nearly halted before narrowing again and going on its way. The water hadn't always been there, though. Before I was born, a lake was just upstream. Deddy and Mr. Adler used to go fishing there when they were boys, mainly for crappie. Deddy said the lake had been lined with pines, said it was more like something you'd

read about in a book than real. It made you feel things you and nobody else either had words for, like you were all wrapped up in a piece of music without lyrics, floating in all that blue with the long, straight green arms of the trees stretching up. Sometimes him and Mr. Adler would carry the canoe out and just paddle around, not much of anything to worry about back then.

As the town grew, the lake was bought up, and somebody somewhere decided it'd be a good idea to put houses on it. So the water was diverted, and the lake was filled in with rock and chert and red mud. Deddy used to talk about the way all the pines had been cut down and piled high at one end with a backhoe before being burnt into nothing but ash and smoke and soot. He said it just sat there, the black remains of all those trees, lingering in the air for weeks before the rain finally washed it away. After that, it was like the trees had never been.

There wasn't anything special about the first houses that were built and sold. Sure they were a little bigger and taller than the single story ones the people around here were used to, but they weren't any better. Pretty soon, Deddy said, everybody began noticing the place didn't drain quite right—big puddles of rust-colored mud stood in the vacant, sodded yards and spotted the roads crisscrossing through the whole mess. You could still smell it a few miles out, the stale water sitting there breeding mosquitoes. Deddy thought it was the lake trying to come back up from its grave deep in the earth somewhere. He said it had been churning and stirring from the moment they buried it, given life by all the dying fish and animals that went down, too. He said one day, when nobody was expecting anything, the old lake would gush back through those muddy holes in the

ground and wash all the filth and bugs and stench away and all the people too if they were stupid enough to keep on living there. The ground started shifting not long after, and the foundations of the first houses cracked and slid. Soon the whole development was condemned and abandoned.

Deddy used to say it served them right. Whoever them was I'm not quite sure. He always seemed to mourn the loss of the old lake like a friend who had died too young. I never minded the loss myself because it wasn't really my loss to mind. I liked the drip hole the way it was. Alabama summers can smother the life out of you—the hot, humid air pressing down on your chest like a twenty-pound weight, but it wasn't like that down in the drip hole.

Water oaks filled the dip in the land, and their canopies reached up to the roof. They met one another creating a deep shade that crept across the water. The smooth stones were cool to the touch, and a chill spread across your skin and down the length of your arms when you pressed your bare back to them and looked up into the solid blue sky between the spreading branches. The whole place was marked by a cool, comforting gray spotted with bright green tufts of moss springing up from the dark, damp dirt.

We were all down there that Saturday. Molly stayed close to Miss Nell, running back and forth from the blanket spread across the mossy ground to the edge of the creek. She squealed as her pink feet pressed into the cool shale when she neared the water. I had ripped my worn and faded shirt off and thrown it on the dark earth near where she was playing before crossing the creek at the shallows, then, wandering up and around behind the trees on the other side.

Hayes was going to be a senior in high school in the fall, and he was leading the way for me as he scaled the steep rocks looming over the creek. That's the way it always was—Hayes up front, me following behind. I watched him force his lean body up higher and higher, hoisting himself effortlessly against the jagged cliff, his long toes grabbing at the surface. He was silent, always pretending I wasn't there trying to trace every step he took just as he took it. Or maybe he wished I hadn't been there, that I was never there, and he was just trying to convince himself he was alone.

It always seemed to me Hayes enjoyed being alone but didn't like being by himself. Instead of going off on his own, he'd always get right at the edge of where everybody was, to where he could still hear them and watch them without having to say anything in return. It was just his way, and I didn't think too much of it for a long time. It wasn't until after Molly's death that I started wondering what it was he was watching and listening for.

Hayes moved differently than me. I stayed close behind him and fell back at times watching as he jumped weightlessly along the length of the rocky slope. Whenever I stumbled behind, missing a step here and there or sliding along the unstable gravel, I noticed Hayes wasn't confident and arrogant in his movements like some would be; neither was he slow and unsteady mirroring my own pace. No, he was detached from each long and graceful stride he made, unaware of his own presence as we climbed higher and higher—unaware even that he was in motion. He was a contradiction to me even then. While he appeared to be oblivious to his surroundings, to his actions, to his role in all we were moving through, he simultaneously felt like an integral part of

everything—like none of this could exist without him—not the trees or rocks or drip hole, not even me. Somehow he was a part of it all. We all were a part of it all together.

At the top of the rocks was a line of oaks, the branches of which stretched over the green and turquoise water creating a motley pattern of light and shade on the surface below. On one of the limbs, someone had long ago tied a worn rope you could barely reach with your feet still planted on the ground and your arm stretched out over the edge of the cliff. That's where I caught up with Hayes. He said it had been him who'd put it there—said he'd climbed out on that branch when he was just seven, his weight causing it to arch and sway as he worked. He was talking to me without looking at me, like I wasn't worth looking at. He stood there, his back against the tree picking at the rope with his fingernails. It seemed, at first, like he wasn't even speaking to me, like he wasn't speaking to anyone but himself and the heavy air through which he talked. He was only allowing me to listen if I would, and I wondered if he let other people listen too, or if it had just been me.

“Mama didn't know I'd come down here,” he said. “Snuck right out the back door and out to the shed to find the scrap of rope I'd been eying. Then I just followed the old dog trails across the field straight to County Road 21. It was easy to find my way down here from there. Doubt anybody ever knew I was gone. They usually don't, and even if they do, they don't say anything about it.”

Hayes was still holding the rope in his hand, swinging it near the edge of the cliff one second, then over his head like a lasso or noose the knot had fallen out of the next. He was looking out over the water to where Molly was playing before he slung the rope

back towards me. He didn't say anything else for a while. Just stood there still looking, his shaggy light brown bangs gilded by the sun as they hung down in his eyes. He reached into the pocket of his swimming trunks and held his hand there for a second, clenched in a fist, the lump pressed against his hip, before he pulled out something that caught the light, and threw it out into the water. A smile crept across one side of his mouth as he dug his big calloused toe into the damp earth and watched Molly stare at the ripples spreading across the surface of the water.

“You ain't going to tell anybody about all this, now then are you?” It wasn't a question, and Hayes took the rope back.

“I doubt Mama would care where I go or when, but I don't want her to take it into her head to put a stop to it now. That wouldn't be any good, Fenton.”

I never knew what to say to him. It was always like he was expecting something from me, but I had no way to tell what. “Naw,” I said. “You know I ain't a snitch.”

“Never can tell. You are kind of a chicken shit.”

His lip was curled up in a smirk as he cut his eyes from the rope to me. I went to grab him—run at him full throttle head first like a bull, plunging deep in his belly with my arms flying around his sides to wail into his back, but just then he started laughing like he hadn't meant any of it, not even the part about the rope and him sneaking out to wherever the hell it was he'd go. I was still trying to figure out what it all meant when he took a running jump with the rope straight from the rocks and fell into the water, the tail end of the rope coming back up and just about hitting me in the face. I could smell the deep musty dampness of mildew that had been growing in between its fibers for years.

Whenever we swung from the rope down into the water below, the squeals and screams and whooping and hollering echoed off the limestone walls all around us, filling the hollow with some kind of confused war cry refusing to be silenced. Our hands were burnt and blistered from spending most of the summer swinging from the worn rope, and they were tough and leathery and strong and ready to do it again.

Mama didn't like it. She never did. She'd always say she had no desire to see her only child laid up dead in a muddy pool of water. I didn't understand it at the time—why she had to be that way when Miss Nell didn't seem too worried about Hayes, but later, it made sense. Some things make more sense over time. But other things stay as fucked up as ever, and it's us who change, getting used to how things are to the point we can't see them any other way.

Mama had always wanted children—lots of babies to look after. It was just her way, but there'd only been me. We didn't talk about the why too much—there didn't seem to be any point after the other one that was supposed to be died, died too late in my thinking. It was just one of those things everybody has happen—when what you want doesn't quite match up with what you have. Made Mama treat me different. That loss of hers, it rested in me somehow. I was every child, boy and girl, she'd seen herself loving and raising, and she felt she had to protect us all by keeping me safe from everything. Over time, Deddy convinced her I'd be alright if she let go a little. Even talked her into letting me swing from the old rope, so long as I watched to make sure I didn't land in the shallows.

While Hayes was busting the water, I looked down at everybody else. Deddy and Mr. Adler had put two watermelons down in the edge of the water to keep them cool until they were ready to be cut open with the big orange-handled knife Mama had packed in the picnic basket along with the sandwiches and chips and sour pickles, and now Deddy and Mr. Adler were both just standing back drinking beer and laughing at only God knows what. Deddy had pulled his shirt off and left it on the hood of the truck, a wrinkled bundle of crimson against the cherry red paint. His belly stuck out just an inch or two past the waistband of his swimming trunks, and thin patches of brown hair spread across his chest and down the center of his abdomen.

It seemed strange to be looking at him like that, so small down there. I felt like I could pick him up and hold him in my palm. I closed one eye and held my hand out focusing as I lined my thumb and index finger up and around his head to pinch it and lift him and toss him in the pocket of my swimsuit.

Mama and Miss Nell were sitting on the blanket talking. Mama was smoking a long narrow cigarette that bobbed up and down between her tucked in lips as she nodded to whatever Miss Nell was saying, and Miss Nell was holding one of Deddy's beers in her right hand. Part of it sloshed out when she called to Molly.

“Molly, you’ve still got your good clothes on. Come back here before you get them wet.”

Molly turned around to where I couldn’t see her face. She was still ankle deep in the calm creek, and she kicked, sending a spray of water up to turn silver in the sunlight as it splashed towards Miss Nell before falling to the earth again.

“Alright, you have it your own way,” Miss Nell said, “but if you soak that dress, you’re not sitting in my lap on the way home.”

Both Mama and Miss Nell were already wearing their swimsuits. Mama had on a one piece covering up her fat and the stretch marks she’d said I’d given her, and she was still wearing the Bermudas she always kept on with her swimsuit. Miss Nell had on a green bikini plunging low in the front, and as she sat on the ground and leaned back against the lichen-covered tree behind her, her stomach seemed to collapse in on itself right at her navel. Watching everybody from up above, made me feel like they belonged to me and just me—like it was my job to keep them and take care of them. When I turned around, Hayes had already made it back to the top of the rocks and was standing behind me looking down at them too.

“Hey, Hayes, watch this,” I yelled back over my shoulder while leaning forward to grab the rope.

“Alright, Fenton. You got my attention.”

Hayes was a good four inches taller than me—long lean muscles running down the length of his body as thick beads of water stood up on his smooth skin. He was leaning against the rough surface of the hickory that reached up taller and higher than our swinging tree, and little flecks of the scaly bark had peeled away and were sticking to his wet shoulders.

“Okay. Here goes.” I grabbed the rope and took several long strides backwards towards him and the hickory so as to get a good running start. As I raced toward the edge of the cliff, my bare foot caught on one of the exposed roots running across the top of the

rocky ground. I could feel the burning where it had cut into the arch, and I knew it had probably broken the skin, but I wasn't going to let anything like that stop me.

I leapt off the edge of the cliff, pushing my weight into the air by pressing both feet hard into the rock even though it sent a throbbing pulse across the sole of my cut up foot. Just as the rope reached its highest point, I let go and curled my body into a tight ball pulling my knees into my chest and wrapping my arms around my folded legs. I could feel the rush of air run over me as I fell towards the earth.

My stomach tightened into a knot, and my legs shook against my locked arms. It was like my body knew better and wanted to revolt even though my brain didn't have time to regret anything before my ass hit the surface of the water. I sunk deeper down into the drip hole than I had ever been before. Or at least I think I did. The water rushed into my ears and up my nostrils, burning like hell fire just before deadening my senses.

I was completely removed from everybody and everything else, like I was on a different planet, a different universe, one that was cold and wet, everything slower. Maybe now I was with God—in the hand of God, in the mouth of God. This wasn't the God I'd heard about in church. No, this God was bigger than all those 'shall nots' and treating everybody nice and everything else that gets pinned onto him by people who think they know best. This God didn't need those rules. This God knew rules didn't make any difference. Only this—this place I was in and was in me was what mattered.

As I pushed myself back up to the surface, I felt like I was being spit out, spit back to where I came from, back to where I belonged. Like I wasn't good enough for

such a place. When I broke the surface of the water, I hollered deep, letting all the air escape I had held in tight.

“Shit, Fenton, I never expected to see something like that from you.” Hayes was standing waist deep in the water, his arms crossed over his chest and an oversized grin spread across his face as long lines of water streamed from his hair down his temples and neck.

My mama had waded out ankle-deep into the creek, and was staring straight at me. Her wavy red hair had fallen from the loose ponytail at the back of her head and was sticking to the sweat on the side of her face and across her forehead. I knew she had to be mad since she didn’t say anything to Miss Nell about Hayes cussing in front of me, even though God knows her and Deddy did it at home all the time.

“Fenton Knox, what the hell do you think you’re about, pulling something like that?” Her arm was extended over the water pointing past me, up above my head, and her shoulders were drawn forward pushing her breasts together and forcing her cleavage to the top of her swimsuit. Her face wrinkled across her brow, and her nose protruded beak-like from her face. She looked like some kind of bird or beast or combination of both I had read about in Greek mythology.

I didn’t say anything—just shrugged my shoulders and turned around to smile at Hayes, but he had waded over to the shallows and was starting to walk up on the shore.

“It’s all right, Joy. The boy was just trying to have a good time and show off,” Deddy said as he walked over to Mama and put his hand on her shoulder, pulling her back out of the water and against his body, the small of her back fitting perfectly against

the curve of his belly. When I turned around to face them, Miss Nell stood up and turned her back on them as she walked over to the cooler and pulled out another one of Deddy's beers. She kept her back turned, threw her head back and took the first long drink. Hayes was kneeling over by the blue flannel blanket. Molly stood in front of him, and her face was only inches from his as he smiled and said something to her before standing back up.

“Ellis, don’t you ‘all right’ me. That was a foolhardy thing your son did just now. He couldn’t see where he was going to land or what he was going to hit all balled up like that, and you and him both know it. He could have knocked his brains out on any one of them rocks out there. I won’t have it. I won’t have him doing it again and leaving me here to bury my only child.” Mama pulled away from Deddy to face him, and she looked at him the way she always did before getting what she wanted.

“Alright, Joy, alright,” Deddy said resting his hands on her shoulders. “I’ll talk to the boy about it.”

Deddy turned around and walked back to the cooler where Mr. Adler and Miss Nell were standing. He said something to them I couldn’t hear because the water was still filling my ears, swimming around in my head, making me feel like I was separated from everybody else. I just saw Mr. Adler snicker a little as he rubbed his hand over his mouth and beard before Miss Nell walked off, swinging her hips as she went. I think Deddy saw that part, too, his eyes following her back to the lichen-covered tree where she stood as she finished off the beer.

I don't know why, but I looked at Mama to see if she'd seen him watching Miss Nell, but Mama just went on smoking her cigarette as Miss Nell tugged on her swimsuit. I think she knew we were all watching her, all of us except for Mr. Adler, but even more, I think she liked it that way.

"Fenton, come here," Deddy said, popping the metal tab on the can.

I waded out of the creek slow, the water pushing against me, seeming to pull me back a little with each step I took. I walked over and sat down on the cooler between him and Mr. Adler. "Yes, sir?"

"You know how your mama feels about you doing things like that." Deddy threw back a big gulp of his beer and wiped his forearm across his mouth.

"Yes, sir. I know." The air felt cool on my wet skin.

"She doesn't want you getting hurt. And besides, you're setting a bad example for Molly. You don't want her to climb up there and try something like that now then do you?"

"No, sir. I guess not." Truth was I hadn't given any thought to Molly, and I didn't really care what she did or didn't do.

I sat there on the cooler for a while, sulking while Hayes waded out in the water by himself. By that time Miss Nell had finished Deddy's beer and had stripped Molly down to her swimsuit, the image of some cartoon character I didn't know or can't remember stretched tight across her round stomach. She had walked out about knee deep when I saw it, the swirling in the water.

I didn't say anything at first. I was a few yards away, and I wanted to be sure. As I ran out towards Hayes, the water splashed up against my thighs, and I lifted my knees higher as it tried to push me back, push me away from him.

"What are you doing, Fenton?" he said slinging water up in my face and eyes so that everything went blurry.

"Nothing. Just stop it." I rubbed my eyes straining to see as I moved closer to him.

"That's not funny," he yelled.

"What are you talking about? I didn't do anything," I said not taking my eyes from the surface of the water.

"You rubbed the back of my leg. I felt it."

"I didn't touch you."

"Yes you did. You were rubbing on me."

"Wait a minute. Wait," I said pointing. "There it is. It's a moccasin. I think it's a moccasin."

"Joy, throw me that limb," Deddy said pointing back up to near where he had parked the truck. He crushed his beer can, throwing it to the ground, and came out in the water towards us, cocking his body sideways as he tried to cut against the current in smooth even strokes. Mr. Adler followed close behind coming towards us, too.

The limb hit the water with a slap while we tried to corner the snake. None of us could really get a good look at it as it slid above and below the surface of the water

gracefully, beautifully. We, in contrast, stumbled and slid on the slippery smooth rocks underfoot. That's when I felt it—a sharp pain in my right arm.

“The fucker bit me,” I said.

Mama started screaming and holding her mouth, “Was it a cottonmouth? Was it?”

“Get him out of the water,” Deddy said to Hayes as he threw the limb to Mr.

Adler.

“Come on.” Hayes grabbed my arm right above where I'd been bitten, causing the blood to rise up and drip down my forearm.

“Easy. I can do it,” I said. I pulled away from him and fought my way up onto the bank. I sat on the shale as Mama ran up to me and grabbed my arm.

“Is it? Is it a cottonmouth bite?” She looked from Miss Nell to Deddy and back to my arm again, but they just stood there not saying anything.

“I got it.” Mr. Adler held the snake up. It writhed about on the end of the limb. He waded out of the water holding it out and above his head. When he threw it on the bank, he pinned it down just below its head with the limb, its brown and ginger body lashing up and down, back and forth.

Deddy walked over to the snake and held the lower half of its body down with his foot so it was stretched out tight, trapped between the two men. “That's no moccasin. Just a young red-bellied water snake. See.” He pointed. “You can tell by the shape of the head. The boy's gonna be fine. Just need to clean the bite up a bit.”

When Mr. Adler pulled the snake out of the water, Hayes had gone to look it over with Deddy. I didn't figure he knew too much about snakes—no more than I did anyway.

But he stood there, looking down at it like he did, like he wanted to. I'd never seen him look at anything like that. He knelt down close to its head, its body squirming between the limb pressed against its throat and Deddy's foot.

A throng of blackbirds was passing overhead, blocking the sun, and making the place grayer than usual, like God was turning his back on us, on the whole scene. They moved and glided through the sky as one, falling and rising with the wind. Their shadow fell across the ground and moved—a single shade of darkness as they swayed through the sky. I swear I could hear the beating of their wings, an isolated rhythm of hundreds or thousands of individual birds flying in unison. I watched as they careened across the sky, not leaving but simply hovering in constant movement back and forth, up and down. No progress made. There was simply beauty in the movement itself.

As we sat there in their shadow, Hayes felt around on the ground where the snake was trapped, without looking where he placed his hand, until he finally reached a rock just larger than his fist. He lifted it up over his shoulder and brought it down hard on the snake's head. He did it two more times, making sure it was dead even though the snake's body was still lashing around.

Mama started screaming. I thought she was screaming because of the snake. I just kept watching it—the twitching and moving even though there was no life left in it. Mama kept screaming and screaming, and then Deddy said, "Oh my God." That's when I looked up. That's when I saw Molly out in the water.

Her body was floating face down just beyond the bank. Mama kept screaming as Deddy ran in, lifting his knees high like I had done when I went in after the snake. When

the water got deep enough, he pushed himself down and against the rocks, forcing his weight on the surface below to propel his body forward, and he glided towards her. Mr. Adler followed behind slow, stopping just past the creek's edge.

“No. No. No.” Miss Nell kept saying it over and over. She didn't cry or scream or wail at first. She just kept saying “no” real quiet.

I couldn't move. The blood was dripping down my arm heavy now. It was warm against the wound but felt colder the further down my arm it ran. I just sat there and watched with everybody else, motionless, while Deddy went to pull Molly out.

When he reached her, he rolled her over on her back and lifted her up. Her wet, brown curls hung down and caught in the bend of his arm. He carried her to the shore slowly, the water pushing up against his thighs in small eddies like fingers or hands that were fighting him, trying to grab her, pull her back, keep her. When he laid her down on the bank, she was so still, so pale. I could see the snake still writhing on the ground just above where she was lying, and I didn't understand anything.

Mr. Adler stood over Deddy and watched as he beat on her chest and breathed down her mouth, trying to bring her back to life, trying to bring her back to us. But we all knew it was too late. She wasn't coming back. That's when the screaming stopped. That's when the whole world went silent.

The town was in shock for a while. Sure, these things happen from time to time, but they fade out of memory faster than you realize. You go back to the old ways of thinking—certain nothing like that's going to happen again, like the time Buck Lyons

shot himself in the face. His wife found him, slumped over the table, blood splattered across the refrigerator and her good kitchen linens. Nobody ever knew if it was just an accident that happened while he was cleaning his gun or if it was because he couldn't stand the thought of facing the chemo again after the cancer came back. Either way, the sheriff ruled it an accident, and the case was closed not to be mentioned again except in muffled whispers after Sunday church service or down an almost vacant aisle at the Piggly Wiggly.

The year Molly died was the same year the geese came early. Still not sure why—maybe summer was leaving everywhere sooner than normal, not just the Tennessee Valley. I had just started working at the Ace Hardware store—only been there about three weeks when the crooked, wrinkled Vs started passing over us in the sky.

“I always hate to see them coming.” Mrs. Brasher said standing at the cash register. She was the type who hated to see anything or anybody coming. I think she hated coming and going herself, and maybe that was the whole problem. Or maybe everybody's like her when they get old—tired of all the comings and goings and what they might mean.

“Here you go, ma'am.” I handed her the paper bag, hoping she would take her light bulbs and leave without saying anything else.

“The geese, Fenton, the geese.” She pointed up at the ceiling, and I looked into one of the fading fluorescent lights like I expected to see some sign of them. “Nasty, messy creatures—don't know why they can't stay up in Canada or Indiana or wherever it is they belong.”

“I think they’d freeze to death or starve or something like that if they didn’t come down here.”

“Serves ’em right. I don’t want them around here. You know back when my Barney was alive, he shot ’em. Weren’t supposed to, but he did it anyway. That’s what’s wrong with the world now.”

“Too many geese?” I asked opening and shutting the till just to watch the orange “no sale” tag pop up and listen to the clicking spring in the drawer.

“No, Fenton.” Mrs. Brasher shook her bag of lightbulbs at me. “All these people dead set on trying to fix everything and help everybody when there ain’t a thing wrong with the way things are. They’re all too afraid to do what they gotta do anymore to look out for themselves—too busy looking out for somebody else, even if it is just a goose. Take Mr. Wilson who lives down the street from me. Did you know he’s gone and taken in a homeless man to live there in the same house with him?”

“No, ma’am. I hadn’t heard that.”

“Well he sure did. Did it after Grace passed, God rest her soul. He’s going to go and get his throat cut doing a thing like that. Can’t trust anybody these days, and can’t help them either—not without risking your own skin.”

I nodded along as I looked out the big plate glass windows onto the main street. It wasn’t *Main Street*. That was a few blocks over by the library and the town museum. The museum was dedicated to a bunch of dusty basketball trophies the high school had won forty years back. But Ace Hardware was on the main highway, 231, running through the whole county—still only a two-lane road with not much of any traffic on it.

“Well, Fenton, are you like that?” Mrs. Brasher squinted at me from behind her thick, smoky glasses.

“No ma’am. I suppose I’m not, ” I said and rubbed the black hairs beginning to stick up on the back of my neck—time for a haircut.

Truth was I felt like I never really thought about anything or anybody but myself, and I kind of thought everybody else was the same—wondered if that was the real problem and Mrs. Brasher and her Barney had everything backwards, and maybe it was people like us, who were really what was wrong. Right about then, Hayes came in the store. The little bell Mr. Simmons had hung over the door pierced the space with a high-pitched metal sound. He’d said it would let us know when somebody was there so we could keep our eye on them, make sure they didn’t steal anything.

I hadn’t seen Hayes since the funeral. Him standing there in front of me just then made a knot come up in my stomach. I could feel him looking at me.

“Hey, Hayes. Anything I can help you with?” I said, talking over Mrs. Brasher’s shoulder. I put my hands on the Formica counter and locked my elbows, but my arms kept shaking.

“I need to get some paint mixed.” He had a little piece of card stock he was rolling and twisting between his fingers.

“Well, I guess I’d better get out of here and back to my babies,” Mrs. Brasher said.

Mr. and Mrs. Brasher had never had any children. The town was divided between those who thought they *couldn’t* and those who thought they *wouldn’t*. Either way, they

had an entire herd of Chihuahuas to make up for it. I wasn't sure how many she was up to now. At last count, it was six.

Mrs. Brasher walked out the front door. Again the bell.

"You got a paint sample there?" I said holding my hand out to Hayes.

He gave it over. "I had to ride with Mama here. Said she didn't have it in her to come in."

I looked out the side window to the gravel parking lot on the right end of the building. Miss Nell was sitting in the driver's side of the car, window rolled down smoking a cigarette. I'd never seen her smoke before. I'd seen her drink plenty but never smoke. She looked like a different woman from the version of herself in the bikini down at the drip hole. Older. Angry. Her dark blonde hair was parted down the center of her head and hung limply around her face as she balanced the cigarette between two fingers she couldn't hold still.

"We're painting Molly's room. Adler said it was time." Hayes always referred to his daddy by his Christian name. I'd have got popped in the mouth if I'd ever tried something like that.

I unrolled the sweat-dampened paint sample to see a dull brown. "Weathered Oak," I said. "Do you know what finish?" I was already walking over to the tall wall of paint cans stacked on paint cans stacked on paint cans.

"No."

“Well do you know what y’all are going to use the room for now that Molly’s gone?” I said it before I could think, and I felt like I did when I let go of the rope—every part of my body revolting, wanting to pull it back, to bring it back, but I couldn’t.

Hayes just stood there looking at me, and there it was again. I wondered if he blamed me. I wondered if I blamed myself.

“What about egg shell for the finish? It’ll be easier to clean than flat.”

I was reaching for the paint can when he said, “Why did you get in the water with the snake, Fenton? I keep running over it and over it in my head, and it doesn’t make any sense.”

I rested my hand on the top of the cans for a moment, my arms too weak to come down. I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything anymore. Every time I thought back to that day, to that moment, everything went gray and silent. It still does.

“I don’t know,” I said, pulling the can from the shelf and setting it on the counter. “I guess I thought I could help. I didn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Why didn’t you just yell out? Why didn’t you tell us what you saw, or just tell me to get out of the water? Why’d you have to go out there and get bit?” He pushed his fists into the counter. “You didn’t even know what kind of snake it was.” His voice was shaking.

I popped the lid off the paint can. “Everything just happened so fast. I saw something in the water. I thought it was a moccasin, but I guess I didn’t know.” My hand slipped, and I stabbed myself in the thumb with the opener. “Shit.”

Hayes watched as I squeezed the cut with my right hand and brought it up to my mouth to suck the blood away. It tasted like a penny on my tongue.

“What did you think you could do to help? I would have been fine. We would have all been fine if you hadn’t gotten in the water and got bit over something that turned out to be nothing.”

“Fuck, Hayes,” I pulled my thumb away from my face.

He took two steps back quick like I had hit him in the mouth or something. Then he came back at me again with the same question, leaning his body against the counter.

“What did you think you were going to do to help?”

“I wanted to catch the snake. Get rid of it. Kill it. So we could go swimming again. I was just trying to help.” I slammed my hand on the counter, smearing blood across the side of the can. Some of the paint spilled out onto my sleeve. It was wet, and all I could think about was the rush of cool blood from the snake bite running down my arm as I watched the ambulance come and carry off Molly’s body.

“If you hadn’t tried to help, if you hadn’t gotten in the water, if you hadn’t been bitten, Molly wouldn’t be dead. We were all too busy watching you. You didn’t need to save us. There was nothing to save us from. It’s all you, don’t you see? We were all too worried about you and that damn snake to watch after Molly. She was the one who needed us—not you and that pathetic bite on your arm.”

I turned my back to him. After I tinted the paint, I put the lid back on and put it in the shaker. I leaned into the counter as it went, feeling the vibrations run through my

stomach and groin down to my legs and feet. I let it go for almost twice as long as I needed to. I just kept waiting and waiting for him to say something else. But he didn't.

When I pulled the can out of the shaker, I wiped the blood off it, and he walked over to the cash register like nothing had happened. It was fine with me. I'd rather go on pretending.

"Do you need any brushes?" I said, putting a wooden mixing stick on top of the can.

He shook his head, and as he handed me the money, his hand touched mine. His fingers were cold and dry, and the nails had been chewed to clean smooth ovals stopping just before the tips of his fingers. The churning in my stomach rose up through my body. I swallowed, trying to fight against it, but my throat felt closed.

Hayes didn't walk straight out the door. Not right away anyway. It took too long. Or maybe it just felt like it took too long. Maybe he ran faster than he had ever run before—just trying to get away. Maybe I was the one stuck, standing there feeling sick, thinking the moment would never end, but it did. He left. I heard the bell. Once as he opened the door and then again as it closed back behind him.

I could see out the side window from the corner of my eye—could see when he opened the back car door and set the can of paint in an empty booster seat, see when he got in the front seat. Miss Nell didn't say anything to him or look at him. She just threw her cigarette out into the gravel parking lot and rolled up her window as they drove away.

They'd been gone for fifteen minutes. Maybe longer, and nobody came in the store. Nobody was going to. I felt like all the air and tools were putting a pressure on

me. So I walked slow down aisle eight and picked out a step ladder, something wooden, not one of those metal ones, and I carried it back to the front of the store. I put it down right there at the front door and unfolded it. Climbed up to the top and grabbed that damn bell.

I left the ladder sitting there. Like I said, nobody was going to be coming in right then. I could feel it, and I walked to aisle three and took a hammer. Then I sat right there in the floor and hit that bell over and over. Making it ring out louder and louder each time. I could hear it and feel it in my head, deep down in my skull ringing and ringing. I kept hitting it and hitting it until it couldn't ring anymore, and all I could hear was the steel hammer pounding the cement floor below.

Chapter 2—Adler

Adler stood at the front of the church, the smooth brass pressing into his calloused palm as he lifted the small walnut casket with the three other men. He refused to look at them, these pall bearers, even while they, too, bore the weight of Molly's body beside his own, and over time he learned to forget them entirely. It was not so much he could not remember who they were—their names and faces, even though there was that. It was more that he wanted to forget them. He wanted to be blind to them, so he looked away. He could neither remember who they were in the weeks and months and years passing after her death, nor could he see them in the moment. They were nothing to him. They must be nothing to him.

He knew that if in the coming days he could remember who they were, he would hate these men for being a part of it all as if somehow their existence, the need of their presence made it real—if only he did not need them, if only there were no corpse to bear. He could feel it, even then, the hate building and churning. It stirred and rose with the heavy scent of their cologne and the deep breaths escaping from their thick bodies. He did not know where it was coming from or why, but he could feel it nonetheless, so he closed his mind and his eyes to it all.

The week since Molly's death had seemed to pass in a maddening rush, and now as the drone of Pastor Jerome's cracked voice pleaded over him to be heard, Adler could

think of nothing but his daughter. He closed his eyes and could see Molly, but not as she had been. Instead, he could see her only as a girl in the casket, the gentle sway of his heavy torso rocking to support her weight. She was cold and still, her brown hair neatly placed around the soft line of her jaw attempting to give the appearance of life.

He wanted to beat himself with his fist on the side of his head until he could no longer see her that way, thinking there must be something wrong with his brain for projecting the image against his closed eyelids. He could see it playing out in front of the church—him standing there clawing at his eyes and pounding on his head until he knocked himself out or until someone somewhere came to take him away. He wondered for a moment where they would carry him. He clenched his fist and pressed it against his thigh. He wanted to do it. He wanted it more than he wanted Molly, but he opened his eyes, and Molly disappeared leaving him alone at the front of the church.

The image of her was replaced by that of Nell, but not the Nell Adler had known. Blue and purple light cascaded through the stained glass window and fell across his wife's face. Her pale hands were folded in her lap and the clean light rested on her. She reminded him of a lost or misplaced saint sitting there on the front pew, but that was not Nell. And still there she was, waiting for something Adler could not understand from the front pew in the alcove to his right, the one occupied by grieving families so as to be better seen by the audience of the congregation.

He could see her, too, in her grief. Her back was bowed and bent in an attempt to arrest her breaths from the moans he had heard escape down in the drip hole and again every night since. He watched the controlled movements of her body and felt as though

he were watching her from a distance. He was numb to his surroundings, disconnected from the faint organ music blending with the slow monotone of the preacher's voice. It was nothing more than a barely audible hum.

He felt connected to the real world, the world of the living, only through holding tightly to the casket handle. The cool brass was slimy and slippery in his sweaty palm, and he could sense the plushness of the deep maroon carpet beneath the leather soles of his black loafers. The overhead lights were glaring, blinding, and hot, causing a thick layer of perspiration to spread across his forehead and down his back.

He had not bothered to polish the shoes, and a deep scratch stretched over the length of the left vamp. He stared at it for a moment, lost to the present, trying to remember how the scar was made.

The rough gray line was a few shades lighter than the rest of the leather, and for a moment he remembered Molly dressed in one of Nell's gowns saved from a high school dance they had gone to long ago. The dress had been tied around Molly's waist with a bright yellow scarf, and the straps were crisscrossed behind her neck and over her shoulders. Nell must have pinned the hem because Adler could remember looking down and seeing the small plastic high heels, still too large for Molly's feet, as she tried to keep them balanced on top of his shoes.

He could feel it, the pressure of Molly's weight pressing down through the leather of his loafers as her heels dug in. He rocked her back and forth, turning in slow circles as they careened through the living room around the chunky blue and white sofa listening to Skeeter Davis until her foot slid off his shoe, the rough plastic edge scratching into the

leather. That's when he grabbed her up in his arms, spinning her around faster until they both collapsed into the sofa on top of one another.

There was a tugging at his fingers as the three other pallbearers began their slow march down the aisle of the church. He lurched forward and turned his head back towards Nell. She was now standing slumped forward, her weight pressed against the waist-high wooden balustrade separating the alcove from the space just at the front of the church. She had a handkerchief pressed to her brown lashes, and the black crepe of her dress clung to her small round breasts. Adler felt a longing, a pulling deep down within him. He wanted to hold her, to protect her, to possess her, in a way—to dissolve from everyone and everything. He wanted to know her body against his own.

Nell's head remained bent, her eyes focused on her almond-shaped nails she had been digging into the thick wax coating of the wooden rail in front of her. Hayes was standing to her right, his long fingers curled over her shoulder, his hand resting on her back. Adler shifted his gaze from Nell to Hayes. As the weight of Molly's body tugged on his arm, Nell turned from the procession, from Adler and Molly it seemed, instead pressing her swollen face into Hayes's chest. Adler proceeded down the aisle and through the church foyer with his daughter.

He had possessed neither the desire nor the intention of serving as a pallbearer at Molly's funeral. Instead, he had seen himself occupying the space beside Nell as they supported one another in their shared grief, their shared loss. Nell, however, had insisted, preferring Hayes rather than Adler at her side. They had skirted the issue for several

days, but it all came to a head when they arrived at the funeral home for the private viewing the previous night.

Standing beside the casket, Nell had been looking down at Molly, her face powdered and painted in an attempt to simulate life as her hands, pale in contrast, rested neatly on the floral polyester dress she had worn only once before at Easter. Nell's arms were folded across her frame, and Adler could feel the tension in her voice as she broke the silence.

"I think you should be one of the pallbearers at the funeral tomorrow," she said without looking up.

"I thought we had already decided this. Hayes is going to make up the fourth."

"I know that's what you said you wanted, but I think it'll be too much to ask of him. After all, he couldn't even come here with us tonight." She brushed her hair behind her ear before crossing her arms back under her breasts. "I can't do it either. It's too much for me, too. I can't stand there and watch as one of my children carries my other child to her grave. I can't." Nell unfolded her arms and started to reach for Molly as if she were going to run her fingers through her hair in an attempt to straighten the wild and frizzy curls. But she stopped, her arm suspended just above the open casket. "The whole town—standing there gawking, gawking at us while we watch the pallbearers file out of that awful, musty old church. I hate the thought of it. Besides, it's too late now to find a fourth. You'll have to do it."

"And it's not too much for me?" Adler said still watching Nell as she let her arm fall to her side. The fluorescent lights overhead gave her skin a sickly green hue clinging

to the circles in her eyes and the hollows of her cheeks. He wanted to leave—to leave her standing there with Molly. It seemed, to him, in that moment, as if their relationship were some kind of failed chemistry experiment in which his contact with her had somehow negatively altered the substance of who she was in every possible way.

Nell stood still, the hollows in her cheeks seeming to grow cavernous. He waited for a response, a recognition of his shared grief, but none came.

“What about Ellis?” he said shifting his gaze from Nell to Molly.

“I don’t want him to have to do it. I don’t want to see him like that again,” Nell said, whipping around. He could feel it—her finally seeing him, seeing what he felt, and suddenly he wanted to turn away, to hide, to become nothing.

“Ellis went and got her and carried her out of the water. Isn’t that enough?”

Adler reached down into the casket and grabbed up Molly’s hand into his, but when he did so he was surprised by the cold stiffness of her smooth fingers. It was wrong, and he knew she was no longer Molly.

“It’s the least he could do after everything that’s happened. Besides, he’s not the type to—”

“I said no.” Nell pulled Molly’s hand from Adler’s and placed it back on her chest. “We all have our burdens to bear, and this will be yours. Ellis has done enough.”

Nell stood unblinking, staring down at Molly.

“Ellis has done nothing. He was too late like the rest of us.” Adler shut the casket and put himself between Molly and Nell. “Do you think you’re the only one who feels the weight of her death?”

“No, but you are her father. I would think you would want to be able to carry her one last time.”

“And what about you? I’m your husband. Isn’t my place at your side?”

“I’ll have Hayes. You need to be with Molly this time. Ellis carried her out of the water. Now you can carry her to her grave,” Nell said before leaving Adler in the cold room with the closed casket.

As the procession exited the church, the late summer sun falling against the polished wood of the casket and reflecting up, he felt, after all, his place should be with Molly. Squinting, he enjoyed the burning sensation running down the length of his arm as he clutched the handle to shift a majority of the weight onto his own body. He shuffled up the hill with the other men, dragging his loafers across the rocks and red clay while listening to the crunching of gravel and long dead pine straw under the feet of the procession behind him.

The Sutherland family plots rested directly in the middle of the small hilltop cemetery standing behind the old rock church. Weaving in and out between the graves sparsely spotted with worn and faded silk flowers and patchy grass fighting against the rocks and gravel, Adler read the names and dates of family and friends he had seen come and go throughout his lifetime and beyond, and now he was to offer up his youngest child. As he looked further behind the graves of those he knew too well in life to the back of the cemetery, he stopped, staring at the century-old headstones, cracked and

chipped, and he wondered how long it would be until Molly's grave, too, was one of the forgotten ones, no longer visited by mourning relatives and friends.

He knew, over time, her name would slip from the collective memory of the town. She would be mourned for a while, but the grief of her death could not long be sustained. Much like a star that burns too bright and too hot too quickly, the pain of such a loss soon grows cold leaving nothing behind but a dark void in the night sky, which can neither be seen nor remembered. So it would be with Molly. The town, therefore, would forget her in time, leaving the few whom she did reach alone in the dark.

Adler and the other men set the small casket onto the metal bier placed between his mother's grave and soon his daughter's, before he looked over the crowd to find his family. Both Nell and Hayes had already been seated on the front row of green chairs set up at the grave's edge. Nell was straightening the black skirt of her dress over her narrow thighs and pointed knees while Hayes sat erect, his hands folded neatly in his lap. His clear complexion and light brown hair nearly akin to blonde mirrored his mother's so exactly Adler could scarce see any of himself in the boy. Hayes lifted his eyes from the closed casket to Adler and held his gaze unsmiling in his own before dropping it to his lap as he slid his hands down the extent of his trousers, smoothing the wrinkles in the fabric.

Crossing in front of the foot of the grave to be seated with Nell and Hayes, Adler felt for the first time he was leaving Molly behind. He was abandoning her there in front of all of the people who were staring, looking, prying in on their loss as they, the survivors, tried to reestablish who they were as a family with one of their own gone. All

of the words, the whispers he had overheard for the past week since her death began to seep through, a new rumor coming back to him with each step he took away from Molly and towards the crowd in front of him. Mrs. Brasher had wondered if her body was swollen, bloated from floating in the water. Old man Higgins had asked if she had cried out, if she felt pain or had been frightened. And the whole town seemed to want to know how the poor girl got out in the water in the first place with all those people around.

Adler, unlike Nell, did not despise the town for their curiosity, their questioning, the direction of their blame. Instead, he interpreted it as a manifestation of their grief over Molly's death. He had seen it time and time again—the questioning and subsequent blame, which often fell on the shoulders of the victims themselves. Not only had he witnessed it in those around him, but he had felt it within himself—not in his current loss, of course, but rather in the losses of others. It seemed natural, he thought, to want to seek blame in the face of grief. Sorrow, brought on by empathy, creates a deep and inconsolable throbbing rendering those who experience it helpless.

It was far easier for Adler to feel anger than sorrow. Anger brings with it a sense of power, a desire for justice to be served, an attempt to right that which is wrong, which in turn displaces sorrow. Sadness, however, is debilitating, drawing from the sufferer all motivation of hope. In the attempt of the town to attach some blame, whether to himself or his family, Adler recognized their inability to accept Molly's death for what it was—a terrible accident fate may hurl towards anyone of them at any time.

He reached the line of seats. Nell had already taken the chair pressed against the headstone at the end of the long row to her right, so he was forced to sit, instead, next to

Hayes who continued to serve as a barrier between the two. The chair squeaked, the legs sinking a little deeper in the mud with his added weight, and even if he did not see all eyes turn to him, he could feel them. He stretched his long legs out, his eyes returning to the scar in the leather of his shoe as a shadow fell across his lap.

“Ellis, I'm glad to see you,” Adler said, lifting his right arm without standing. He had neither seen nor heard from Ellis since they had left the hospital in a huddled mass after Molly had been officially declared dead, and now he did not feel like paying him the honor of standing as he and his family greeted them at her grave.

“You know we're here for you. Me and Joy,” Ellis said shaking Adler's hand.
“All you have to do is ask.”

“Funny, you haven't been here for us until now,” Adler said looking from Ellis to the scar on his shoe. “In fact, haven't seen you since the hospital. Fenton came by a couple times to talk with us, or really just to talk to me since Nell kept herself locked up in the bedroom, and Hayes is always off God only knows where. Fenton brought us those casseroles Joy had made. Appreciated that,” he said looking around Ellis to Joy as he stood. “We sure as hell didn't see hide nor hair of you, though. You know you can't catch this thing that happened to Molly.”

“Adler, sit down, and stop trying to make a scene at a funeral,” Nell said taking Hayes's hand up in hers. “I'd think you'd have more respect for Molly than to start something like this.”

“I'd have thought Ellis here would have had more respect for all of us than to stay away the way he did. You'd think we hadn't been through shit before together.” Adler

looked at Nell, the muffled whispers of mourners and spectators beginning to gain volume on all sides.

“Just trying to give you some space in all this. You don’t need a bunch of nosy assholes looking in watching you grieve when something like this happens,” Ellis said. He waved his arms toward the crowd coming up the hill from the church. “Besides you didn’t seem like you wanted anybody there really—not the way you kept to yourself at the hospital.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t act the way you expected, Ellis,” Adler said. “You sure didn’t act the way I’d have thought after Joy lost the baby, sitting up at that bar telling stories from seventeen years ago like nothing had happened. But I sat at one of those greasy little tables with Nell while Joy sat there, too broken, listening to Fleetwood Mac or whatever the hell it was on the jukebox over and over while you just kept on talking about that shit to nobody but yourself and the filthy air in front of you.”

“Adler, I think you need to sit down,” Joy said stepping between them. “There are some things that don’t need to be brought up right now. And this is one of them. We’re sorry about Molly. You have to know that. We all have our own way of handling these things.”

Adler watched Joy, her face still and drawn by some unseen weight, as she looked to Nell, but Nell remained unmoved—her eyes downcast on her and Hayes’s interlocked hands.

“I see what you’re saying, Joy. I do,” Adler said as he rubbed his hands through his hair. “And I’m sorry. I guess I don’t really know what I’m doing or saying anymore.

Here I'll let y'all go sit down before I make an even bigger ass out of myself. Seems like mess just follows me around." Adler stepped to the side, letting them pass as he patted Fenton on the shoulder. Ellis crossed in front of the row of chairs and cut behind them to take the seat directly behind Nell.

Pastor Jerome was standing at the narrow pass between the head of Molly's grave and the foot of the grave of some long forgotten relative, and as he opened his mouth, a slow droning of the Lord's prayer passed his lips and filled the warm air, sliding over Adler.

"Brothers and Sisters," the old man began, "we are here today to commit one of our own back to the Lord."

Adler paid little heed to the words the old reverend spoke. The damp humidity of late summer was clinging to his flesh, and the earthy mixture of goldenrods and sweet gums reminded him of running through the woods as a boy.

"We may wonder why Molly was taken from us so young, but ours is not to question why, but to simply accept his will. Now for those of you who brought your Bibles with you today, if you'll turn to the twenty-third Psalm. The rest of you just listen and let the words of God be a comfort. 'Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...'"

Adler closed his eyes against the present. He thought neither of Molly nor Nell nor of anyone. Instead, he was completely absorbed in his own existence, his own relationship with the physical world around him, feeling the freedom, the joy of his isolation.

As the pastor closed his final prayer, Adler opened his eyes, the brightness of the early afternoon sun blinding him for a moment. Nell dropped her arms to her side and pushed her weight up and away from the chair as Hayes rose with her. Adler remained motionless for a moment longer bracing his elbows on his knees as he rested his face in his open palms. Everyone around him was standing, waiting to put this moment behind them in the chronicles of their untouched memories, but he could not move, his breath coming deeper and more quickly, filling his lungs to such an extent that he was aware of the sporadic heaving of his back against the taut fabric of his shirt. Everything was silent around him, or so it seemed, save the steady rhythmic tapping of a woodpecker in the tree line just below the cemetery. The world was motionless. Time was motionless. He was lost somewhere between trying to understand and trying to let go, when he felt Fenton's hand against his back.

He had been sitting behind him during the graveside service, silently, motionlessly, and as Adler turned his face towards him now, he noticed the stiff wrinkles in the coarse charcoal fabric of his oversized suit—a hand-me-down from Hayes. The garment was standing up awkwardly against the straight line of his shoulders as if it were looking for some curve on which to settle but finding none, refused to accommodate the boy's thin body.

“I don't understand any of this either, Mr. Adler, but I know you can do it. I know you can,” Fenton said.

Adler nodded to Fenton, smiling without smiling, rising from his seat to take his place beside the closed casket and the open grave. He stood still, his eyes back on the scar in the shoe leather until Fenton passed by him.

“Wait,” he said and grabbed Fenton by the arm. “You’re still a part of this family.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

Adler’s hand continued to grip tightly to Fenton’s shoulder to keep him from leaving them, to keep him from running from the whole scene, and as the service came to a close and the funeral guests walked back down the hill slowly, solemnly, he held it yet tighter.

Hayes stood at Adler’s side between him and Nell who was resting her head against his arm. As the last guests turned from the graveside, Hayes took three slight steps backwards, before turning his back on them as well and beginning his quick steady march down the hill without saying anything to Fenton or Adler or anyone.

“Fenton, why don't you come on down now, and let Miss Nell and Mr. Adler bury Molly in peace,” Ellis said after watching Hayes cut his eyes over to Fenton before walking down the steep hill.

“No, sir,” he said, dropping his shoulder so Adler’s hand would fall as well. “I’ve already talked to Pastor Jerome about it. I’m going to help lower the casket.”

“Well you could have told us something about it,” Ellis said.

“He told me, Ellis,” Joy said, “It’s something he feels like he needs to do. I’m proud of him.”

“Well I’m glad to see y’all didn’t feel the need to tell me anything about it.”

Ellis and Joy stood, staring at one another, saying something without saying anything.

“Fine then. You just have it your own way. I’m not going to stand up here at a funeral and argue anymore. We’ve had enough of that today. Adler,” Ellis said, nodding to him. “Nell. You be sure to give me a call if you need anything. Anything.” He took her hands in his, pressing them before turning away from Fenton and Joy and tracing his path back down the hill to the church.

“Alright then.” Joy put her hand on Fenton’s shoulder, “just see as you do this thing right.” And she walked away.

“I can’t watch this any longer,” Nell said. “I knew this would be too much for Hayes. And now it’s getting to be too much for me. It’s not right. It’s just not right. It’s not right that she should be taken away like this. Come on Adler. I can’t watch while they put her down in that hole.”

“No, Nell. I’m going to stay with Molly until it’s all over.”

He waited, listening to Nell’s heavy breath behind him, just at his shoulder. He wanted her to stay, wanted her to take his hand in hers and stand with him as Molly was lowered in the grave before being covered by the mound of soil that had been displaced to make room for her body, but she turned from him. He had known she would, choosing instead to follow Ellis, her steps matching his in time.

As Adler listened to the clicking of her heels against the rocks, he stepped closer to the edge of the deep pit leaving Fenton to stand behind him.

“Are you ready, Brother Adler,” Pastor Jerome said as he stepped forward.

“Yes. Go ahead. I want to be here.”

Pastor Jerome cleared his throat and said, “All right boys.”

Three boys about Fenton’s age stood from the back row of chairs under the green tent and walked up to the casket. Adler recognized them as a couple of the deacons’ sons.

As the boys gathered around the casket, Fenton walked around a tall headstone and collected a pair of yellow nylon ropes from the ground on the other side. His hands shook as he threaded the end of his rope through the brass handle and passed it underneath and over the bier to the boy kneeling across from him. Lifting the casket from the bier with the three boys, Fenton’s eyes came to rest on Adler.

The skin behind his freckles flushed with a deep pink, but his look did not waver. With his free hand, Fenton wiped his arm across his nose before he shifted the casket dead center of the grave with the three boys.

Molly was lowered into the black, and Adler knelt down watching the darkness spread its fingers around the brightly polished box. The three other boys, having had experience with this before, walked the casket steadily into the grave, but Fenton allowed the rope to slide through his hand until it cut through his thin callouses and into his palm. He pulled the wounded hand back, grabbing the rope with the other hand as the head of the casket lunged forward diving lower than the foot. The three others quickly loosened the slack on the ends of their ropes, realigning the casket to a slow even descent.

Fenton's eyes flashed to Adler at the moment of the mistake, but Adler remained still, catching his glance for only a second before staring back into the abyss.

"Thank you," Pastor Jerome said as they pulled the ropes out from the hole and wrapped them back together, "that will be fine. Why don't you all go down to the kitchen now and get you something to eat and drink."

Adler rested his hand on Fenton's shoulder when he passed. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"It's alright, Mr. Adler. You don't have to thank me for anything. I needed to do it. I didn't want to, but I needed to."

"Well it's obviously more than Hayes felt like he needed to do, and I want you to know I appreciate it."

Fenton nodded, then weaved his way through the numerous graves and headstones.

"Is there anything else you need, Brother Adler," Pastor Jerome said walking up behind the others.

"No, pastor. Thank you for the service. I know it was a comfort to my wife," Adler said.

"Now, Adler, this is a tough thing you're going through. I watched you struggle when your mama died two years back, and you came out of it on the right side. I did wonder there for awhile, but this is a completely different beast you're dealing with. Why don't you come by sometime next week with Nell and maybe Hayes, so we, me and the church, can see you through this time."

“That's thoughtful of you, Jerome, but we're going to make it just fine.” Adler took two steps back. “Why don't you go on down to the kitchen. I'll be down in a bit. Just want to say my final goodbyes before they come fill it in.”

“Alright, Adler, alright,” Pastor Jerome said waving his open palms in front of his chest. “I'm not going to force anything on you, but when you realize you can't do this thing without the helping hand of God, we'll be waiting with open arms.”

“I'll remember.”

As Pastor Jerome crossed the length of the cemetery, Adler stepped closer to the open crypt. Patches of grass spotted the ground green around the hole, and the sunlight offered a yellow hue. The mound where his mother rested was covered in bleached white stone and towered over the small yet deep pit before him. He knelt down at the foot of the grave and dug his fingers into the dirt, scraping between the shallow roots of the ash tree running across the ground like the veins across the back of his hands. When he had successfully gathered a small handful of red clay mixed with stones and a few blades of grass, he stood, leaning over the narrow hole and threw it on top of the casket before turning his back and walking away to join Nell and the others in the church.

The sun came cutting in through the narrow blinds and fell in long white lines across the king size bed. Adler stirred as the light hit his face, throwing his arm out and to the left, but there was no one there to reach or hold. There had been no one there for the mornings and nights filling the eight weeks since Molly's funeral. Adler grunted,

clearing his throat as he stood from the bed, which reeked of his own sweat while scratching his bare chest and straightening his boxers.

He stumbled down the hall, stopping at Molly's bedroom door. He stood for a moment, the world still a blur between sleep and reality, while he rested his hand on the brass door knob. He had stood there like that every morning since Nell had started sleeping in Molly's room, but he had never been able to open the door. He always simply went on, shuffling down the hall to the kitchen where he poured out a dark steady stream of coffee Nell had prepared hours earlier before retreating back to bed. This morning, however, he was surprised when he felt the door swing open under the pressure of his own arm.

Nell was lying on the still-made bed. Her eyes were not closed. They were looking straight ahead towards Adler and yet through him. She had not been asleep, not for many hours. It was clear. And standing there watching her, Adler felt like she had been expecting him.

"It's been long enough, Nell." Adler tried to regain his composure.

"Long enough for what?" Nell sat up, wiping sleep from her deeply circled eyes. The bed was neat and smooth, and Nell had a pink and green blanket spread over her legs.

"It's time to start letting go, to start making some kind of a change. We can't keep going like this. It's not right." Nell's small lips were pale and wilted, and hints of silver were beginning to touch the new growth of her hair.

“You bastard, it’s only been two months, and she’s our daughter.” She threw her legs out from under the blanket and over the edge of the mattress. She was as strong as ever, more so, drawing strength from pain.

Adler rubbed down his greasy dark hair. “She *was* our daughter, Nell.”

Nell said nothing. She merely looked at him through the slits of her eyes warning him, telling him to retreat before it was too late.

“What I mean is this just isn't healthy,” he said, realizing his mistake. “You can't go on sleeping in here like this, keeping it as a shrine to her. Why don't we clean it up—paint it? Turn it into an office or something. I think it's what Molly would want.”

“Don't you speak of her to me. You have no idea what she would want,” she said. “An office? You’re an idiot. You think Molly would want us to have an office? For what? For you to run that failing tire business out of since the shop is always half empty? Or so you can sit at home feeling like you’re doing something. Besides, don’t you think you’ve let go enough for the both of us already? You haven't stepped foot in here since that day. You don't want to let go. You just want to forget.”

“You want me to come in?”

He crossed the little room and sat on the bed. Nell grabbed a light brown teddy bear and stood up. When he sat on the bedspread spotted with purple and yellow elephants, the smell of Molly rushed up to him—a mixture of baby shampoo and lavender soap.

“I’m here,” he said and raised his hand for her to take it.

“I can't. Not yet.” Nell turned from him and clutched the teddy bear more tightly.

“You remind me of her. Her eyes were always your eyes.”

Adler grabbed her arm at the elbow and pulled her down beside him. “Nell, I miss you.”

And she leaned against him, a moment of weakness, her posture collapsing into his chest, a sob escaping her throat. Adler wrapped his arms around her and felt the loss of weight, the loss of softness that had passed from her over the last two months. Her body had become sharp and hard, so he tried to rub her shoulders.

“Nell, we can get through this together.”

“I don't want to get through it. To get through it would be to forget,” she said, her face still buried against his bare chest.

Adler pushed his face against the bend of her neck and kissed her behind the ear. He tasted salt and the stale sandalwood perfume. “I'm not asking you to forget her. I just want you to come back to me,” he said.

Nell's body went limp for a moment before she leaned back on Molly's pillow challenging him, daring him even to come closer. She was not the woman who had been in his arms only seconds ago. She was back to the unbroken version of herself.

She said, “I don't understand how this could have happened. We were all there. How did we not see? How did we not hear her splashing, fighting in the water? It doesn't make sense. That's all I've been able to think about. How did we forget her? The whole day just plays over and over, and no matter how hard I try, I can't change the one thing—we forgot her.”

“I don't know, Nell. I've thought about it a lot too, and I just don't know. There was so much going on—the snake, Fenton's arm, everyone running around. We just lost track.”

“It was when Hayes killed the snake,” Nell said, her eyes still and glassy. “When he was beating its brains out on the bank and those damn birds were flying—that's when my baby was out in that water.”

“Nell, don't start blaming Hayes. None of this was his fault.”

“Hayes? I don't blame Hayes.” Nell stood up and crossed to the center of the room. “It wasn't his fault everyone was too busy worrying about the damn snake. Like you—you made sure to catch it. And the Knox boy—you made sure he was safe. But you didn't give a thought to Molly.”

“Nell, we had to make sure it wasn't poisonous. We had to make sure Fenton was going to be alright.”

“Sure. Fenton,” she said. “You had to make sure that Fenton was going to be alright, but what about Molly? What about my daughter?” She pointed out the high narrow window as if Molly's ghost were standing in the front yard casting judgment.

“Don't you speak to me like that,” Adler said, standing up. “Molly was my daughter too, and she always will be. I didn't put anybody above her. I never did, unlike you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means Hayes.” Adler stepped close up against Nell, his chest brushing against her breast as he looked down into her face. “Of course you wouldn't blame him,” Adler

said. “You always put him above Molly—your precious boy. Maybe if you hadn't been so concerned about Hayes getting out of the water, you would have been watching Molly like you should have been. You just turned your back on her. Even though you're so afraid to forget her now, you forgot her then, when it mattered, and now she's dead.”

Nell's head dropped.

“I'm sorry, Nell,” Adler said turning his back to her to face the bed. “I'm sorry, I didn't meant that. I couldn't even wade out in the water to get her body. Ellis had to do it. I just froze.”

Nell's hands were on his shoulders. She turned him and slapped his face hard. “If that little son of a bitch, hadn't seen that snake, if he hadn't thought it was a fucking copper head or cotton mouth or whatever the hell he thought he saw and scared us all to death, Molly would still be here. She would. Don't you dare ever try to put this on me again. You're nothing but a coward who couldn't even go out and get her.”

Alder was about to tell her to stop, but Hayes came in.

“Go get your shoes, Hayes, while I brush my teeth,” Nell said. “We're going to go buy paint. Your father thinks it's time to move on. He wants an office.”

As Nell and Hayes pulled out of the chert driveway, Adler crossed the backyard to the red storage building resembling a small squat barn. Pulling on the swollen door that was stuck in the damp frame, he measured out the monthly payments in his head. Sixty-eight dollars and seventy-two cents, sixty-eight dollars and seventy-two cents every month for the past two years. They must be getting close to paying the damn thing off by

now. If only Nell could let go of something, anything, he could get rid of the shed and put a fire pit in the vacant space, or a new swing set for the kids, even though Molly was gone now and Hayes was too old for it, but he knew Nell would never hear of what he wanted.

He stepped up onto the bare wood floor and started rummaging through boxes of crafts—tinted macaroni glued to yellowing paper curled up around the edges, an old shriveled balloon covered in orange construction paper with the face of a jack-o-lantern sloppily painted in black paint that had faded to blue, paper chains, finger paintings, bent and twisted pipe cleaners that didn't resemble much of anything. He lifted the box and slid it across the rafters to the near empty loft above before pulling out a large cardboard box from underneath a green nylon Christmas tree bag. He pulled it open and saw piles of paper, an artificial leather wedding album, mildew clinging to the corners, and a picture frame with the marriage license under a broken pane of glass. Without hesitating, he flipped the box over, dumping the contents onto the splintered floor.

The early fall sun burnt Adler's eyes when he stepped outside, and he held his forearm up, clutching the empty box as he slammed the door back into its ill-fitting frame. He passed through the back door and walked into Molly's room, setting the box down on the quilted bedspread before he began to gather the toys and books and games on the white bookshelf. He lifted the pale blue donkey from the bottom shelf, its limp ears flopping over his knuckles.

As Adler threw the donkey to the bottom of the box, piling on top of it other stuffed toys, games and books, the likes of which included *Good Night Moon*, *The Poky*

Little Puppy, and *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, the pages of which had all been colored green, he forcibly pushed away Molly alive. And he pushed away Molly dead. He wanted to erase every sign of her so he could forget. He cleared the shelves quickly, efficiently, and left the small room a little less full than it had been before.

He crossed the kitchen with the loaded box, reaching for the knob of the back door before turning around and setting it on the table. He stepped behind the shallow bar and reached into the drawer by the kitchen sink, an empty cereal bowl sitting beneath the faucet. He felt around in the drawer, his hands fumbling over screwdrivers and capless ballpoint pens before his fingers curled around a half empty book of matches. And he shoved them deep down into his pocket before opening the cabinet beneath the sink and grabbing a plastic bottle of lighter fluid. He threw the bottle on top of the box and went out the back door, the screen slamming behind him.

At the barn, which sat in front of the garden of collards, he dumped Molly's belongings on top of the ashes and remnants of corn stalks he had cut down in August and placed in the barrel. The old soot billowed up and filled his nostrils. He poured a quarter of the lighter fluid in, struck a match against the back of the paperboard folder, and threw it in. Flames whipped up over its sides.

The fire consumed the contents of the barrel, melting the polyester fur of the stuffed animals and transforming the pages of read books and played games to ash, while Adler watched, the dark gray smoke curling and rising overhead. Before passing up into the deep blue of the sky and fading into nothingness, the smoke rushed over him, stinging

his eyes and clinging to his hair and clothes, leaving behind a smoldering in his throat.

Adler held the smoke in his lungs for a moment before releasing it in a deep heavy cough.

He hated the donkey and elephant bed spread, the teddy bear and favorite storybooks. They were all imperfect representations of her, empty and broken. She was more, and it was wrong that these things should survive her, that they should remain behind to tell her story. No, it was better for them to be gone, for them to be turned to ash, soot, and smoke than to stay behind and confine her existence to that of nothing more than a four-year-old child who died too soon. All of these thoughts crossed Adler's mind as he picked up the empty box, turned his back on the fire and walked back to the house to refill it.

Chapter 3—Fenton

I sat there for a long time, staring at all the smashed up bits from the bell before I got up to find the broom and dustpan. I wondered if Mr. Simmons would notice it wasn't hanging over the door anymore, or if he'd notice the chips in the cement floor where I'd beaten it with the hammer, but I didn't care one way or another. As I dropped the pieces from the dustpan into the wide mouth of the barrel trashcan, it rang out one last time, the warped and crooked tongue falling against the unrecognizable scraps of brass that had just moments earlier made up the body and lip of the bell.

There was filth in the trash can—a few small boxes I hadn't broken down very well, piles of dust and dirt and hair, and the wadded paint sample Hayes must have thrown in after I'd handed it back to him. I stood there looking at it all for awhile before I decided I had to leave.

I went to the front door and pressed my hands against the glass looking up and down 231 as far as I could see in both directions. Wasn't anybody there. Wasn't going to be anybody there, but I still wasn't sure. Holding up the business sign that still hung from its ball chain, I traced the letters on the back spelling out CLOSED with my pinky, and stopping when I got to the little clock with the plastic hands broken right off. I fingered the metal eyelet, flipped the sign over, and walked out without even wiping the

greasy spots from my hands off the glass. My shift wasn't over until six. That's when I was supposed to lock up and head home.

As soon as I stepped out and turned to lock the front door, I smelled it—the smoke. It wasn't a strong smell. I was too far away from it for that. At first I thought it must be leaves or trash, but it had neither the musky scent of damp earth nor the sickening sweet put off by discarded waists.

I closed my eyes and pulled my shoulders back, letting it fill my lungs while I sat there on my bike, my feet still on the ground. It made me think of the smell of burning dust filling the house every winter when the furnace would be turned on after a long summer and warm fall. It smelt like paper and chemicals, like melting plastic all at the same time. In the sky, a faint plume of light gray curled towards the clouds. It was coming from a few streets over, near the courthouse, just a little past our house back where the Sutherlands lived. I pushed my feet hard against the pedals and headed towards it.

I wasn't sure why I was going, why I wanted to see, but I felt a pulling down in me. It was as if I had a thread buried, tied somewhere deep in my chest, or maybe my stomach, connecting me to the burning. I knew it was the Sutherlands. I think I knew before I even looked up, before I saw where it was coming from.

The wind was cool and soft, rushing over my body as I pedaled down Main Street past the courthouse and library and post office, but I still felt hot. I felt like the smoke was covering me, filling my pores with soot as I rode through town. There weren't any houses down that way, just a few old brick buildings that had been saved from when

Raynham had first got started. There weren't many of them left either—the post office, the museum, and the library. All the rest had been knocked down, and squat metal buildings with low roofs had been put up in their place. It was strange to look at—the old buildings with their brick fronts and wide windows next to the lumpy corrugated metal structures looking like they had just been sat down on top of the old ones, forcing them into the earth to be swallowed up just like Deddy and Mr. Adler's lake.

As I passed the courthouse, I couldn't stop thinking about Molly and Mr. Adler and Miss Nell. For the past several weeks, every night I would wake up early, before the sun had a chance to cast its first silver light across the still dark sky. I would wake up to the sounds of Miss Nell's screams in my head—the shrill piercing screams echoing against the stony walls at the drip hole when we all realized Molly was gone.

It was always Miss Nell my thoughts drifted back to. I watched her. I watched her at the funeral holding tight onto Hayes's hand while she looked straight ahead, straight at the casket. Her face was dry and blank like there wasn't anything unusual or upsetting about what was going on around her—like she was just passing down an aisle at the Piggly Wiggly staring at all the canned goods trying to find the right brand of green beans to buy. I heard people talking about it later—whispering that she didn't really care. How could she? How could she really care, a mother, who doesn't even seem upset at her own child's funeral? But that's not what I saw. I could tell she was hurt—more hurt than I've ever seen anybody. She was too hurt to even cry. How could she? It was all spent. Everything, every part of her was spent up in her grief.

I turned off Main Street and down Valley Drive, and I couldn't see anything—not the packed tar and gravel road rolling out in front of me, or the empty field pushed next to the Sutherland's yard, not even the mounds of freshly cut hay, still green, piled high across the street from their house. I just knew it was there—knew from all the years I'd seen it time and time again.

I slid my bike against the gravel, stopping in front of the short, wide house, gray smoke pouring out from behind. Blackened scraps of paper swirled around one another as they floated up into the sky, and the taste of ash swept across my tongue and teeth filling my mouth with grit and bitterness. I was still standing in the grassy ditch, staring at the dark cinders slipping up and fading into the white clouds when Miss Nell pulled in the driveway with Hayes.

She didn't see me, or if she did, she showed no sign of it. Hayes got out of the passenger side and grabbed a greasy Jack's bag, sticking it down into his backpack before slinging it across his back and walking towards the end of the chert driveway. Miss Nell pulled the can of paint from the back of the car and headed to the house.

Hayes passed the dented mailbox, walking straight towards me with his eyes at his feet, and I hid myself and my bike in the pampas grass, but it was no use. The summer growth had been burnt too early the previous year, and the long slender blades didn't grow back in the spring the way they should have, leaving the plant singed and sparse and bare. What grass was left only reached up to my shoulders wrapping around my arms and across my face as the teeth along its serrated edges cut into my skin. I was hoping Hayes would just keep staring at the road or his feet or whatever it was he was

looking at down there, and for a minute, I thought he would, but as he got to the center of the unlined road, he stopped to look at me.

I figured he was going to say something else about the snake or the hardware store or just yell at me for being there at all, but he didn't. He just stood staring for about eight seconds. My skin went all slimy and clammy, and I couldn't move or talk or even breathe. I just kept standing there, the wind blowing the grass up in my eyes while I watched him watching me. I felt like my knees were going to buckle under me and I'd fall, busting my head open on the tar and gravel road because I wouldn't even be able to put my arms up to catch myself. Figured Hayes would just leave me laying there, passed out. I could see it—all of it in those eight seconds, playing out just like that before Hayes turned, cutting to his right and across the field to the dog trails.

I almost called after him to wait, part of me wanting to go, too—to see where he went, to know why he looked at me the way he did without saying, but I still couldn't move.

When I opened my mouth, nothing came. It was all dry and hollow. I was stuck there to that spot just watching him walk away from me. It was always like this—me waiting to see what everyone was going to do. I could only try to figure out what it all meant while they moved around me. But Hayes wasn't moving around anyone. He was moving away, crossing the grassy field.

The dog trails were narrow, only a few inches wide, the paths running in a crisscross next to the Sutherland's house all the way up and into the woods on the other side. I can't remember now where the dogs that ran those trails came from, but they were always there over at the Sutherlands'—sitting, watching us as we came and went.

They weren't allowed in the house—never. Miss Nell wouldn't hear of it. Instead, they roamed wherever they would go before returning home to eat or sleep. They were smart enough. The first generation of them anyway. In the heat of the summer, they figured out they could dig into the cool earth underneath Mr. Adler's patched canoe that hadn't been touched in years and just stayed propped up on a rusty trailer. They used it to get away from the hot humid air by digging deep into the ground right under it making them a den where they hung out all summer, just poking their heads out every now and then to see the comings and the goings. The first group who had done all the work died, but every dog after them did the same thing, making use of what had been made and left.

The paths were the same way, being used by generation after generation of the dogs. Years later, even when they were all dead, and Miss Nell and Mr. Adler and Hayes were gone too, I knew I could drive by there, if I only would, and see the brown paths still running through the green showing where all those dead dogs had walked, padding their feet against the ground time after time to the point where the grass could never take hold again.

Watching Hayes cross the field, the growth reaching up to his hips, I thought back to Miss Nell. The feeling I had about her, the pulling all came back, and as he disappeared into the woods, I looked to where she had been standing. I couldn't leave, not yet. It was all her, and it had to do with her scream after Deddy got out of the water with Molly.

All was quiet and still except for the chattering of a flock of birds roosting in the single tree in the middle of the field behind me. Their clicking calls created a muffled

clamor of chatter, but when I looked back I could see no sign of them. Even as I crossed the road and traced the line of the driveway to the side of the Sutherlands' house to better see where the smoke was coming from, their cry followed me, calling out to me, maybe even warning me.

As I reached the corner of the house, the back screen door slammed, piercing the air and sending the roosting birds to the sky in a swooping black cloud above the smoke.

“What the fuck have you done, Adler?” Miss Nell said, followed by the clamor of something heavy and metal hitting the side of a wall, then the sound of wet—no other way to describe it, just the sound of wet. I peered around the corner and could see through the screen of the porch. The porch jutted out from the back of the house. The paint I had sold Hayes was lying on the ground, the dull beige splattered across the deep red particle board of the old storage barn that the Sutherland's had in their backyard.

“Nell, calm down. I knew you wouldn't like this, but it needed to be done. We need to move on,” Mr. Adler said.

“Get your hands off of me. Don't you come near me.”

I pressed against the chipping paint on the weather worn side of the house. Miss Nell was holding her head in her hands as the smoke seethed around and over her body. She was beautiful, standing there that way, and I wanted to go to her. I wanted to, just like I had wanted to go to Hayes.

“Why would you do something like this?” she said.

As Mr. Adler stepped closer, she took a step back. “I did it because it was too much. It was too painful.”

“No, Adler, this is too much.” She threw her arms in the direction of the rusted burn barrel.

“Nell I couldn’t do it anymore. Walking past her room every day, seeing all of her things sitting there without her. It was like they were just waiting for her to come back, and she wasn’t. She just wasn’t.”

“Those were her things. We need to keep those things to remember her by. She’ll never have anything else.” Miss Nell fell to the ground, her knees pressed into the mud and patches of dry, dead grass. “Oh my God, how could you do this? Please tell me you didn’t throw her bear away. Her bear—it still smelt like her.”

“You don’t need to be sitting there holding some worn out bear.”

“Adler—” she stopped, stood up, and rushed at him. “I want to kill some part of you, so that you can feel what I feel.” Miss Nell was shaking, and it was like I could feel everything she was saying—like it was down inside of me before the words were even out of her mouth. I hated Mr. Adler with her. I hated her too, and for a moment, I was glad Molly was dead.

“Nell, you don’t mean that,” he said, putting his arms on her shoulders and gently pushing her back away from him. “You have to let her go. I feel like I lost you when I lost her.”

“No, Adler,” she said in a voice that was barely audible, “you didn’t lose me. You couldn’t because you never had me.”

“Nell, we used to be happy.”

“You’re wrong there. I’ve never been happy with you. In fact, I’ve never been happy at all.” She stepped closer to the burn barrel. “You know where I was the night of Molly’s funeral—you know, don’t you? Don’t you?”

Mr. Adler didn’t say a thing. He just stood there looking at her like he wanted to grab her, shake her, hold her, before he turned his back. I could see the muscles of his face shift as if he said something, but I couldn’t make it out.

She was looking down into the burn barrel, her arms folded across her body, before she looked up and caught my eye, through the screen of the porch, me standing there peering at her from the side of the house. She held me there and walked straight up to the screened door and rested her hand on the latch without going in. Her face was pressed up close to the door; it was distorted and pale through the gray screen.

She didn’t smile or scowl as I stood watching. Instead, she looked numb, empty, like she were only partially aware of my being there, like she held me like that, watching me because she knew that she should feel something about my presence but didn’t know what. She had nothing left for me, so she just accepted me. But I couldn’t move.

After several seconds she let her gaze drop to her hand resting on the latch, staring at it before opening the door to cross the back porch and go in the house through the kitchen. The front door opened and closed, and I ran to the front of the house. She walked down the steep brick steps, holding her keys in her hand, and got into the faded black Corsica, the red pin stripe beginning to peel and pull away from the passenger side door. She refused to look at me even though I know she saw me standing there, and she drove away.

I was still at the vacant tar and gravel road when I heard it—a deep growling bellow, followed by a higher pitch of pain. Without thinking, I ran around the house to the backyard to Mr. Adler.

He was sprawled out on the ground, his legs stretched out in different directions and his back hunched. Scattered around him was the smoldering debris from the overturned burn barrel. Molly's singed teddy bear rested at my feet, still alight, still burning. The bear's face was half gone, and I stomped on it, grinding its limbs into the dirt to put out the flames that were jumping to the dry grass.

Mr. Adler's hands were red and blistered, turned up on his thighs, around him little mounds of burning rubbish, each one giving off its own plume of smoke and ash. I thought of a picture in my history book of the soldiers, the few survivors of some battle from the Civil War. I couldn't remember who the dying were—the North or the South—most likely the South. All I could remember was the desolation—the brokenness. You could see it in their faces, blank and staring—those boys, some the same age I was at the time, not knowing what to do, not knowing on what side of life they were standing, and not knowing on which side they wanted to be standing yet either.

I couldn't separate the two in my mind—the black and white image from all those years ago, those men, those boys dying right there on the page over and over again for us to watch every time we opened our books, and the here and now, scorched remnants of children's books beginning to catch the wind and float up towards the sky right along with the black and gray. I didn't know which was worse—to be fighting for something, maybe not the right thing but something, or to be standing and doing nothing.

“What are you doing here, Fenton?” Mr. Adler said, his face still hidden, still turned towards the ground. “What do you want?” Bits of ash clung to his hair.

“I heard you hollering, and I thought I ought to come see what the commotion was about. Sounded like you were hurt,” I said.

“Don’t lie to me,” he said. “I saw you just as well as she did—standing, watching us from the side of the house.”

My stomach tightened, and I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to run away or throw up or just scream—scream the same scream that he had screamed pushing over that damn burn barrel, but I didn’t. I just stood there, kicking at the bear.

“You here for Hayes?” He snatched up the bear and beat it against his pants leg before tucking it under his arm. If the bear was burning him, he didn’t let it show. He stood up.

“No, sir,” I said.

“Well he’s not here. Hasn’t been here much at all these past few weeks. Give him some time, he’ll come back around,” he said and walked towards the house. “Him and Nell always come back around. Don’t know if it’s because they want to or if it’s because they’re just too stupid to figure out anything else to do or anywhere else to go.”

“I’m not here for Hayes,” I said as I followed behind.

“I heard you the first time.” He turned towards me. “I was just trying to give you the chance to take a believable excuse for why you were standing out there watching me and Nell trying to find the best way we can to climb out of this fucking mess we’ve been put in. So why are you here, Fenton?”

His face was close to me, and I felt like I was holding my breath without meaning to. “I smelt the burning—the fire I mean—over from the store, and I thought I’d come —”

“Thought you’d come watch the damn thing burn.”

“No, sir. I—”

“You were there when she died. Why shouldn’t you be here now to stand and watch this too? Is that what you thought?”

“No, sir. I didn’t know what was happening. I just—“

“Of course you didn’t, Fenton. How could you? How could you know I’d set the whole thing on fire? How could you know that?”

I kept looking at Mr. Adler’s face trying to figure out what to say. There just wasn’t anything there to read—no emotion at all.

“Just get in the house, Fenton,” he said holding the door open for me.

As I walked inside, he pointed to the table before throwing the stuffed bear onto it. It’s eyes were intact. They reminded me of Miss Nell—of the way she looked at me when she realized I was standing there watching her. I stared at them wondering how they didn’t melt in the fire as Mr. Adler walked to the kitchen and began running cold water over his burns.

“That’ll only make it worse,” I said.

“Is that so?” He was talking over the running water. “Well right now it sure as hell feels like an improvement. You know my grandmamma used to put toothpaste on

my burns. Didn't do a damn thing." He cut the water off and grabbed a dish rag to blot at his hands.

"Mama keeps an aloe plant in the window over the sink," I said, "I don't ever use it though."

I'd been in the Sutherland's kitchen hundreds of times before, but sitting there then, it felt like the first. The lights were off, the sun cutting through the blinds in long lean stripes across the room, and I was lost. I felt like I was stuck in some parallel world. All I had to do was find my way out. Molly would be alive, and Mr. Adler would be happy and quiet like he always was. Here nothing was right. It couldn't be right—none of it could be right. I could feel it deep inside of me. This wasn't the place I had known. Everyone around me had changed, and I started wondering if I was the same me, or if I were different, too. Maybe I was turning into somebody who belonged in this place, and then that thought made me want to throw up again.

"You want anything?" Mr. Adler asked as he rummaged through the refrigerator, glass bottles ringing out as they clanged up against one another.

"No, sir."

"You sure? You want a beer?" He held one out to me by the neck of the bottle as he held the other flush against his burnt palm.

"No, sir. I don't drink."

"You're lying to me, again," he said. Then he popped the cap against the walnut mounted bottle opener and let the magnet bar catch it just before falling to the floor.

“You forget I used to be fifteen. And even if you aren’t lying,” he said, setting the bottle down in front of me, “it’s about time you give it a try.”

I pressed the brown glass against my lips and felt the cold for a moment before drinking from it while watching him pace from the refrigerator to the other end of the table and then back again.

“So you probably think I’m about as crazy as Nell does right about now,” he said, taking a drink.

He was so angry. I could see it. I could see it in the way he moved, in his restless refusal to be calm, to settle. I’d never seen him angry before. I’d never seen him the way he was then—so open and hostile towards what he was facing. It made him seem real. He wasn’t like the rest of them anymore, like Mama and Deddy, my teachers at school and all the old people at the church, who acted like they had it all figured out, who went through life everyday as if it were laid out perfectly for them, and all they had to do was step into the right spot at the right time like some kind of intricate dance that they and only they knew. He was different now. He was just as lost and confused as I was. I could see it in everything he did. He’d been cut out of whatever he’d known before, and if he was going to get through it, he’d have to learn it all over again, but more than that—he’d have to learn a whole new dance.

“I don’t think she thinks you’re crazy,” I said, still watching him as he moved across the room to take the chair across from me.

“Really, and how’s that?” He sat down. “We both know you stood there and saw how she reacted.”

“Yes sir, I guess that’s why I don’t think she thinks you’re crazy.” It seemed to me that Miss Nell would have done something very different if she couldn’t see why Mr. Adler was doing what he was doing. She wasn’t the type of woman to put up with anything she didn’t understand. “I could see her thinking,” I said, “see her recognize why you were doing what you were doing.”

“And why’s that, Fenton?” He tilted the bottle back to get the last of the beer before getting up to get another. “Why would I burn all of Molly’s things, and what is it exactly you think Nell understands?”

“Why do you think you did it?”

“Ha,” Mr. Adler said popping the lid off, but this time the magnet didn’t catch, and the cap fell to the floor. “See there, you don’t know. You’re just trying to get me to tell you, so you can get some idea of what’s going on in here instead of admitting I’ve lost it.” He tapped his temple with the open bottle, froth spilling over into his dark hair.

“No that’s not it,” I said. “I heard you tell Miss Nell you did it to let go—to forget what hurts.”

“And you don’t believe it? You think I was lying about that?”

“No sir, that’s not what I said. I think it’s true in a way, but I don’t think that’s all of it. I think you’re angry.”

“Well, Goddamnit, Fenton, of course I’m angry. Molly’s dead. She walked right out there and drowned in front of me, and I didn’t do a damn thing to stop it.” He was leaning forward at the table, leering at me as he held the empty bottle tight. “Do you

know what that feels like? Can you understand what it feels like to know I could have stopped all of this from happening if I'd just looked up a few minutes sooner?"

"I know," I said. I was scared beyond all recognition of something I didn't understand. Maybe I was scared of dying, too, or maybe I was just scared it was my fault. Sometimes I wondered if I were even sad Molly had died. She didn't mean much of anything to me—just Hayes's little sister. Maybe I was just scared that deep down Hayes was right, and I knew it. I knew it was my fault— if I hadn't been there hollering about that snake she'd probably still be alive. Or maybe I was scared she could just go away like that and be gone, and everything she left behind just keep on going without her like she'd never been. Sometimes it was like none of us ever really mattered at all. It seemed like we could all just go away like Molly did, and nothing would really change. The same sky would still be there looking down on what was left.

"No, you don't know," Mr. Adler said pulling me back, always pulling me back to the here and now. "You're just a kid. You have no idea what it feels like to know I let her die while Hayes was beating that snake to death." He was rubbing his face, pushing the folds of skin around his deep set eyes into his hands with force.

"Is that why you burnt the stuff? Because you're mad at yourself and a dead snake?" I knew it wasn't true. It might have been if it were Miss Nell out there burning that stuff, but not Mr. Adler.

"What do you think, Fenton? Tell me what you think." His face was red and blotchy and shiny with sweat. "You seem to think you know something about all of this, so either say it or get out of my house."

“I don’t think you burnt the stuff because of you or anybody else, not even Miss Nell.”

“Then tell me why I did it.”

“Because you’re angry,” I said before finishing the beer and sliding it across the table.

“Damnit, you already said that. You just keep saying that. I don’t think you know what the hell you’re talking about.” He almost laughed, but not quite.

“Can I have another one?”

“See there. I knew it wasn’t your first time.” He got up and grabbed two more beers from the refrigerator.

“You’re angry,” I said “at her things, and not just her things, everything. You’re angry at everything because it’s still here. Why should something as meaningless as a stuffed bear from the Wal-Mart or a worn out Golden Book still be here when she’s dead? That’s what you’re thinking. Why did they get to outlive her? Why do you have to look at them sitting there on the shelves or bed or wherever the hell they were every day and have to think about her touching them and playing with them and then they still be there after she’s gone? Why should they outlive her?” I stopped to drink the beer I was clutching in both my hands. “I think that’s why you’re angry, and I think that’s why you burned her things. I think Miss Nell knows, too, but what’s more than that, I think she feels the same way you do but just can’t admit it to herself.”

“And why do you think that? Why do you think I’m so angry about her things?”

“Because of the way you burnt them. You didn’t burn them to forget. You wouldn’t have stayed there if you were doing it for that reason. You’d of thrown it all in there and walked away to let it burn down on its own. I think you wanted to see it burn. You wanted to watch it.”

“Is that so?”

“I think so, and I think Miss Nell hates it as much as you do. I think she hates that it’s still here, but she doesn’t want to let it go because it’s all that’s left.”

“See—that’s where you’re wrong,” he said pointing at me with the neck of the almost empty bottle. “There’s nothing left either way. Molly’s gone whether the shit sits in her room and rots or whether I burn it. She’s still gone, and all the stuff she left behind is just sitting there screaming out about just how disposable she was, and I wasn’t going to let that happen. I wasn’t going to let a bunch of useless toys and books and whatever the hell else was in there do that to her. She was more important than those things, and if she’s gone, they need to be gone, too.”

“And what about all the things that were here before her—all the things that saw her come and go and are still standing unchanged?” I asked.

“Well, I can’t burn down the whole town,” he laughed.

“No, I guess not,” and I drank the last of the second beer, “but I do understand—why you did it I mean.”

“Do you?” He leaned his chair back on two feet. “Do you really?”

“Well, not all the way. But I understand it as best I can being outside and looking in.”

“You like to do that, don’t you? Look in on people.”

“No, not usually. It was just when I smelt all that burning, I felt like I needed to be here. I don’t know why.”

“I think you do. I think you do like to look in.” He threw the beer bottle over my head to the trash can just behind me.

I thought he was throwing it at me at first—that he’d finally realized what I’d done by standing there watching him and Miss Nell. I ducked down and prepared myself to be hit, but he didn’t have anything like that in mind.

“Get up now. I’m going to take you somewhere where you can watch people if that’s what you’re wanting to do.”

He stood up and took a light weight jacket from the hook by the back door, but I didn’t follow him—not right away. All I could think about were those birds hollering at me before I went to the side of the house and saw what I saw. It was like they were there all over again. I could hear them, but I didn’t listen.

As I walked out, he was sitting in his truck at the side of the house. It was running, exhaust fumes pouring into the cool air.

“Come on,” he said, before pumping his arm to roll the window up.

It was still light as we went down the rough narrow road to reach the highway stretching straight through the center of Raynham, neither one of us saying much of anything as we went. Sitting on the bench seat with worn patches and holes, cotton batting poking through here and there, I felt like I was miles away from everything else. It was starting to get cold and I could feel it cutting into me like a knife through the open vents in the

truck, but there was still a burning running just below the surface of my skin. It was the feeling I always got when I knew something was about to happen—something I knew meant no good for anybody.

As we crossed the town, going over the railroad tracks and under the trestle we zigzagged around the old Methodist church that had been left abandoned after the last tornado came through and tore it all to pieces. The congregation had taken the insurance money to build a new one on the other side of town, but they just left the old one standing there, all torn up and falling in. I used to ask Mama and Deddy why the town didn't make them finish tearing it down, but they didn't know the answer. Pretty soon I just quit asking about it.

I thought maybe Mr. Adler forgot where he was going, forgot what he wanted me to see, because we just kept circling, passing by the Piggly Wiggly and Mordecai's gas station until I was beginning to get nervous somebody standing there seeing us over and over again was going to call the police to see what we were up to. But right about the time I was thinking all that, it was like Mr. Adler could read my mind. He started doubling back towards his house. He didn't stop there, though. No, he just kept on going right past it, and as he did, I looked at my bike, laying out in the tall grass. I kept looking at it, watching it out the side mirror.

The sun was starting to set. We turned down my street, shadows of the trees falling in parallel lines across us as we passed through their shade. My throat got tight, and we pulled into my driveway. Miss Nell's car was sitting off the street in front of our house with its race stripe. I didn't say anything, though. I just looked at Mr. Adler. He

sat there, his wrists propped up on the steering wheel as he lightly tapped the dash with his index fingers, back and forth, back and forth. He didn't say anything, and just as he reached for the ignition to start the truck, I jumped out.

"Fenton, don't worry about it. Let's go somewhere else," he yelled out the passenger door I'd left hanging open. "We could get the canoes."

I pretended not to hear him. Instead, I went on around the side of the house like I'd done time and time again, but this time was different.

I knew Deddy was home because his truck was parked out front. Mr. Adler had pulled up next to it in the narrow driveway. For some reason, I was hoping Mama was there too, but her car wasn't in the garage.

Walking in the back door, I let the screen slam behind me. Nothing. Everything was still, silent. I walked slow and quiet down the hallway towards Mama and Deddy's room, and then I just stood for what felt like five, ten, minutes with my hand on the doorknob. All I could hear was the ringing in my ears drowning out everything else that might have been there. I was stuck in that spot alone in the dark hallway with the constant droning, ringing, pulsing through my head. For the first time since Molly's funeral, I felt cold.

Right as I started to turn, to walk back out the backdoor and straight to Mr. Adler and the worn out old bench seat, the warm iron door knob was pulled from my hand, and Miss Nell was left standing just inches in front of me with nothing, not even the thin hollow door separating us.

She was buttoning a few buttons of her blouse, and I could still see her navel through the flaps of fabric and her fumbling fingers. She exhaled as she let her hands drop to her sides. It was almost as if she had expected to see me there—as if she had been waiting for me and wondering what had taken me so long.

Deddy was behind her, but I couldn't get my eyes off Miss Nell. I couldn't get her eyes off me. Still, I could see him, an out of focus blur wrapping a white sheet around his waist as he stood. Just then Miss Nell's eyes fell. She gave in again, refusing to look at me.

"Fenton, get back here," Deddy said.

I didn't even realize I had turned away, didn't realize I had left until I heard his voice behind me and felt my shoulders bumping into the paneled walls. My legs were numb. They were moving, but they were numb, carrying me away. I let the screen door slam again, but I couldn't hear it this time. All I could hear was the blood rushing and pumping through my head as I fought to get back to the truck.

When I reached the driveway, the passenger door was still open, Mr. Adler sitting with his arms folded across the steering wheel as he stared blankly ahead like he saw something there he didn't want to see, but had to look at. As I got in, I looked in the direction where he was staring, but I didn't see anything, just the tall chimney and brick porch steps still standing from Mama Rae's old house. That was all that was left of my grandparents' place, all that survived after the fire.

Deddy didn't come out after me, and neither did Miss Nell. They just stayed holed up together until we left and no telling how long after. I didn't say anything, and

neither did Mr. Adler. He slowly took the truck out of the driveway and went around the circle to come out on the highway next to McCrary's pharmacy right behind our house. McCrary's had always been there—the only drugstore in town. It was a fat squat brick building nobody much would notice unless you were looking for it, and then back when I was about ten they put up one of those big electric signs, it putting off a sickly yellow glow filling our backyard every night since.

“I need to get my bike,” I said.

Mr. Adler kept sitting there looking like he was going to be sick all over the place as he passed back by the old discarded church.

“And then I guess I better get on back home,” I said, straining to look past the broken shards of purple and blue stained glass into the darkness that was left behind.

Chapter 4—Fenton

It had been a long time since me and Deddy had gone down to the creek in the canoes with Mr. Adler and Miss Nell and Hayes. The last time we went, Mama had stayed behind at the trucks to watch Molly. She was just a baby then—barely walking, and I was probably about eleven. I hadn't realized at the time why Miss Nell had wanted to go with us instead of staying back with Mama and Molly. Seemed more natural to me for her to stay. She didn't fish or anything like us. She didn't say much either. It was like she went along just to sit there and take it all in, but taking it all in never seemed to impress her too much.

I was already in one of the canoes ready to go. Deddy was back behind the truck pulling the last one out of the bed with Mr. Adler while Mama and Miss Nell were up front in the cab. Miss Nell had Molly on her lap, kissing her and holding her tight with one arm, her other extended with a beer in her hand. A glare fell across the windshield right where Molly's face was, and I couldn't see anything except for the bright white streak sliding across the glass. I tried to look past it, tried to see if the smell of the beer all soured sweet on Miss Nell made Molly feel sick, too. It always made me think of vomit—whenever Deddy would pull me in and hug me late at night before bed, the smell seeped off of him like his body was making it and churning it out. All I could ever think was vomit.

Mama never smelled like that, but it was all the same difference in the end I guess. No, you couldn't feel the vodka pouring out of her like you could with Deddy and his beer at the end of a long night, but you could still smell it on her breath when she'd move in close—all clean and antiseptic-like. Reminded me of falling off my bike when I was eight and skinning my knee. I had sat on the toilet, the blood pouring down my shin while Mama knelt on the olive linoleum dabbing at the fleshy bits with the rubbing alcohol, blowing into the ripped skin. I could still smell it, even then, surrounded by all that earth and water just watching everybody loading up to set out.

As Mr. Adler let the back end of the last canoe slide off the tail gate and into the dirt, Deddy twisted it around, the fiberglass grinding and scraping against the rocks as he drug it down to the bank. "Shit," he said quiet as he let the front of the canoe drop into the edge of the water, "Don't want to help any, now then do you, Fenton?"

"I figured I'd be in the way up there," I said. "Besides, Hayes isn't helping either."

"Alright, alright," Deddy said without really listening. He loaded the front of his canoe down with a couple coolers to try to counter balance his weight since he was going to be in there alone. Mama would get us at the pickup point a few miles downstream.

Hayes was crouched under an old water oak stretching up and over the narrow pass in the creek. He was running a stick through the damp dirt prying up loose rocks here and there and scratching at some of the barely exposed roots. I knew even back then he liked to keep himself to himself, but I didn't mind. That was before I started following him—trying to figure him out by somehow being like him. Sitting there in the canoe

watching him, I felt like I was moving in slow motion, the current pulling on the canoe and then pushing me right back up against the bank like it didn't want me after all.

The morning wasn't fully on us yet. It was still that strange time where it's no longer night but not quite day. The air was still cool and damp. You could see it rising off the water, but more than that, you could feel it, the moisture, just hanging there all around you, pulling the gooseflesh up on your skin. I felt hidden, alone in the foggy gray still lingering all around us, still giving time to whatever lurks in the night to creep back to where it belongs before the bright white starts fading in and bursts into day.

We always set out in the hollow resting right down the hill from the Marvin's where we bought our Christmas trees every November, that is until they closed up. You couldn't see too much once you were down in the little dip of land, and there sure as hell wasn't anyway anybody up on the hill could look down and see us. Sure we could see the bright red and yellow sign towering above, but other than that it was all just trees and water, except for an old board and batten house cradled into the sloping hills.

The land seemed to fold around it—holding it in like it had been there longer than the trees and rocks and dirt. It was a part of the hollow, just a feature like a nose or an eye on a face. It moved with the land—the whole structure of it, the brick foundation rising and falling with the peaks and valleys. Along the lowest point, there was a cellar door. It was short and narrow, and you could tell it had once been painted bright red, but was now faded to a rusty pink with waist high grass clawing at its edges.

I've always liked doors—unusual doors, unfamiliar doors. I used to look for them, whenever I was out riding around with Deddy. I figure I thought I was just collecting

them in my mind, storing them up like other people collect stamps or the way Mr. and Mrs. Brasher collected their dogs.

Deddy'd always worked for the Raynham Water Board, and I guess he probably always will. He used to have to go out one weekend every month, whenever it was his turn on call, to check the wells. That was back before he got the promotion. Now he just makes somebody else do it when it's his turn. Says he's too old for that now—climbing down in the pits to make sure everything is just the way it's supposed to be. Back then, I'd always ride with him on his Saturday. Mama wouldn't let me go on Sundays because of church, even though we never went—said it'd look bad, me riding all over the county in Deddy's work truck on the Lord's day. We wouldn't say too much as we rode around listening to Jim Morrison in the old truck, but I was always on the lookout for those doors.

I didn't care anything about the front doors, sitting up on their heel-worn porches with wreaths or ribbons or whatever people put up there. No, I cared more about the cellar doors, the basement doors, the doors in old sheds standing behind the houses just up against the tree line like the woods were about to consume them.

I liked to imagine opening them up—seeing something new, something that would change the way I thought about everything. Sure, deep down I think I knew there probably wasn't anything special behind those doors—nothing any different than what was in our own basement or the Sutherland's storage building. I'd try to tell myself it was just a bunch of old shovels and rakes, cobwebs hanging in every corner, or that

maybe it was just a cluttered mess of mothballs and faded memories some old lady kept piling up waiting to pass on to a family who didn't care and didn't want them.

I'd push my mind's eye to see those spaces behind the doors that way, all common, but it just didn't work. I kept collecting them and collecting them, memorizing every detail, and when I was alone in my bed at night, I'd open them right up. Then there wouldn't be any dirt walls or rusted lawn equipment or pictures of the dead. No they'd open up to a completely different space—vast and wide and green. That was the way it always was. They never opened into some cramped interior place like they should, but into a whole new existence with a blue sky stretching up above. The only difference was there wouldn't be anything living—no rabbits or cats or caterpillars, just trees and grass and water flowing through it. It was like every place I'd ever been and every place I'd ever wanted to go.

I was still staring at the old red door along the bank, trying to tell myself there was nothing that should be calling me the way it was, when I heard Deddy yelling to Mr. Adler. All the boxes of withered new potatoes and the old tiller—green and yellow paint chipping off around black-brown rust marks I'd put behind the door just disappeared, and I was left feeling the pull to jump out of that boat and swim right across the murky water to see what was up there.

“Well, Adler, you 'bout ready to do this?” Deddy said tossing an empty beer can under the rear bench at the back of the canoe.

“I'm ready whenever y'all are, Ellis.”

Hayes had dropped his stick under the tree and walked over to the back of our canoe, one foot propped up on the rear wall. As he raised his arm to catch the paddle, Mr. Adler threw to him, I could still see the dark dirt up under his fingernails, clinging to his cuticles. He balanced the paddle on the side of the canoe as he stepped into the stern with one foot and pushed away from the shore with the other.

He steered us away from the bank and turned the boat perpendicular to the current, and I watched Mr. Adler walk up the hill to Deddy's truck where Mama was still sitting with Miss Nell and Molly. The sun was falling through the trees and spotting them all with dark blotchy shadows mixed with clean morning light as Mr. Adler opened the door for Miss Nell and took Molly in his arms, kissing her on top of her head.

Watching them up there on the hill, the whole place was filled with a still quiet seeming to mute everything and everyone around me. Mama was saying something to Miss Nell, and I could see Mr. Adler laugh, throwing his head back while holding Molly a little tighter, but it was all just out of my reach—something for me to see but not be a part of. They were moving, living, but it was all in silence until Mr. Adler set Molly back in the truck, and Miss Nell slammed the truck door. The sound rang out, echoing off the rocky hills and sending a flock of birds to the sky, the sound of their wings beating against the air, pushing them further and further away from us.

The river was narrow in the little crook of land where we always pushed off, the trees stretching across on either side, reaching out to touch one another limb to limb like they were trying to block the sun from hitting the water below. I always felt cold sitting in the shadows there just waiting to start, waiting to go. As we twisted around the bend,

Deddy leading the way and Mr. Adler and Miss Nell drifting behind, the water opened up, and light fell down reflecting off the hills and valleys of currents in shining whiteness.

The trees didn't reach out to each other here, but stretched up towards the sky, the shade from their canopies lining only the water's edge.

With the widening of the river, the water's flow slowed, and the silt and sand stayed settled down below, undisturbed. You could look straight down, peering in between the spots of reflected light through the clearness, and find a completely different world. It was my favorite place to just drift along and fish. I was never too sure why that was, though. Fish like dirty water—the murk and filth clouding up around them as they go along. They don't like a place like this where they can be seen by just anybody. They like to hide in the cool, dark dirt that blocks out the light and anything from our world above.

“Hey, Deddy,” I said twisting around to reach for my fishing pole, “will you come bait this line for me?” I never baited my own line back then—didn't like the feel of the minnows in my hand—didn't like the feel of the life going out of them as I pushed them down on the hook.

“I'm coming,” Deddy said, “just give me a minute.” He had laid one of his paddles lengthwise in the canoe while letting the other hang over the edge as he held on to it with his left hand. He was still drifting towards us, slow and steady even though he wasn't trying to.

As he reached under his seat to grab the empty beer can he'd thrown under there, he floated up close to us, the front end of his canoe dipping up out of the water from the

unbalanced weight. He was right there, even with me, me watching him, our boats almost touching, but him not even noticing. He leaned over the edge of the canoe and pushed the empty can just under the surface and held it there until it was filled with water. It was so quiet, all I could hear was the glub-glub-glub of the air escaping the can. Then it stopped, and everything was quiet again. Deddy let the can go, and it slowly sank to the bottom. I watched it drift down further and further away, before hitting the river bed, a cloud of dirt and silt coming up in murky waves as it settled out of sight.

“Alright, Fenton,” Deddy said as he pushed the paddle against the water so he’d drift down parallel to me, “hand me the end of your hook.”

I didn’t watch Deddy bait the lines anymore. I knew how he did it, reaching in the styrofoam tub of minnows and grabbing one out, his smooth, shining, silver body squirming and writhing around between his long fingers. He always baited them the same way, biting on his tongue as he held the fish between his left thumb and forefinger and pierced him with the hook straight through one eye and out the other before letting him drop in the water. Miss Nell was watching Deddy as he strung the minnow on the hook without looking away once. She sat there taking the whole thing in like she was afraid she was going to miss something, her eyes shifting back and forth between Daddy’s scraped and stained fingers to his tongue clinched tight between his teeth without flinching once.

“Well, I think it’s about time for another one of these,” Deddy said as he rocked the canoe back and forth getting to the cooler at the front end. “Y’all want one?” he said holding up a beer towards Mr. Adler and Miss Nell.

“A little early for that, ain’t it, Ellis?” Mr. Adler said as him and Miss Nell paddled up closer to us.

“Hair of the dog, Adler. Hair of the dog.” Deddy popped open the beer can and took a long drink. “Do you kids want a coke?” he said.

I jerked on my fishing pole, making the dead minnow dance in the water to lure something else in while still looking down in the creek to the cloud of dust beginning to settle around the dented beer can. “I’ll take a Dr. Pepper,” I said.

“Hayes, you want anything?” Deddy said, reaching into the cooler

“No, sir.” Hayes’ interest was in the tree line.

Hayes never really looked at you when he was talking. There was always something off somewhere far away he seemed to hold on to. Back then I thought it was ’cause he was scared or shy or something along those lines, but the more I talked to him, the less I thought that anymore. He’d say too much for that to be the case. He might not talk too often, but when he did, it all just kind of came out—everything he was feeling or thinking or knew just spilled out of him.

It was like that before he died, the telling. We should have all seen what he was going to do, but we didn’t until it was too late. I think the holding in until it had to spill out, until there was no choice but for it to go somewhere, was what took him.

It wasn’t until after he was gone, I figured his looking off came from him thinking about what he was going to say next rather than him trying to hide from you. Hayes’ words didn’t come from inside but from out somewhere, and he just had to keep an eye

out 'cause maybe even he didn't know what words were showing up next. I think he was scared of the words, too.

“What's that even mean?” I said looking away from Hayes and over to Deddy.

“What's what mean?” Deddy said.

“Hair of the dog. What does it mean?”

Deddy laughed a little and took another drink of his beer. “Well, Fenton,” he said, “I guess it's coming face to face with whatever bit you the night before.”

“I don't understand what that means,” I said.

“It means your deddy drank too much beer last night, Fenton,” Mr. Adler said as he paddled his canoe up even with Deddy's. “Isn't that right, Ellis?”

“I reckon that's about right,” Deddy said. “Happens to the best of us.”

Hayes paddled faster, causing us to pull away from them. “It means that he got drunk last night. And instead of just facing his hangover, he'd rather keep on getting drunk today.”

“What the hell do you think you just said, Hayes?” Mr. Adler yelled. His voice echoed off the hills up around us and came back down again. I'd never heard Mr. Adler yell like that.

Everything got all still and quiet after the echo died away, and the beating of Hayes's paddle in the water was the only sound. I looked back at Deddy. He was still just sitting there drifting along, his face calm. I didn't notice them at first—might not have noticed at all if it hadn't been for Deddy looking up there, but I followed his line of vision, and at the end was about four buzzards silently flying around. They were circling

something in the woods just out of sight where the thorns and briars and underbrush get tangled into one another so you can't see nothing but gray and green and brown. That's when I noticed the smell all sweet and sulfurous hitting the back of my throat and roof of my mouth, clinging there as the buzzards flew above, the shadows from the outer rim of their circle falling on us as they waited to dive below.

"Something big out there," Deddy said, finishing off his beer and leaning over to hold the can under the water. "Ain't no dog or house cat with a stench like that."

It was like Mr. Adler didn't see the buzzards or smell anything. He was paddling towards us while Miss Nell sat in her end picking at the creamy white paint on her finger nails. I twisted round with my chin all pulled into my neck thinking that was going to keep Mr. Adler from seeing me.

Hayes kept on with his paddling. About then one of the buzzards dove down in the woods out of sight. The others followed as their shadows fell over us one by one, one last time.

"Hayes, I asked you a question." Mr. Adler said again. He was still paddling fast, about to overtake Deddy who didn't seem to be in any hurry at all. "What the hell do you think you said?"

"I know what I said." Hayes set his oar up so it barely skimmed the surface of the water, leaving little trails of eddies as we floated with the current. "I said he got drunk yesterday, and he's going to get drunk again today. There isn't anything new about it."

"You need to get your ass over here and apologize right now," Mr. Adler said through his teeth, his jaw all clenched. He put his oar up.

“Adler, just leave him alone,” Miss Nell said. They were next to Deddy. “Hey Ellis, give me one of those beers. No, not that one. I don’t like Adler’s. Too much like having sex on a canoe.” Miss Nell was leaning over the edge of the boat, reaching for the beer, smiling but not smiling at the same time.

“Too fucking close to water for your taste, huh Nell?” he said as she took the beer.

“Something like that.” She popped open the can and tilted her head way back, her throat bobbing up and down as she forced half of it down in one long draw.

“You want one, Adler?” Deddy said holding up a can.

“Naw, still too early for me.”

“Hand me another one Ellis,” Nell said as she finished off the beer and threw the can to the center of the canoe.

“Damn. You’re taking it serious aren’t you?” Deddy handed her another beer and got one out for himself.

“Can’t be letting you have all the fun.”

Miss Nell pushed the brown-blond bangs away from her face, her fingers twitching and shaking as she pinned them with some bobby pins.

Our boat jerked forward and to the right.

“Shit, I’ve caught something,” I said, the reel on my pole whistling and clicking. I spun it round and round. I lifted up off my seat a little, half squatting but almost sitting trying to pull the thing in.

“Keep it steady, Fenton.” Deddy set down his beer to pick up the oar and start over towards us.

It was big, whatever it was, pulling on our narrow canoe hard first one way and then the other. I was losing my balance, leaning with the canoe rather than against it as it veered toward the bank.

All of sudden the line just snapped and popped up, then curled in on itself as I threw the pole to the center of the canoe.

“Well I lost him,” I said, “a big one.”

“Look out,” Hayes said, pushing his paddle against a rotten pine tree that had fallen into the water, small brim swimming all around, feeding off the bugs and wood mites and whatever else they could find.

Whatever I had had on the end of my line had pulled us too close to the bank, and we drifted under the shadow of the hickories and water oaks that were stretching out, leaning over the water. It was cool as we passed under the shade, the Jesus bugs skipping and striding across the clear black water.

“I can’t steer us back out yet,” Hayes said. “We’re going to have to walk the canoe past that one.” He continued to push his paddle against the bank, motioning to a tree that had fallen out in the water.

It wasn’t a young oak—too tall for that, but its canopy was narrow and sparse.

“Must have fallen from deep in the wood somewhere. Out where it didn’t have no room to grow or spread out,” I said when we reached the giant tree.

“Doesn’t matter where the damn thing came from.” Hayes stood up, and our canoe rocked and tilted banging against the dead limbs below. “We just got to get past it.”

“You kids got this?” Mr. Adler asked, paddling just outside the shadow of the tree line.

“Yeah we got it,” Hayes said. He pushed his paddle down to the bed against the rocks and dirt and limbs.

I was still balancing at the front of the canoe, waiting for Hayes to push us a little closer to the downed tree. As we got up next to it, I noticed the way the bark had peeled off in gray sheets and was floating in the black water around the pale current-smoothed wood.

“Alright, Hayes,” I said, “I’m about to take my step. You gonna push the canoe through for me.”

Hayes lifted off his seat as he pushed his weight against the paddle leveraging us forward against the surface below. “Go for it,” he said.

The canoe was rocking back and forth, and I was still too far away from the limb I wanted to grab. I felt like I was going to be sick, but I just kept staring at the Jesus bugs hopping all around on the surface of the water like it wasn’t any different from the land. That’s when I felt the tree bump up against my shins.

“Fenton, take your step,” Hayes yelled as he continued to push the canoe forward.

“I’m going,” I said. I didn’t have time to look for the limb anymore. I just had to go.

Hayes pushed the front end of the canoe through the narrow space between the fallen tree and the water below before using his oar to balance as he stepped over the dead tree, too, and we were free.

“Well looks like you kids handled that one just fine,” Deddy said, opening the cooler as we paddled back out to the center of the creek. “You want a beer, Hayes?” He held up a can. “You don’t mind, do you Adler? I know Nell doesn’t care.”

“That’s up to Hayes,” Mr. Adler said.

“How ’bout it Hayes?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, if he’s not going to take it, why don’t you hand it over here to me,” Miss Nell said unbuttoning one of the top buttons on the pale blue blouse tied tightly around her waist exposing her stomach below.

“Alright then, alright,” Deddy said and he set the beer down in the bed of the canoe. “If you’re gonna be drinking all my beer, why don’t you come over here and get them out for yourself.”

“I guess I will.” Miss Nell was smoothing her hands over her hair as she looked back to Mr. Adler. “Will you row us a little closer, so I can step over? You don’t mind, do you?”

Mr. Addler didn’t say a thing. He just looked back and forth from Deddy to Miss Nell as he did the rowing.

We were a few hundred yards away from the narrow bend in the creek where the current picks up before opening to a wide open space that’s calm and still and quiet again. It was after noon by then, the sun coming at us at an angle back behind, and I knew Mama would be waiting on the other side of the bend. She’d be sitting up on the hood of the truck, her bare feet propped up against the chrome bumper while she watched Molly

playing with her dolls and stuffed toys on a blanket spread out close to the bank in the shade.

As Miss Nell stood up on one foot preparing herself to step over to Deddy's boat, she spread her arms out, rocking back and forth at her waist to catch her balance. The two canoes were touching at times, bumping up against one another as they were pushed and pulled by the current. Just as Miss Nell started to step, Mr. Adler tried to paddle closer to Deddy's boat. But as the two canoes hit, they were forced further apart making a wide space of water for Miss Nell to step over. She tried to reach it, but her foot just barely met the side wall of the canoe. Deddy saw that she was going to fall, and he stood up to try to catch her, but just as he grabbed for her, she screamed out and the whole canoe tumped over in the water along with him and her and the coolers of beer and coke.

Mr. Adler sat there, the front end of his canoe all cocked up out of the water. He wasn't offering to help any as Miss Nell and Deddy laughed and splashed around. Deddy swam over to his canoe and got it flipped over the right way while Miss Nell grabbed on to one of the coolers and put it back up in the front of the boat.

"Get all the beer," Deddy hollered as he put the second cooler back up in the canoe.

"What about the cokes?" Miss Nell said as she started gathering the beer bobbing up all around them.

"Naw, don't worry about them," Deddy said. "They've already sunk down to the bottom of the creek. There ain't no getting them back. But the beer—it floats."

Just as Deddy was helping pull Miss Nell back into the canoe, me and Hayes reached the bend in the creek, the current carrying us up ahead a ways. We just kind of drifted along for awhile like that with about a dozen cans of beer floating downstream with us as Hayes steered around the rocks and away from the bank. Mr. Adler must have started paddling a little harder because his canoe was right behind ours, the front end still jutting way up out of the water from the unbalanced weight. Deddy and Miss Nell were further back, just then passing into the narrowing bend. Miss Nell was turned around backward looking at Deddy, her wet back pressed up against one of the coolers.

As the bend started opening back up, I could see a whole group of people ahead of us. Most of them were up on the bank looking down towards the creek where about four or five people were standing waist deep. The water wasn't clean and clear here like a ways back.

"Fucking hell," Hayes said as he started steering the canoe back towards the left bank.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Can't you see it's a baptism?" he said.

Pastor Jerome was standing out there with a little boy surrounded by a couple other men. It was mostly shady down that stretch of the creek where all the people were gathered, but not where they were standing in the water. The sun came pushing past the trees above, illuminating that patch of the creek a faded green among the brown.

Just as Pastor Jerome dipped the little boy backwards holding his palm over his mouth while pinning his nose closed tight, saying, "In the name of the Father and the Son

and of the Holy Spirit,” a bunch of Deddy’s beers came floating by. They passed in between them and the men who were standing round with their arms crossed over their chests, the sun reflecting off the bright aluminum. Hayes started laughing, but Mr. Adler didn’t seem to pay any attention to any of it. He just kept paddling past the congregation. I thought I heard one of the cans pop open after the fat deacon reached over from where he was standing to pull it from the water.

A little ways up from the baptism, Mama was sitting up on the hood of Deddy’s truck, Molly on the ground below. Mr. Adler reached her first as he pushed the canoe up on the bank close to Molly.

“They’re coming up behind us, Joy,” Mr. Adler said and jumped out of the canoe dragging it around towards the bed of the truck, leaving grooves and ruts in the fine silt and rocks.

Me and Hayes were lifting our canoe into the back of the truck as Deddy and Miss Nell paddled up. Mama stood and walked down the sloping bank to where Deddy was pulling on the canoe, Miss Nell still sitting with her back up against the coolers.

“What happened here, Ellis?” Mama said.

“We fell in.” Deddy rubbed his hands down his still wet jeans.

“Well how did you and Nell manage that, but Adler didn’t?”

“It’s just one of those things, Joy,” Deddy said.

Miss Nell jumped out of the canoe and walked up the bank to Molly, picking her up and holding her on her hip. Molly started crying, pushing away from Miss Nell’s wet body, calling out for Mr. Adler. So he took Molly up, and Mrs. Nell went back down to the

creek to pick up one of the coolers. Her wet shirt was sticking to her as she moved, and you could see her dark underwear straight through the thin fabric.

Me and Hayes climbed in the back of the truck with the canoes, and Miss Nell and Mr. Adler rode up front with Mama and Deddy and Molly back to where their truck was parked at the other end of the creek. When they got out, Mr. Adler's lap was wet from where Miss Nell had to sit on him, with Deddy all crammed up in the middle holding Molly while Mama drove.

After we dropped the Sutherlands off at their truck, I decided to stay in the back with our two canoes, letting Mama and Deddy ride up front by themselves. I was holding on to the paddles, making sure they didn't slide out of the open tailgate, and we pulled up the steep embankment, Mama spinning dirt and gravel back behind her. The old red door was there, pulling me in. Just as we were about to make the sharp turn out onto the tar and gravel road, an old man walked from back behind the house to the cellar door. But right when he started to swing it open, Mama cut the turn sharp, slinging me up against the canoes to where I couldn't see anything.

Chapter 5—Nell

Sitting on the cinder block steps jutting out from the back of the church, Nell could still hear the people behind the thin door. The women were laying out plates of food—lukewarm casseroles with grease pooling up around the edges, sliced deli meats and cheese spread out on plastic trays, and tubs of fruit suspended in a motley rainbow of gelatin. The men were sitting at long and splintered banquet tables in the rusted metal chairs that had been passed down to the church from the high school, Franklin County still sprawled across the back of them in permanent marker. They were laughing by now, far enough removed from the graveside, telling the same old stories from years before, when things were supposedly better, when people were different.

Nell did not need to be there to see it. She'd seen it time and time again—when she was a girl and her grandmother died, followed shortly thereafter by her grandfather and again with her mother a few months after she had married Adler. Then there was Buck Lyons a year or so ago—the closed casket shutting out the muted whispers and sideways glances of the good church people of Raynham. More vividly, however, was the small service, not quite a funeral, for Joy's dead baby. It surprised her, even then, how such a loss, the loss belonging to another, could overshadow her own.

It would have been Joy's second, another boy only a year or so younger than Fenton, but something had happened. Nell had never known what exactly. Neither Ellis

nor Joy had said. They mourned in their own private way, not talking much about it with anybody until Pastor Jerome along with the help of the congregation pressured them into having a service, the small silver urn sitting on the altar just under the pulpit as forced words were spoken about someone that no one had known and no one would be able to know. After that, Ellis and Joy had quit attending the Pentecostal church on the hill, instead carrying Fenton twice a year on Easter and Mother's Day to the Baptist church down the highway.

Nell had never asked the baby's name, if there had even been one. It may have been said at the funeral. It must have been, but Nell had not listened. Instead, she had stared blankly at the tiny urn at the front of the church and thought of how little space would be taken up inside—most of it dark and empty except for the few remains left. A cremated body withers and shrinks, becoming only a fraction of what was, and she imagined only a few teaspoons worth of gray ashes coating the bottom of the heart shaped urn, its shape defined by two folded angel wings. Nell preferred to think of them as birds' wings, having little use for anything she could neither see nor feel.

Digging the heels of her flesh colored shoes into the dark clay spilling out between the cracks of the chipped cinder blocks, she could still imagine the cool feel of metal against her palms. She could see Joy picking it up before silently walking out of the crowded church. Nell could almost feel its weight in her hands, heavier from the urn itself than the sparse contents inside, and she was jealous. She was jealous of Joy for having something to carry home to place on a mantle or tuck away in a drawer to be looked at or held whenever the pulling returned, and in that moment Nell hated her. Nell

knew she would have to leave Molly up on the rocky hill with the other dead bodies. She would not bring her home and hold her again.

Up at the cemetery, Adler rested his back against the white ash and gazed up into its spreading canopy, the sun falling between its branches and across his face. He closed his eyes against the light and shadow, and still Nell watched him, her face motionless and firm.

The thin fabric of her dress fell limply over her legs and created a distinct outline of her hips and thighs below, and her insides seemed to be collapsing in on themselves. Just as Nell felt the tightening of her muscles begin to relax, the back door of the church opened, hitting her in the spine. Mrs. Brasher stood at the open door, her wrinkles crossing each other in a helter-skelter path across her face. This old woman, thought Nell, this old woman has been here my whole life, and still she is here while Molly is dead.

Nell stood up.

“Honey, I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Brasher said reaching out to brush away the dirt and grass clinging to Nell’s dress. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No ma’am, I’m fine.”

“Well, alright, honey.” Mrs. Brasher crossed her arms over her sagging breasts and took Nell in from head to foot. “You don’t need to be out here all by yourself. Now get in here and get you some of this food we’ve fixed for you and Ellis and Hayes.”

Nell allowed herself to be led back into the church but she wondered why old women believed every problem could be solved with a plate of food. Her grandmamma

had been the same way, always pushing a plate of something out in front of her when anything went wrong—like when her daddy ran off when she was only nine and her and her mama had to move in with her grandmamma and granddaddy just to get by. Nell felt like every waking moment had been filled with some kind of food being pushed and shoved in front of her for months afterwards.

She did not deal with grief in this way. She was more like her granddaddy, retreating off to bed with the slightest sign of trouble. There wasn't much sleep couldn't fix—making her forget, letting her escape whatever was going on around her. At least that was the way it was when her daddy ran off with Gretchen Townsley for Georgia without any sign or warning for her or her mama. She always found peace in her bed—the quiet forgetting. Sleep had continued to comfort her throughout her life until now, until the dreams began with Molly, her floating out there in the water and Ellis holding her up, the wet curls clinging to his arms and neck.

As she stepped back into the church, a slow silence crept across the room starting with the corner nearest her. The men sitting at the tables stopped telling their stories and were silent. Pastor Jerome was sitting at the head of the least splintered table near the front, a spoonful of potato salad hovering just below his mouth.

He said, “That’s when I told her if she called the insurance company one more time sounding like that, they’d start looking into her mental health coverage next.” He laughed, but no one else did.

“Is there anything I can get you, honey?” Mrs. Brasher asked, resting her hand against Nell’s shoulder blade.

“Just a glass of unsweet tea,” she said.

“Alright then, but you need to eat something soon. Keep up your strength,” Mrs. Brasher said and disappeared in the kitchen.

For what? For Hayes, for Adler? That’s what they would tell her in their condescending way. Surely she knew she must be there for them.

She didn’t know why this was her burden. She didn’t know why it was anyone’s burden. Nell chose, instead, to stay strong for no one but herself. She could not carry their weight too.

Mrs. Brasher handed Nell the glass of tea. “Why don’t you sit down for a minute,” she said.

“No, I’m fine.”

“I am so sorry that you are having to go through all of this.” The old woman rested her hand on Nell’s arm.

Nell lifted her arm and knocked Mrs. Brasher away. She slung her head back drinking the tea as if taking a shot of whiskey. She wished she were. “If you’ll excuse me, Mrs. Brasher, I need to go check on Hayes.” She walked away without waiting for a response.

She crossed the room to the foyer glass doors, half embracing the men and women who came up to her to offer the sympathy she had heard repeated so many times in the past week, and she nodded her head, murmuring thanks as she fought back the urge to cry, to scream, to do something more honest, more real than what she was doing.

When they had carried Molly up to the cemetery, the sky had been a bright clear blue, spotted with clouds, but the wind had picked up and was slinging the crepe myrtles back and forth. The sky was filling with clouds of gray and white, and she thought that by nightfall it would all turn ugly and dark.

As she turned from the glass doors, she was startled to see Hayes leaning against the wall just a few feet away. His skin was ashy and pale. Nell noticed the way his hair fell over his ears and eyebrows and into his eyes. She had planned on taking him to the barber shop when school started back, but now she didn't see the point. She had refused to cut his hair, her first born, until he was three, and standing there in front of her now, his shaggy hair falling across his face, he still looked like the boy she had held so many years before. But his eyes were set, fighting her without words. The roundness of his face from when he was a boy was gone, and she could see the distinct angle of his sharp jaw, his teeth clenched behind his full lips.

"Hayes, let's go home," she said, a truce, holding her hand out.

"What about Adler?" he said.

"He knows how to find his way."

Nell walked straight to the back of the house to her bedroom, dropping her purse in the foyer as she crossed the threshold. Standing at the foot of the unmade bed, she lifted her legs one at a time, bending them back at the knee before slipping the flesh colored patent leather heels from her feet and dropping them to the floor. She felt smaller, not just shorter but smaller, standing there flatfooted in front of the king size bed.

She closed her eyes and twisted her arm around to the back of her body, stretching to reach the zipper pull.

For the first few years of their marriage, Adler had always helped her undress, opening up the hard to reach places as he kissed her neck. That had been years ago, though, and Nell had grown accustomed to reaching those places without his help. She arched her back, forcing the zipper lower as she reached up and pulled it down. The dress fell to the floor, creating a black puddle of crepe she stepped out off before crawling into the bed.

She lay awake on the still made bed for several minutes, tracing the lines and corners of the room—all in shades of white, the walls, the bedding, even the old dresser, its chipped paint coming off in sheets of ivory bone exposing the worn gray wood beneath. It would feel clean, she had thought, having everything in white, but she had not thought about the wear of everyday life.

Her white had become dingy and gray, with dust clinging to the delicate smocked curtains and yellow sweat stains covering the edge of the bed where Adler slept. Even the carpeted floor, not quite white, but a pale beige, had been stained years ago—a spilled glass of red wine. Or perhaps it had been thrown. Either way, Nell had not bothered to clean it, choosing instead to fill a new, unbroken glass, and so it stayed just another mark on her white world she could not and would not manage.

Nell was unsure of how long she had been asleep when she awoke to Adler holding her, one arm wrapped around her waist as he cupped her right breast with his hand. She tried to pull away softly, not wanting to wake him, but he was not asleep.

“Hey there. I was looking for you at the church, but I’m glad I found you here, like this.”

Nell shifted more of her weight to her stomach, trying to pull her breast from his hand without sitting up. “It looked like it was going to rain, and for all I knew you were still up on the cemetery.”

“I understand,” he said, but Nell knew he didn’t. He didn’t understand anything as he pulled her body back tighter into his. “Ellis and Joy brought me home. They saw you leave earlier with Hayes.”

Nell could feel a heaviness pressing down on her coming not only from the unwanted weight of his body but also from him, from every part of him—pouring from his pores and words and breath against her skin. She wanted to push him away, to tell him he disgusted her, but she did not want the confrontation—not because she was frightened, but rather because she was tired. She was too tired to fight with him or anyone. Still, she could feel it coming deep from within her. The fight was coming whether she wanted it to or not.

Adler slid his hand down her waist before resting it between her legs. His breath was heavy now, a panting in her ears and head. “You know how much I love you, don’t you?”

“Don’t do that. You always do that,” she said, pulling her body from his and standing up at the foot of the bed. One bra strap was sliding off her shoulder and the elastic waistband of her half-slip was stretched taught over her rounded hipbones.

“What is it I always do?” He propped up on one arm, his chest bare.

“This,” Nell said slinging her arm in the direction of the bed. “You always do this. Whenever anything bad happens, I can rely on you to turn around and grope me and paw at me like you’re some kind of clumsy teenager. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You did this after my mother died and then again when we thought we were going to lose the house. You don’t remember? Only those times, I just laid there and let you do whatever it was you wanted to do until you were done, but not this time,” she said. He had wrestled his pants back on without getting out of the bed.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she said. “Why the hell do you think I would want to have sex with you only hours after her funeral.”

“I don’t know Nell. I’m sorry I’m not handling this the way you want. Why don’t you tell me what to say and how to act like you always do, and maybe this will be a lot easier for the both of us?”

“Don’t you dare make this about me,” she said, walking up to him. “I just wanted to be left alone, and I feel like I made that pretty clear by leaving you at the church. Hayes is capable of figuring it out. He realizes I need some time to myself—to just process what this all means, but you are completely incapable.”

“You’re right Nell. I am incapable. I guess I’m just an idiot because I love you and want to be close to you.”

“No, no. This is not about you or what you want. You cannot use her like that.”

“Then tell me what you want.”

“I don’t want you, and I don’t care about how you want to tell me you love me. I don’t understand why you can’t grasp that this is not about us. It’s about her. She’s gone. She’s dead, and you didn’t even want to be a pallbearer. Why? Tell me why, Adler? Why didn’t you want to be with her one last time? Why can’t you talk about her? You haven’t said her name since that night at the hospital. Not once. Just tell me something about Molly instead of grabbing at me.”

“Alright Nell, alright. Do you want me to let you in to how I feel?” He stood up. “I’ll let you in. All I can do is think about her, and it’s killing me. Everything I do or see or think about reminds me of her in some way. And I want to push away. I want to push it all away and hide and forget. Everything is ruined. Even all of the good memories are fucked up now that she’s gone because that’s all they are—memories, and there will never be anything else. I just want to try to forget for a while. Is it so bad to try to be happy with what I have left, with what we have left, if just for a few moments before it all comes back?”

He paced from one side of the wide room to the other. Twilight was setting in and the overcast skies filled the unlit room with a deep gray. He seemed to be moving inside a world separate from her.

“Do you want to know what I do all day, in the back of the tire shop now? Do you?” he said. “I just listen to ‘Good Night’ over and over and over. Do you remember that Nell? Do you? Do you remember singing it to her the first night when we came home from the hospital with her, and every night for months and months after, just trying to get her to sleep? Do you remember singing it to her every time she was sick or hurt or

scared? Because I do. And now I can't get that damn song out of my head, and it's driving me mad, so I just go ahead and listen to it hoping one day I can just let it go."

"I don't want to ever let go."

"Sometimes you have to, Nell. It's the only way to get through a thing like this. It's the only way to get through life."

She turned without saying a word and walked to the closet, pulling out a white blouse she wrapped around her body and a pair of blue jeans she slid under her slip before pulling it off.

"Do you understand, Nell? Because we have Hayes, we still have Hayes. We can't get lost in a thing like this. We have to find our way back out—to him, to us."

"I'm already lost, Adler. I was lost before Molly died. I just knew how to hide from it then." She slid on a pair of ballet flats. "I've always been lost, and there's no finding my way out now."

"What do you mean Nell? What are you doing?" Adler said, stepping in front of the bedroom door.

"I have to get out of here," she said. "I have to go."

"Why? Because I did what you asked me to? And now you get to run off?"

"Adler, please just move," Nell said. "I need some time by myself. I've already told you that."

"No, you don't," he said crossing the room to the tall dresser. "What are you trying to say, Nell, about having been lost?"

“It’s just the way I am, Adler. I’m lost, and I’m lost because of you. I only want what I can’t have, and I’ve always known that I can have you.”

“Nell, what are you trying to say to me.”

“I’m not trying to say anything. I’m telling you I don’t want you. That I never have.” She stood looking up into his eyes, unmoving, her face smooth and firm as she watched him. “You make it too easy. No one wants something they can have without even trying, and I’ve never had to try for you. You’ve always just been here—no matter what I do or say, you’re still always here waiting for me. I don’t have to love you or care about you or do anything to keep you. I’m sick of it. I’m sick of being forced to hold on to something I never even wanted. Now, are you going to let me go or not.” She looked at his arm blocking her from passing.

“What are you going to do,” he said, dropping it.

“Does it matter?” and she brushed past him. “I know you’ll be here when I get back.”

As she walked down the hallway and past the kitchen, Nell was startled to see Hayes sitting at the table holding the purple geode that had been missing from the top of Molly’s dresser just a few days before her death.

“Hayes, what are you doing?” she said. “Where did you get that?”

He quickly pushed the geode deep down in his pocket and rested his folded hands back on the table. “What does it matter?” he said. “What are you doing?”

Nell shifted her weight from one foot to the other feeling the deep seam of the grout line through the thin leather soles of her shoes. A stack of Styrofoam plates sat on

the kitchen island. “Now, why did Adler bring this mess home? Does he really think we’d want to eat the food from her funeral?” She grabbed the plates and dropped them in the trash before wiping down the butcher block countertop with her dishcloth.

“Did you not want me or Molly either?”

“What?” Nell said, dropping the dishcloth to the floor and crossing the room to the table.

“Was it just Adler you didn’t want, or did you not want any of this? I’ve heard the stories—the quick wedding, and then I was born eight months later. It must all be awful for you.”

Nell lifted her hand and slapped Hayes across the face so hard he was forced to catch himself on the table to keep from falling out of his chair.

She stood there for a moment longer, the red welchs rising up on his cheek. Hayes rubbed the side of his face.

“You are mine,” Nell said and pushed her face down close to his, feeling the breath escape his slightly open mouth. “You are no one else’s but mine, and that is all.”

Hayes said nothing.

“Good,” she said and crossed the kitchen to the backdoor letting the screen slam behind her.

Everything left then, everything but her grief. She was no longer angry with Hayes or disgusted with Adler. All she could feel was her loss, and she could sense herself buckling under its weight. She pressed her back against the cedar shingles of the house as she slid down to the ground.

The clouds had broken, and the sky was deepening into indigo while reds and oranges crossed into the shade of the black trees. Hayes was hers, she thought again as a trailing contrail glowed like fire.

She had never spoken of the pregnancy, never told her mother about the night at Mama Rae's when she and Ellis made love. They were seniors in high school.

But Nell's mother knew her daughter was in trouble, knew she was in trouble in the same way she had been in trouble before she married Nell's father.

"What are you going to do?" her mother said. She sat in front of the wood burning fireplace darning the socks of a man who lived two towns over and sold broken down cars out of the side lot of an abandoned gas station. Her mother had been seeing this new man the past two months.

"What am I going to do about what, Mama?" Nell watched the needle fall and rise with the dexterous twist of her mother's wrist.

"Don't play the fool with me. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," she said. The embers of the fire popped up with a sharp crackle.

"Do you need some money? I can ask Mr. Jake to lend you some to have it taken care of."

"No," Nell said. "I don't want that."

Her mouth was dry, the hot fire heating the side of her face in the crowded and cramped living room, as she thought about taking the money and having everything fixed. It wasn't the first time it had crossed her mind. When she first realized what it meant, why she was late, she wanted to run away to have it taken out so no one would

ever know, so she could forget, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't take Mr. Jake's money.

There had been many since her daddy left, and she suspected there had been a fair share before he had left. Her mama had been too scared to bring the men around when her grandparents were still alive, but they were there, lurking in the background.

Nell learned to recognize the signs of them—when her mother would bring home a new dress her grandmamma would not approve of or a piece of jewelry they all knew she couldn't afford on her waitress salary. There were times, too, when she came home with bruises or a bloodied face when those men thought she hadn't paid her fare for the nice things she was given. Nell could still remember, sitting in front of the warmth of the fire, the cold seeping through the floorboards as she had hid under the bed when those men, drunken, angry came looking for something.

After Nell's grandmamma and granddaddy had died and left her and her mama the house, the men became more of a presence in Nell's life. She hated seeing them. Hated the rotation—the men who would ignore her as she set down their breakfasts, or the ones who would slap her ass as she walked away. But more than them, she hated the ones who would try to play the part of her father telling her what to do, how to dress, what was expected of her. And it was Mr. Jake who fell most fully into this latter category. No. She would not take anything from him.

“Then what are you going to do?” her mother said.

“I don't know.”

“Have you slept with Adler, yet?” she said, her eyes still on the worn and sweat-stained sock.

“What?”

“I can look at you and tell it’s not his— it’s somebody’s that it’s not supposed to be. Do you think I’ve never had that look before? Only thing is, I had sense enough to have it taken care of. Now tell me have you had sex with Adler?”

Nell had had enough. “Why do you darn that man’s socks and wash his clothes and carry him his lunch? Doesn’t he have a wife to do all that for him? They usually do.”

A smile crept across her mother’s face. “Don’t you worry about my sins.” She put the sock up to her mouth to bite through the dark brown thread. “It seems like you’re racking up your fair share. Now tell me. Have you had sex with him yet or not.”

“No,” Nell said.

“Well, if you’re not going to take Jake’s money, then you’re going to need to sleep with Adler. We both knew you were going to end up marrying him anyway. You’ll just have to do it a little sooner than expected.” Then she dropped the spool of thread into her basket and shut the lid.

The contrails had completely disappeared, and stars were beginning to make their way through the dark. She heard voices in the kitchen and decided to leave before Hayes and Adler found her. Standing up, she brushed the earth and decaying leaves from her clothes and walked to her car. She pressed her hand against the glass of the back door as

she stared at Molly's booster seat, a McDonald's cup still in the cupholder and a forgotten balloon floating beside it.

Fucking balloon, she thought, that fucking balloon is still here, and she's dead. She opened the back door and reached for the balloon as it bobbed up and down away from her. Holding it in her hand for a moment she looked at the wilting red mylar and thought back to Molly. Her favorite color was purple. Why did she pick this damn red balloon? Nell hated the balloon and then hated herself for feeling that way about the last thing she had bought for her.

As Nell leaned over to put the balloon back in the car, she heard the screen door slam. The thin ribbon slipped between her fingertips, and the balloon floated into the sky. She grabbed at the string, but it lifted up and away from her. Adler was standing on the narrow stoop, his hands plunged deep into his pockets as he watched the balloon go up. All was quiet until the screen door slammed once again, and Adler turned off the porch light from within, leaving her too in the darkness.

Chapter 6—Nell

Nell stood in the driveway, her hand pressed against the still warm hood of the car. The smoke from the burn barrel all around her. She could feel Fenton's eyes on her, and she wanted to shake them off, but she couldn't. Instead, she let him look. What did he want from her anyway? What did he expect to find? She knew there was nothing there, and if there were, it was buried too deep for a fifteen year old boy to discover. It was buried too deep for anyone.

She opened the door and sat down in the car, slow and deliberate, letting him search. Then she pulled out of the driveway onto the tar and gravel road.

The houses in Raynham, for the most part, sat back away from the road, their wide driveways crawling up the expanse of broad yards before stopping just shy of a cluster of rose bushes or azaleas or hydrangeas sitting below a picture window and protected by a thin line of worn bricks protruding out of the thick red clay.

Nell drove slowly, squinting to see inside the homes as she passed. In some, the lights were on and the blinds drawn high, so she could see through to the families inside—people gathering around the table to eat, others sitting in the open living rooms looking at one another, talking to one another. A mother stood leaning against a doorframe, her hands wrapped in a blue flowered apron as she looked down at her husband sitting stretched out in a brown leather recliner, a young girl on the floor with a stack of books

beside her and around her a scattered nest of papers. In another, a boy lay back on his bed throwing a small red ball against the wall opposite him, the ball bouncing back into his cupped hands in a swift relaxed motion as he waited unmoving, unflinching. In most, however, all was dark except for the surreal flicker of the television bouncing around the room and across the captivated faces.

Nell felt weary as she pushed through the town, lightheaded but not. She was aware, she thought, of the very real presence of her brain, but yet simultaneously had a strange numbing sensation as if the front cavity of her skull had been emptied of its contents. She could feel herself moving as though she were in a cloud, disconnected from everything and everyone. Her hands relaxed around the steering wheel, and she believed that none of her actions would have any consequences, that is, until they did. She felt as though she herself were a contradiction, and she imagined herself to be moving through time and space with a slow fluidity that resisted change or effect. She was nothing, but with a sudden rap like the clap of thunder everything would change, and the world would come crumbling to her feet with the slightest glance, and she would again be left alone.

Pulling into the smooth paved driveway leading up to the two story house, Nell could feel the urge to be with Ellis slipping away from her, but she had made up her mind again just as she had the night of Molly's funeral. She would not turn back now—not with the plume of smoke still spilling from the back of the house on the other side of town. The driveway was empty except for Ellis's beat up Chevy, and she knew Joy would either be at the church or Sammy's bar, haunting one or the other. She sat in her

car a while longer, trying and failing to find some sign of movement behind the narrow blinds before she opened the car door and swung her legs out into the damp, cool air.

As she walked up to the house, she felt the pounding in her head echo the steady rhythm of her feet against sidewalk, and just as she reached the bottom step she wanted to turn back to the fire, to Adler. She felt sick. The pounding in her head was followed by a swift beating in her chest. She kept going forward and could feel in each step the dissonance between her forward movement and the voice inside telling her to stop. It was deafening. She felt off balance and gripped the iron rail running along the front porch steps until she was standing face to face with Ellis at the open front door.

“I don’t want to be at my house.” It was the only thing she could think of to say.

“Well, I’m glad you’re with me,” Ellis said.

He was so sure of himself, she thought, and she traced the smug lines of his face, him towering over her as if to demand some recognition from her of the desire she felt for him. But there was no desire, just a longing, a longing to again remember what had passed from her and what Adler was burning. Ellis had been the one to pull Molly’s body from the water and set it at her feet, like a sacrifice. And for that she owed him something she did not want to give.

“Adler’s burning her things,” Nell said.

Ellis dropped his arm and leaned in to kiss her neck, but she pulled away.

“That’s not what this is about, and you know it.”

He said nothing, and Nell walked inside to the back of the house down the dark hallway to the bedroom, Ellis following behind.

“Why would he burn her things?” he asked as Nell turned her back to him to unbutton the mother of pearl buttons lining the front of her white blouse.

He put his hands on her bare shoulders and stood in front of her, this man, tall and once attractive. She could still remember the lines of his body and the feel of him under her from seventeen years ago. She didn’t want him then, and she didn’t want him now—his belly sticking out over the waistband of his boxers and pale stretch marks circling his torso.

“Why do you keep coming back here?” he asked.

She put her fingers against his peeling lips.

“Because I’m alone,” she said.

She undressed quickly as if she were standing in front of nothing more than a reflection of herself in her own bathroom mirror. “Because it doesn’t matter anymore. Because everything binding me is dead.”

“What about Hayes. You still have him. You still have a family there,” Ellis said unbuttoning his stiff black trousers.

“Hayes is different. Hayes is mine,” Nell said as she walked up to him naked and cold.

Nell sat at the edge of the brass bed on one of the folded patchwork quilts Mama Rae had made adjusting the straps of her bra as Ellis slid his arm under the fabric of her blouse and rested his hand against the small of her back. The roughness of his palm pushing in on her. She wanted to pull away, but still she sat there—motionless looking

straight ahead at the tall dresser filled with pictures of Ellis and Joy and Fenton. Her bare feet rested on the knotted orange pine floors, and the warmth from the kerosene heater began to spread across the room, the burning dust from the season's first lighting closing in on her, making her feel as if she were smothering.

She felt like she was seventeen, not fully knowing why she was doing what she was doing as this man she didn't want touched her and pulled her back down against him on the bed.

"Lay, lady, lay," he whispered, his lips grazing her ear. He ran his hands over her hip bones.

"I should go," she said.

She turned her head away from him looking through the brass bars of the footboard to the mirror facing the bed. Her face was smeared with stale makeup, and all she could hear was the voice of her mother—*You look like a whore, all them boys following you around like a dog in heat.*

"Are you going to come back again? Or was it just about Adler this time?" he said. "I've missed you, Nell. I've needed you, and now I think you finally might need me too—even if it's just to get back at him."

She stood up, fastening her jeans. "I've never needed anyone."

"Well, maybe not, or maybe that's just what you tell yourself at night when you're alone with him in the dark. But I think you'll find most everybody needs somebody for something."

“I’m going, Ellis.” She slid on the worn ballet slippers and stood up at the edge of the bed. He propped against the headboard. Her blouse was still open as she walked to the closed bedroom door and stopped before opening it as she worked at the buttons.

She did not need to look from her fumbling fingers to know who was standing there. She could feel him watching her all over again—the same warmth rising up from her chest to her face as he stood there motionlessly seeing her for what she was as if she were his to stare at and hold for as long as he saw fit. Still Nell looked up to see him. She had never noticed the small scar Fenton carried just above his upper lip, and as he stood there watching her, she couldn’t take her eyes off it, imagining how it got there to begin with. A fall from his bicycle? A blow from another boy? Or perhaps just the result of some accident?

He did not look at her the way other men saw her, the way she would expect a teenage boy to look at an undressed woman. Instead, he looked only at her eyes as if he were searching for something, trying to find something about her she was unwilling to offer anyone. But, somehow, deep within, Nell felt a desire to give him whatever it was he was so desperately looking for, as if it would save them both. She could not, though, and she knew she could not. He was looking for something she had never given to anyone. Instead, she gave him what she thought he should want. She opened her blouse, but he turned from her, rushing down the hall bumping into the walls as he went. She opened her mouth to call after him, but she could only hear Ellis calling him. Ellis’ voice was no more than a droning in her head.

Nell followed Fenton slowly, not trying to catch him, instead only tracing his steps out of the house. As she stood on the back porch for a few moments, her back pressed against the door, she did not care that he had seen her. It seemed fitting that he should be here, too, after watching her—watching her at the drip hole and the funeral and then again, just hours earlier, outside the house as Molly's things were burnt into nothing.

The katydids were chirping and squealing still, their slowing call not accepting the early autumn creeping over them to chill and silence their song in a few short weeks. A truck was pulling out of the driveway.

Nell wrapped her arms around her narrow body feeling alone and cold the way she did seventeen years ago sitting on the front porch of Mama Rae's house in somebody else's clothes.

It had been Nell's idea, all those years ago, to shoot off the old canon and set the bridge on fire. It had been her idea too to do it when she knew Joy was going to be out of the way with Mama Rae up in Winston County. What she hadn't counted on, though, was the way her plan would come together just perfectly, everybody falling in place like they ought to. Nell hated perfection and everything surrounding it. She hated it for its artifice, its seeming impossibility, preferring instead the flawed. Perfection, to Nell, seemed fitting only for picture books—never real life.

She had never cared much for Ellis, never wanted him either, not the way she had seen women longing after men in picture shows at the drive-in, but still she felt a pulling towards him, a pulling different and stronger than what she had with Adler.

Ellis had seemed too big for Raynham from the very start, always talking about leaving, seeing something new—doing something different than what his daddy had done and what his granddaddy had done before him. He had wanted to be a part of something else, something bigger, but he never said what. Nell had suspected he didn't know anymore than anybody else how to get out and be something different, but still she liked it, the talk, thinking it was nothing more than a bunch of big words for a man who would turn out to be little enough in the end.

Nell had no desire to leave Raynham. She knew the men here were the same as the men anywhere, and she was just as likely to get what she could by staying than leaving. Nell didn't want to be provided for either. She assumed she could provide for herself well enough, if she would only try. And, in a way she did try. She did, after all, give just enough of herself to be cared for and looked after. It was no easy task for Nell to give, and anything was better than nothing, in her thinking.

What Nell wanted, more than a man or house or any of the other things that the women in a town like Raynahm wanted, was a challenge. She wanted to take without giving anything in return. She wanted to take what was not hers, and Ellis offered her that challenge, but it was not Ellis alone. No, it was Ellis with Joy.

Joy, unlike Ellis, was just like everybody else in Raynham. All she wanted was the husband and house, and a yard full of kids to holler at from time to time. Nell was never quite sure how the two of them fit together—Ellis wanting to run away from it all with Joy wanting to settle down right there on Mama Rae's land to make another generation that wouldn't change from the one before them.

When they were still in high school, Nell would sit there every Friday night in one of the booths at Chuck's picking at her burger and fries, Adler's arm draped over her shoulder, not saying anything, just watching, watching to see if she could figure out why Ellis would want Joy. That's when she started thinking, started wondering if she could pull him away, if she could give him something different and if he'd take it. She'd never really wanted him. She'd just wanted him to want her enough to admit that Joy wasn't enough. That's all she'd really cared about, even though she'd never admit it, not even to herself. All she'd wanted was to take a little bit of him away. She never wanted all of him.

Afterwards, she'd hated him because he turned out to be just like everyone else, fitting perfectly in the box Joy had constructed for him. She hated Adler too for not realizing what was going on. But not Joy. She'd never hated Joy, not then. Maybe because she knew that Joy had always known. Nell let Joy keep on with her game of knowing all, but it didn't turn out the way she wanted because she ended up with a much bigger piece of Ellis than she had ever hoped to win.

Sitting on that front porch seventeen years ago, she felt the way she did now on the back porch—like she'd ruined everything while simultaneously having nothing to ruin. And then there was Molly. She was gone, and Nell felt curiously drawn to the man who had pulled her dead body from the water. It was all she could see when she closed her eyes at night—the image of Ellis holding the girl, the weight of her pressing down against his arms—and together, the two of them there in her memory felt distant, as if maybe Molly had never been at all.

But there was still Ellis—Ellis who held Molly at the end. And now she needed him, not in the way she had needed him seventeen years ago, not to feel wanted by being able to pull him away from someone he was supposed to love. She needed him to remember. She needed him to prove to herself that Molly wasn't just a dream to be swept away each morning. She had to relive it—over and over again, that moment at the drip hole when everything changed. And she could do that with Ellis. Each time he touched her, held her, felt her, she would remember it was him who pulled Molly from the water. Not Adler, but him. She would not say it, but she could feel it, feel it inside of him when they were together. Molly had become the language they both knew but refused to speak.