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The Crow Chaser

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The Crow Chaser

A Thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
The College of Arts & Sciences
Department of English
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

William Clark Warren
April 2022



Thesis/Dissertation Signature Request Form
The Crow Chaser

Submitted by William Clark Warren in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA in Creative Writing.

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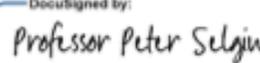
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TABLE of CONTENTS

Critical Essay	<i>What Makes Us Superhuman: The Broken Protagonists of Jeff Vandermeer & Madeline Miller</i>	2
	Forward The Field of Genre Fiction	3
	I. Designing Something Broken	5
	II. Miller’s Abused Witch	8
	III. Vandermeer’s Detached Biologist	13
	IV. The Transformative Nature of Being Broken	19
	Epilogue My Desk & Me	21
Thesis Manuscript	<i>The Crow Chaser</i>	23
	Chapter One Aphonia	25
	Chapter Two The Elephant	40
	Chapter Three Meet & Met	56
	Chapter Four Kin	75
	Chapter Five A Man Without Pants	89
	Chapter Six Morning in the Woods	112
	Interlude One Points of View	123
	Chapter Seven The Roof	139
	Chapter Eight Paternity	147
	Chapter Nine El Desperado	162
	Chapter Ten Something to Talk About	175
	Chapter Eleven Saint Charity	184
	Chapter Twelve Hercules’ Day	198
	Interlude Two Night	209

What Makes Us Superhuman:
The Broken Protagonists of Madeline Miller & Jeff Vandermeer

William Clark Warren

FORWARD: *The Field of Genre Fiction*

The ecosystem of what I read tends to have little overlap with that of my peers. If the goal of this essay is to place my novel *The Crow Chaser* into a literary landscape, any connection I can attempt to make between it and contemporary literary fiction will prove to be a contrivance. Before typing out these words and risking self-parody, I created a color-coded spreadsheet listing every single book of fiction I have read published after 2011. Genre fiction dominated. The only works of literary fiction present were ones I read in class. I just don't enjoy reading most literary fiction, let alone writing it.

And while training to become a better writer, I have been pleasantly surprised by the tolerance shown by my educators and mentors towards genre fiction, given its reputation for an over-focus on premise, sacrificing character and language; however, I will forever nurse the sting of a peer's response to my writing: "I just can't find the literary merit in this."

I have received similar feedback on many of my stories: great world-building, interesting and memorable characters, and strong language. But was any of it literary? To be clear, I never intended my writing to be "of literary merit." I had just meant for it to be good. And to me, that's all literary writing should be. I don't think as writers and as critical readers, there should be much else in consideration. As Jeff Vandermeer states in *Wonderbook: the Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*:

"Even the issue of what is imaginative or fantastical can be misunderstood, especially by those who are overinvested in the tribalism of genre. Does it really matter if the imaginative impulse

results in the ‘fantastical’ in the sense of ‘containing an explicit fantastical event’? No. For one thing, ‘imaginative’ writing occurs across every possible genre and subgenre. And for a certain kind of writer, a sense of fantastical play will always exist on the page” (Vandermeer 12).

In other words, if you have beef with genre fiction, a cosmic octopus will show you the door. Some writers will always gravitate towards the unreal and fantastical in their work. To that end, this essay will not be focusing on works that a publishing company might market as literary.

For those of you keeping track, we have come dangerously close to the middle of this essay’s second page, and I still have not yet articulated a thesis statement. And so, as I drag you out onto the bioluminescent field of genre fiction, I think it would be most fitting if we disregard the old formulas and say fuck it. Who needs a thesis statement anyway? A thesis statement functions like a hallway with high walls that, if you are lucky, will have some windows to let in outside light. I would rather go frolicking outside. Dress me in a pleated skirt and call me Fraulein William. I am not going back to the convent.

I am going to write about character design. Specifically, I am going to write about how two works of contemporary genre fiction, Madeline Miller’s *Circe* and Jeff Vandermeer’s *Annihilation*, feature broken protagonists. I am going to discuss how the fantastical elements in both of these novels influence the course of action their broken characters take. And I am going to treat these novels as though they possess the same inherent literary merit as any piece of literary fiction taught in English departments at universities nationwide.

I: *Designing Something Broken*

On my desk stands a little bookshelf I built over ten years ago out of sanded but unfinished planks of pine. Over my printer, it forms a wooden loft in which I store knickknacks, seashells, leather bookmarks, and a collection of craft books. I got most of these books before I started writing *The Crow Chaser*, and many of them offer the most basic of writing tips (take *Writing the Intimate Character* by Jordan Rosenfeld, which notes on page 88 that “When you write from the pronoun *I*, readers get to feel as though they are inside your viewpoint character’s perspective.”) But there are a notable few I have acquired since. Some of these books were gifts, some I bought, and a couple I stole, but prefer to think of as borrowed and simply never returned. I turn to these books for answers to some fundamental questions: Why do characters matter? What makes a well-realized character? And how does a character influence his or her own story?

One of the books I ~borrowed~, *Method and Madness: the Making of a Story* by Alice LaPlante, has this to say about characters: “When we read a book of fiction, one of the things we’re most focused on (whether we realize it or not) is character... whether the characters are compelling or not is really the bottom line. Consciously or subconsciously, we have our radar switched on to detect signs of life” (LaPlante 326). Characters are what makes fiction readable and functional. On the periodic table of storytelling, they are an element which cannot be further divided. The more interesting a character is, the richer the fiction. A compelling character feels alive and is necessary to the art of writing fiction.

But characters do not pop into existence from the void. Whether a character is interesting or boring, full or flat, unique or generic does not depend on luck. Writers aren’t gamblers hoping

a good character rolls out of a slot machine. A character is a thing devised by its author. The goal of a fiction writer is to use words as a sculptor uses marble to create a likeness of a person, a *round* or *three-dimensional* character. For this, Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* offers a technique:

“If Macbeth were merely ambitious, there'd be no play. He'd simply defeat the English and rule Scotland. Macbeth is a brilliantly realized character because of the contradiction between his ambition on one hand and his guilt on the other. From this profound inner contradiction springs his passion, his complexity, his poetry. Dimension means contradiction” (McKee 378).

In so many words, this is an affirmation of William Faulkner's famous speech delivered at the 1950 Nobel Banquet Hall in Stockholm, where he said, “... the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.”

In the first section of his book analyzing various classic Russian short stories *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, George Saunders examines Anton Chekhov's craft in the short story “The Cart,” specifically the way Chekhov designs its protagonist Marya. In his analysis, Saunders says, “Of all the people in the world he might have put in this cart, Chekhov has chosen an unhappy woman resisting the charms of springtime... Out of the mist of every-story-that-could-be, a particular woman has started to emerge” (Saunders 15). What Saunders gets at is how characters create their stories. “The Cart” does not make sense if Marya is a blissful newlywed or a psychotic murderer. Saunders continues:

“As a particular person gets made, the potential for meaningful action increases... Now that Marya is here, unhappy, the story becomes restless.

“The story has said of her, ‘She is unhappy and can’t imagine any other life for herself.’

“And we feel the story preparing itself to say something like ‘Well, we’ll see about that’” (Saunders 16).

A fully realized protagonist is one that possesses contradictions, but also details that influence the course of the plot. The protagonist, the character upon which a novel hinges, must meet these criteria. But this essay is not an exploration of protagonists broadly. I am here to write about the broken protagonist. So, what makes a protagonist (or a person) broken?

A quick Google search of the phrase “a broken person” delivers this depressing result from a blog post on *YourTango.com* entitled “12 Sad Signs You’re Emotionally Damaged & Are Too Broken to Love.” It describes a broken individual as one who “[has] big problems that hurt other people, leaving them in emotional distress.” While this isn’t an academic source, it is a useful framework. A broken character is one whose internal conflicts/traumatic backstory drive forward a plot in which that character’s actions do harm to others. Chekhov’s Marya, for example, is not a broken character, as her actions, what few of them there are, are neither sufficiently damaging nor is that damage outwardly directed. Marya might be a *broken-down* character, but she is not a *broken* character. Broken characters are those who might be described as abusive, paranoid, volatile, and disloyal. They are hurt people who hurt people.

II: Miller's Abused Witch

Barring the few unfortunates living in doomsday bunkers for the last four years, everyone has heard of Madeline Miller's second novel *Circe*. The book was a critical and commercial sensation. The glossy bronze face on its cover stared longingly out from the windows of bookstores nationwide, begging potential readers to pick it up. As in her debut novel *Song of Achilles*, Miller's accessible yet luscious prose does not attempt to reimagine the Heroic Age of Greek Mythology; instead, Miller retells it from the perspective of sidelined characters—often ones equally as interesting as their more famous counterparts. I grew up in the age of *historically accurate* adaptations of the new millennium, which itself was followed by the *gritty reimaginings* of the Obama years. So when a novel like *Circe* that revels in magic and the strangeness of mythology arrived, it wasn't just refreshing—it was downright attractive. After all, there is nothing more attractive than confidence.

That is the Circe we are most familiar with. She is the daughter of Helios, the witch of Aiaia who turns men into swine and keeps lionesses for companions, who the hero Odysseus *has to shag*, and who must be left behind as he continues on his ill-fated journey back home to Ithaca. This is the Circe western literature has known for almost three thousand years: a powerful, feral, sexy sorceress. But that is not the character we meet at the start of Miller's novel. *Circe* opens with the line, "When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist." We are a far ways away from the woman Homer introduced us to in *The Odyssey*.

Part of what makes Miller's Circe such an interesting character is that Miller introduces her not at the height of her power, but as a powerless, vulnerable young nymph in the court of

her father. In this way, plot and character compliment each other. A protagonist needs room to develop. We all know what Circe will one day become, so Miller starts her off as something quite different. Circe begins as an insignificant, neglected and abused, broken girl cowering in the shadow of her infinitely more powerful family.

Between Helios' narcissism and Perse's disdain, Miller's Circe spends the first act of the novel doubting her own self-worth, desperate to glom onto what little external validation she can get. In this way, Circe is hurt. And it is this hurt which drives her to hurt others, namely and most evidently a fellow nymph and romantic rival named Scylla. She thinks to herself, when she finds out that the object of her affection Glaucos is in love with Scylla:

“Beautiful Scylla, dainty-doe Scylla, Scylla with her viper heart. Why had she done such a thing? It was not love, I had seen the sneer in her eyes when she spoke of [Glaucos'] flippers. Perhaps it was because she loved my sister and brother, who scorned me. Maybe... she liked the thought of taking something from the daughter of the sun” (Miller 55).

Were this a kitchen-sink realist novel, any non-lethal sabotage Circe might attempt would be mostly temporary. Imagine Circe in *Mean Girls* tricking Scylla into eating fattening protein bars or spreading a rumor about her venereal health. But this is the realm of Greek Mythology, and if you know who Circe is, you know who Scylla is. And so we see the tragic depths of Circe's brokenness as she concocts a brew from *pharmaka*, yellow flowers which grow in the places where the titan Cronos' blood fell. She pours it into Scylla's pond with the intention of transforming Scylla into what Circe believes to be her true form, a trick Circe had performed

earlier when she turned a fisherman into a god. But as her brother Aeëtes later says to her, “You do not think it convenient that their truest forms should happen to be your desires?” (Miller 70). Circe believes that Scylla is the only thing standing in the way of love and validation, so Circe turns Scylla into a monster.

I don’t know if a broken protagonist who feels powerless and struggles with loneliness lashing out against a romantic rival in a barbaric and cruel manner during the first act of a novel sounds familiar to anyone, but it should.

But back to *Circe*: On its face, this act looks like the deeds of a mythological mean girl. Girl likes boy. Boy likes another girl. Girl sabotages the other girl. But that is not the full story here. Circe does not transform Scylla to get the boy. She transforms Scylla because she is desperate and hurting and will do anything to feel like someone worthy of love, as she had felt briefly when she and Glaucos first met. What Circe lacks is a sense of self-worth after being reminded almost constantly by everyone around her that she is weak, ugly, and worth less than even the lowest of nymphs. Moments after her birth, her parents deem her insufficient. In Helios’ court and in the halls of her grandfather Oceanos, Circe is often alone and ignored, and when she isn’t ignored, she is bullied. Only Helios and Aeëtes show her any attention that falls outside the realm of abuse, and then only with conditions. As her sister Pasiphaë says, “None shrank and simpered as you did, and yet great Helios stepped on you all the faster, because you were already crouched at his feet” (Miller 146). With both Helios and Aeëtes, when Circe ceases to be obedient, they turn on her. When Helios banishes Circe for what she did to Scylla, he states:

“[Circe] defied my commands and contradicted my authority. She has turned her poisons against her own kind and committed other treacheries as well... She is a disgrace to our name. An ingrate to the care we have shown her. It is agreed with Zeus that for this she must be punished. She is exiled to a deserted island where she can do no harm. She leaves tomorrow” (Miller 74).

Notably, the first of Circe’s crimes that Helios lists is undermining *him*. This is common with narcissistic parents, who view their children not as autonomous beings with agency of their own, but as extensions of their own being. Similarly, when Aeëtes visits Aiaia much later in his pursuit of his daughter Medea, he demands that Circe hand her over. When Circe informs him that Medea is gone, that Circe let her go, Aeëtes says, “She is a criminal and a traitor! It was your duty to keep her for me!... I should punish you” (Miller 173).

When Helios delivers Circe to the island of Aiaia, where she will live out the rest of her days, the island comes with a palace and provisions aplenty. As Circe notes, “Zeus had demanded the discipline of Helios’ blood. Helios could not speak back openly, but he could make an answer of sorts, a message of defiance to rebalance the scales” (Miller 80). Helios does not set Circe up in a swanky new home because he cares for her, but because he cares about what it looks like if one of his children lives in anything less.

For the remainder of the novel, Scylla’s shadow looms in the back of Circe’s mind. But it is in her exile that Circe develops her much needed sense of self-worth, by living for herself and honing her craft with magic. The time it takes for Circe to become the powerhouse she is in *The Odyssey* is equivalent to the time it takes for her to heal her brokenness, and become the confident and competent sorceress that enters Homer’s ancient epic like a cold wind at the front

of a tempest. And even at the height of her power, this is not where Miller's Circe ends her story. "I had been old and stern for so long, carved with regrets and years like a monolith. But that was only a shape I was poured into. I did not have to keep it" (Miller 373). Old scabs still bleed, and Circe must settle the damages of her youth.

Circe is the story of a broken character, imbued with magical ability, which heightens the consequences of her brokenness. Overtime she must heal, and make right the wrongs she has committed. Ultimately, *Circe* tells a positive message about broken people, that they can grow and change under the right circumstances to become heroes.

While Lon O'Riordan might not qualify as a hero, much of his and Circe's psychological hang ups run parallel with each other. Both yearn for companionship early in their narratives and take out their jealousy on perceived romantic competition. For both of them, this results in an even more lonely situation than they began with. Both must spend time in the wilderness to heal.

And it seems like the wilderness is the place to be. In the oldest story written, Gilgamesh must remove himself from the city of Ur after his beloved friend Enkidu dies. It is in the wilds that he overcomes his mourning and fears of mortality, and finds enlightenment. And as can be seen in novels like *Circe*, this trope continues to hold weight to this day. Nature is never still, but always changing, even if those changes are slow and subtle. It is a place for growth and danger.

III: *Vandermeer's Detached Biologist*

You might know *Annihilation* from its 2018 adaptation of the same name starring Natalie Portman, but the name is about where the similarity between this novel and its adaptation ends. If you have seen the movie and not read the book, I regret to inform you that whatever foothold you may think you possess is one constructed by a filmmaker who only read the book once and chose not to consult it while writing and directing the movie. Yes, that is true, and it denotes a strangely prideful disdain for the source material from an otherwise competent filmmaker.

When I first came across Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*, the first and most self-contained book in the Southern Reach Trilogy, it was the summer after I graduated college, and I was in the middle of a trip up the east coast. I picked it up out of a shelf on the third floor of a bookstore in downtown Montreal. Thinking I would buy the next book *Acceptance* when I got home if I liked it, I purchased *Annihilation* without its sequel (the third and final installment *Authority* was set to release that autumn). Both fortunately and unfortunately for me, I burned through *Annihilation* in less than twenty-four hours, already on an Amtrak train south to New York as I turned its final pages. This novel is without doubt one of my favorite books of all time.

As I re-read it for this essay, I found I could not simply skim for evidence, so I began reading the whole thing, again, in one day, while taking note of pertinent quotes. I have a document twelve pages long filled with potential excerpts. As much as I would like to inundate you with them, to do so would take this essay four outside of its page range.

The main reason why I cherish this book so much is its protagonist: an unnamed biologist on an expedition into the mysterious and uncanny Area X, documenting her experience and

reflecting on the events in her life that have brought her there. It is later revealed that the narrative is told in a journal that she has compiled after the events of the book, both unable and unwilling to return home.

Honestly, the biologist reminds me of one of my exes: aloof, guarded, coldly rational, and intelligent. As she describes herself: “[F]un for me was sneaking off to peer into a tidal pool, to grasp the intricacies of the creatures that lived there... Observation had always meant more to me than interaction,” (Vandermeer 110). The biologist knows what she brings to the team. “I qualified because I specialized in transitional environments... my existence back in the world had become at least as empty as Area X. With nothing left to anchor me, I *needed* to be here,” (Vandermeer 12).

After her husband joined the eleventh expedition into Area X, he reappears suddenly at her house, but he is an empty version of himself. The biologist says of him, “He contained within him now the very distance he had in so many subtle and not so subtle ways accused me of in the past” (Vandermeer 56). The biologist calls the Southern Reach, the government agency in charge of Area X, and they pick him up, unable to explain his sudden emergence. In their custody, her husband (along with all of the other members of the eleventh expedition who, like him, just showed up at their homes one day) wastes away from cancer. Within six months he is dead. After all of this, the biologist joins up for the twelfth expedition. She is self-aware and knows how strange the circumstances are, as she says, “A spouse of a former expedition member had never signed up before.... I think they accepted me as an experiment,” (Vandermeer 83).

The biologist describes her husband as “gregarious” while she “prefer[s] solitude.” And though early in their relationship they both view this as a strength, “it was a wave that did not

break until after we were married” (Vandermeer 78). Ultimately, their differences form a rift that only widens with time:

“At first I must have seemed mysterious to him, my guardedness, my need to be alone, even after he thought he’d gotten inside my defenses. Either I was a puzzle to be solved or he just thought that once he got to know me better, he could still break through to some other place, some core where another person lived inside me. During one of our fights, he admitted as much— tried to make his ‘volunteering’ for the expedition a sign of how much I had pushed him away, before taking it back later, ashamed. I told him point blank so there would be no mistake: This person he wanted to know better did not exist; I was who I seemed to be from the outside. That would never change,” (Vandermeer 77).

But the biologist lied to her husband. There are reasons why she is the way she is. The biologist is broken— was broken— by years of neglect from her parents and bullying in school. She says of her childhood, “Sometimes it felt as if I had been placed with a family rather than born into one” (Vandermeer 44). The biologist does not dwell long on her family during her ruminations over her past. She was an only child to an aspiring painter and a con-artist (mother and father respectively). Rather than try to get the attention and affirmation she needed as a child, she retreated to an overgrown pool in their back yard, where she observed the wildlife there. This experience of *solitude* (a word she often repeats in lieu of *loneliness*) is how she discovers her passion for biology and ecology, which ultimately brings her to Area X as the biologist.

Later in the novel, the biologist recalls her onboarding process with the psychologist. In the exchange, the biologist reveals more about her upbringing (to us, not the psychologist):

“‘Tell me about your parents. What are they like?’ she would ask, a classic opening gambit.

“‘Normal,’ I replied, trying to smile while thinking *distant, impractical, irrelevant, moody, useless*.

“‘Your mother is an alcoholic, correct? And your father is a kind of . . . con man?’

“I almost exhibited a lack of control at what seemed like an insult, not an insight,” (Vandermeer 121).

And with the expedition, where the biologist is one of five women selected to enter Area X, she quickly sets herself apart from the others. Area X, a wilderness aggressively reclaiming land from civilization, doesn’t bother her the way it does the others. “I was more attuned to solitude than any of us,” (Vandermeer 22). Again, the biologist uses that word: *solitude*.

Only once does the biologist use the other word, the *lonely* word. When describing a particularly low point in her past, the biologist says of herself climbing to tidal pools drunk at night: “... feeling vulnerable and lonely, even though she’d promised herself she would never get lonely,” (Vandermeer 174). This is the revealing link to the biologist’s brokenness. She is and has been lonely her whole life, often masking it as her own choice. *She prefers solitude. She doesn’t let anyone in because there is nothing to get into.*

This brokenness is why the biologist’s marriage falls apart, why her husband signed up to go into Area X, and why she followed him. And the whole thing is just so tragic. Without my interloping, please read these selected excerpts that illustrate their marriage’s collapse, an event which undergirds the novel’s main plot:

“At some point during our relationship, my husband began to call me the ghost bird, which was his way of teasing me for not being present enough in his life,” (Vandermeer 109).

“‘Ghost bird, do you love me?’ he whispered once in the dark, before he left for his expedition training, even though he was the ghost. ‘Ghost bird, do you need me?’ I loved him, but I didn’t need him, and I thought that was the way it was supposed to be,” (Vandermeer 110).

“My husband had had an interior life that went beyond his gregarious exterior, and if I had known enough to let him inside my guard, I might have understood this fact. Except I hadn’t, of course... He had created his share of problems— by pushing me too hard, by wanting too much, by trying to see something in me that didn’t exist. But I could have met him partway and retained my sovereignty. And now it was too late,” (Vandermeer 167).

“‘Will you come after me if I don’t come back? If you can?’ ... How I wish, beyond reason, that I had answered him, even to tell him no,” (Vandermeer 189).

As members of the expedition are picked off or turn on her, the biologist discovers that Area X transforms the life within it— that mounds of moss and dolphins in the channel are human on their cellular level and that some of the monsters that stalk the marshes were once members of previous expeditions, possibly her husband.

As she explains:

“[Area X] creates out of our ecosystem a new world, whose processes and aims are utterly alien— one that works through

supreme acts of mirroring, and by remaining hidden in so many other ways, all without surrendering the foundations of its *otherness* as it becomes what it encounters,” (Vandermeer 191).

The biologist knows it is only a matter of time before Area X takes her as well. The novel ends without her finding any real healing for her brokenness. But she has found closure and some kind of purpose.

As a character, the biologist’s *solitude* makes her push her husband away. After this, she enters a strange world to seek answers. In this way, she is cut from a similar cloth as Lon O’Riordan. And both fixate on the natural world to find what they cannot among fellow humans.

But unlike the biologist, Lon allows himself to feel this loneliness. This is a more recent development for him and not a state of being he has known since childhood, as with the biologist. When Lon enters his own strange world and makes his pact with the crows he begs them to do something, anything to help him. He is so tired of being silent. Lon’s silence, his inability to communicate and connect with the people around him, is the source of his loneliness.

Loneliness is one of the few emotions neuroscientists have shown to manifest in physical sensations, the same as hunger, thirst, and sleepiness. From an evolutionary stand-point, this makes perfect sense. Humans are generally weak, slow, and relatively defenseless animals outside of a group. In the Pleistocene fields of our ancestors, we could only survive if we understood on a sensorial level that being alone was dangerous. Cruelly, though, loneliness triggers an increase in the stress hormone Cortisol, which makes people less sociable and more paranoid. In other words, when someone is feeling lonely, they are themselves often less able to alleviate that feeling than they would otherwise be.

Is it any surprise, then, that the broken characters in these novels find the source of their brokenness in social inadequacy? And yet, it is within the loneliness each character finds that they strengthen and become something more.

IV: *The Transformative Nature of Being Broken*

In *Circe*, *Annihilation*, and *The Crow Chaser*, broken protagonists take journeys that lead them into states of change, both literal and metaphorical, into and from something more than human.

In Madeline Miller's novel, *Circe* starts out as a minor nymph, becomes a powerful witch, and in the end changes herself into a mortal, rejecting the divinity of her abusive family. In the end, she takes a potion, saying, "My divinity shines in me like the last rays of the sun before they drown in the sea" (*Circe* 385).

Jeff Vandermeer's biologist is changed into a superhuman version of herself but must stave off her impending transformation into something she can no longer recognize as herself. After finding her husband's journal, she decides to follow the path she believes he has taken up the coast. She says, "I don't believe I'll find him— I don't need to find him— but I want to see what he saw," (*Vandermeer* 194).

And the protagonist of my novel, Lon O'Riordan, finds that suddenly, in his isolation and silence, he can communicate with crows in a way he never could have before. He must change internally, though, if he will survive his loneliness and the medical aphonia that causes it.

This is what I have found:

All of these novels focus on character first, and so these broken characters' arcs drive their plots. And in each novel, change is literal, fantastical, and heightens struggle.

The point of a broken protagonist is not to be an exemplar. They aren't role models. Broken protagonists are messy, psychologically complicated characters who hurt those around

them more than they help. Especially today, broken characters represent something transgressive and transformational by their own existence.

Broken characters make fertile ground for writing fiction. And whether their brokenness is a static or dynamic aspect of their character arc, this kind of character lends itself specifically to fantastical fiction. In the realm of un-realism, metaphors can take literal meaning in the character's journey, and the literal events of their story can in turn create metaphors. So when characters like Circe, the biologist, or Lon sojourn through their plots, the fantasy adds to the stakes of their stories. A gulf exists between the damage Circe must undo if she is a highschooler sabotaging the girl dating her crush and the damage she let loose on the world by creating one of the world's most feared monsters. Following the footsteps of an ill-fated expedition is one thing, but following them into an aggressively permuting landscape bent on absorbing the people who enter it is quite another. And the Faustian bargain Lon brokered appears much less benign if it is not with a flock of crows who agreed to eat him when he dies.

EPILOGUE: *My Desk & Me*

The state of my desk has changed since I began writing *The Crow Chaser*. What was once a cluttered but tidy surface now rests in the aftermath of bedlam. Stacks of papers, novels, yellow legal pads, and notebooks clutter what little available real estate remains on its surface. Notes written to remind me of the date for my next therapy session and job applications have been dyed with brown rings from cups of tea. I stuck a scented candle (*Nautica Home: Cedar + Black Pepper*) on my desk, but have only remembered to light it twice since placing it there because I don't keep a lighter in my office. There is too much flammable material in it.

Even if I can tidy up the mess, I don't know if I will ever see my desk the same way after all of this. We have been through too much together.

Since I was old enough to understand danger, I have fantasized about surviving a catastrophe. Over the weekend I read about the recent tsunami that hit Tonga after a volcanic eruption, and this part of me wished I had been there. This part of me wished I had witnessed and survived something horrible, not because I like suffering, but because of what comes after.

After an earthquake or flood or war, journalists always find people digging through wreckage and handing out water bottles with smiles on their faces. Often, these people report being happier than they were before whatever event rocked their lives. Sometimes it's that they have made new friends or found a new outlook on life, but sometimes it runs deeper. Sometimes, these people report feeling like they matter in a way that they did not before. Something huge and beyond human power changed them and gave them something new: purpose.

If Circe, the biologist, or Lon found themselves in such a situation, I suspect that they would be one of those people.

I suspect that I would be one of those people.

But not every protagonist can make that kind of story. The fantastical allows for something smaller, where a protagonist's actions can be given heft without sinking half an island into the ocean. It allows for the kind of change in a character that would be impossible without a natural disaster.

My desk and I have survived no such thing. But we have attempted to construct something like it. Together, we wrote a novel about being broken, about social impairment, about being lonely and not knowing how to deal with it, about making mistakes, and about transcendence. At my desk, I have discovered many things about myself, chief among them:

I'm a guy who believes in change.

And I think change is worth writing about.

The Crow Chaser

William Clark Warren

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

-

“Hope” is the thing with feathers
Emily Dickenson

Chapter One

Aphonia

Lon has lost his voice and it isn't coming back. Intellectually, he has known this for six months, maybe longer. But the discovery of his silence, setting up a new life inside its borders, comes like stumbling upon a lost continent. *Terra incognita*, undiscovered country, empty of life, filled with twilight shadows. Chance drifted him here, to his old bedroom in his mom's old basement, where he paces back and forth, bow to stern, beached.

He has run out of things to do, besides the one thing he is supposed to be doing. His laptop sits open on his desk, anticipating his surrender. All morning, whenever Lon gets close to sitting down and getting started, he thinks up something else he would rather do— wash dishes, do some pushups, read up on the election, fold laundry, water mom's garden out back, make origami out of gum wrappers, plan a vacation he can't afford, count the foreclosures in the neighborhood, see what's playing on CMT— all of these things Lon has done before he finally parks his ass in the swivel chair at his desk, turns on his laptop, and plays one of the DVDs stacked next to it.

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE FOR BEGINNERS reads the red text burning against the white plastic of the box set. People in turtle-neck sweaters smiling too white smiles stand beneath the words like it's a banner, their hands frozen in unknowable symbols. They look like aliens.

Resistance is futile.

Lon takes a moment to remember which disc he is on. When he inserts the one he thinks he is supposed to watch into the computer, a blinding white screen lights up. A pretty redheaded woman waves as a man's voice speaks over her, and she starts signing away. Since starting these discs a week ago, Lon has tried to figure out if she is actually mute, or if she is a translator. If she has a voice, Lon imagines it to be nasal, high pitched and perky, if slightly annoying. But when her mouth moves, nothing comes out, just lips and shiny white teeth. Lon realizes that he has never even seen her tongue.

In pirate movies there is always a man with his tongue cut out. He can't talk, and to prove this he opens his mouth wide enough to display the emptiness in his jaw where his tongue is supposed to be. He's a stock character, a man missing a chunk of himself, sullen and brooding and often the sidekick to a dashing renegade captain. In reality, though, a tongueless pirate is not a true mute. A bunch of consonants and vowels are impossible to pronounce, sure. But he still has vocal cords. He can still hum a tune or shout in anger or cry out in pain.

... So he trained the parrot to talk for him. No one's yet figured how...

Lon knows how he would do it. He would play recordings of words and phrases, maybe with a tape player or something like that, and then use treats to reward the bird whenever it got a word right. Positive reinforcement. Like training a dog. Lon is certain that if he can figure out what kinds of foods parrots like— What is the parrot equivalent of chocolate chip cookie dough? — he can get a parrot to speak for him. He has heard as well that crows can talk, too. Actually, he has heard they talk even better than most parrots. Lon imagines walking around in the Rubyville town center, going to the grocery store, or stopping at the gas station with a crow perched on his shoulder. Then he imagines doing the exact same thing with a parrot. Lacking any

tropical islands or sail boats, a crow feels more appropriate. A parrot would be too colorful, too cheerful. Besides, Lon has heard they can be temperamental.

This is the thing.

Lon isn't stupid. And yet, right now, sitting at his old desk in his old room, clothes all over the floor and papers crumpled across his desk, doing his damndest to keep focus on the pretty redheaded lady's hands, Lon feels like his brain has reduced to a clump of noodles. That is what trying to learn American Sign Language has done to him.

The pretty redheaded woman moves her hands and arms across his laptop screen, synchronized to specific facial expressions, like she is in the middle of practicing an interpretive dance routine. Days ago, when Lon tried to learn the alphabet, he thought her name was Nina and then found out later that her name is Tina. The thumb rests between different fingers. He can't tell which ones. But that is how the whole experience of learning this language feels so far. The videos blend together into a dance already choreographed and rehearsed, and he has been thrown into it and must stumble his way through.

Sometimes Lon's mom Mary will ask him how it's going, and Lon can't actually tell her how it's going, so he shrugs because he doesn't know what else to do. And Mary themes the same patient, strained voice that every mom knows how to theme, like the doctor teaches it to new mothers in the delivery room, and she tells Lon that he has to keep practicing if he wants to make headway. Learning a new language, she tells him, takes time.

Shouldn't he carry a notepad and pen with him instead? It isn't like he knows anyone who can speak sign language. *Speak* isn't even the right word, he thinks. *Enact? Perform?* Lon

imagines himself signing away at Mary's bewildered face. She wouldn't know if he was cussing her out or asking for a glass of water.

Lon didn't think to bring any of this up last time he was at the doctor's office. Doctor Ledford kept telling Lon that he has to think in the long term now. This isn't going to change.

Lon leans back from his desk and rubs his neck. Touching the scars there has become a tic of his since the stitches came out. Ravines and crevices form unnatural right angles on his skin. One crater on the right side of his throat is just big enough for him to rest his thumb inside, nestled like a songbird. When Lon looks at himself in the mirror, he thinks that his neck looks like what the country must look like from the sky, the round shapes of the land cut up for ditches and power lines and highways.

The music in the ASL tutorial takes Lon off guard as it swells, and he almost falls out of his chair. The lesson is already ending. Tina the Tina waves goodbye behind a cheesy lighting effect that brushes across the screen. It's meant to resemble a shooting star, but to Lon it looks like Tina is attempting to claw her way out from his laptop and force more sign language lessons onto him. He slams his laptop shut and grips its sides. For a moment, Lon thinks about shattering it against the wall. He wants to crush its plastic and metal pieces under foot and grind the ASL tutorial DVDs into the carpet. A pretty redheaded ghost would dissipate like smoke fanned away into nothingness. Not the best idea, but a satisfying fantasy. Lon lets the laptop go and taps his fingers against the scratched wood surface of the desk. Like hell is he going to keep this up.

Two years ago Lon had an apartment in Nashville. He held down an underpaying but stable job at a music production company working as an audio technician, mostly for mid-tier and uber up-and-coming pop-country singers. He used to have work-friends who would take him

out for drinks after a long day. He used to have girlfriends with five-year plans. He used to have a life just as exciting as any twenty-something's. And then a couple of lumps in his throat and a stack of medical bills took all of that away.

Now Lon has been exiled to a forgotten corner of Tennessee near the Georgia and Carolina borders. That is to say, he is home. Home, one letter away from Hole. A hole in the countryside no one ever seems to claw their way out of. Even people like him who thought they had gotten out get sucked back in. But the funny thing is, even when Lon was out, he wanted to get out of *out*—leave Nashville and find a quiet beach town on the Carolina coast.

Tires crunch up the driveway. Mom's home. Lon rummages around his desk for a pen and scribbles on a lined sheet of paper, then he shoves the note into his pocket. Up the beige carpeted stairs, Lon climbs out from his mother's basement. Mary calls it Lon's Lair. The house is a raised ranch and the stairs let out to a wood-paneled living room, which is itself situated between the stairwell and the kitchen. A counter covered in stacks of mail divides the rooms.

In the kitchen the door to the garage jolts but does not open. Mary curses on the other side of it, fighting with her keys. Lon intervenes by unlocking the door and holding it open. Mary's arms cradle a mountain of white plastic bags. Mary lends Lon a grateful look. The top of her graying blonde head passes his chest on her way to the counter, where she unloads. She tells Lon that there are more bags in her car's trunk.

Lon goes to get the bags and he tries, he really tries, not to glare at the shiny new McCain/Palin sticker his mom had slapped onto the bumper of her old Volvo. Signs and stickers supporting the Republican ticket are all over, like *Ws* had been and Support Our Troops ribbons had been before that.

If he could speak, Lon and Mary would argue over the election every day. *The fucking insurance companies... make the best of a hard situation... other countries... then why don't you move?... medical debt... looking for a handout.* Mary would tell Lon he hates America and Lon would tell Mary she hates Americans. Round and round they would go. Never in his life has Lon ever thought he would long for the experience. But here he stands, starting at a support bumper sticker, mouthing the words to a debate he will only hear in his head. While Lon gathers up the remaining grocery bags, he feels contractually obligated to insert some platitudes about his voice mattering on Election Day to his imaginary argument, but he can't even by his own bullshit on that one. He lives in Tennessee. A vote for Obama is a vote cast into the incinerator.

Lon takes the bags inside.

Once he has set the groceries down on the counter, he pulls out the note from his pocket. Mary is putting bananas in a fruit basket by the sink when he slaps it down in front of her. It reads, *I want a crow.*

Lon made too big of a deal out of slamming his note down for his mom to ignore him. She reads it, mouthing the words. She scrunches her eyebrows, then lifts one. She asks why Lon would want something like that.

Lon bites his lip as he takes the note back. He taps his pockets, but they are empty. He left the pen downstairs. He starts rummaging through the kitchen to find a replacement pen. While he does that, Mary turns away from him and grabs a canister of Clorox wipes from under the sink. Finally, Lon finds a pen in a drawer by the fridge and jots down his explanation. He holds it out for his mom to read.

To talk for me.

Mary glances at the note, sighs, and rifles through the white plastic bags. Doctor Ledford said that the best long-term strategy is for Lon to learn sign language.

When Mary takes groceries out of their bags, she sorts them by whether they belong in the freezer, fridge, pantry, or somewhere else before she puts any of them away. Anything that comes in a non-edible container, she disinfects — a habit she picked up after twenty years working as a school nurse. As she gets on that, Lon writes more. He puts the note in her face. Mary is in the middle of wiping down a bag's worth of yogurt tubs. She looks up at him from the sharp corner of her eye and asked Lon to please give her a second.

Lon knows he is being obnoxious, so he pulls his arm back and waits. But he can't stop rubbing the paper between his finger and thumb in anticipation. When Mary disinfects the last tub of yogurt, she turns to Lon, straightens her posture, and holds out a hand. Proper. Sarcastic. She has made the act of handing over the note feel like Lon is now in on her joke when he didn't want to be. But that is the price of admission if he wants her to keep reading.

Why should I learn SL if no one else will? No one will understand me anyway.

Mary brings up Doctor Ledford again.

The scars on his neck feel like they are digging deeper into his skin. Lon snatches the paper from her and points to the first note. *I want a crow.*

Mary says no, not in her house, and then has the gall to ask Lon if he will please help her out with the grocery bags.

Lon crumples the note up into his fist and pitches it against the wall. It bounces impotently onto the linoleum floor. Still, his mom admonishes him with his name like she would a dog. Lon! He can't stop himself from hissing. Air rips at his trachea like briars and the back of

his tongue tastes like blood. Every muscle in his body feels like it is about to rip from his skeleton and burst out from his skin. He throws his arms across the countertop.

Everything scatters.

###

Friends used to call Lon's car the Male Birth Control. Subject of countless jokes, the best one was when Travis Miller bought Lon a box of condoms for his eighteenth birthday, but when Lon opened it up, the box was stuffed with dozens of pictures of the car. It isn't even that ugly. It's just bland and sensible. It gets good mileage. A themed 1995 Honda Accord with gray paint. An old folk artist sold it to him for fifteen hundred dollars. On the way to prom, Rose Barnes asked Lon if his dad has money, why doesn't he get him a real car. Lon had to explain to her that the last time his father sent him money besides child support was on his tenth birthday— a ten dollar bill for ten years. Lon saved up his own money working at the movie theater for a year to afford his car.

Eight years since he bought it, the Male Birth Control still chugs along despite the miles he has put on it since. Not that Lon needs it. Most men come out of chemo and radiation sterile.

Since he moved home, Lon reconnected with Rose Barnes. He had to drive to Chattanooga for treatment and while filling the tank with gas, she pulled up at the pump next to him. Rose cried when she recognized him, this scrawny guy with no hair waving at her. She had heard that Lon had gotten sick, but she didn't... she didn't finish that sentence. Rose hugged Lon like she meant to fuse their chests together.

The two of them started hanging out after that, then something more than just hanging out. Lon lost his voice before they could put a word to it. Around that time was when Rose told Lon what she did for a living. The subject had clouded the air like steam in a hot shower— how come Rose never had to pick up a shift or clock into a 9-to-5? Then one day, her housemate referred to Lon as Rose’s pro bono case. They had to have a long conversation after that, which was hard since Lon couldn’t talk much.

After Swainson’s Funeral Home had to cut back on their staff, like most of the local businesses still open after the Recession crept into the countryside, nobody worth working for were hiring. Money got tight and there were only so many options. So Rose began to work as a kind of call-girl. She and her housemate both did that kind of thing. Just for now. Just until she could figure something else out. Lon had heard on the radio some somebody say that the only jobs left in Tennessee were at a meth lab. At least Rose never got involved with that.

Cell service is spotty in the mountains, so they do not rely on texts. A message can pop up hours after it is sent. Phone calls are out for obvious reasons. They email sometimes, but neither Rose nor Lon much likes being attached to a computer enough to reliably check an inbox. So, the only real choice is to coordinate. Lon knows what times are good to show up at her place. Rose is usually home when she says she is supposed to be.

Driving into town from his mom’s takes Lon about fifteen minutes. Rose’s street is near the Rubyville town center, off Johnston Avenue, past the Kinnard & Co. Auto Repair, but before the Taco Bell/KFC. The sun splits behind a mountain, even more violent in its incomplete state. Golden shafts strike the windshield and off the glass glare white. Lon winces and pulls down the visor as Lon turns left onto Breckenridge Street.

Rose's housemate Gil stands in the yard waiting for his chihuahua Butterworth to do her business. He sports a pair of oversized sunglasses that make him look like a cartoon bug, short blond hair like the fuzz of a bumblebee. Gil waves at him as Lon steps out of the car and says hey over his dog's maniacal barking. Rose is inside and Gil got hooked up with some gummies he wants him to try. Lon gives a thumbs up and cross the lawn to the front door. Butterworth's barking flips to crying at his approach. She scampers behind Gil's leg and starts pissing herself dangerously close to Gil's shoes. Gil scolds her, drawing out her name. *Butterworth!*

Lon takes his shoes off in the small linoleum floored foyer. Gil does not like it when people track in dirt. He has even trained Butterworth to wipe her paws on the doormat before entering. The living room, which the foyer opens up into, is dimly lit. Rose has fallen asleep on the couch while watching *LOST*. Jack Shephard stands in a dark lot behind an airport and shouts through the fake beard glued onto his face. Lon has for no discernable reason a keen ability to recognize fake facial hair on television. Jack shouts that they have to go back to the island and then it cuts to black and the show title appears in white text with a dramatic *pah*.

Rose wears tight low-rise jeans and an oversized flannel shirt over a black tank. She looks like she has been asleep for a little while. Strands of her black hair have settled between her slightly parted lips, swaying with each breath. One of her shoes clings onto her toes, half-kicked off, while the other rests, tipped over on the floor. Lon is never sure how she manages to look the way she looks with so little effort.

Lon wakes Rose by sitting down on the floor and resting his head on her thigh. Rose's steady breathing catches, and after a moment, her long fingers run through his hair. Lon turns his head. Down the length of the couch, she stares back at him and smiles a wide, dimpled smile, her

eyelids still heavy over her eyes. Lon craves this look like a fly craves sugar water. Rose yawns and stretches. She grabs the remote controller and turns off the television. As soon as the screen goes black, in a sudden burst of energy, she hops to a seated position. She tells Lon that she was wondering when he would turn up. She leans over, wraps her arms over his shoulders, and kisses him. Her mouth does not taste like sleep.

When they pull away from each other, Lon has mysteriously hovered from the floor and landed on the couch next to her. Rose strokes his hair again. It's so fucking good to have hair again. She asks if Lon would like her to read to him. She started doing that during his final round of chemo. The pastime stuck and they have gone through three novels that way. Their current book, *The Stand* by Stephen King, is a certified doorstop so it has taken them longer than usual to read it through. Rose chose it because there's a deaf-mute character in it and she thought Lon would like to hear a story that features someone in it who can't talk. But Lon's favorite character is the singer.

Rose grabs the fat paperback from the side table. Lon climbs over her and squeezes into the space behind her against the couch's back. With his arms wrapped around her, Rose opens the book where a ripped piece of cardstock serves as a bookmark. They left off with the cowboy imprisoned in a laboratory.

Rose has a low voice for a woman. Her accent thickens when she reads, something she is self-conscious about, but it is one of her most endearing qualities. Words fall from her lips like honey from a comb. Lon can and has listened to Rose read for hours.

When she finishes the chapter, Lon puts a hand on the book and presses it down. She shifts onto her back and looks up at him. Her dark hair spills over the edge of the couch and Lon

thinks to himself, *how the hell have I controlled myself this long?* Lon kisses her. Lips still against his, she smiles, clutches his shirt, and draws him in.

Lon kisses her lips, her chin, her neck, her collar bone. Her mouth brushes against his ear and the warmth of her breath rattles his spine. Rose's skin smells like fresh tea and almonds. My hands journey down her side and pause at her belt loops.

She tells him not to be so bashful and leads him into her bedroom.

###

Lon and Rose have a lot in common. There are the obvious similarities. Both of them stand at six feet and one inch tall, and they wear the same size shoe. Once as a joke during their senior year of high school, they spent a whole day with switched sneakers. They giggled and laughed in the hallway, pointed at each others' feet and said things like, *Hey cool treads, where'd you get 'em?* They were the only ones who thought it was funny.

They both have black hair. Rose claims hers comes from her Cherokee great-grandmother, the one everyone seems to have. But Lon's hair color comes from Black Irish.

Both Lon and Rose grew up with their classmates believing that they were more wealthy than they actually were. Rose's father ran a local pawn shop which collected a sizable jewelry collection. He could have probably proved all of Rose's peers right, but he spent too much on booze. And Lon's father's family is one of the richest families in the county, a bunch of New England carpetbaggers who moved down south in the 60s. Lon's grandfather George

O’Riordan’s face was spread, rolled, and glued onto half the billboards off the highway advertising his services as a defense attorney before he became the County Executive.

Rose’s dad died in a car accident three years ago. Lon’s father up and left him and his mom when Lon was four years old. Since then, his father has not been dad or pa, he has just been Neill.

Lon had heard that Neill moved back to town from his exodus in Colorado, that he brought back with him some twenty-something Mexican girl. Neill is having his second wind. But when money got tight and Lon and Mary couldn’t scrounge up the funds for treatment, old George O’Riordan of highway billboard fame pitched in. So even if Lon had his vocal cords to talk the shit he wanted to about Neill, he can’t. To do so feels like it would incur some kind of bad patrilineal karma, if such a thing exists. *Thou shalt honor thy father. I am the Lord, thy filthy rich grandfather. Look on my billboards and despair.*

This, Rose and Lon do not have in common.

As they lie in her bed, Rose asks Lon if he heard his piece of shit granddaddy got Brandon Armstrong free after he raped and almost killed Emily Abbot.

Lon shakes his head, though he isn’t surprised. It seems like the kind of thing his grandfather would do. If a family has the money or connections, that old man can get anyone out of anything.

Rose says she saw Brandon walking around like he owned the whole fucking town at a party three days ago.

Even though Lon knows why Rose is going to parties without him, he sometimes wishes she'd invite him. Is he so boring these days? Not good enough conversation? It has been a long time since Lon has gone to a real party.

That reminds her, and she jumps up. Rose does not say what *that* is, but Lon waits to find out. The springed mattress juggles Lon when she gets up to her feet and starts getting dressed. She steps into a clean pair of underwear, and then shimmies a tight pair of jeans on. She throws on a gray t-shirt without a bra, and pulls her hair back. Gil has some edibles, she tells him, and she wants Lon to try. Did Gil already tell him?

Lon nods and starts putting his clothes back on. After sex, Rose likes to get high. But Lon can't be around smoke, so the house made the switch to edibles.

Gil is sprawled across the couch, already stoned, with Butterworth on his chest lying belly-up. The episode of *Planet Earth* about deep oceans casts a mellow blue light across the dark living room. Rose and Lon step out of her bedroom just in time to witness the Vampire Squid.

The moment Butterworth lays eyes on Lon, she starts growling. Gil stretches his arm precariously to the side table so that his chihuahua is not disturbed. He grabs a small bag of dog biscuits and shakes them at Lon. He recommends Lon keep a couple in his pocket and give them to Butterworth every time he sees her. Positive reinforcement. That old trick. Lon takes the treats and offers a fresh biscuit to Butterworth. Her growls switch in an instant to whines and tail-wags. Reclining like a Roman senator, she snaps up a treat.

Rose asks where the gummies are. Gil says they are on the kitchen table. She goes to get them while Lon falls into the loveseat catty-corner to the couch. A red fleshy monster swims across the television with fangs up and down its webbed tentacles.

Rose returns with a small plastic bag in her hands. She slips into the loveseat with Lon and pops a gummy into his mouth. Raspberry flavor does what it can to disguise the taste of marijuana. Lon wraps an arm around her slender shoulders. It takes him a moment to realize that his other hand is stroking the scars on his neck, his thumb resting in the crater.

Rose prods Gil about a date she thought he was supposed to have tonight.

Gil says that the date bailed. Apparently, he got worried about his wife finding out. Gil says he thinks he might start charging more upfront, you know? All these closeted guys can be so skittish. And baby has got to make rent, doesn't he, *Butterworth*?

Butterworth whines and smacks her lips in agreement.

The Vampire Squid warps and writhes in the deep ocean blackness. David Attenborough's cottony British narration accompanies a low orchestral swell. Lon's fingers move with the creature. If Sign Language could be more like this, he'd be fluent by now. Like casting spells.

Fuck, is he high already? Rose chuckles and kisses his forehead. She says that she doesn't mind that Lon is such a lightweight.

Lon straightens his head atop his neck and does his best impersonation of someone sober. It isn't convincing. Rose and Gil laugh at him. Even *Butterworth* giggles, jiggling on Gil's chest like a four-legged jelly-bean.

Gil tells them that they all don't even know how many gay guys there are in town. Everyone around here is just acting. Gil rubs Butterworth's belly and she starts to grumble, like she has heard this monologue one too many times. Gil says that when he was five or six, when they were in that drought— remember that? It had been something like three or four months without a drop of rain. People weren't allowed to have sprinklers on in their yards. Gil's ma drug him to church. The whole congregation was gathering to pray for rain. It's like the kind of thing people do in Third World Countries, isn't it? A whole bunch of bible thumpers coming together to pray to God for rain. And guess what? Gil didn't see a single one of those fuckers bring an umbrella.

“Crows can make umbrellas,” Lon whispers. He doesn't even know if what he's saying is true, it just feels true. “They can hold leaves up over their chicks.”

Rose pulls away slightly and looks at Lon. Her mouth moves, and Lon knows there are sounds coming out of it, that it is supposed to be language, but he can't make any sense of it. He watches his hands and their squid-like signing. His fingers transform into feathers, and he tries to sing.

Chapter Two

The Elephant

The next morning when Lon pulls into the driveway that wraps around the back of the house, he finds his mom bending over the passenger-side seat of her car fiddling with her bag, about to leave for her job at Rubyville Middle School as a school nurse. She stands outside her car with her hands on her hips and waits for Lon to emerge from the Honda. She's about to knock on his window when he opens the door. He nods his head in greeting.

Mary wants to know if that's an apology.

It isn't, but Lon nods again anyway and pretends like it is.

Mary does not want Lon to do that ever again. He can't just storm off like that and then not show up till the next morning. She worries about him.

Lon leans up against his car and crosses his arms. Is she serious?

She knows that he's an adult, but Lon will always be her boy. His mom puts a hand on Lon's cheek.

Lon nods for real this time.

Mary walks around the front of her car and is about to step inside it when she stops. She meant to tell Lon yesterday that she ran into Travis Miller at the school. He's helping the baseball team. Lon can do something like that. Get involved in the community. He needs to do something with his time besides whatever it is he does all day.

If Lon had his voice, and if he felt like being petty, he'd say that he'd spend his day teaching crow how to talk for him. But if he had his voice, he wouldn't need a crow. His mind spirals out from there.

Mary waves at him, pulling him back into the here and now. He doesn't have a voice. He doesn't have a crow. All she's saying is that it might be good for Lon to do something. She loves him. Mary gets into her car and backs out the wraparound driveway. Lon takes a breath and goes inside, where he eats, drinks some water, washes, and changes his clothes.

###

Another thing about being home again that unsettles Lon is the sheer number of people who are still here from his childhood. There are the people he expected to be around, the community staples. But it is all the people his own age that have left him bewildered. Didn't they all need jobs or something?

Rose was one thing. A string of bad luck after high school got her more and more stuck with each misfortune. But everyone else?

What the hell was Travis Miller still doing in Rubyville?

Lon remembers his old friend from way back when they used to explore creeks in the woods, catching minnows, and running from copperheads. Travis, who always came up with the best jokes about Lon's car and who went to UT for a forestry degree— he was the type who should have ended up in Knoxville or some other college town where he would devote his time

to college sports and drunk sorority girls. There is nothing for people to do in this place except grow up, get old, and maybe pick up a chemical dependency along the way.

Lon falls onto his bed, the same bed he has slept in since he was ten years old, with the same dark green and yellow plaid comforter and sand-colored sheets. His green walls are still dotted with holes from when Lon had hung up posters as a teenager. Clint Eastwood used to glower next to his bed, dusty poncho waving in the desert wind. Lon looks at the pack of American Sign Language DVDs set by his desk.

What good even is Lon in a place like this?

###

Since he got the idea, Lon steps outside every time he hears crows. There is a flock of them nearby. Isn't a flock of crows called a murder? It sounds like something a metalhead would have come up with. Three birds caw to each other from the branches of the pin oak tree in the back yard. When they see Lon, they go quiet.

Lon crossed the yard to them.

For a moment, the crows look like they might let him stand in their presence. But one of the crows makes an especially shrill call, and all three take wing. They beat their wings and fly over Lon's head, over the house, to perch on the powerlines by the street.

Lon shoves his hands into his pockets.

Well that went about as well as a beached whale.

###

Rose isn't home. Gil says she's working.

Lon tilts his head. Rose never works on Wednesday nights. Lon thought for sure she'd be home. He isn't able to linger on this long, though. Butterworth rushes Lon and halts a safe three-foot distance away. There, she snaps and growls, tail erect and little white teeth bared, in supposed safety. Lon reaches for a dog biscuit in his jacket pocket and holds it out for her. Her tail loosens and starts to wag, then she approaches and accepts the treat before running back into the living room.

Gil asks Lon if he wants to step inside and wait for Rose to get back.

Lon shakes his head and touches his belly.

Gil agrees. He's kind of hungry too.

Being so close to the Rubyville town center, they walk. Only a handful of restaurants line Johnston Avenue, and most double as bars. Brick and painted wood-siding façades dating back to the 1840s line the sidewalk. Further down the road, the old buildings end abruptly and give way to a gray rubble parking lot, a mote separating the historic town center from a Waffle House and the KFC/Taco Bell. On the other side of Memorial Street, there's Jimbo's Diner, El Desperado Mexican Cantina, and Ruby Red's Country Bar, red neon lights burning like a flare across the street from the other two.

Gil is up for El Desperado.

Lon shrugs.

El Desperado it is.

Despite the assertions printed across its menu, El Desperado is not authentic Mexican cuisine. Brightly colored skeletons dressed in sombreros and black mariachi suits dance across its ochre walls. Latin music plays through buzzy speakers. On a TV in the back corner, the channel is always set to a soccer game. It all feels like overcompensation. But they make good quesadillas.

El Desperado isn't busy, but it isn't empty either. Lon tries to remember what day of the week it is and if it would make sense for people to be out eating tonight. A hostess seats them at a square table by the bar. Gil, who seems to know everyone working, chats up their black-clad waitress. She brings their food and beers to the table in record time. He says that she's a friend from high school. Gil went to the same high school as Lon and Rose, but Gil is a few years younger, so this tracks.

Gil starts on about his plan to move to Atlanta once he has saved up enough money. He thinks at his current rate of harvest from the sexually repressed men of the Smoky Mountains, he can pack up and make the move sometime next spring. Atlanta, Gil tells him, is the gayest city in the country. He heard so on the radio. San Francisco likes to claim the title, but ATL is *so* much gayer. Like, if you are a gay person in the South, you either end up in Atlanta or New Orleans, and Gil does not think he can handle swamp weather. Besides, after Katrina— man, has it already been two years?— there isn't much of New Orleans left to move to.

Lon nods along to make the conversation feel less one-sided. He's halfway through his steak quesadilla when he feels someone watching him. It feels like an itch at the corner of his eye.

Across the restaurant, sitting in a corner booth, a man stares at Lon. He's Lon, or what Lon will be in twenty years. He has the same wavy black hair, the same long nose. The man has got about thirty pounds more to him and his teeth take up more of his mouth, but the resemblance is obvious.

It's Neill.

He sits in the booth with his wife— his new wife. Jesus, she doesn't look any older than Lon. Between them, a little girl plays with the basket of tortilla chips. She crunches them in her hand and spreads their crumbs across the red table cloth. The scars on Lon's neck feel like they are digging deeper into his flesh, choking him. He had not heard about the kid. His sister.

Neill lifts a furtive hand in a kind of shy wave. Beneath the rim of his baseball cap, his eyes crinkle. A soft, closed-lip smile tightens his jaw, and he dips his head in a nod. Wasn't it just a matter of time before Lon ran into him, now that they are both back from the dead?

Lon stands and knocks over his beer. Fucking idiot.

Gil grabs Lon's arm and tells him to chill. Does he want to get them thrown out of here? Out of a fucking restaurant, seriously?

Lon feels like spitting fire. He yanks his arm free from Gil's grip. He runs his fingers down the scars that wrecked his flesh.

Gil sighs, takes a long draught of his beer, and says they ought to get out of here. As he stands, he places a twenty dollar bill onto the table. Lon shoves his hand into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. He slams a five on top of Gil's twenty. That should cover the tip.

They leave.

Outside, Gil is quick at Lon's wing and suggests he drop Lon off at home. This has all been enough drama for one night, hasn't it?

Lon looks down at Gil. Did he see? Lon can't tell.

Gil treats Lon like a very fragile, very combustible antique. Like an abandoned land mine from some long forgotten war in need of disarming before it explodes under a farmer's plow or the playing feet of children. He hovers his hand over Lon's shoulder, too afraid to actually touch him. He says that they should just call it a night.

Lon shakes his head. He needs a drink. A real fucking drink— whiskey, bourbon, vodka, the good stuff, the stuff that makes a neck shrivel up and burn. He needs it badly.

Across the street, Ruby Red's Country Bar glows with neon lights like sex and hot embers and everything Lon needs right now. He steps into the street. Gil calls for Lon to wait, but fuck a lot of that. A pickup roars past him. His hair blows to the side in its wake. Country music wails out in the night— Garth Brooks' "Friends in Low Places." The street glistens from rain fallen earlier that day and in the puddles, a mirror world shines through.

Lon reaches for the door, but Gil smacks his hand away. He asks Lon if he would wait just one fucking second, please! Gil puts himself between Lon and the bar entrance.

A flock of shadowed smokers eye them a couple of yards away. Lon suddenly becomes conscious of the attention he has drawn to himself.

Gil stops to take a deep breath. He's thinking. He does not want any more drama tonight. Twisting his mouth, he explains that he will sometimes meet up for drinks with dates at Ruby Red's. He asks Lon to let him scope the place out before coming inside. Gil does not want anyone there to get the wrong idea and start another scene.

Lon agrees and posts up against the bar's façade.

Gil smiles gratefully and slips inside.

One of the smokers, a guy Lon has seen working at the Kinnard & Co, calls over to him. He asks Lon if that dude he's with, isn't he a queer? Language aside, there isn't any malice in the question. The man sounds genuinely curious, like he has never seen a gay man out in the wild before.

Lon nods.

He asks if Lon is.

Lon shakes his head.

Then he asks why Lon is hanging out around him. Again, completely baffled.

Lon shrugs and rather than continue the conversation decides Gil has taken enough time scoping out the bar. He pulls the black wooden door open and steps inside Ruby Red's.

Inside smells like its surfaces have been mopped with spilled beer. Smoke clouds the air. No one gives a shit about smoking inside here. It tickles the back of Lon's mouth. Women in bejeweled denim pop their butts out from the bar, attracting men wearing trucker hats and getting them to buy the next round. Old fellows with guts busting out over their belts play pool in the back. A drunk couple slow dances by the juke. It takes Lon a few minutes to find where Gil has gone off to, but when he does spy him, Gil is leaning over a table, talking to some woman with black hair. A yellow light flashes past her face, and Lon cannot believe it took him so long to recognize Rose. He has not seen her dressed up like that since they were in high school.

And she's with her date.

Some dude wearing a backwards blue baseball cap and a yellow fishing shirt draped down past the breach of his legs hangs all over her, his braceleted arm like a hairy pool noodle around Rose's shoulder. The guy gets up, rounds Gil, and pats him on the back. Lon recognizes him, too. His mom was just talking about Travis Miller the other day.

For a moment, familiarity at seeing an old friend lulls Lon away from the anger churning in his blood, until Travis leans over and kisses Rose. He kneads his hand against her face and opens her jaw to widen it with his own, like he's sucking the meat off of it. When he pulls away, Rose's mouth sheens with saliva. Travis runs a thumb under her lower lip and swaggers away to the bathroom.

Mary's voice rings in Lon's head. Travis Miller is helping out with the middle school baseball team. Lon could do something like that.

When Rose had told Lon about working as a call-girl, the both of them had been surprised by how little the revelation affected Lon. At the time, he wasn't sure if he'd survive long enough for it to matter. He just wanted to spend what time he had with someone he liked and who liked him back. In the time since, Lon never had to look it in its face. He knew that Rose was with other men. But he never *saw* Rose with other men.

For a moment, on his way to the bathroom, Lon thinks Travis sees him standing by the entrance. He lifts his hand in a pathetic, timid way that reminded Lon of Neill. Lon feels his fingers curl and press into his palms. He follows.

###

When Lon and Travis were kids, they and some of the other boys used to wait in the school bathrooms to ambush other kids who had done something to piss them off— tattle-tails, liars, kiss-asses... There were the usual methods of torture and shaming. Pantsings and swirlies were common. Wedgies and purple-nurples even more. One time, Lon hung a kid on a doorknob by the elastic band of his underwear, his feet dangling just inches from the floor that always smelled damp with piss.

But there was one punishment they reserved only for the most deserving— for cheats, double-crossers, and Yankees. They got the worst of the worst.

They got the Elephant.

Usually, it took two people to give someone the Elephant. Someone had to hold the victim down while the other set to work. But in the time between seeing Travis go to the men's bathroom at Ruby Red's and Lon following him, he had already figured out a way around that. When Travis sees Lon push open the bathroom door, an old friend he has not seen in— What has it been? Seven years?— Lon punches him in the face.

Travis' nose cracks, a sound just high and crisp enough that it doesn't travel far over the rattling music of the bar. Travis falls to the ground with his hand over his face. Blood streams between his fingers and he looks up with welling eyes.

The key to giving someone a proper Elephant is to make sure that their hands are taken out of the struggle as quickly as possible. Lon rips his belt free from its loops and uses it to bind Travis' wrists as Travis shouts and cusses through red teeth. Lon tears a paper towel from the

dispenser, wads it up, and shoves it into Travis' mouth to muffle him. Travis has gotten back onto his feet, though, so Lon wrestles him back down to the floor.

A man opens the door, sees Lon and Travis, and wordlessly turns around.

Lon grabs Travis' feet and pulls off his shoes, then yanks off Travis' pants. Travis wriggles and writhes like an eel. He has no doubt come around to what Lon is doing by now. Lon sits on Travis' back and one at a time he takes Travis' feet, bows back his legs, and tucks them into the legs of Travis' boxer trunks.

Travis screams into the brown wad of paper towel as his underwear cuts into his ball sack.

Lon steps away, snarling. He has not done anything this cruel since he was a kid. A deep, primal part of him feels good about it.

He feels avenged.

Travis squirms on the bathroom floor, his body contorted into the shape of an elephant's head. His arms are the trunk and his bent legs are the ears. Lon kicks Travis' pants into a puddle by the urinal, and he retreats back into the bar.

Rose sits alone at her table. Lon thinks about going after her, about flipping the table and hissing his lungs into her face. He thinks about ripping his flesh off his bones with a broken beer bottle and dropping it at her feet. But for what?

Lon gets out of Ruby Red's. At the door, Gil reaches for Lon. He must see it on Lon's face that he knows what's up. Gil tries to explain that he didn't know, he had no clue that Rose would be there, but Lon throws him off.

###

When Lon was in chemo and his voice shrank into a thin rasp, Rose would cheer him up by playing her guitar and singing songs to him. Sometimes, she would let him play and she would sing. The first time Lon thought that he loved her was during one of those songs. It felt like an electrical current passed through his skull. She looked over at him with wicked, grinning black eyes and stopped. She asked why he was staring at her.

They didn't sleep together much through his illness. Rarely did Lon have the energy. But they would shower together, curled up in each other's arms, and they would let the hot water rain down onto them.

Rose whispered to him about how everything had gone to shit since high school. She spent two years commuting to Chattanooga to get her Associate's. But in some ways, having an Associate's without a Bachelor's can be worse than not having a degree at all. People would see it on her resumé and assume she had no follow-through, that she couldn't stick it out. So, finding work had been difficult.

Then her dad died in the car accident.

He was drunk and going too fast around a mountain bend and his car flipped off the side of a cliff. Ironically, that got her the job at Swainson's Funeral Home before they downsized her out.

Once, Lon told her in his wilting voice that he wanted her to help his mother with the funeral arrangements. That made her cry, but she agreed.

“It isn’t fair,” she said into his ear, hot shower water dripping down her nose. “None of this is fair.”

###

Lon walks.

The smokers chitter to themselves and he passes through their clouds, trying to ignore what they have to say.

He looks like a ghost.

Shit, take a look at his neck.

Man is about to kill somebody.

Lon can walk back to Rose’s and get his car. He can get home and hide away in his mother’s basement like a fucking loser and stay there until it turns into his grave.

In the red distance behind him, someone calls out. Rose’s voice echoes off the brick sides of the old storefronts.

Lon stops for a moment. The sound of her makes him rattle. Then he keeps walking. He’s at the street corner and he turns onto Breckenridge. He’s where the sidewalk ends when Rose rounds the corner and calls to him again.

Her silhouette glows with red and golden edges. She’s in a skirt, not a tight one, but it shows off her legs. She’s all done up. Lon knows that if he keeps walking, she will catch up to him. He decides he might as well stop and wait for her.

Rose tries to touch him. He shudders and she withdraws her hand. She knows that this is bad. She just didn't think...

Lon kicks rocks. He pleads. He throws his arms in every direction he can think to ask, why?

Rose pulls her hair and looks around like she has been caught in a trap and can't find an escape. Lon waves his hand at her and points back in the direction of Ruby Red's.

Why?

Rose looks back at him. No sorrow or even remorse mars her face. Her eyes, unbearably soft, look at Lon with pity.

Rose tells Lon that Travis offered her one hundred and fifty dollars for the night, that it had to be tonight. She reminds Lon that he knows what she does. She knows that Lon knew she was out working tonight. She knows that Gil had told him. This is not her fault, she says. Lon had signed onto this a long while back, now. She thought he understood what all that meant. As long as she does this work, Rose can never be Lon's alone. That is just the way it is.

Lon feels like his bones have hollowed out. Every word out of Rose's mouth diminishes him. He rubs the scars on his neck. If he was whole, if he just had his fucking voice, maybe things would be different. Maybe he would be enough, and she would stop.

Rose looks up. She's trying to keep tears from ruining her makeup.

Lon steps away from her.

Her voice cracks when she asks for him to wait, but Lon keeps going.

Lon walks and he does not stop walking.

###

Time disappears and Lon finds himself trudging on the side of the road with the town glowing in the distance. The grass licks the shins of his jeans and the side of the road crunches under each step he takes. He cannot remember how he got here. Rose's voice rings in the night, yelling out for him maybe, or just yelling, but he's gone now either way.

He pulls out his phone to call his mom, but he has no service. He massages his face and takes a seat on the side of the road. Pulling up his knees, he curls over them and hisses. Every once in a while, white lights race across his legs, his arms wrapped around them, and then shrink away with the wet sound of rolling wheels and a cloud of kicked up mist from the road. Lon rubs his neck. His thumb sinks into his scars and he curses the world.

A soft voice, like a child's but not quite— rougher than a child's would be, Lon thinks— comes from above him. He hears a flutter of feathers and then a voice again, down the road. Lon lifts his head up and looks around, expecting to see someone, but no one is there. To his left, Rubyville blazes through the trees. To his right, a gas station shines as the last light before skyward black mountains. Across the road, dark trees dance together in an early autumn breeze. Lon gets up. He wonders if he imagined the voice, then hears it again. And more wings.

They are scratching at something on the side of the road. Lon walks closer to it and sees that they are pecking at the last pieces of a flattened carcass, possibly what was once a raccoon or an opossum. The child-like voices caw and croak at each other as they hop about, celebrating their find. Only now does the stench of rotting flesh waft into Lon's nostrils. He recoils, but only for a moment, and then approaches.

The crows allow him to come closer, but when he holds out his hand, they bustle away from him. They puff up and squawk. Lon steps back, realizing the implicit threat of his size.

Lon stuffs his hands into his pockets, feeling for something the birds might like. They watch him, curious and unblinking. In his jacket, Lon finds a couple of dog biscuits meant for Butterworth.

He breaks up the treat and holds the bits in his palm.

The crows appraise him. They bob their heads from side to side. Then one, the largest crow, struts forward and pecks a piece of the biscuit from his hand. The others, there are three more of them, follow their leader and take the rest of the dog treat from Lon. They whistle with pleasure and then return to the roadkill that brought them here.

Lon sits next to them, ignoring the smell of rot. They seem not to mind his presence at all. He wonders if they will let him touch them, but knows not to be pushy. No one likes somebody who comes off as too desperate.

A car rolls to a stop just past him. Lon watches it and knows that his flock is doing the same. It's a Volvo. In the glow of the tail-lights, Lon sees a fresh McCain/Palin sticker.

Mary gets out of the car and rushes over to him.

The crows retreat from her, gliding onto some nearby branches, and croak to each other. They are annoyed by this interruption to their meal, but they don't fly away further.

Mary hugs Lon. She says she got a call from Neill and she worried that Lon might get himself into some trouble.

Lon lets out a breath that feels like it collapses his entire rib cage. A tear rolls down his cheek onto her shoulder. She runs a hand through the back of his hair and tells him everything

will be alright before leading him back to her car. In the side mirror, Lon looks back at the crows returning to the ruffled carcass on the side of the road. He turns around and waves at them, and they caw in reply.

They'll be around.

Chapter Three

Meet & Met

He found her.

That's not the whole story.

He was looking for her, and he found her.

She has an ad posted up on Craigslist. She doesn't use her name, not her real name, but he knows that it is her. The ad reads: TALL HOT BABE LOOKING FOR FUN.

There's a picture she took of herself in the bathroom mirror. Lon recognizes the shower curtain, gray with some white flowers. The camera flash in the reflection blocks out her face. Her hair falls like black water over her shoulders. She wears a purple bra and Daisy Dukes. There's a phone number that's not hers. She has a business phone. Even Lon has to admit that it is smart. Rose doesn't say she's charging, but the clues are all there.

Text me if you are looking for a good time.

###

Lon knows Rose's old routines and he knows where to go if he wants to avoid her. He refuses to drive past Ruby Red's when he goes into town. If he can pull it off, he doesn't drive through the Rubyville town center at all. He would forgo the municipality as a whole, wouldn't even step outside his mom's neighborhood, if not for the crows.

He parks the Male Birth Control on the side of the road where his mom picked him up that horrible night. He puts on his hazards, steps out onto the grass, and waits in the grass by the woods with his hands in jacket pockets stuffed with snacks. He has been doing this every afternoon this week, when his mom is at work and no one is going to get too nosy about what he's up to skulking around the woods off the road.

Lon has thought about that night. It likes to step into his head in quiet moments of waiting like this. It would have been so easy to walk out into the road as a truck drove past. It had been so dark, a driver wouldn't have seen him until it was too late. Lon shoves that thought back into the mental cellar where it dwells. He doesn't like to think he has the disposition for self-slaughter. Not directly, at least. He rubs the scars on his neck. Not after everything else.

The crows recognize his car and materialize from the woods, more confidently than they had yesterday and the day before that. Lon never sees them until they are already at the forest's edge, watching him under the shade of yellowing autumn leaves. He pulls out a fist of raisins from his jacket pocket, holds out his hand, and opens his palm in front of him.

The bravest pair of crows land in the tall grass between Lon and the woods. The grass whispers when it folds under their talons. If Lon moves too abruptly, they will leap backwards into the trees, and the whole ritual will have to start over again. But when they advance, the other crows follow. The flock contracts and expands on itself, stretching from position to position like a spring until they reach Lon by his car.

One of the crows, who Lon has started to recognize as the flock's leader, struts over to him with its chest puffed out. Normally, Lon would bend down and offer the crow what food he

had brought, but today the lead crow doesn't wait for Lon to bend over. In a feathered flurry, the crow hops onto Lon's outstretched arm.

Instinct, something Lon had not taken into account, seizes control of his body. He throws himself back, away from the crow, and slams his back against the side of his car. The crow flies over Lon's head and the raisins, flung from his hand, scatter onto the ground. All of the crows— Lon counts six of them today— take wing and glide over the grass. They swoop in on the raisins and start plucking them up. With their beaks, they comb the grass for any morsels they may have missed.

Then, they do something peculiar. As the rest of the crows feed, two of them come forward from the others. One places a red bottle cap at Lon's foot and the other a striped blue jay feather. A grin tugs at the sides of Lon's mouth like he has a hook there. Are these payments? Gifts? He takes the bottle cap and the feather and puts them in his pocket. This seems to please the crows, who chitter and caw among themselves. The lead crow nods its head in approval, a fair trade with the man who brings treats now brokered. Lon wonders if they have a name for him in their crowing, a series of clicks or croaks that mean him.

When cars pass, they blow by. The wind-wake that follows brushes Lon's hair forward. But one set of wheels, Lon hears, slows to a stop. Lon lifts his attention from the crows to see why, thinking it will be a cop nosing around to tell him to stop feeding the wildlife or something. About fifteen feet behind the Male Birth Control, an old brown Ford Explorer with a cracked windshield parks— Rose's car.

Lon looks back, but the crows have already taken wing and are halfway back to the woods.

As Rose steps out onto the side of the road, she calls for Lon. Curses bite at his lips. He shoves his hands back into his jacket pockets and rounds the front of his car to the driver-side door. But she's fast— he always forgets how fast she can be— and reaches the car door just in time to cut off his escape.

Rose has been trying to get a hold of him.

Lon has not returned any of her emails, her calls, her texts. But why should he have? What is there to say?

She wants to meet. She wants to talk things over. Not here, obviously. Not now. Rose didn't mean to ambush him. But she has not seen him anywhere and she saw Lon on the side of the road and she didn't know if she would get another chance.

Maybe Lon should have replied to her. It is harder to say no to Rose in person when he can see the red at the edges of her eyes and smell the tang of her sweat. Two voices wrestle in his head. Grab her. Kiss her. Be a man and take her back. Give in and fall into her arms. Hit her. Spit in her face. Throw her to the ground. Make her feel the pain she caused. Make her regret what she did.

Stalemate.

Rose touches Lon like she would before, when he would get stuck in his head, and for a moment Lon lets her move her fingers towards his hair. It has grown over his ears now. But his hand flies from his pocket and he pushes her away. Rose stumbles back and holds her hands up in an apology. She didn't mean to. It's just hard...

Lon's heart and lungs wrestle. They feel like they're ripping themselves from Lon's arteries and veins and mean to push clear out of his ribcage. His breath feels like steam.

Rose regains her footing. She wants to meet up tomorrow. There's a lot that they need to talk about. At least, she thinks so. Will he agree to meet up? Please?

Lon can see Rose's chest has gone still and her lips press tightly against each other. She's literally holding her breath for his answer. The longer he takes to answer, the muscles in her face start to flinch.

Lon cannot say no. So he nods.

Rose relaxes and a terribly beautiful smile brightens her face. Lon can pick where and when they meet. He just has to send her an email. She will be waiting to hear from him.

Lon nods again, his way of letting her know that this conversation is over, that she can leave now. He reaches for his car door and pulls it ajar, but she has not moved. He looks up at her. She's staring at him. He can see her own impulses dueling within her brain. Her foot moves a half-step toward him, grinding on the asphalt, but she doesn't allow herself to take the full stride to him. She backs away, but her eyes don't leave him until she has to get back into her car.

Lon's neck feels like a guitar's, a slide pressing down on the strings and drawing down. He makes himself breathe and gets into his car. He locks the door and wrings the grip of the steering wheel.

Rose's car rolls by and she waves as he passes him.

It takes Lon only a moment to decide that he had lied to her. He won't send an email, he won't make arrangements, he won't meet up with her.

He doesn't want to see Rose ever again.

###

Saturday mornings Lon spends with his mom in the garden. Mary has three beds in her back yard filled with herbs and flowers. Hunched over on their knees, they both pull weeds. Mary asks Lon to pay special attention to the peonies (which she pronounces pee-*own*-ease). They look dry and green patches of decidedly non-peony leaves have begun invading the soil between their stalks. Mint, any gardener will tell, grows like a weed and volunteer sprouts have to be watched out for with care.

Through the back screen door, they hear the house phone ring a high digital trill. Lon perks up, but Mary waves her hand and says that she will get it. They both seem to remember at the same time that Lon can't answer the phone, and they pause for a half-moment before Mary shakes her head, pulls off her gloves, and goes inside.

Lon worries that it is Rose or Gil calling. Both of them have tried to email or text him. Lon will sometimes respond to Gil just to let him know that he's still alive and, no, he doesn't hold anything against *him* specifically. He didn't know Rose would be in Ruby Red's that night. Lon can buy all of that. But the way Gil had been so cautious, so hesitant to let Lon enter the place, it makes him wonder.

Lon has not responded to anything from Rose. Would she cross that line and call the house? Is she desperate enough for forgiveness or catharsis or whatever it is that she wants from him that she would risk having to talk to his mom? Lon almost wishes that she would. Mary would verbally eviscerate her.

Lon has told his mom some of what happened. After he spent three days locked up in his room, only stepping out for biological functions, Mary cornered him outside the bathroom and

refused to move until he let her in on what was going on. Lon wrote it down on a piece of toilet paper. *Rose and I broke up. She is seeing other people.* He omitted the part about her charging money. That bit was still too painful to share.

Sitting back on his heels, Lon wipes his brow with the back of his gloves. Late September can still get warm in the mountains, but October will bring more consistently cool weather. A breeze blows his hair into his eyes, and he turns to face it, blowing his hair back. It is the path of least resistance. No soil will get onto his forehead this way.

But from the pin oak tree in the corner of the yard, Lon sees a flock of black eyes among the rustling leaves. He counts eleven crows hopping around its branches. All of them keep an eye on him, heads cocked and long beaks open. They caw to each other. One flies down a branch and flounces across the yard over to him. The lead crow.

It stops a few feet away, jerks its head to the side, and fixes a marble-like eyeball on him. It croaks, and for a moment Lon thinks he hears a word.

Mary calls Lon from the house. The crow flies back to its flock, and Lon forgets the word before he can even take off his gardening gloves.

Mary leans against the kitchen counter with her hand over the mouth of the house phone. The digital letters framed in gray plastic are too far away from Lon to read the Caller ID. Mary tells him that it is Neill.

Lon takes a seat at the table and scratches at the green gingham tablecloth draped over it. He grimaces so Mary knows that he's not pleased to hear this. Neill was there that night, right before everything went south. He must have seen something. He called Mary to pick Lon up.

Mary says that Neill wants to talk to them. She asks Lon if it is all right for her to put Neill on the speakerphone.

Lon sighs but nods.

Mary tells Neill that he's on speakerphone and that Lon is here. Neill asks if they can hear him fine and Mary confirms.

The instinct elicited by the sound of his father's voice, almost forgotten except in Lon's oldest memories, makes Lon shrink in his chair. He folds over and puts his hands behind his head. His knees lift up and he rests his feet against the chair's leg. Lon wants to hit something, but he also feels like he's about to be hit. He wants to be held by someone giant to his size, the warmth of arms wrapped around his whole body.

Neill apologizes to Lon first thing. About El Desperado. He says that he has replayed that moment in his head over and over and he wishes he had done something better, like he could have come up and introduced Diana, or offered to pay for his food, or gone about the whole thing any number of different ways. He just wasn't expecting to see Lon there, so he just did what he first thought to do. Neill fails to apologize, Lon cannot help but notice, for ditching his family to run away out west. Maybe that's too much to ask for in a random phone call.

There's an uncomfortable pause.

Does Neill expect Lon to say something back? Lon looks up at his mom.

Mary tells Neill that they are still there and that they are listening. Lon can hear Neill's breathing.

There has been some bad news. Neill's father— Lon's grandfather— died last night. They think it was a heart attack.

Mary inhales and grabs at her collar. Lon rubs his jaw. Old George O’Riordan, who Lon had seen on billboards and who had helped pay for some of his cancer treatment, but who he had also never actually met.

Neill relays what little he knows about the funeral arrangements. He’s extending an invitation to Lon and Mary without explicitly doing so.

There’s one more thing.

Neill sounds awkward at this point. He’s nervous.

He wants to know if they all will want to meet up sometime soon. He says it is way past time that everyone met. He knows when he was gone that he caused a lot of hurt. He knows that he cannot make up for it. But a lot has changed in that time and Neill is trying to do what he can to heal the wounds he inflicted. Besides, it seems like a good idea to, you know, do this before the funeral.

Lon looks at his mom. She bites her lip. She’s wavering. Lon knows what she’s going to say.

###

Over the week and more often than he wants to admit, Rose hides somewhere inside Lon’s dreams. She doesn’t invade them. She isn’t haunting him. The dreams are never out-and-out about her. Until they are. Lon finds her hidden in the backwoods of a dream, and then he lets her loose to trample across it.

When Lon goes to sleep at night, he keeps her out of his thoughts. The most reliable way to keep her away is to think about the pieces of his life without her. Mostly, this means that he goes to sleep thinking about his adult life before cancer.

Lon is at an industrial warehouse that's also a restaurant in downtown Nashville. This place doesn't really exist. But in his dreaming, he goes there often. He lives there. His apartment is on the upper level with black iron stairs snaking their way up the back. These facts about his life come to him all at once, like he has just been reminded.

He's supposed to be driving home to his mother's, but instead he parks on the street side and enters.

Inside, the restaurant interior is trendy and industrial with repurposed metal chandeliers, amber-colored glasses, and napkins folded to look like exotic animals. Lon takes a seat at a long table with a dark wooden top where a party of people he knows are having a party.

Shania Twain is there. Somehow, she's Lon's responsibility.

Her imagined boyfriend scratches Lon's head. Lon bends into the scratches, taps his foot against the floor, and admits to the table that he is, in fact, a dog.

Lon has to go back to his apartment to work, but he has to bring Shania Twain with him. He takes her by the wrist and leads her into his apartment. They don't actually travel the distance. A few steps and suddenly they are where they need to be.

In his apartment behind or above the restaurant, Lon gets to work. But he's preoccupied by trying not to play "That Don't Impress Me Much" in front of Shania Twain. He believes that she's not a fan of her own work.

He records the sound of a Tesla-esque experiment. A man with gel in his hair opened up a portal to an alternate dimension for a moment long enough to draw from it a giant glob of water and a Great White Shark suspended inside it. But the man documented his experiment poorly. The scientific community isn't sure if he actually succeeded in his endeavor. They think it is a hoax. They are trying the same thing, after all, but space-vultures keep getting in the way. So Lon has to get the audio just right. It is the only chance they have at proving the gel-haired man's experiment was real.

Lon looks up from his recording equipment to Shania Twain. She sits knees to chest on the floor in front of Lon's white refrigerator. He asks her what is wrong. He has been ignoring her as much as he can this whole time. He doesn't want her to know that he's a fan. He tries to make friends with Shania Twain.

Shania Twain informs Lon that she's sad because she can't go to the pool. She doesn't have a bathing suit.

And suddenly, Lon has an opportunity to make her happy, to solve a problem. So he sits down in front of her and tries to come up with solutions between them.

She asks if she would fit in his mother's bathing suit.

Lon shakes his head. Shania Twain is too skinny. But Lon is fairly certain that he can find a bathing suit that would fit somewhere in the apartment.

Lon hates his dream-self, this version so desperate to be liked.

He can't find a bathing suit. But he finds a pair of yellow floats shaped like ducklings on the floor. When he offers them to Shania Twain, she asks him if he's joking.

Lon isn't joking, but he says he is to save face.

Shania Twain has had just about enough of Lon. She goes to the parked car outside the building.

Was it a song by her that played at the after-party seven years ago? Lon was drunk and said to his friends around a bottle of Jamison that he was in love with Rose Barnes. She was in the other room. Did she hear him? But when she asked him to leave the party with her, he refused. He was afraid to miss more fun. She got a ride home with someone else. That morning, Lon woke up on a couch, and knew he had seriously fucked up. Rose broke up with him a couple of days later.

Lon follows Shania Twain to the car and climbs into his own backseat. On the floor, between the door and the seats, he finds some old Lavalier microphones. He looks up and sees her sitting in the driver's seat, hands on the wheel.

But that can't be right.

He's on the right side of the car. Cars never work like they ought to in dreams. They are uncontrollable sensitive hunks of metal that like to reconfigure their form on a whim. Lon remembers this in a moment of lucidity, and accepts that his car is now situated in the British style.

So he sits behind the wheel on the right side of the car, which should have been the passenger's seat, and he's behind her. This checks out.

Shania Twain gets in the car and sits in the passenger seat that should be the driver's seat.

Lon reaches forward to touch Rose's shoulder. He says how funny it is that she's here, that they are looking for a bathing suit. She ignores him.

He asks her if she remembers that time when they planned on going to the Ocoee River with some friends from school— was Travis one of them?— and the two of them got lost. They drove around for two hours in the Honda, talking the whole time about family and music and movies. And then there was the time a few weeks later when Lon finally discovered a swimming hole on the river. In retrospect, Lon doubts that where he took her was the original intended location. The place was covered with trash and the water was brown. A cement dam, ten feet tall and maybe twenty feet wide, drained into it. Lon jumped ten feet into the water from a granite cliffside. Hitting the water felt like getting punched in the jaw. Once in, he tried to coax Rose to jump in with him. The water wasn't so bad. But she wouldn't jump in. Then Rose screamed and pointed at the water. A long green gar swam inches below the murky surface next to him. Lon climbed out of the water and drove Rose back to town, laughing at how spooked the two of them were. He asks if Rose remembers that time.

Her brown Cherokee pupils cut him.

She does not remember.

They all go back inside to the restaurant and rejoin the party at the long table, since they never left. Everyone is happy to see Rose. Lon is happy to see her. She is tall and lithe and cute, all soft edges. Her hair is as dark as potting soil and pulled back into a tight ponytail. He has thought that about her hair before, but knew it made a terrible complement.

A waiter dressed in white and black tells Lon the restaurant is closing soon.

Everyone steps outside.

Across the street, a man with a mustache stands next to a car, and Lon knows that he is Rose's, so he doesn't look long at him. He doesn't want to draw attention.

At this moment when everyone streams outside and the party washes past him, Lon stands alone. It lasts for hours.

Rose is fighting the flow of human bodies to go back inside.

Someone bumps into Lon and asks him if he got his keys, which Lon didn't. He left them in his attic office. He only has a few minutes before the building closes its doors and everything shuts down. He takes the opportunity to follow Rose inside.

Rose is talking to some people Lon does not know. He stands in a stairwell and positions himself in just the right place to get her attention. He stares at her until she looks back at him. Rose smiles in a soft acknowledgement. Like a child, that attention is all Lon wants and he feels a soft glow in the reflection of her smile.

Lon flurries off to find the manager. He needs someone to let down the stairs from the ceiling and let him into the attic office. Waitstaff swarm and start stacking sheets of flimsy plywood and cardboard boxes to get the drawstring on the ceiling.

One asks Lon if he went to the college in town and Lon tells him that he did. He asks if he was a music student, if Lon is who he thinks he is, some name that keeps coming up.

Lon tells him that it might be him, but probably isn't. He hears the words, "I don't do much of that anymore. I mostly do production these days," slip out from his mouth.

The waitstaff at last reach the drawstring and pull it down. A ladder folds down from the attic. Lon climbs it up through a black rectangle.

In the attic, everything is rickety and thin and claustrophobic. A storm thrashes outside. Rain makes music against the tin roof. The floorboards creak under each step Lon takes towards his desk. A gas lantern burns on it. Rats scurry across its top, throwing old, browned pieces of

paper onto the floor. Lightning flashes outside, and his shadow cast against the wall doesn't look like his own. Lon reaches for something on his desk that he won't remember.

He wakes up an hour and a half before his alarm.

###

Mary has not stopped fussing since Neill called yesterday. She complains about her weight. She gets her hair done and spends the evening painting her nails while watching *CSI*. She checks her mascara and applies dark lipstick in the car visor mirror on their way to meet Neill. Mary almost never wears lipstick.

Lon watches her from the side of his eye as he drives them down a winding road.

She assures him that she isn't interested in Neill. God no. But she has this thought—wouldn't it be horrible if he got a look at her and thought he had made the right decision, that leaving her had been a good idea after all? Mary doesn't want Neill to feel validated in his decision to abandon them. She wants him to know what he's missing out on. She might not be some girl straight out of college, but she isn't old. Forty-seven isn't old, even if it seems that way to Lon right now. She reminds Lon that she was younger than he is now when she had him, and slams the visor back up against the car roof.

They get to the restaurant early. Some place off Highway 74 near Doris Ridge. Neill had suggested it. They pull into the gravel parking lot out front where a couple trucks are parked. A plastic white sign with faded letters reads *Uncle Walter's Country Cooking*. Mary has never been here before, but she has driven past it. The same is true for Lon.

The inside of Uncle Walter's is a bit rough with scuffed gray tiles on the floor and wallpaper that looks like it had been rolled out in the seventies, but it smells wonderful. Lon's stomach growls seconds after they step inside. Some farmers in overalls chew on hamburgers at the bar. Provisions fill blond pine shelves by the register. A waitress eyes Lon and Mary as they enter, but she's on a payphone— Lon has not seen one of those in a long time— and seems to be in the middle of an important conversation, as she looks away from them and, clutching the metal cord like she means to strangle someone with it, starts whispering emphatically into the phone.

Lon and Mary grab a booth by the window, where Lon rests his head. Next to him, Mary fidgets with her purse.

Eventually, the waitress rests the phone on the top of the booth and brings them two menus. Mary lets her know that they are waiting on two more people. The waitress says that will be no problem. Mary informs her that neither she nor Lon have been here before and asks what's good here. The waitress points on the menu to the pulled pork sandwich. It is their specialty. She says she will be back with more menus in a few and can take their drink orders then, and heads back to the payphone.

Mary turns to Lon with a huff. It takes Lon a few seconds to notice that she's staring at him. He cuts his eyes back at her. She has been trying to get his attention.

Lon twists his neck and looks back at her. He's listening.

Mary sighs again and slowly tells him that there are some things that Lon needs to know before Neill gets here.

Lon can't hide his smirk. It seems a tad late to have this talk. But he nods to let his mom know that he's following.

Neill didn't have a good relationship with his father. Almost every problem she and Neill had in their marriage stemmed from Neill's father. After the divorce, more than one person in the O'Riordan family reached out to tell Mary that they thought Neill had left George as much as he had left her. At the time, she thought they were being cruel, but she also knows that it was true.

Lon wants to know how much contact his mom has had with the O'Riordans after all this time. The old man knew about Lon's illness, after all.

Mary stops abruptly and starts tapping her finger against the slate plastic tabletop. She wants a cigarette. They don't let people smoke in restaurants anymore, do they? It has been a long time since his mom last smoked. She quit when Lon got diagnosed with throat cancer.

This is the deal. If Mary and Lon are going to get involved with these people again, even if it is just for George's funeral, Lon needs to be aware that this family has some serious problems. Books can be written about the problems in that family— psychological manipulation, abuse, all sorts of stuff. In a way, it is good that Neill wasn't a part of Lon's life. Mary is glad that she had been able to shield Lon from all of that. Not to let that deadbeat off the hook. But all of this is to say that today at least and at the funeral, Lon needs to tread carefully. When Neill and that woman show up, it is going to be hard for her and Lon of them not to let him have it. But this is not the time. Mary wants to make sure that Lon understands that he needs to have some grace around all of this.

Lon nods.

The waitress reappears at their side and places four sets of cutlery wrapped in white paper napkins on the table. She's here for their drink orders, and do they want to order any appetizers?

Mary is fine with having water with lemon. Lon points at *Sprite* on the drinks listed and Mary leans over to see. She relays the order.

The waitress smiles and says something about how her son is shy too.

Mary corrects her. He can't talk. He lost his vocal cords.

The waitress freezes and everything on her face expands. Apologies tumble out from her mouth like ice cubes from a cup.

Mary brushes past all of this and asks for a plate of fried pickles, asking Lon if that sounds good to him without waiting for his response before reiterating that they will be having fried pickles as an appetizer.

The waitress nods and says that she will be right back with the drinks.

Lon stares at his mother from the hoods of his eyes. That was a bit harsh.

Mary shrugs. You know what they say about assuming.

Suddenly, Lon remembers something.

He taps his mom's shoulder. When she looks over, he holds up his arms like he's cradling an infant. He points at the empty bench across the table.

The color leaves Mary's face. She didn't know that they had a baby.

As if on cue, a green pickup pulls into the parking lot. Lon and Mary watch from the window as Neill steps out. Not that Lon ever thought he resembled his mother all that much, but it unsettles him exactly how much he looks like his father. He doesn't know how to feel about it.

From the other side of the car, a small tan woman hops out— the truck is too tall for her to step out of gracefully. She reaches into the vehicle’s back seat while Neill looks into the window and sees the two of them staring at him. He waves in the same awkward way he had when he saw Lon at El Desperado.

Mary cusses under her breath and waves back.

###

The conversation. What is there to say? It goes well?

Neill introduces his new wife Diana and their three-year-old girl Julia, Lon’s half-sister. Diana is great. She isn’t from Mexico as Lon had heard but from Ecuador— Quito to be exact. She and Mary get along like old friends in a genuine, un-forced way that appears to make Neill uncomfortable. Lon’s mere presence has that effect on Neill as well. There’s only one truly awkward moment when Mary brings up Diana’s age, but Diana diffuses it. She’s twenty-nine and she knows what she wants in a husband. She calls Neill *mi viejo*, Spanish for *my old man*.

Neill talks a lot about his new job as a Project Manager for a construction and home renovation company. He keenly avoids talking about his recently deceased father. Mary does pry from him the plans for the funeral. The service will be held next week at St. Isidore, the nearest Catholic Church.

Julia is cute, all messy black curls and pouting lips. She takes special interest in Lon, like she knows their kinship on a primal level without fully understanding it. She crawls under the table to sit next to him, a coloring book clutched against her chest. She climbs up onto the booth

and shows it to him. It is full of fairies and unicorns and bright crayon scribbles. Julia conjures a purple crayon from a pocket on the front of her dress, offers it, and once Lon accepts the crayon she produces another, this one a dark forest green. She chooses a page to color full of friendly-looking dragons.

Everything is alright.

Chapter Four

Kin

E-D's Food Market has little in the way of floral arrangements, but it is the closest thing to a florist nearby. Mary's own garden flowers are not in bloom, and even if they were they may be too festive. Mary says that they need something understated and serious to bring to the funeral. White roses or maybe tulips.

Lon picks up an arrangement of yellow roses with pink slightly wilted tips paired with baby's breath from a dripping green bucket.

Mary smiles at them but she doesn't think they will work. They are too romantic. Champagne roses are for young love.

Lon puts the flowers back and shoves his hands into his pockets. Mary is being particular as ever. This could take a while. Lon taps his foot to draw her gaze from the flower arrangements and points to the frozen food aisle.

Mary nods and returns her attention to the florals.

Most of E-D's smells like rotten eggs. But in the frozen foods aisle, the odor dulls. Lon has heard somewhere that smells strengthen in warmer air, that particles cling to moisture or something like that. But that isn't why he has come to this aisle. He has not been to the grocery store in weeks or months, definitely not since he and Rose broke up, and he would absolutely murder someone for a pack of ice cream sandwiches. He has earned them. Damnit, he deserves a box full of delicious, cold brown and white rectangles as much as anyone ever has.

Lon opens the freezer door and cold air blasts against him. Fog clouds up the windows on the doors up and down the aisle. Lon grabs a couple boxes of ice cream sandwiches. When he closes the door, he sees a man wearing a baseball cap and torn denims at the end of the aisle. His knees are locked like a deer about to bolt. Bruises cloud his face. Lon lets out a deep breath. Shit.

Travis Miller doesn't seem particularly stoked to have this meeting either.

Lon walks to him with his free hand up as if to say that he isn't going to sucker punch him in the middle of the grocery store. If he did that, he would ruin his ice cream sandwiches.

This appears to put Travis at some ease, and he heads down the aisle to meet Lon in front of the frozen breakfasts. The yellow of Travis' bruises almost match the boxes of waffles stacked at their side. The sight of a former friend, or maybe the sheer awkwardness of the moment, makes Lon forget for a second that he cannot speak, and he starts to hiss out an apology for jumping Travis, then stops in the middle of his first word. To his credit, Travis takes the lead.

If it had been him, Travis concedes that he wouldn't have acted much better. He might not have done *that*— Travis shifts as though suddenly aware of how uncomfortably close to his balls his underwear is— but he wouldn't have taken it well either. He deserves what he got, even if he didn't think so at the time. Like, the first thing he ought to have done was reach out to Lon to let him know what was going on with him and Rose. That is what bros are supposed to do. Even if they have not seen each other in however long. The whole thing is fucked up. Travis had a hell of a time explaining his face to everyone when he showed up the next day at middle school baseball practice.

Lon places a hand on Travis' shoulder and gets Travis to look him in the eye. He blows air into his lips and trumpets it out like an elephant.

Travis laughs and tells Lon to go fuck himself. Anyways, Travis has to get some bags of peas. Not for his face or anything.

Lon lets him pass with a smile. He meets Mary back at the flowers. She still has not picked anything out. She sees the boxes of ice cream sandwiches in Lon's arm and says something about how, yeah, it has been that kind of a week. Lon shakes his head. It has been that kind of *month*. In the end, Mary settles on an arrangement of chrysanthemums and carnations.

###

The next day, Lon wears his Johnny Cash suit for his grandfather's funeral. Black on black on black. It has been a while since Lon has had to style his hair. It has grown long and he has to brush it back from his face. He drives the Honda with Mary in the passenger seat. The flowers rest on her lap. She's fussing. Again. She has not seen most of these people in twenty years.

St. Isidore Catholic Church, situated literally on the Georgia border more than forty miles away, takes almost an hour on winding mountain roads to drive to. The building itself is small, built on the side of a hill, but the parking lot sprawls out like a paved black lake at the hill's foot with freshly painted parking spaces. On the dark wooden façade of the church, a glazed blue Virgin Mary leans over the doorway with a stoic outward gaze, hands clasped together like she will indeed pray for every soul who steps inside.

Shoes echo with impossible intensity on the tile floor. Small clusters of attendees crowd the narthex, and when Lon and Mary enter, strange people approach Mary and hug her. They say her name and pull it out like taffy— *Maaary Aaalfoord*. Several people reach to take Lon's

hand and shake it. The last time they saw him, he was in diapers, he was so small, he looks just like his father, they heard about his illness, they are glad he could make it, so good to see him after all this time.

Mary's heels click against the tile floor like someone has stuck a microphone to them as they make their way down the center aisle to find a seat. From the pews, silent eyes fall on her and Lon in a dull, rehearsed kind of way that makes Lon think that people watching mean to commit this as a kind of hazing for anyone not already seated. Mary leads Lon to a pew in the middle of the church and they slide in. Mary makes a joke about how Catholic Churches always fill in from back to front.

Eventually the crowds in the narthex dissipate along with the conversations held there like morning mist thinning away with the rising sun. The pews fill in, and silence falls thick over the building. Neill sidles into their pew. Flustered, he explains that Julia is throwing a tantrum and Diana is handling her in the car. They will be in shortly.

A piano plays "Amazing Grace" as the pallbearers, six men to whom Lon assumes he is somehow related, march the casket down the center aisle towards the altar. A priest in long green robes flanked by two altar servers in white leads them. One altar server carries a small golden cross like a military standard.

Lon has never been to a Catholic mass before. Mary is Presbyterian, sometimes. Neither of them go to church as much as they think they ought to. Lon has trouble keeping up with the call and response nature of the ceremony. He keeps a close eye on the people in the pew in front of them and follows their movements— when to stand, when to sit, when to kneel, when to sign

the cross, when to shake hands. Confusingly, there are gestures he has not even heard of before, and cannot emulate by watching others.

At the front of the church, a woman with a tightly pulled gray bun signs the mass. It occurs to Lon that someone might have requested that she be there for his benefit, forgetting that he didn't lose his hearing along with his voice.

Diana and Julia join them in the middle of a song. As much as Lon can admire the peculiarity and ritual of this place, he draws the line at its music. It is awful. A woman at a piano in need of tuning sings in a breathy imitation of an opera soprano. Most of the song lyrics don't rhyme, which wouldn't be so bad except they don't even keep meter either. Jesus Christ, who writes these things? Lon flips through the pastel blue pages of the program to find out who these lyrical failures are.

Before he can etch their names into his brain, they stand, and Julia scoots down the pew away from Diana, behind Neill and Mary. She tugs at the flap of Lon's jacket. He turns and she's looking up at him. He waves. Julia smiles and hides behind her cardigan, then scoots back down to her mother. Lon follows her with his eyes to Neill, who is sneaking swigs from a flask.

For the sermon (in the program, Lon sees they call it a *homily*), the priest performs what can loosely be considered a eulogy. The priest delivers it like he's reading a bullet list.

Lon zones out.

He watches the people listening and tries to sort out who they are. Old people and people who look lost amidst the rituals Lon assumes are friends and associates. From what Lon can tell, the people who look like him, people who are probably family, all seem to know what the hell is going on. It feels safe to assume that Lon is the only non-Catholic member of the family. It then

occurs to Lon that he doesn't know if he was baptized Catholic, or something else, or at all. He will ask his mom about that later.

On one of the panels of stained glass, one of the ones depicting Jesus' crucifixion, women huddle together, weeping at Jesus' feet. Lon knows from the stories that one of them is Mary Magdalene. That was Jesus' whole thing, right? That he hung out with prostitutes and lepers, the kinds of people everyone looked down on? Lon looks at Mary Magdalene, head covered in a green scarf, hands pressed together in prayer, and he sees Rose. It's the world's oldest profession, Lon tells himself. If Jesus Christ liked Mary Magdalene, he probably would have loved Rose.

Lon sinks into the pew and stares at his shoes.

It takes him a moment to remember that he is not the only person in the church.

The priest wraps up the homily with body count. George O'Riordan was married to Dorothy Sullivan O'Riordan for thirty years before her passing twenty years ago, with whom he had five children. He had thirteen grandchildren.

At some point, everyone is expected to take bread and wine. Mary touches Lon's arm and shakes her head. That's right. Catholics are pretty exclusive about that sort of thing. The horrid woman responsible for music yodels through this procession, until the very end when the priest mercifully shoves a wafer into her mouth.

The mass doesn't continue for much longer after that. To Lon's great surprise, the whole thing doesn't feel like it went an hour. He had heard people complain before about the length of Catholic mass. And while the whole thing wasn't exactly riveting theater, he didn't feel like it was as unbearable as others sometimes made it out to be. Catholic suffering appears to be quite over-rated, Lon thinks.

The priest and the altar servers and the pallbearers proceed back down to the church's entrance to the sound of bagpipes drowning out the lone pianist and her singing. Lon had hoped this would be the end of his immersion into his father's family, but as soon as they stepped outside and his mom starts talking with people who say that there is a reception back at the house, Lon sees on his mom's face that she intends to go.

###

Growing up, Lon knew that his father's family had a farm out somewhere near Doris Ridge. He imagined something vast and grand, an antebellum manor with gables and a wrap-around porch amidst groves of well-pruned trees that flanked the driveway and rolling pasture fields that faded into the distant mountains. And there are fields. But as Lon pulls into the property's driveway, those fantasies bubble and melt away, though they reveal a glowing core. Lon didn't think he had ever been here before. But he remembers when he was small, looking out a car window with raindrops racing each other downward and hadn't the car turned into this same driveway?

The farm sits in a mountain-rimmed bowl. The gravel driveway snakes through hills and over a creek. They pass a grove of crooked persimmon trees, and there it is, a yellow house with dark shutters and a tin roof. It's nice, but far from grand. No wrap-around porch, for instance, and no gables. Beyond the house, black cattle graze in fields pocked with round haystacks. The asphalt loop at the front of the house is filled up with parked cars. Those still arriving pull off to the side and park in the grass.

Lon parks the Honda next to a small pear tree and steps out. His foot sinks into the grass further than he thought it should.

Mary calls for help getting out of the car, and Lon rounds it to oblige her. She grabs onto his arm and totters to a stand, her heeled boots unsuited for walking on soft soil. She grabs the bouquet of flowers from her seat.

Men in black jackets stand around the shallow front porch smoking cigars. Already, some have gotten into the liquor and hold round glasses of whiskey.

Mary asks Lon not to drink too much while they are here. They'll both need their wits to find their way home. Under her breath, Mary laments not buying a GPS.

One of the men on the porch recognizes her and calls her name as she and Lon walk over from the car. The same stretching out of her name— *Maaary*— as though the length of it can mask the insincerity of its intention. He holds his arms wide, cigar in one hand, tumbler in the other. He sports a grin that Lon recognizes as like his own, and the same eyes.

Mary hugs the man cautiously, waist stuck out like she doesn't want to get too close to him. He releases her and she holds an arm out and introduces Lon.

The man almost spits out his drink. Mary tells Lon that this is his Uncle George Junior, who pops his cigar into his mouth and holds out a hand. Lon shakes it. Uncle Junior hasn't seen little Lonnie since he was in diapers. Jesus Christ, he looks just like Neill.

Mary pats Lon on the back. She says that Lon is better looking than Neill ever was.

Uncle Junior chuckles and nods. Mary excuses them and opens the door. She's hoping to give Mrs. O'Riordan her regards at some point. Uncle Junior says that she's probably in the

living room. He taps Lon's arm and says that it is good to see him. Lon has, he tells him, some cousins skulking around the place that he should meet.

Lon nods politely, but he would rather not. He has the feeling that all of this will be enough without adding on any pressure to make friends. That is what cousins are supposed to be, right? Friends?

As soon as the door shuts behind them, children stampede in front of them from down the hallway and thunder up a flight of wooden stairs. Julia trails behind the pack. She has to climb up the steps on all fours. Lon hopes that when he dies, there will be this much life left in his wake.

He follows his mom down the hallway as the glowing core of a memory starts to grow. This place has a smell, like old wood and tobacco, that he didn't know he knew.

Guests pack the living room off the side of the hallway. A woman grabs Mary, again, happy to see her after so long, and forces her to hug. Mary isn't a touchy person. If the default greeting today is hugging, Lon knows this reception will quickly become Mary's waking nightmare.

Mary asks if there's a place for her to put the flowers, and the woman takes them from her with a *you didn't have to* lathered on. Then her eyes fall onto Lon with that same look of surprise that Uncle Junior had, like she has laid eyes on a ghost. She draws out his name and reaches to touch his hair. She asks if Lon remembers her, which he doesn't. She's not a part of the mental time-capsule Lon has coming here dug up in his brain. She's his Aunt Shannon. Lon reaches out to shake her hand, but she wraps her arms around him and squeezes herself into his chest.

Mary hides an evil grin. Lon isn't very touchy either.

Neill, of all people, saves them. He pushes through the crowd and peels Aunt Shannon off of Lon with a clearing of his throat. Shannon gushes for a few moments longer, she's so touched to see the two of them together, and then, remembering the flowers in her hand, scurries off.

Neill thanks Mary and Lon for coming. He wasn't expecting them to drive out this way. It means a lot to him that they showed up.

There's a lot of talk in this room. Lon gets himself some food off the spread and finds a can of beer to his liking. Yellow Cans. More people he doesn't know come up to him, one after another. These family and friends who aren't either. They all say the same things, how glad they are to see him. Some offer condolences, which Lon has to solemnly nod and accept. If only he can explain his estrangement with a nod or a twist of the lip.

At some point, Shannon corners Lon again and interrogates him about his personal life, does he have a girl in his life, is he working, Lon's not on welfare is he, and has he met his Aunt Leslie yet? Lon makes like he has to go to the bathroom, and flees before she can ask him about his shoe size.

Into the hall, Lon slips out and walks in a direction generally away from the noise. He sneaks into a room at the end by the stairs with an unlocked door and, closing it behind him, turns on the light.

The room, a study, smells like an old man. Lon pounds his forehead with the palm of his hand as the very obvious reason for that occurs to him. Dark built-in bookshelves line green papered walls. A desk stands in the back with a lamp and books stacked on top of it. An oriental rug covers the wooden floor. Lon sits in the swivel chair behind the desk and takes in a deep breath. This room. He has certainly been in this room before.

Lon sips from his beer can and minds the rise and fall of his ribcage. He passes a hand over the desk's surface, indented and uneven, rather like his own desk's. He wonders if this is where his grandfather cut the check after Mary and Lon ran out of funds, after the health insurance company left them in the lurch.

When Lon feels that his heart has slowed enough that the panic has calmed in his blood, he stands from the desk and starts looking more intently at the bookshelves' contents. Lon expected to find a lot of high-brow stuff there, but instead the books standing in ranks are worn out pulp paperbacks and mystery novels. Family photos populate most of the gaps. Some of the faces are familiar, younger versions of people he has met on this day. On one of the bookshelves, there is a Chinese Checkers board and a jar full of colorful marbles. Everything about the room leaves Lon suspended uncomfortably between feeling at home and alien. It is like having to remember the words to a song years after last hearing it.

That feeling reminds Lon of a recurring dream Gil told him about. Gil would walk onto the stage in the cafeteria of Rubyville High School, only to find that he did so in the dead middle of a play. All the actors look at him and expect him to deliver his lines. Gil would realize that he knows the play, that he had done it years ago, but he cannot remember a single word of it. So Gil would stand there agape as the crowd begins booing and throwing things at him. Sometimes, just to be sure he was properly shamed, all of this would happen to Gil standing bare-assed with his hand around his dick.

Lon feels beyond grateful that he is, as he looks down to check, still in his suit. This is no dream. The walls don't pull up to reveal an audience pointing and laughing at him.

A soft knock on the door, and then it creaks open.

Neill halts in the doorframe awkwardly before committing to his entrance. He closes the door quietly behind him. He explains that he wasn't expecting anyone to be in here. Neill says something about how his father spends— he isn't used to talking about him in the past tense yet — hours in this room every day.

Lon nods and follows Neill with his eyes as Neill crosses the room and opens up a window behind the desk. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out from his jacket pocket. Leaning against the windowsill, Neill remembers to ask if Lon minds, like it is an afterthought. Lon does mind, but he doesn't think it would matter if he made it known. He shakes his head and turns his attention back to the bookshelves.

Eyes tickle at the back of Lon's head. They only break away with the clipped grinding of a lighter's ignition and the smell of burning paper and, in the moments it takes for the smoke to waft across the room, what Lon realizes isn't tobacco. Lon looks over at Neill, whose lips purse around the end of a blunt. Neill inhales deeply before blowing smoke out the window. He explains how his father hated weed and people who smoke it. One time, George O'Riordan told Neill that only hippies, commies, and darkies smoke marijuana. His words, not Neill's. Actually, he probably used worse language. But Neill gets some pleasure knowing how his father's ghost must be tied in knots watching his son smoke the stuff in his study.

Lon nods and tries to sort out a means of graceful escape from this room like the last. He isn't interested in being someone else's therapist or guilt receptacle.

Neill asks Lon what he will do when Neill dies.

They stand there, eyes locked as Neill takes another hit off his blunt. Neither say a word to each other, until at last Neill turns his head and releases the smoke in his lungs out into the air

outside. He waves his hand and says that Lon shouldn't mind him. He's all kinds of fucked up anyways.

Lon points to his beer and slinks out of the study.

###

Lon thinks this whole reception has gone on for far too long. He checks his phone and his chest sinks in disappointment. He has only been stuck here at this farm for an hour. How is that possible? He thought for sure it would be getting late by now. But stepping outside, the sun is more or less in the same position in the sky. It's not that he has been here too long, it's that the entire time has drawn out like torture.

On the steps up to the screened-in back porch where there's more smoking and drinking and commiserating and other performances of ritual for those not close enough to the dead to truly grieve, Lon sits. Old partners, clients, and colleagues talk shop and discuss old George O'Riordan's impact in the community. On and on. Lon would risk passing through them to go find his mom, but then he might have to go back into the house and subject himself to more supposed relatives.

He should have brought a notepad or something. He could steal silence while people read his words.

Lon wishes suddenly that he could fly. He would leap into the air, beat his arms, and take to the sky. From overhead, the ground would look less wild than it ought to, but more than he would have expected. Swathes of land cleared for farms, developments, industry, but the

woodlands creeping over their borders and reclaiming territory long ago ceded. Lon would seek out these forests. Clouds would wet his feathers, and he would emerge from them to find the sun, whose heat would warm him. In the woods, he would find others like him. He would live in silence with only the birds and the wind for conversation.

But man is made to speak. Lon can't change what he is.

He hears the porch door creak open and slam shut. He turns, and sees his mom.

It is time for them to leave.

Chapter Five

A Man Without Pants

On the first day of October, Lon gets an email from Gil. Gil got invited to a party on Friday and wants Lon to come along with him. No Rose, he promises. He just wants to hang out with his friend, whom he has not seen in over three weeks now. Lon adjusts his elbows on his bed mattress, reads the email again on his laptop, and closes it, unsure how to respond.

Morning light bleeds into his room, filtered through white plastic blinds. Outside his window, slightly overgrown box shrubberies house a nest of chickadees. Lon reaches from his bed to peel back the blinds from the window and peers outside. A dramatic male chickadee dances atop the bushes and chirps. The blinds slip from Lon's fingers and clatter against the sill. The bird flies in the split second the blinds rattle, and when Lon pulls them back again, it is gone.

Lon gets up from his bed and ambles over to his desk. He used to write songs on this thing. He would spend hours scribbling out lyrics, scratch over them, and then write them better. Lon presses his index finger along its surface and feels the resistance against his nail. When did he stop doing that?

He sold his guitar along with most of his furniture when he moved out of Nashville. But it had stood in the corner of his apartment untouched for a couple of years before that. He wrote songs in high school and then in college. But sometime in all of that, people who would know started telling him that everyone tries to be a songwriter or a musician. If he wanted to make any money in the music business, he needed to get into producing and familiarize himself with audio

software. Their words appealed to Lon's sense of practicality. That was where the money was, they told him.

Now money is nowhere.

Is money in the mail today?

Lon's disability check will arrive from Social Security soon. He and Mary will decide later how much to set aside to pay the hospital bills. For Lon's debt. Lon slumps down into the frayed black pleather swivel chair at the desk and starts dancing his feet from side to side. Posting an elbow up on the chair's arm-rest, he settles his thumb in his neck-crater.

It is a kind of emotional manipulation hospitals play. They save lives, they take risks, they do the good work. But they don't tell anyone how much the good work costs until it is done. Lon doesn't even have it all that bad. His grandfather scooped out thousands of dollars from what Lon would have owed. There are horror stories all around about people who commit suicide after sending their families into bankruptcy after heart surgery, liver transplants, chemotherapy. Not that it spares their loved ones from the billing offices. Like the reaper himself, the healthcare industry always collects what it is due.

Lon spins around in his chair. He wishes dearly for someone he can hit. Some insurance company CEO, or a government bureaucrat that he could hunt down and give the knuckles. There used to be a time when people could do something like that without worrying about getting thrown into prison, right? It was not assault, just maintaining personal dignity. Find the person responsible for suffering and make them feel a sliver of the pain they have inflicted. Lon doesn't define that as retribution, it isn't quite revenge, but it is something. The world needs something more to enforce societal responsibility. If you fuck over a bunch of people, a bunch of

people will punch you in the face. Maybe there ought to be a law entitling everyone to one good hit. It seems fair enough. Lon spins and spins and spins.

When Lon returns his attention to his desk, he scrounges around for a pen and something to write on. He doesn't know what to write, maybe he can work out his *Assault v. Personal Dignity* thesis. Somewhere in the desk's drawers lies an old notebook. Lon digs around for it and when he finds it, he sees the year 2001 dug into its marbled cover. He flips through the pages. Funny, Lon never realized how much his writing changed since high school.

He happens upon a song he wrote in the spring before he graduated. He remembers it because he had not slept all night, and finally at 4:30 a.m, he pulled out his notebook. Of course, the song was called "I Can't Sleep."

Each verse began with a line ending in *cause I can't sleep*.

I've done thirty pushups, cause I can't sleep...

Yada yada yada...

My sheets are origami, cause I can't sleep...

Yada yada yada...

Lon giggles at the penultimate verse, the last funny one he wrote before an obligatory sappy ending.

My head's hitting the wall, cause I can't sleep,

Hopefully, a concussion will break this theme...

The notebook is full all the way to the back cover. In the margins, notes and doodles don't leave an inch of bare paper. Humpback whales with tophats bow to notations on meter. A Yeti swings from the rim of a UFO next to a list of potential album titles. *Good Folks, Meet Me*

on Lookout Mountain, Shotgun Pops. Lon rubs his forehead, unsure how the same brain sitting in his skull now did all of this then, on top of high school, on top of a social life, on top of teenage hormones.

The house shivers when a yellow school bus passes down the road out front. Crows caw to each other, riled up by the disturbance growling past.

Lon decides now would be a grand time for an ice cream sandwich.

He climbs the stairs up to the main floor. On the countertop between the living room and the kitchen, his mom has left a small stack of Lon's mail. He checks it before making for the freezer. Sure enough, hidden in the stack of credit card solicitations and glossy coupons for stores he doesn't go to, Lon finds an envelope from Social Security. He leaves it on the top of the stack. He will have to take it to the bank soon.

While Lon leans down to get his ice cream sandwich out of the freezer, he hears tapping at the window.

He looks up and sees a crow there with something in its beak. It places the object down onto the windowsill and flies away.

Lon unwraps the dessert as he walks to the window. He holds the ice cream sandwich in his jaws, freeing up his hands, and pushes the window open. He almost lets it break and drop onto the floor when he sees what the crow left. A yellow guitar pick.

###

Lon does eventually respond to Gil's email. He will go to the party with him. He needs to get out of the house and spend time around human beings to whom he isn't genetically related. He leaves a note for his mom and sticks it to the fridge with a magnet.

It reads:

Out

Don't stay up

Lon

###

It has been Fall for weeks, but today is the first day that it looks like it. Everyone in the world simultaneously embraced the season. Pumpkin patches and corn mazes have suddenly popped up off every mountain road and dirt path. Signs that advertised summer cabin getaways a couple weeks ago now boast perfect views of autumn foliage in the Smokies.

The town center of Rubyville, with the oldest and most rustic buildings around (not counting the old copper mine ghost towns, and for some reason no one does), is decorated with hay bails and orange leaf garlands and friendly scarecrows. The sun goes down behind the mountains, and the streetlights, adorned with yellow and orange wire light fixtures flash on in the shape of maple leaves and pumpkins. Hanging above, the trees are still green. Only some sport yellow freckles in their canopies.

Lon pulls up to Gil's house and honks his horn. Moments later, the door opens and Butterworth storms out onto the front lawn. Tail raised, she barks and growls like she and she

alone is the defender of this property and lo, none can withstand her fury. Gil scoops her up and tosses her back inside before slamming the door shut.

Gil's dressed peculiarly. At first, Lon thinks he's just in denim on denim, a look Lon has only seen gay men and musicians pull off. But that's not right. The sleeves are too long. And the shirt cuts too short. And is Gil wearing little pairs of toddler jeans on his feet? Lon rubs his eyes to make sure he's seeing things right. As Gil slips into the passenger seat, Lon raises an eyebrow.

Gil asks what Lon's looking at and Lon gestures to Gil's getup. Gil smiles. Pretty clever, right? It's for the party. Every article of clothing he wears is made of pants.

Lon stares at him and waits for more explanation. Gil doesn't give him any, but asks if it is okay if they pick up some friends down the road. He knows them from high school and they are going to the same party.

Lon nods, it's no problem.

Midway through giving Lon directions, Gil smacks his own head. He forgot to tell Lon that the party had a theme.

There it is. There's the explanation. Lon sighs. He wonders if this will be a situation where he or Gil looks more stupid.

The party, Gil explains, is a Pants Party. Lon smirks, remembering the scene from "Anchor Man"— *There's a party in my pants*. At this Pants Party, that can mean whatever you want it to mean, just as long as what you are wearing has something to do with pants. So, Gil made his entire outfit out of pants. He throws his arms up to present his costume that is, indeed, completely made up of pants.

It's a funny story about how the party all got planned. There's some guy Gil knows. He got dumped days before his girlfriend's birthday, but he had already gotten all this stuff to throw her birthday party. So, instead of moping and throwing out all the booze he had bought, he decided to throw the Pants Party. Gil pats Lon's shoulder. It might not be a big deal. When parties have themes, straight guys tend not to get super into it.

They turn right off Johnston into a neighborhood called Arborwood and stop at a small house that looks like it used to be a trailer. Gil tells Lon to honk his horn, and he does. They wait a moment. Gil tells Lon to honk again, and he's about to when two girls emerge.

One sports high waisted khakis, a pink button-down shirt with a blue bowtie, and oversized glasses and pigtails— Smartypants— and the other wears a long black tie, a topcoat and monocle, and tight fitting slacks held up by suspenders over a white blouse, twirling a cane between her gloved fingers— Fancypants. Gil rolls down the window and they start hollering at each other about each other's clothes. When they get in the back of the Male Birth Control, Gil introduces them, but Lon can't hear their names over their giggling and complimenting Gil's outfit. Lon doesn't press the issue. In his head, they are Smartypants and Fancypants.

Gil continues to direct Lon on their way to the Pants Party. He flips through Lon's collection of CDs. He stops and pulls out a black and silver disc with Val Kilmer as Batman printed on it. Lon has the *Batman Forever* soundtrack?!? Lon grins and gestures for Gil to put it in. Fancypants passes a silver flask up to Gil, who takes a swig from it. Gil rolls his window down and starts thrusting his pelvis up from the seat as Seal's "Kiss From A Rose" starts playing. The song is like auditory seduction.

Gil offers Lon the flask and he waves it away. He doesn't know what it is and, judging by the tightness of Fancypants' outfit, he really doesn't know where it has been.

Smartypants asks why Lon is so quiet, and Gil whips around on her, gasping her name. Rachel? Lon peers at her from the rearview. Nope, still Smartypants. Her mouth is the shape of a zero, like she just remembered something horrible and important. Lon taps Gil's shoulder to let him know it's fine. He looks back at Smartypants and lends her a smile. Tonight isn't a night for that kind of guilt.

They pull onto a backstreet with cars parked all the way down its curb. In yards and weaving between vehicles, Lon sees that he, not Gil or the girls in his back seat, is going to look like the idiot tonight. A guy with hammers hanging on his pants and a girl dressed like Spongebob Squarepants cross the road right in front of them. Fuck.

When they park, Gil turns to Lon. He knows how to solve this problem, but Lon might not like it.

Lon doesn't like how quickly he nods, how desperate he feels. But the last thing he wants is to deal with sarcastic remarks all night about what he's supposed to be. No one likes the guy who thinks he's too cool.

Gil tells Lon to take off his pants.

Lon looks back to Smartypants and Fancypants.

They nod in agreement.

His best shot at fitting in at the Pants Party is if he doesn't wear pants at all.

Lon hisses what would have been a groan, and unbuttons his jeans. The girls in the back whoop like this is a strip tease. Gil tells them to stop, that Lon is shy. Somehow, this is worse

than anything Gil could have said, and Lon rebels against it. He kicks off his shoes, wriggles out of his jeans, and tosses them into the backseat, slapping Fancypants in the face with them. Smartypants giggles. Lon's just in his boxers now. He looks to Gil, who is grinning ear to ear. He tells him that Lon has the whitest fucking legs of all time and opens his car door.

The Pants Party is a block and a half down the road from the car. On the walk there, Fancypants and Gil lock arms, leaving Smartypants to attach herself to Lon. She hovers at his side and asks him why he looks so familiar.

Lon shrugs.

She twists her mouth and says that she will figure it out before the night is over. She pulls a roll of Smarties candy from her pocket and offers it to Lon. That's a good one. He admits a silent laugh and takes the candy from her, unrolls the plastic wrapper, and pops the chalky little pucks into his mouth.

In the garage, tables are set up for Flip Cup and Beer Pong. Some guy in overalls tries to hustle Gil and Lon into a game as they walk to the door. A *Happy Birthday* banner hangs across the ceiling with the word BITCH scrawled in dark black sharpie over it. Classy.

The door into the house from the garage opens into the kitchen, where people crowd. Gil and the girls know people. They lift their arms and hug people and smile and squeal with excitement.

In the sink, a cooler full of hunch-punch glows like something radioactive. Fancypants slinks next to Lon and ladles the liquid into a plastic cup. She hands it to him and gets herself one. She lifts her cup in cheers and they throw them back. The drink tastes like lemonade and

piss, but he's pretty sure it will be better than any beer up for grabs. Fancypants pats Lon on the chest and disappears into the crowd.

Lon jostles his way into the living room, where the party has more room to breathe. A couple is making out on the couch. Other than that, people stand around a table playing a drinking game involving a deck of cards and a bottle of vodka. Lon watches the game for a bit, trying to sort out the rules. Whichever card someone picks up from the mess around the bottle starts off a kind of mini-game. Never Have I Ever, Nose-Goes, something like that. After a card is pulled, it is stacked on the mouth of the vodka bottle. When the stack falls, the person who placed the card has to take a swig. The whole of the game seems like an overly complicated way to get wasted.

Gil is very suddenly at Lon's side. There are these guys who are bothering him. Lon looks over and recognizes one of them from high school.

Brandon Armstrong.

Hadn't Rose told him that Lon's grandfather got him out of an assault charge or something? Brandon is one of the few people at the party that doesn't appear to be dressed in theme. His friend, a guy with a shipping label slapped onto his chest, is at least dressed as cargo pants.

They eye Lon like hyenas before skulking out of the room.

They won't leave Gil the fuck alone. Gil knows them, of course. He can't go to a party, he feels like, without them antagonizing him. It started at a football game his senior year of high school. Yes, this has been going on that long. They tried to pick a fight with him then and they only relented when some girl stepped in. They think there's some kind of old score that needs to

be settled, but Gil doesn't know what score that could be. He needs to know if it is okay if he finds Lon if they try to pull some shit later.

Lon nods. He isn't as strong as he used to be, but he imagines the scars on his neck make him look more intimidating than before.

Gil thanks him, and slips away into the crowd.

Lon feels a light punch on his shoulder.

He turns and steps back, anticipating a fist to his face. But none comes. Travis Miller comes at Lon with arms out for a hug, calls Lon bro beans.

Travis smells like he used weed for cologne. He sports a pair of pajama pants, no joke or pun involved, it is just the least he figured he can get away with.

Travis asks Lon if he wants to smoke with him and Lon shakes his head. He points to the scars on his neck. Travis smacks his forehead like *duh* and says he wants Lon to drink with him on the porch.

Wary, Lon follows.

Outside is way colder than Lon remembers it being when he arrived. The skin on his legs shrieks, and Lon tries rubbing his hands on his thighs to warm them up. There's a guy on the porch who throws up his hands and starts cussing when he sees Lon. He isn't wearing pants either. Evidently, he's pissed that someone else had the idea. The guy looks young, like he isn't even legal to drink. He's in a full three-piece suit, sans pants of course.

Travis introduces Lon.

The guy without pants is the host's younger brother or something.

Travis pulls three Bud-Lites out of a cooler and hands them to Lon and the other guy without pants. Lon cracks it open and gulps down half the can. He's far from drunk enough to deal with this right now.

Travis wants to know where the other guy who also isn't wearing pants' brother is. He has not seen him yet.

The guy doesn't know. He asks how Travis knows him.

Travis stutters something about how they used to play baseball together.

Lon's pretty sure he's lying, but he doesn't know why. When the guy asks Lon, Lon shakes his head. He doesn't know the host. He's a rando.

Travis says Lon needs to meet him. Dwayne. He's a cool guy.

The other guy without pants says Dwayne is probably somewhere bitching about his girl. Like, he's happy he threw this party, but they were not even together that long. What was he doing planning this big party for her, anyhow? Would they plan a girl's birthday party if they were only together for four months?

Lon takes another long drink from his beer, finishing it off, and excuses himself.

###

He heads back to the kitchen and ladles himself a cup of punch. Lon finds Gil by the fridge in conversation with a woman who might possibly be the most attractive person Lon has ever seen. She has wavy blonde hair, freckles. Her tight spandex leggings have flames painted up her legs.

Hotpants.

Lon inserts himself into their conversation by just walking up and standing next to Gil.

Gil, someone with more social grace at the moment than Lon, welcomes him in and pats his arm. Gil introduces Lon to Hotpants and mentions that Lon can't talk.

Hotpants looks Lon up and down and cracks a joke about Lon being the perfect man.

Never has Lon lost interest in someone so quickly. He snaps his fingers into a nonchalant Fonzie pose and walks away.

###

For a while, Lon just makes a round through the house, not sure what else to do but keep drinking. He goes through six cups of punch this way. The living room and kitchen are crowded with people just standing around talking and playing games. The couple making out on the couch are still making out on the couch— he checks his phone— an hour and a half since he got here.

People are taking hits from a bong out on the back porch, now. Fancypants posts up in the doorway. When she sees Lon, she smiles and asks what he's drinking.

He holds up his cup to her lips. The punch ran out and he just mixed what he could find on the counter. She takes a sip, crinkles her nose, and grins. It's disgusting. Lon nods, and takes a sip of it anyway.

Fancypants says Lon should go looking for Sara.

Lon has no idea who Sara is, but he nods like he does.

Fancypants says that Sara is cute, isn't she?

Lon pretends like he's thinking, then nods again. Who the fuck is Sara?

Fancypants giggles in a way that makes her whole body shudder, and she leans in. She whispers into Lon's ear. If Sara isn't interested, Lon should come find her later. She leans back against the doorway with a wicked grin and pushes a playful paw on Lon's chest. He's dismissed.

Lon continues on his rounds of the house. He peeks his head into a room where he's pretty sure an orgy is about to break out. Over a dozen people are paired off on a bed, the floor, and the walls.

Smartypants is pressing a girl in tight black pants against a wall. Lon's been around the block enough to know when two girls are into each other, and when it is just attention-getting. Smartypants isn't looking for attention.

The other guy without pants bumps into Lon's shoulder. He has got a crooked drunk grin on his face. He has never seen anything this wild before. He pulls his flip phone out and points it at Smartypants and the girl she's making out with. He curses under his breath, and stumbles off.

Lon takes a sip of his rank drink and walks the other way down the hall.

There's a room at the end of the hallway where people sit around in a circle and speak in hushed voices tinged with guilt and exhilaration. They look hungry. In highschool, this was the room where kids pulled out a dimebag of weed and passed around a bowl. Here, Lon knows it's going to be something else. He pokes his head in and sees Travis amongst them, and Hotpants, who makes brief eye contact with Lon before casting her gaze downward. Lon presses the door closed, and gets away from there.

###

Lon downs his drink, crushes the cup in his palm, and goes to find a trash can or something. There's a bag tied up to a doorknob in the living room he throws the plastic cup away in.

His head feels like static. He finds a spot in the room that isn't too crowded to stand and wait for the fuzziness to pass.

Gil appears again from nowhere. It occurs to Lon that even though they were supposed to be hanging out together, he has seen very little of Gil tonight.

Those assholes are bothering him again. Lon sees Cargo Pants enter the living room. His eyes survey the room from the door. He's hunting. When he sees Gil with Lon this time, he's more ballsy than last time. He comes right over and opens his arms out wide like a strutting bird.

Where has Gil been hiding?

Cargo Pants is ready to take things outside. He reaches for Gil, but Lon puts a heavy hand on Cargo Pants' shoulder.

Gil introduces Lon as Lon, his friend who used to be a cage fighter and who some mobster tried to kill when he didn't throw a fight. It is a stupid lie, but not stupid enough for Cargo Pants to disbelieve it. He steps away from Lon, eyes wide.

Lon stretches his chin up, displaying the scars across his throat.

Cargo Pants backs away, bumping into somebody, and then retreats out of the room.

Gil laughs and thanks Lon for having his back. They low-five.

No one's making out on the couch anymore, so Lon sits there. Next to it, an acoustic guitar is set up in a black metal stand. Like greeting an old friend, he reaches out for it and pulls it into him by the neck. He shoves his hand into his jacket pocket and finds the yellow pick the crow left him the other day. And he starts to play.

Gil, still too cautious to leave Lon's protection, perches on the couch arm. He sways as Lon plays a few songs. He asks if Lon knows anything Gil can sing to. Lon thinks, then begins to pluck. Gil juts his lower jaw out and turns to Lon. Is he serious? Lon grins and nods as he noodles "Under Pressure" by Queen.

With a soft chuckle, Gil snaps his fingers to the beat and starts off with his version of Freddie Mercury's scatting. They are not loud, and they don't draw a bunch of attention from the party, but some people draw in closer to them to listen.

Fancypants plops down next to Lon and sings David Bowie's part. Or she thinks that's what she's doing. Words slur and she hops over lines she can't remember. Gil calls her out on it, and she swats at his leg over Lon. But her voice is lower than Gil's, so in a mirthy drunken kind of way, it works.

Lon improvises a set of songs from the '80s that he knows Gil will know, and at the very least Fancypants is able to pick up some of where Gil doesn't know the words. Lon plays "Jessie's Girl," "867-5309," and "You Give Love a Bad Name." Somewhere in there, the other guy without pants calls out for "Freebird" but Lon ignores him. They are all songs from when they were kids, the kind of tunes Lon remembers playing on the car radio on the way to the beach. Lon thinks about his imagined escape to the Carolina coast. Everything is pastel and clean. Palm trees sway in the morning breeze and low waves sound relieved as they caress the sand. Lon finishes the set off with "I Want You to Want Me," a song where the guitar is just as important as the singer. Technically, it isn't an '80s song, but he remembers it as one.

When the song ends, there's a small applause from the people in the room. Fancypants kisses Lon on the cheek and disappears. Gil claps Lon on the back. He didn't know Lon could

play like that. Of course he didn't. Gil has only really known Lon since he moved back from Nashville. Lon puts the guitar back in its stand and stretches his fingers.

Gil follows Lon up from the couch. He's drunker than Lon thought. He's apologizing. He's apologizing for apologizing. He knows Lon doesn't want him to talk about Rose. Lon sighs. He shushes Gil, the closest thing he can do to telling him to shut up, to not ruin what had just been a good time. Gil bumps into a doorway. He's really drunk.

Through the crowd, Smartypants makes a b-line to Lon and Gil.

She heard some douchebag took a picture of her kissing a girl. Gil shrugs, but Lon sighs. She snarls and Lon has to put up his hands as a gesture that no, it wasn't him.

She wants to know who it was.

Lon points to the other guy not wearing pants over in the corner of the room. He's playing some drinking game involving bottle caps.

Smartypants crosses the room faster than her legs should be able to carry her. Like a herd of animals that knows which of its number is about to be prey, people in the room part. A panther, she leaps onto his back.

The other guy without pants hits the ground. Smartypants wails on him. He babbles nonsensically about how he isn't allowed to hit girls.

Gil goes to break them up, but Lon holds him back. He lifts his hand and starts counting down fingers. She's owed at least five seconds. When his fingers make a fist, they swoop in and pull her off him.

As they lift Smartypants off him, the other guy without pants crawls away. He got a busted lip. He cusses and spits and doesn't have a clue what just happened. Gil hands Smartypants off to Lon, leans over him, and tells him to delete the picture from his phone.

###

Lon shepherds Smartypants out of the room into a hallway. She stumbles a little. He wraps an arm around her for stability. He looks down at her and lifts his eyebrows, the closest thing he can do to asking if she will be okay.

She grumbles.

In front of them, the bathroom door flies open and a girl bumbles out, wiping her mouth. The smell of sickness clings like perfume as she fumbles past them. Lon stops them there as the girl passes them.

He expects Smartypants to vent. If Lon and Gil had not pulled her off that guy, she would have beat him senseless. Lon raises an eyebrow and waits for her to talk.

Instead, Smartypants yanks Lon by the wrist into the bathroom and shuts the door.

The air smells like vomit and beer. She pushes him against the sink and twirls around, pressing her butt against Lon's crotch while she turns the lock on the door and flips up the fan switch.

Like his arms are on strings, Lon reaches out and grips her hips. Until now, he has not noticed the shape of her body beneath her costume. She pulls her pigtails out when she turns around and throws her arms over Lon's shoulders.

Her lips smash against his.

It takes him a moment to realize that they are kissing, that their faces aren't just smooshed up against each other. But once it hits him what is going on, it is like he's rolling down a mountainside and nothing can stop gravity's pull. His hands rip into her hair. She tastes like flesh, nothing but blood and skin, but that's all he wants right now.

It is all he needs.

She pulls away for a moment to take off her glasses. She's really pretty, Lon thinks, and he wants to see more of her uncovered. He grapples with her shirt and starts yanking it up. She's doing something similar with his jacket but she can't get it off his shoulders while he's undressing her. They have to coordinate this a little bit. He lets her take off his jacket first.

How long has it been since Lon was with a woman other than Rose? Since Nashville? The things that stick out to Lon about Smartypants are all the things that make her different from Rose. Smartypants has dirty-blond hair. She's a head and a half shorter than him. Her body is softer and Lon's hands find more things to grab onto and paw at. Her hands move like his. Not hungry, but vengeful somehow. In the frenzy towards nakedness on the floor, Lon feels like he's proving something.

The linoleum floor is too cold, so they drag a dingy blue bath rug under her. She giggles nervously, a momentary break in the intensity.

Lon tries to get a good look at her when he's over her, but she buries her face into his neck. At some point, she mutters that she wants to turn around. Lon nods and folds back onto his knees. She posts up and they continue.

Will Rose feel this? Will she sense what Lon is doing to Smartypants? The fantasy that she can drives him on. Every muscle in Lon's body burns. Time and sex are not faithful friends to each other. He doesn't know how long he has been in here. He notices the moles on Smartypants' back and runs a hand up the side of her back, and then back down. He looks at the shape of her, and throws the last thoughts of Rose into darkness.

Eventually, Lon's hands spasm and they clamp onto Smartypants' sides. Hot air burns through his throat, he clenches his jaw, and hisses through his teeth. Smartypants curls and lets out a small sound. Lon feels suspended there over the bathroom floor for a moment. Then, he falls back onto his heels, gasping.

She turns around and Lon sees tears are falling down her cheek. She wipes them away with the backs of her hands, breathing heavily, and thanks Lon. She won't stop thanking him, and kisses him again, before putting her clothes back on.

Lon feels his blood pulsing right beneath his skin and in his teeth. He doesn't understand what is going on. He thought he did. But now...

His head feels heavier than it did a couple seconds ago. He falls off his heels onto the floor and collects his boxers. He looks for his pants, then remembers that they are in his car.

Smartypants stands up as she pulls her underwear up her legs. While she dresses, she doesn't fix her hair, and when she puts her shirt back on, she leaves it crumpled and a little unbuttoned. She isn't hiding that she just fucked some guy in the bathroom.

When they are both dressed, she looks at herself in the mirror, then back to Lon. She kisses him again, and this time he does taste something else on her. Salt. She pulls away, thanks him one last time, and slips out of the bathroom.

Lon waits a minute.

He stares at the beads of sweat that collected on his skin in the mirror. He pats them off with a dank hand-towel. Before leaving the bathroom, he flushes the toilet. Maybe it will make him look less used.

When he steps out into the hallway, he's grateful that no one is there waiting for him.

###

He makes his way back to the living room. He checks the time on his phone again. It is 2:03 a.m. Gil sits on the couch chatting up the couple who had been making out on the couch hours ago. Lon sees Brandon Armstrong and Cargo Pants heading their way. They have been waiting for this moment. Gil has nowhere to run now. Gil spits out a string of cuss words and tries to get up, but Brandon pushes him back down into the couch. Brandon and Cargo Pants loom over him like a pair of trolls guarding a bridge. The couch couple slip away before they have to get caught up in all of this.

Time to be the knight in rusting armor.

They sense Lon's presence before he makes himself known. He's taller than both of them. The shadow he casts darkens their own.

Cargo Pants shrinks away. The cage fighter!

Brandon Armstrong isn't so easily intimidated. He cracks a joke. Something like, oh look, it's Hooty and the Blowjob. Lon really wishes people in the mountains would listen to

music from the last ten years. Then he remembers how he just played a set of songs from twenty-something years ago, and shrugs.

Gil asks why they can't just leave him alone.

Brandon and Cargo Pants laugh at each other. Cargo Pants says he has been waiting for shit to go down all night. Brandon puffs out his chest.

It is time to go outside. He reaches towards Gil, but Lon pulls him back by the shoulder and gets between them.

Brandon throws his head back suddenly and squints. He recognizes Lon.

Lon O'Riordan.

It has been a while. He thought Lon looked familiar. He wants to know how Lon's been doing. He talks about Lon's grandfather, how he got him out of some bullshit with a lying cunt. Lon knows how shit like that goes, right? He tells Lon he shouldn't hang around queers like Gil. Not unless he likes getting his pickle dirty. Brandon says fags are unnatural and that gayfers like Gil ought to—

His nose cracks against Lon's knuckles. Brandon recoils. Blood streams down and darkens his mustache.

Cargo Pants grabs at Lon, but he's drunk. Lon shoves him off, and Cargo Pants crumbles to the floor.

Brandon swings at Lon, but the hit to his face has made him bleary, and his fist glances off Lon's shoulder. Lon rams his left fist into Brandon's diaphragm and doubles him over. He raises his elbow and is about to throw it down when arms pull him away. The crowd has called the fight. Gil shouts that that's enough.

Brandon howls an incoherent string of cusses and makes to come at Lon, but bodies stand between them. As they are parted, Brandon throws his arm forward and points a finger at Lon. He shouts how he's going to fuck Lon's girl, he's going to fuck Lon's mother, he's going to fuck them all.

Lon raises his head, displaying the scars on his neck like a threat. He has been through tougher shit than some hotheaded hick. He's looking forward to next time.

The crowd masses between them like a curtain, and soon Lon can't see Brandon, or even hear him anymore. Gil herds Lon outside, where the party inside sounds muffled and crickets sing for the moon and the stars. It is a clear night, but fucking cold. The skin on Lon's legs screams out against it. What was Lon thinking leaving his pants in the car?

Gil thanks Lon as the trudge through the muddy front yard, but he wishes Lon would stop assaulting people so much. One day he's going to get arrested or worse.

Lon puts a hand on Gil's shoulder and nods.

Gil asks if Lon is good to drive.

Lon gestures back to the party, but Gil doesn't get what he's saying. Lon pulls out his phone and, slamming keys as fast as he can, types out:

What about the girls?

Gil tells him Sara and Michelle have already left. This surprises Lon, but he's glad for it. The idea of being in the same car as Smartypants right now after, well, everything doesn't sound all that appealing. Lon nods and they make their way down the street to the Male Birth Control.

###

Lon doesn't know if he's lying about how sober he is, but he drives well enough the ten minutes to Gil and Rose's house on the other side of Rubyville's town center.

When Lon drops Gil off, he sees that the lights are on at the house. Gil says his goodbyes, trips on his way out of the car, and stumbles to the front door. Lon wonders for half a moment if Gil will tell Rose about what happened, or at least whatever Gil knows happened. But he rejects the thought.

He doesn't care what Rose knows. She's a ghost to him anyways.

And still, she has the lights on.

Chapter Six

Sunrise in the Woods

A boot nudges at Lon's back as if to discern whether he's dead or alive.

Lon takes in the smell of damp fallen leaves. His hand clutches as moist dirt. He's cold. Why is he so cold? He lies in the fetal position, clutching his jacket close over his core, knees tucked into it just enough to cover some of his bare legs. He opens his eyes and realizes that his mattress is frigid underbrush. He never made it home last night.

The boot nudges him again and a man's voice asks if he's alright.

Lon sits. Shivering, hungover. He cradles his forehead. No, he is not alright. The space at the backs of his eyes throb. He rubs his eye sockets, drags his hands down his face, and sees the glint of metal through his fingers.

Mud and leaves cling to the side of the man's black, steel-toed boots. He looms over Lon in a tan uniform. From wire-rimmed sunglasses set on a short pug-like nose, he looks down at Lon like something disgusting. As if little devils rest behind it and have positioned it to just the perfect angle, a ray of morning light reflects off the edge of his badge and stings Lon's eyes.

The state trooper asks Lon if he's alright again.

Lon nods and gets himself to a shaky stand.

Having established that Lon is alright enough, the state trooper moves onto more procedural inquiries. What was Lon doing sleeping out in the woods... And where are his pants?

Lon shakes his head and points to the scars on his neck. His throat aches like someone shoved a metal rod down it. But Lon's gesture isn't clear enough.

The trooper spits on the ground and asks the same line of questions, but this time slower and in a lower register, as he would to someone mentally ill or foreign.

How many more times in his life will Lon have to do this? He points to the scars on his neck again. Isn't it clear enough? His voice was cut out from him. He can't talk.

A crow swoops onto a branch overhead and watches, black marble eyes locked on Lon, beak agape. It expands its neck and makes a low *raa raa raa*.

Like they are trudging out from a pit of mud, memories slip and crawl into Lon's mind. He looks around him and sees the little pieces— the thorns he had scratched his legs on, the branches he broke, the empty turtle shell by the bushes— of how he got here.

Lon drove the Male Birth Control slowly away from Rose and Gil's house, keeping his foot light on the acceleration, down Calhoun and then onto the state route leading out of Rubyville. The night's darkness gulped him down like a giant mouth chugging a slurry of black asphalt, telephone wires, and crushed and bloody animals on the roadside. Out of town, there was only the black of land, the bruised blue of night, and the white of a Cheshire Cat moon. Lon pulled over onto the side of the road and turned off the headlights on the Honda before stepping out.

The woods, a blackness erected before a deeper blackness, like a construction paper cutout, swayed and whispered in a cold breeze. Beyond, Lon heard something squawk, and then another something deeper in the forest reply. The crows alerted each other of his presence. The

strange man who brings gifts. But Lon didn't wait for them to meet him this time. Hands in his jacket pockets, he walked into the woods.

The wind of feathers brushed his head like a blessing as he journeyed deeper into the woods. He pushed back jagged bush branches. Briars scratched at his legs. He tripped on something hollow and stumbled, but kept his feet as a turtle shell skittered into the underbrush.

The trees rose like guards to block out the moon and stars. In every shadow, Lon saw a silky reflection on the edge of a black bird's feathers. They cawed and flew around over his head in ornate patterns, like they were dancing.

They called his name.

###

The trooper repeats the fact that he has asked Lon a very simple question through tightened lips. His right hand hovers near his holster, just enough to suggest violence if Lon doesn't cooperate. Lon had better start talking.

The crow caws and swoops down at the trooper. The trooper jumps back and swats at it. Another crow from the brush joins it. The state trooper's ineffectual arms flap about, hitting only leafless and dying branches. He cusses and says that they must be near a nest. He backsteps away from Lon, as if the crows are herding him. Once the trooper stands an acceptable distance from Lon, the birds settle. They perch on a branch behind Lon and shriek their warning.

Freaked. The state trooper looks completely freaked.

Lon raises his arms, gesticulating that everyone should calm down. The crows nod, but keep a firm gaze on the trooper.

The state trooper puts his hand on his holster again. He needs Lon to ID himself, now.

Seeing no alternative, Lon whispers, "I can't speak." The words, like gravel passing through his throat, leave his flesh raw. Lon draws a hand to his scarred neck and rubs it.

To his credit, the trooper doesn't betray any embarrassment at this revelation. He loosens up a tad, though, and offers a mumbled apology. The trooper wants to know if the vehicle parked on the side of the road belongs to Lon.

Lon nods.

And does he have a driver's license?

Again, Lon nods. He points to his car. His wallet is in his pants which are, of course, still in the back seat of his car. Lon rubs his legs and wonders if their gooseflesh covering will ever go away.

The state trooper requests that Lon walk with him over to the vehicle and allow the trooper to run Lon's license through their database. Lon shrugs. He's an obvious ne'er-do-well and vagrant, so this doesn't really bother him.

Lon leads the trooper through the woods. He pulls his jacket closer to his chest and his teeth start to chatter. Memories from the night before flood his mind. Smartypants, Lon's scuffle with Brandon Armstrong, Rose's light, the crows. He can't dwell inside his memories long, though. An instinct that rises when being followed or, more accurately, stalked stirs in Lon's chest. Lon is probably a drifter in the trooper's eyes. An undesirable. If he wanted to, the trooper

could just shoot Lon in the back and leave him to bleed out on the forest floor. A fun bit of sport. How long does it take for a hipster's body to be found? Before it's cool.

Another memory wrestles with the others and Lon struggles to fend it off. It intrudes, and Lon has to shove it down. An agreement he made in the woods. A contract. Now is not the time.

When they reach the roadside, Lon finds his Honda unlocked, keys still stuck in the ignition. His pants are where he left them the night before, in the backseat. He wrestles to put them back on. His teenage self remembers how sucky cars are for putting clothes on as well as taking them off. Once he pulls them back over his hips, he buttons and zips the fly, and shoves a hand into his pocket for his wallet.

The trooper waits at Lon's window. Wallet in hand, Lon shows him his license. The trooper takes it, a look of surprise on his face as he peers down at it from his glasses. He says he has to run it, and heads back to his vehicle.

Lon sighs and rests his head back against his seat. He wonders if sleeping in the woods with no pants is a crime. The county could have something on the books about that. Local governments always have those strangely specific kinds of ordinances. He once heard there was a town in Alabama where there was a law on the books stating the illegality of marriage to a porcupine.

When the trooper gets back, he's all smiles and good manners. He says he knows—*knew* Lon's grandfather. Good man. He's sorry for Lon's loss, by the way. The trooper says that he imagines the death in the family has taken quite an emotional toll.

Lon nods like it was a horrible, devastating loss, gulping down a phantom sob for good measure.

The trooper hands Lon his license and tells him that next time he has had too much to drink, he ought to call a friend or even the police for a ride home. He pats the roof of the Male Birth Control, and lets Lon on his way.

As the police car zips past him down the road, Lon runs a hand through his hair. It is a new day. In his jacket pocket, Lon finds the guitar pick. He twiddles it between his fingers.

###

At E-D's Food Market, Lon walks down to the toy aisle. Neon-colored packages and bins full of rubber balls glow from the shelves. The fluorescent bulbs overhead buzz and tremble.

We will see if we can get your voice back.

Lon shakes his head. He runs his fingers over ranks of wiffle ball bats and hockey sticks. Lon stops when he finds something metal, a gray and black baseball bat.

But what can you offer us in return?

Lon picks up the bat and swings it around. He likes the whistle it makes in the air as he strikes an invisible baseball. It is priced at \$15.99. Lon checks his wallet and grins down at his last twenty dollar bill folded inside. He buys the bat and heads out of town, to the field where they said he should go.

###

Lon doesn't know if it is a memory, a dream, or some chemically induced marriage of the two. But when he went out into the woods, Lon knew exactly what he was looking for. And still, he didn't know there would be so many of them. He started counting, and when he got to thirty crows, he stopped.

What does it take to feed that many crows?

They surrounded him like a jury, like he was a witness summoned or a defendant awaiting judgment. Crows took flight from one branch to another to murmur and gossip amongst themselves, and then would glide to another branch for a better view.

As soon as Lon got there, he had forgotten how to get back to the road.

Lon had tripped on an empty turtle shell. He picked it up and asked the crows if it belonged to any of them. But he didn't feel any burn in his throat. Was he just that drunk? Was he really even talking?

Somehow, the crows understood. They croaked to each other like Lon had said something nonsensical. That shell had belonged to a turtle. Crows don't live in shells. What a strange man, they laughed. But he's kind and he brings them treats sometimes.

One after another, crows took turns perching on Lon's shoulder and arms. They told him their names. They were named for their size, specific markings, scars, and missing talons. Many of them were named for the specific black of their feathers. There are so many words in English for red— scarlet, crimson, clay— or blue— azure, cyan, periwinkle, navy. So it is for crows and the color black.

Lon recognized the lead crow. She didn't fly to him as the other crows had. She landed on the forest floor, leaves scattering from the wind under her wings, and strode towards him. She was huge, even greater in size than Lon had known her to be. She was the size of a king.

Like he would for a king, Lon bowed to her.

The lead crow told Lon her name last.

Linda.

Linda was glad to see Lon, but she admits that she didn't expect to see him at this time, so late in the night. Her voice sounded strained, as though Lon had interrupted something.

Lon fell to his knees and began to cry. He pulled his head back and showed the crows his neck. He tried to tell them that he couldn't talk, but suddenly he couldn't communicate as he had before. He put his hands to his lips and drew them out from his open mouth, then grabbed at nothing.

His voice was gone and he wanted it back.

Lon reached out to the crows and brought his hands back to his neck. He begged them to do something, anything to help him. Lon held himself as he wept. He was so tired of being silent.

The crows cawed all around him. Were they laughing? Linda tilted her head and looked down her beak at Lon with one of her eyes. In its moonlight reflection, Lon could see the shadow of black branches overhead like veins spreading out over the eyeball's surface. Linda asked Lon what he would give to them for this? What would the flock get in return?

Lon didn't even think. He offered the only thing he had— himself. Another day, though. Not on that night.

Linda asked when.

Lon told her that when he died, he would give them his body. That was the trade he would make for his voice.

The flock chattered. They were not certain about the merits of this trade.

To convince them, Lon asked how long it had been since the crows had tasted human flesh. Was it during Prohibition, when bootleggers would go “missing” out in the hollows? Or earlier— the Civil War? Soldiers slaughtered each other by the thousands in a single day back then. To eat a man would be an honor for a crow these days, or a novelty at least.

Linda turned her back on Lon. She ruffled her wings and explained that the lives of mankind are many times longer than that of crows. A contract like this wouldn't do any living in this flock any good.

Lon disagreed. His life won't be long. He's fairly certain about that. As he tried to explain this, the crow chorus croaked. They were not satisfied.

Lon told them— Isn't this the natural order of things?

Man speaks.

Crows eat.

The flock went quiet. Every crow watched Linda. Lon watched Linda. She would be the one who decides this agreement.

Linda turned. If Lon meant what he said, the crows needed some kind of assurance from him. A security deposit. An act of good faith. In a field not far from here, along one of the roads and penned in by twisted sharp metal, there's a thing that isn't alive, but moves. The crows wish to eat that field's grain, but dare not come near *that thing*. Lon must destroy it. If he does that, the crows will accept this deal.

Lon said that he would destroy it.

Linda dipped her head and leapt into the air. The rest of the crows followed her, cawing and cackling, their wings flapping over Lon's head like some kind of baptism. And in moments, they had all gone.

The world started to dip, and Lon found his bed on the foliage of the forest floor.

###

At 9:03 a.m, Lon pulls up on the side of the road by a barbed wire fence. He looks around. He's pretty sure this is the place. The woods curtain the hills on the outskirts of a wheat field. A happy looking scarecrow posted about a hundred yards into the field looks like it is waiting for someone to give it a hug.

Lon steps out of the car with the metal baseball bat in his right hand. He can already hear his mom's voice asking him where the hell he has been. Lon finds the place in the barbed wire fence right where they told him it would be, and as he walks over the fallen over wood post and jagged metal, he practices the face he will make to tell his mom it isn't any of her business where he is and where he goes. He's a grown man. He can sleep on whichever forest floor he chooses. The baseball bat rocks against his leg with each step he takes, sometimes using it to push back stalks of wheat.

A crow lands on one of the fence posts behind him and caws its encouragement. *Go get him, Lon! You can do it!*

Of course, the unshakeable Mary Alford won't be easy to blow off. She will block him if he tries to get past her. She will tell Lon that she was worried sick when she woke up in the morning without his car in the driveway and with his bed empty. Drunk drivers send themselves off cliffs, down mountainsides, and into early graves all the time. Lon will need to muster his best *I'm sorry* sigh and give her a convincing enough hug. It won't really matter. Lon doesn't plan on attending any parties like that ever again.

The scarecrow's grin grows wider the closer Lon gets to it. Yellow straw sticks out from a green and blue flannel shirt. The painted pumpkin that serves as its head has begun to rot under a plastic cowboy hat. The poor thing almost looks like it has been crucified. Like it sees Lon coming toward it with his baseball bat and welcomes him. Maybe Lon comes as a mercy.

More crows crowd the fence posts. Not all of them cheer, but the ones that do hoot and chant Lon's name with enthusiasm.

But what if Lon isn't as smooth as he thinks he is? What if his mom demands details about what happened last night?

Lon stops in front of the scarecrow and scratches his head. He looks back at the crows. They are a large flock. He has never seen so many crows perched in one place at once. Well, besides... Lon pulls a head off a stalk of wheat and holds it up. The crows roar and jeer. Lon is their champion.

He puts the head of wheat in his pocket and squares off against the scarecrow. Wind blows Lon's hair back from his face and he can smell the must and death on it. The wheat ripples like ocean waves. In his hands, the metal bat feels cold as ice.

Lon swings.

Interlude One

Points of View

“I guess we have to push back our timeline, don’t we, *Butterworth*,” Gil says to his chihuahua. *Butterworth*, sprawled across his pillow, sneezes her soft agreement. Gil sighs and turns out the lamp on his bedside table. He pulls the covers up and wraps an arm around *Butterworth*. On the bedside table, his phone, set to silent, lights up. Gil counts to thirty, and it goes dark. He closes his eyes, but through his lids he can see that the phone has lit up again. He doesn’t have to check it to know who is calling. All night, the same number calls and burdens his voicemail with variations on the same message.

Where are you?

I need you.

Why won’t you answer my calls?

It happens sometimes. A client gets attached and starts to get stupid ideas. So Gil has to drop them.

“I really don’t think that would be a good idea,” Gil had warned him swiftly between sloppy kisses. Dennis’ wine-stained lips pulled away. Dennis is horrible at hiding his emotions—it is a miracle that he stayed closeted this far in his life—and the way his eyes sank when he pulled away made Gil feel like he had just hit a small child with a gimp leg. “I’m just saying that I don’t think that that’s really what you want.”

Five seconds earlier, in the middle of what was otherwise some good old-fashioned drunken sin, Dennis blurted out, “I want you to come to my son’s football game with me!” Then he put his lips back onto Gil’s mouth before Gil could respond.

Gil had so many reasons why this would be a horrible idea. To start with, Dennis and Gil were not together, officially speaking— Gil doesn’t do pro bono work— and going to Dennis’ son’s football game with him certainly feels like something that would send out a message to the world that he and Dennis are together. Second, Dennis has not come out to anyone, not even his family, and this would without a doubt be the worst way imaginable to do that. Gil could see the fans in the bleachers spontaneously producing torches and pitchforks. And finally, as a rule Gil doesn’t go out in public with clients. They meet in a secret spot by the dam or on hiking trails, out by the abandoned mines, and in steamed up trucks off predetermined back roads. They do not go to football games together.

“I have never in my whole life felt like this,” Dennis had said. Such a fucking cliché.

Gil rolls over and forces his eyes to stay closed. Dennis fell for him at the worst time possible. Gil is so close to saving up enough money. He had calculated that he would only need to keep going out with Dennis once a week for another two months, and then Goodbye Rubyville! Gil still has a couple other clients, but they are not as reliable as Dennis. They are not as desperate.

Still, even if it were not for the money, cutting off Dennis is hard. Dennis is stupid and careless, but he’s also sweet. One time, he met Gil out at the Cherokee Caves, and like a teenage boy the big dummy brought Gil flowers. Gil told him just to bring a six-pack next time.

“You’ve come too far,” Gil tells himself. “You have to be ruthless.”

###

Jackson Hughes, Sam Brown, and Mitchell Powell— the seventh grade’s most notorious trouble makers. Normally during recess, the trio would be up to some mischief out on the playground, passing around stolen cigarettes or yanking at girls’ skirts. But today, instead, they sit hunched over and clutching their bellies in Mary’s office. It is the result of a stupid boy-dare to see who could drink the most hand soap from the bathroom dispenser. All three of them complained of stomach aches through social studies with Mrs. Johnson, who naturally thought that they were just trying to get out of class. Only when Sam threw up a pink sudsy mess all over his text book did she send them to Mary.

“I have to say, it is never a dull day with kids like you,” Mary says to them after the last phone call notifying a parent, another disinterested mother “too busy” to pick up her kid. Mary knows whose families are on welfare— school lunches don’t get eaten on their own— and with all the years she worked as a school nurse, she has gotten pretty good at figuring out the hardworking folks who need a break from the layabouts gaming the system. It always comes out in their kids.

“Miss Alford,” Mitchell groans, “can I have some more PeptoBismol?”

“No,” she says.

“I feel like I’m gonna hurl.”

Mary grabs a small plastic trash can by her desk and holds it out for him. “Then please remember to use this.”

Mitchell shakes his head. "I think I'll be okay."

Mary puts the trash can back down. Most people are like that. What they want and what they need are not the same thing. It takes a firm hand to guide someone from their wants and to their needs.

Mary turns to her computer and pretends to read a memo sent from the principal about impending budget cuts, preparations that need to be made, groundwork that needs to be laid. In her lap, Mary practices signing.

You can talk to me.

She has let Lon go on too long chasing down the wrong paths. He's feeding those birds now and they are all over the house. In the trees, in her garden, on the car. It's like a Hitchcock movie outside her house every day. And it all started with that note, that stupid note. But Mary thought he was doing better. He *was* doing better, she's certain of that. And then, suddenly, he just got so much worse.

You don't have to be alone.

"Miss Alford?" Sam, the shortest one, the one who threw up in class, says. "What are you doing?"

Mary looks up. All three of them are watching her. Of course they are watching her. They are looking for a distraction.

"I'm practicing sign language," Mary says.

"Cause your son's deaf?" Mitchell asks.

"He's not deaf," Jackson says like he knows.

“He’s not deaf,” Mary says more sharply than she means to. But it gets the boys to mind their own business, at least for the moment.

We can do this together.

Mitchell bends over and throws up on the floor.

###

Brandon Armstrong’s record is six rubbers wasted in a day. Today he’s going for seven. He can feel it already in his pants that he’s ready. It is time to break his personal record.

He looks down at Leena, who is curled up next to him on the couch watching VH1, some reality show where they pimp out bimbos and try to hook them up with some has-been. Brandon has not been paying attention to whatever the fuck is on the TV. He’s checked out. He takes a sip from his beer, and then with his free hand cups Leena’s boob and gives it a squeeze.

“Shit, what are you doing?” She laughs.

Brandon bites his lip. “Girl, you know what I’m doing.” He flexes his bicep behind her head and bounces his hip against the couch cushion.

“Jesus Christ,” Leena says. She stands up from the couch. All she wears is a pair of green and pink striped underwear and an unzipped hoodie, one of Brandon’s. An hour ago, she wore even less. Leena puts up an unsteady hand and stumbles toward the bathroom. “I can’t deal with you.”

In his head, the thing Brandon likes to call his Lion, this feeling like his muscles can turn to steel and like he can break his teeth by clenching his jaw hard enough, flares up. He even got

his Lion tattooed on his chest. When Brandon lets his Lion take over, there's no telling what shit will go down. And this bitch Leena thinks she is too good for Brandon's Lion? "Oh come on! Don't you be like that after all the shit I've done for you. Fuck, I went down on you for like ten minutes last time. Do you know how disgusting that is?"

"I'm tired." Leena whispers, "It hurts."

His Lion makes Brandon stand up. He lumbers over her and puts a hand under her chin. He growls. "Come on, babe. Quit fucking around with me."

Leena looks up at him. She isn't the hottest girl Brandon has done it with, but she isn't like the kind of girl anybody would be ashamed of fucking. She has got some jacked up teeth and her ass is completely flat, but she's kind of cute. And when she looks up at Brandon like that, she's all kinds of hot. He runs his hand up her cheek.

"Come on," he says. "We can do it on the couch again. You don't even need to take off my hoodie."

"Can we...?" Leena looks down at Brandon's pants, then back up at him. "Can we smoke first? I just need a little break."

Brandon nods. He brought some good shit with him. He goes through his backpack to get it. "The guy who cooks this shit, he told me to be careful with it," Brandon says as he pulls out the little bag full of jagged little rocks. A kid might think they were pieces of rock candy. "You don't want to overdo it. This shit will rot your teeth and make you all get buggy if you smoke too much."

"I won't overdo it," Leena says. She runs her hands down Brandon's chest. "I just need something good to get me ready for you again. That's all."

“Don’t worry about that.” Brandon bites his lip. He’s definitely going to waste another rubber today. “This shit is real fucking good.”

###

For Neill, Saturdays are the best. He wakes up while Diana still sleeps. At some point in the night, Julia crept into the bed with them. Diana holds her like a fragile and incredibly lifelike doll. Neill slinks out of bed, careful not to wake them, and goes to the kitchen to make pancakes and eggs. He mixes the batter and cuts up a banana for Julia, who only eats pancakes if there are bananas in them.

Neill has just poured the scrambled eggs onto the pan when he sees Diana leaning against the doorway. To Neill, no woman has ever looked better in pajamas. The morning light touches the side of her like she’s the subject of a Renaissance painting.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?” Neill asks.

“No. Julia did that for you.”

“She’s up?”

“I told her she could pick out her outfit today.” Diana crosses her arms and takes a march-like step into the kitchen. That can only mean one thing.

Neill pulls the skillet with the eggs on it off the burner. He knows that Diana will require his undivided attention.

“Julia was asking about her brother.”

“Lon?”

“Do you have any other sons I need to be made aware of?” Diana stands next to Neill as the stove and usurps the pan full of eggs, putting them back on the burner. She takes a spatula and flips a pancake Neill had forgotten about. Its dark face mocks him.

“No,” Neill says through a forced chuckle. “Just the one.”

“It has been a few weeks since your father’s funeral. Don’t you think you should, I don’t know, invite Lon over to dinner with us or something? That is why we moved here. So Julia could have a family, and Lon is her family.”

“She’s got plenty of family,” Neill says.

“Family she never sees. *Mi viejo*, we talked about this...”

Neill retreats and leans up against a counter. His shoulders suddenly feel heavy, like an ox’s yoke has been placed across them. He shakes his head and says, “Lon doesn’t want anything to do with us. I can tell.”

“I don’t understand,” Diana says through her teeth. She’s forcing herself to sound more patient than she actually is. “What is wrong with you lately? And don’t blame this on your father’s death, this began before all of that.”

“Honey, the truth is... Look, I just don’t think that it’s a good idea.”

All of this, moving back home, reintegrating with his family, seeing Mary and Lon, has been a mistake and Neill has realized it too late. He thought he was better, stronger. He went years without the nightmares. *It’s a gift, son.* Hands on his neck and on his shoulders. *A gift from a father to his boy.* As if they had been waiting for him here, ready to infest his sleep the moment he returned. But even still, the dreams have changed. He hears his own voice and feels his own hands pressing him down.

At that moment, the phone rings.

Diana holds her finger up as if to say *This isn't over*, and goes to answer it. From the hallway, she calls back, "Keep an eye on the stove."

Neill releases the breath he held hostage and returns to making breakfast. He has never told Diana about everything. He has never told anyone about everything. Even if he did, will she understand? That the reason why he ran away in the first place was because of Lon?

Feebly, Neill pushes the yellow eggs around on the skillet. He flips the pancake from the pan onto a plate. With a hiss, he pours more batter onto the pan.

"*Mi viejo*," Diana calls for him. "It's Mary. She says it is about your son."

###

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," Rose croaks as she swerves out of the parking lot. When the car straightens out on the road, she rubs her neck. In the rearview, a dark figure stumbles into the yellow street light. He's still waving for her to come back— it's alright, just come back, babe.

What went wrong? Rose asks herself. She'd done everything right, hadn't she?

He doesn't know her. He doesn't know her real name. Anonymity— that was one of Rose's first lessons when she started doing this. And she learned it the hard way. She stopped meeting with anyone she already knows, or people who know people she knows, which felt dangerous at first, but she made a sort of protocol to make it feel safer. A quick search for mutual friends on Facebook, and while she's there she checks to make sure they seem fine enough. No pictures with guns and no pictures with women Rose would suspect to be in the same line of

business as her. (She keeps doing that, making euphemisms for herself. *Just say it*, she thinks in her darker moments. *You're a hooker, a slut, a whore!*) She stopped meeting in Rubyville in case anyone she knew saw her there again. It is a small town anyway. She would burn through clients too quickly if she didn't expand her territory.

Rose has been to Doris Ridge, Ocoee, McCaysville, and even drove to Dalton across the Georgia border once. She got to the restaurant early, took a seat at the end of the bar, out of the light, and watched the door. He didn't know her, but she knew him. She thought so, at least. When he arrived, she kept an eye on him for about fifteen minutes while he waited at the booth. She looked for any red flags that she wouldn't have found online. This whole business has been all about learning to trust her gut. *Anything* that seems off *is* off, and that's reason enough for Rose to skip.

Rose has only had to walk out three times so far. Out of how many people in the last two years? Fourteen? She would get some angry abusive texts, but once that was through, she never heard from them again. It's no harm no foul. Rose only charges once she has made contact.

But no alarm bells went off tonight. This guy— Clint— he seemed nice. Rose had figured he was just some lonely, kind-hearted sort of guy who says, "I don't usually do this kind of thing." Maybe he recently got out of a divorce, or maybe he just wasn't good with girls and didn't know what it was like to be wanted. He was a perfect gentleman at dinner.

Clint wanted to go back to his place. Should that have been a red flag? Rose never goes home with clients. She has only been to one man's house, and that was actually because he got himself too drunk to drive (or finish the job). "No," she had told Clint. But she turned her tone playfully, the way she knows men like, and said, "I know a good place to go to."

This is another part of her research. She finds places for them to have sex nearby. Usually, yes, it is a seedy motel. But sometimes it is a field under the stars or a quiet place near the river where they can lay a blanket down and it is almost romantic.

Clint was a motel guy. They met in Harbuck, a bit too far away from the river, so yeah, Rose took him to a motel off 68 where she had already booked a room.

Nothing had seemed off.

Eventually, Rose gets to a stoplight. In the red light, she checks her neck in her visor mirror. Already, she can see bruises clouding her skin. He didn't stop when she asked him to. He wouldn't. He just kept going— kept pressing his palms down.

Rose lowers her chin and looks in her own eye.

“You can't keep doing this,” her mirror self tells her. “You're gonna get yourself killed.”

###

It seems like it took a while for all the aunts and uncles to get around to reading grandpa's will. Even when they did, Aunt Leslie made herself unavailable. Dad insisted that they do it at his house. So now Aunt Shannon and Uncle Neill are over. The whole thing has just been a lot more of an ordeal than it feels like it should. Rachel tried to be good. She opened up a bottle of wine for Aunt Shannon. She gave Uncle Neill a hug at the door. She hid her weed from dad. She thought she could get through it, but as she sat and listened to Shannon's reminiscences through gulping sobs while Neill and dad started arguing over the ethics of dad executing the will, Rachel knew she needed to smoke or she'd throw herself out of a window.

“I’m not hiring another lawyer for something I can do myself,” dad says.

“I’m not saying you can’t do it,” Neill says. “I just think we should have someone else look at it. You’re too close, you know.”

“Rachel, honey,” Shannon claws Rachel’s arm. A glass of white wine sloshes in her other hand. “Never take life for granted. It’s such a beautiful thing. Don’t you ever take it for granted.”

Rachel can’t take it anymore. The first chance she gets— the second Shannon looks away from her— Rachel gets out of there and slips behind the house. Aunt Leslie had the right idea. She planned a vacation this week just so she wouldn’t have to be around everyone. Let the others figure this shit out. Rachel packs the bowl she had in her pocket, thinks about lighting it, and looks back through the window. She’s in her dad’s line of sight. Fuck.

She goes into the woods.

The woods behind her dad’s house have always freaked Rachel out a little. They seem like the kind of woods where serial killers hide bodies. And there are always crows cawing in them, never any songbirds, and in the fall they always get super foggy. But Rachel can’t handle the bullshit today without smoking, and she can’t smoke in front of her dad, so...

Rachel lights her bowl, purple and blue blown glass, and pulls the smoke in.

“Fuck this fucking family, right?” Uncle Neill comes out of nowhere.

“Shit!” Reflexively, Rachel tries to hide the bowl, but she knows she’s already been caught.

“Don’t worry, I’m not a narc,” Neill says. He sits down next to Rachel on the bench like he’s playing it cool. Cool Uncle Neill, still acting like he’s better than everyone else. “Your dad sent me after you, but I think we have some time before he gets suspicious.

“I just can’t deal with all of y’all right now,” Rachel says.

“Yeah.” Neill nods like he isn’t part of the problem.

“Do you care if I keep smoking?” Rachel holds up her bowl.

Neill shakes his head and makes a sound that sounds like a no, but isn’t really that committed to anything.

Rachel thinks that even if Neill did rat on her to dad, at least it’s just pot she got caught with. She’s been getting into some other stuff lately, and it would be real bad if dad found out about it. Like, wake you up in the middle of the night with dudes who shove you into a van and send you off to a camp kind of bad. Rachel checks her pockets to make sure she has her phone. That’s her other weak spot. If her dad found any of the texts from Travis... She and Travis met at a party a couple weeks ago. It was Rachel’s first time trying anything harder than weed, and he was really sweet when she spun out. He brushed her hair and told her that she was safe, and she really felt that way with him.

“It’s been a weird couple of months, huh?” Neill says.

“Why can’t you just let my dad handle all of this stuff?” Rachel says. “He knows what he’s doing and you’re just pissing him off.”

“Your dad and I have some trust issues.”

“What, you think he’s going to fuck you over, really?”

“No. I’m just on edge. Mary called me a couple days ago about Lon. He’s been going through some stuff and she wants me to sort of step in and help out.”

These names Mary and Lon, names Rachel hadn’t heard since she was little, have been coming up a lot more recently. Her long lost aunt and cousin. The two of them made a splash

when they showed up to grandpa's funeral. Everyone kept saying stuff like *Poor Lon* and *Mary's so strong*, all because one of them survived cancer or something.

"I just don't know what to do," Neill says.

"Maybe you should call him," Rachel says. The ember in the bowl has gone out and she sticks it in her pocket again. "Give him a choice."

Neill nods and thanks Rachel before heading back to the house. Rachel tells him that she'll be right up, but she needs a second. Rachel leans back on the bench, lifting her legs up to balance, then lets them fall back onto the leafy ground. She pulls out her phone and texts Travis. She'll sneak out tonight after her dad has passed out. She'll show up at his apartment in Rubyville and they'll do some coke before fucking on the carpeted floor. Afterwards, Travis will help her put on some lotion to help with the carpet-burns on her shoulders and butt.

###

Linda keeps her oath, but she knows in a way that the rest of her flock doesn't know that searching for Lon's voice is a fool's errand. But she had agreed to his terms. She had to. She felt sorrow and pity for him, and it has been a long time since she has felt either of those things for anything outside her flock.

They will try to help him.

A voice can be many things, Linda knows. She used to have one, after all. She hopes that Lon will learn that.

Linda flies with Wide Wing and Old Scratch behind her. They don't fly over the mountains, that would be too dangerous. Owls, hawks, and even eagles can see them if they go too high. And though crow meat doesn't taste good to any animal, some raptors will eat it if they are hungry enough. And raptors are always hungry. No, instead of making themselves such easy targets, the crows fly just above the treetops, banking with the slope of the mountains.

Wide Wing had the idea that morning, and Linda thinks it good enough to explore. The earth has mouths, Wide Wing explained, where sometimes a voice can get caught. Maybe this is where Lon's voice has escaped to. Maybe the earth has trapped his voice in one of its mouths and it cannot escape back to him.

Linda perches on a branch of a pine tree. Old Scratch and Wide Wing land on branches nearby. Old Scratch chirps. This is the place. But none of the crows move towards the cave. They are blocked.

At the cave's mouth, teenagers sit and pass around a bottle of some brown liquid. They laugh and take swigs from it. One stumbles away from the group to urinate. Two of them are kissing loudly as the others try to ignore them. Linda must explain to Wide Wing that this is part of the human mating ritual. Another adolescent moves precariously close to the cavern's lips. The others laugh and egg him on. On the wind, Linda can taste the strange liquid and knows that the kids are drinking poison. Such strange beings, people are. Linda has to remind herself not to be too harsh. Didn't she once do as they do?

Linda caws, and all of the teens stop what they are doing.

"Check out the crows," a girl says.

"Crows are so cool," a boy says. "I fucking love crows."

“No way, bro,” another boy says. “They creep me the fuck out.”

“Dude, are you serious?”

“As the...” he belches. “Serious as the frigging grave. My grandad said that crows are, like, spies for witches. Like they watch people for them.”

“You believe that?”

“No! But still... they creep me out. My grandad used to shoot crows whenever he saw them hanging around his house.”

Wide Wing chitters. Is it safe for them to approach the earth’s mouth?

Linda caws. She swoops down from the tree, close enough to the young people to make them jump back, and lands on a rock at the cave’s entrance. She looks at the teens, who watch her like they would watch a ghost. Linda has to tilt her head and keep her beak out of the way to focus on each one of them. When she lands her gaze on the one who said he’s scared of crows, she caws again.

He jumps and the other ones laugh. They won’t bother her.

Linda hops into the cave. Inside is dark as sleep. She jumps from rock to rock, over puddles of water and around dripping pillars clinging to the cave’s roof like a cat’s fangs, until she thinks she cannot go any further without getting lost. Linda calls for Lon, and hears her own voice echo in the darkness. She waits, and calls again.

Still, she only hears her own voice.

This is not where Lon’s voice has gone.

Outside, the kids have scattered. The only thing left to tell of their presence, the bottle of poison, they shattered on the ground. Old Scratch noses around the shards. There is a piece with some colors painted onto it that he wants to bring back to his nest.

Wide Wing bobs her head in excitement. Was she right? Did Linda find Lon's voice in the earth?

Linda ruffles her feathers. Lon's voice was not there.

They will have to keep searching.

Chapter Seven

The Roof

Jobless claims hit a sixteen-year high today. The last time jobless claims reached over 500,000 was 1990 ... President Bush is cautioning congress and the incoming administration against any proposals to regulate Wall Street. The President's warnings come ahead of tomorrow's Global Economic Summit in Washington D.C. ...

News headlines on the radio dip in and out of static while Lon drives through the mountains flanking Highway 74. Their blue bulk blocks the radio waves. He's barely listening. His eyes keep dipping down to the gas meter. The red needle has been hovering over empty for about ten minutes and while he knows there's a gas station around the next bend, he isn't sure if he will make it. He cuts the radio, cuts the heat, and double checks to make sure his head lights are also off. He taps the wheel nervously into his rearview mirror, where a pile of wood planks lies. He spent all morning driving around the old copper mines and the ghost towns thereabout to get them.

It is a simple solution to an ongoing problem. The crows fly from their home in the woods to his mother's house more each day, and they tell him how tiring it can be, especially for the young and elderly crows.

Lon rounds the foot of a mountain and can see an Exxon sign, red, white, and blue, only a couple yards away. As if fainting from fright, the Male Birth Control shutters, and the engine

goes quiet. Lon hisses curses, puts on his hazards, and tries to ride the car's momentum as far as he can.

The Honda coasts just up to the gravel turn-off into the Exxon's parking lot. As it grinds to a stop, a gray-haired woman in a long, bright orange UT sweatshirt rushes out from the gas station. She waves her arms and asks if Lon needs a push.

He steps out, signals to her that he can push if she can steer.

She nods and hops in the driver's seat. When she sticks a thumbs-up out the window, Lon starts pushing. It is gravel, thankfully down an easy slope, until they get to the flat-ish broken concrete of the parking lot. Yellow stalks of grass grow straight and in all directions between cracks in the concrete, like they enjoy the challenge. The woman steers the Male Birth Control next to a pump, and puts it in park. As she gets out and hands Lon his keys, she remarks on how she has never seen a car like that.

He nods. He knows.

She waves him inside and says that he can pay for his gas at the counter. Inside, Confederate paraphernalia adorns the shelves and walls. A glass-faced fridge by the checkout counter is stocked with Nehi soda. Next to it, a metal basket-shelf holds round canisters of dipping tobacco. As the woman makes her way behind the counter, she asks Lon if he wants to buy a lottery ticket.

Lon shakes his head and pulls his wallet out from his pocket. He hands her the thirty dollars he has. Thirty dollars for pump four. With the price for regular at \$3.27 a gallon, that much ought to get him about two-thirds of a tank. It has been a long time since Lon has been able to fill up the tank of his car. At least since the war in Iraq started.

While Lon pumps, he leans against the car. There's a Wendy's across the street and a billboard advertising spelunking expeditions into the Cherokee Caves. On the side of the gas station, there's a dirty wooden palate with shoots of golden grass bursting from its slats. Lon peers inside the gas station. It appears the woman in orange has gone to the bathroom. Before leaving, he breaks the palate down by stomping on it, picks up the pieces, and throws them into his back seat.

###

Armful by armful, Lon climbs a ladder up to the roof of his mother's house. Linda watches him with curious eyes from the chimney. He explains that it won't be much, but it will be better than nothing, especially as Fall comes to its end.

Lon chooses a flat part of the roof obscured by the bends in the house, somewhere his mom won't easily see what he has done and won't tear it down. For a moment, Lon looks out at the neighborhood from the top of the house, the forests and mountains, the electrical lines, and the black streets that cut everything up. The world is more beautiful, he thinks, the higher up from it you are. Lon lifts his gaze upward. Wouldn't it be cool to be a pilot or an astronaut to see it all?

Linda chirps, like she knows what he's thinking.

Lon checks his phone for the time. 10:49 a.m. He has got work to do if he's going to finish up before his mom gets home at 4:00 p.m. He climbs down the ladder and rummages through the garage until he finds a hammer and some non-rusty nails. When he goes back up

onto the roof, he starts by ripping the old nails and rusted jagged bits out of the wood pile. And then, he starts building.

As he builds the bird house for the crows— a crow house?— Linda offers him points of advice to make the construction more suitable for the rest of the flock. Clearly, Lon has limitations on how large it can be, but there are considerations as far as shape and the placement of entrances and perches for which crows have specific preferences compared to other birds. It needs to be spacious enough to fit at least three fully-fledged crows with adequate perches. If Lon has any nuts or seeds he can sprinkle the floor with, that would be an appreciated treat. This is, of course, only a temporary place to rest, a sort of stop for the crows who are too tired to fly back to their nests in the woods. Lon doesn't need to make it too cozy.

Lon builds what he thinks looks remarkably like an old beach house, some place his mom took him when he was little. Chicken wire takes the place of a screened in porch, but besides that, the image of it throws Lon in how much it looks like what he remembers that house was like. It is square, and stands on stilts so Lon can move it if he needs to. The wood is dirty and dark, some of it rotting. A low sloping roof vaults over the top. No door obstructs the entrance, a rough frame of leftover wood through the chicken wire. While Linda assures him that the crows *can* learn how to use one, there's no use in the extra work. Within the structure, perches rib the walls like shelves or bunks.

To assess his work, Linda hops inside. She coos softly, a good sign. When she's finished, she stands at the doorway, cocks her head to see Lon better, and starts bobbing. He has done good work. She takes off, cawing like a firecracker in the crisp air.

Lon checks the time again. 3:51 p.m. Just enough time left to put the tools and the ladder away, so his mom won't know a thing.

But as he returns to the garage, her Volvo rolls up the driveway. Lon flips his phone open and checks the time again. He must have estimated things wrong.

Mary steps out of the car and asks what Lon is doing with the ladder. He shrugs his answer. Crows land on the white gutters hanging over him and start to caw.

Mary snarls. She says that Lon needs to stop feeding those things. They are pests. And they carry diseases.

Lon doesn't respond to that. People carry diseases too. But that seems to upset Mary, who follows him inside. As Lon washes his hands at the sink, Mary puts her purse on the kitchen table and says his name like she needs his immediate attention.

He turns and waits.

Mary nods and smiles. In the middle of the kitchen, she plants herself like a cheerleader. And then she lifts up her hands, and starts moving them in choreographed swoops of the arm and intricate hand movements, like hieroglyphs made flesh.

The scars on Lon's neck begin to pulse.

At first, Mary mistakes Lon's astonishment for wonder or relief, and she keeps signing. But she soon notices that Lon isn't watching her hands, that he isn't tracking what they say. He watches her face, like someone expecting to be spoken to would do. Like someone who doesn't understand a single movement of American Sign Language. Slowly, disappointment and frustration twist Mary's features.

Lon looks down at his feet and shakes his head.

Mary throws her hands into the sky. She knew Lon wasn't taking this seriously. After all of this, she should have known better. How long has Lon had those DVDs sitting in his room? What was the point of buying all of them if Lon never planned to use them?

Lon tries to blow her off. It isn't like he can say anything back. Not on his own. He heads to the stairs to his room in the basement.

Mary hounds after him. Bitching at him. *Doctor Ledford* this. *Pull yourself together* that. He doesn't care. He stomps extra-loud down the staircase to drown out her shouting. She yells at his back that fucking chimpanzees and gorillas learn sign language. Lon is just being lazy. He's being a victim. When Lon gets to his room, he closes the door in her face, and locks it.

Mary shouts that she wasn't aware that she was dealing with a teenager again, and storms back upstairs.

Lon falls down onto his bed and lets himself cry.

###

On the side table next to the couch sits a picture of Mary and Lon taken in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Mary is only twenty-nine years old— it occurs to Lon sometimes that if he had been more like her or Neill, he would already be a father by now. Her blown out dirty blonde hair billows in the breeze. Her dark sunglasses reflect the mid-afternoon sun and the smudged shape of the stranger she asked to take the picture. Lon has just turned seven. He grins at her hip, all freckles, missing one of his front teeth. His mop of black hair looks wild as a bed of briars.

They went to the Wright Brothers monument and museum, the hill where man flew for the first time. Stones in the grass mark where the first real airplane had landed after each test-flight. On the hilltop, a tall white marble tower juts into the sky. It is what Lon imagines the Lighthouse of Alexandria had looked like before it was burned to the ground.

For a week they stayed in a dark brown, two bedroom beach house down the road with a screened in porch and a rocky path to the ocean. Lon had never seen a house on stilts before, and Mary told him that most of the houses here had them in case of flooding or tidal waves. Little white crabs scuttled around in the sand and rocks under the house. Once, Lon saw a gray fox skulking around under there, feeding on a discarded bag of chips.

Gray and gold cat-tails crowned the sand dunes between the house and the beach. They spent their days on the coarse pebbled shore under a green and white striped umbrella, from which they would watch brown and black pelicans skim over humble Atlantic waves, and occasionally venture out to swim or build drip sand castles.

Mary took Lon out into the water, holding his hand as they waded deeper and deeper. Lon, face to the sky and water lapping his chin, told her that he couldn't touch the ground anymore. She said it was okay, that she would keep him above the water. When waves came, she told him to jump. Suspended weightlessly in the tide, he felt like a cool, gentle palm lifted him up by his feet. They body-surfed back to the brown shallows.

Back under the umbrella, they ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Mary made them with strawberry jam, which they both agreed was better than grape jelly. They had a small portable radio, and would listen to pop stations as they licked the salt and sticky jelly from their fingers.

Ever since, Lon has wanted to go back to Kitty Hawk.

###

When Lon is finally certain that his mom has gone to sleep, he slinks out from the basement. Mary left the dishes dirty and soaking in the sink. Lon's nose curls at the dank smell. He goes to the cabinet by the door to the garage, where his mom keeps her liquor. Lon takes a coffee mug and fills it with cheap bourbon. He steps outside, where the night has gone bitter and crisply cold. Through the treetops, Lon looks up at the almost full moon.

No one is out there. Not even the crows.

Lon doesn't even like bourbon. Every swallow tastes like liquid ashes. But it is the hardest thing in the cabinet, and the thing Mary will be least likely to notice he had snatched.

He ambles over to his car and thinks about leaving. But can he? Will the world even let him? Lon thinks about being a kid, floating in the tide, head above the surface, his feet skimming the ground between waves, and his mom holding his hand.

Lon has wondered before if Rubyville has a gravitational pull. Every chance Lon ever got to leave imploded on itself. His career in music production. His friends in Nashville, who used to call and email him sometimes when he first got sick. Rose.

At that, Lon winces. He doesn't want to think about her. He's over her. She's gone. She's nothing anymore.

Lon takes another swig from the mug and looks at the backside of the Male Birth Control, his green and gray license plate. If he can get out of Rubyville, he thinks, he won't go back to Nashville.

But it doesn't matter.

This, Lon thinks before finishing off the mug of bourbon and going back inside, is what it is like to live through a life's epilogue. He only hopes that it doesn't drag out for much longer. He did promise Linda that it won't.

Chapter Eight

Paternity

The house phone rings. Mary isn't home. Lon stares at it, a spoon of peanut butter hanging from his pursed lips. Lon grabs a pen and paper and goes to check the caller ID. It's Neill. Weird. He writes this down as well as the time of the call— 12:39 p.m. Lon turns to get back to his peanut butter, when the phone lights up and rings again. Neill, again. He must know that Mary isn't home. Which means...

Lon answers.

Sure enough, Neill has called for Lon. Neill hesitates and asks if that's Lon on the other end. Lon coughs. Is that close enough to a yes?

Neill begins by saying how good it was to see Lon at the funeral. Was that really two months ago? Gosh. Lon sits at the kitchen table and leans back into the chair. He rubs his neck, his thumb resting in the crater. Neill coughs and brings up the election. First black president. That's some history to tell the grandkids about. He keeps allowing uncomfortable pauses between his sentences, an instinct that expects verbal responses. Sometimes, just to spare him, Lon releases an extra-heavy breath, the closest thing he can produce to an *mhmm*.

After another pause, Neill notes that Thanksgiving is coming up. It is in about a week, as a matter of fact. He wants to know if Lon has any plans.

Lon rubs his chin and isn't sure he agrees with the foundations of what Neill is even saying. It can't be that late in the year already, can it? He arches his back and looks out the

window over the sink. The trees become more bare each day. Autumnal splendor is all gone. Lon supposes that this would mean that Thanksgiving is getting close. Lon doesn't have a calendar to double check.

Neill hopes Lon will think about it.

###

Since the blowup over Sign Language, Lon and Mary have not spent much time together. When she watches TV, he goes to his room. When he comes up to get something to eat, she suddenly has to go to the bathroom for the next thirty minutes. Lon knows that broaching any conversation with his mom, let alone one about spending time with Neill, will drip with discomfort.

He sits on the couch, periodically flipping open his phone to check the time, with a note folded in his lap. Lon is aware that this would be a great opportunity for his mom to throw in his face how useful it would be if he had just done what Dr. Ledford had said he should and learned how to do sign language. He tries to move his hands through the alphabet. Would he accidentally tell her that *Teill* called and asked about *Nhatksgivitg*? There's probably a sign for Thanksgiving, he might not have needed to spell it out. Did Mary get that far?

The gray Volvo rolls up the driveway, and Lon's neck starts to feel like it is tightening. He fiddles with the note, rubbing it between his fingers. Why is he so nervous? It's not what the conversation is about, he tells himself. It is the act of conversing.

Fuck, where's Linda when Lon needs her.

Mary opens the door from the garage into the kitchen. She has mail under her arm and starts to sort through it at the kitchen table before she realizes that Lon is sitting in the living room staring at her. She looks back down at the mail, and finishes sorting through it before she steps into the living room. She asks if something is up.

Lon gets up from the couch and walks over to her. He feels like a dog returning a chewed slipper. With a breath that sounds too loud, he hands her the note.

She reads it.

Neill called. He asked if I could celebrate Thanksgiving with him.

Mary sighs, and Lon can't tell if it is from relief or frustration. But faster than she seems like she should, Mary says that Lon ought to go, that this can be something good.

Lon remembers the funeral, all those people, the smell of the air around that family. He feels uncertain.

But Mary has already grabbed the phone. She says that she can make other plans of her own, and can spend the holiday with some friends. Maybe with Jennifer Hendrix, the school's art teacher. She had mentioned how she and her husband didn't know how they were going to celebrate now that both of their sons are deployed.

Lon's chest twists as she dials the phone and puts it to her ear. Is it possible that she's happier away from him? It's not like he has been jonesing for motherly affection, but this feels so strange. It feels artificial, somehow.

Neill picks up on the other end of Mary's call. Or is it Diana? Mary has already made up Lon's mind for him, he's going to spend Thanksgiving with them. She nods, *ahums*, and writes

on the note Lon gave her. The call is over before Lon even has a clear sense of what the hell is going on.

Mary hands Lon the piece of paper. She wrote down an address and a time on it. She recommends Lon bring a bottle of wine with him.

###

Nine days later, Lon finds himself alone in the house printing off directions on MapQuest. Mary got up early to spend Thanksgiving with the Hendrixes. The directions take him to Doris Ridge, not far away from the Catholic church where George O’Riordan’s funeral was held.

When Lon pulls up, any hopes he might have had that this would be a small gathering are cast into the mud. Cars and pickup trucks fill the driveway and line the street.

The house, a respectable brick monster with black shutters and white Corinthian columns, dominates the street otherwise lined with forty-year old ranch houses. An American flag waves over the front porch, twinned with a teal and red one for the Tennessee Titans. On the porch, a ceramic tick hound in an orange and white jersey stands guard. The house begs to be seen as a bona fide Tennessean. If there is a portrait of Daniel Boone inside, Lon thinks he will shit himself.

Lon folds up the directions and sticks them in his jacket pocket. He takes a bottle of red wine and gets out of the car. As he approaches, Lon can smell meat cooking. By the sound of it, there are people out back and more inside the house. Lon rings the doorbell. Is this really Neill’s place? He waits, and rings the doorbell again.

When the door opens, Lon takes a step back. He recognizes the woman standing in the doorway, but she can't be here. He pulls the directions out from his coat pocket. This can't be the right place. Why the hell would Hotpants be here?

Hotpants remembers him too. From the party, right? She points at the scars on his neck and says that it's hard to forget those. But what is he doing here?

Lon shows her the MapQuest directions.

A man walks up behind Hotpants and wraps an arm around her. Uncle Junior has a cigar in his mouth and a bottle of Budweiser in his free hand. He introduces Lon to his cousin Rachel.

This revelation shocks Rachel as much as Lon. Her jaw opens like a bear trap. His *what?*

Uncle Junior tells Lon to come inside, takes the bottle of wine, and welcomes him to his house. He hopes Lon doesn't mind the crowd. Thanksgivings in the O'Riordan family are a big deal. Can't just invite family, but there has got to be clients and business associates and there's the sheriff over there and does Lon like the painting Uncle Junior hung over the fireplace of Daniel Boone?

Rachel follows them as Uncle Junior herds Lon through the house. Nobody told her she had another cousin. Uncle Junior explains that Lon is Neill's son, he was at the funeral, and that maybe if Rachel had bothered to come to that, they would have known each other by now.

Lon looks back at her over his shoulder and offers a weak smile. She rolls her eyes and disappears into a group of dudes in polo shirts.

No one had told Lon that he wasn't heading to Neill's house. Why hadn't anyone said anything about Thanksgiving being held at Uncle Junior's? It feels like vital information that would have influenced Lon's decision-making, what little he had in this whole mess.

The whole house smells like floor cleaner and cigar smoke. The blonde hardwood floors are covered in animal skins. Ducks and deer heads are mounted on the walls. Lon sees some people he recognizes from the funeral, like his Aunt Shannon, the one who wouldn't leave him and his mom alone. Lon deftly avoids staring at her too long. He doesn't think he could manage dealing with her.

Uncle Junior calls for Neill, who has just stuck a buttered roll into his mouth, and waves him over. Domineeringly, Uncle Junior puts a hand on Lon's shoulder as Neill approaches and says that it is a hell of a sight seeing the two of them here, the prodigal son and the prodigal son's own prodigal son. Uncle Junior chortles at his own joke.

Neill half-smiles. He lifts up what is left of his roll and says to Uncle Junior that this whole thing is really nice. The bread is great.

Uncle Junior takes a sip of his beer and tells Neill to get a drink. He pats Lon on the back, and leaves them to talk to a man in khakis standing by the turkey.

Neill shakes Lon's hand. He's glad he could make it.

Lon waves his finger in a slow circle. What is the deal with all this?

Neill nods his head like he has been partially deflated. He hates these kinds of things too. Junior hadn't told him it would be like this, but he probably should have known better. Junior has political aspirations. He wants to follow in his father's footsteps. The house is full of the *right kinds of people* for that sort of thing. The food is good, though. It isn't exactly a dinner, there will not be a time where everyone sits down and says grace at a table. But that's probably for the best. Getting stuck next to the wrong person at one of these things can just suck a soul right out.

There's a bloated pause, and then Neill asks Lon how he's doing.

Lon shrugs.

Neill laughs and nods. Same.

Neill pats Lon on the shoulder and says that he had better find Diana and see what she has gotten up to. She might need help handling Julia. With that, he wanders off into the Thanksgiving gathering.

Lon stands by himself there for a moment, unsure what to do. After a moment, he decides he had better get himself a drink. Weaving between circles of political and religious conversations, Lon finds a cooler in the kitchen with cans of beer in it. Taking one, he moves from room to room of Uncle Junior's house without really knowing where he's supposed to go.

In the kitchen, the Thanksgiving spread is set across a long table covered in a red and white gingham cloth. In the dining room, the blonde wood floor clashes with the dark wood of the dining room table and chairs, but this contrast is mitigated by an olive green and brown rug. The foyer, Lon realizes as he saunters back into it from the dining room, just kind of opens up like walking into an elevator shaft. Lon cranes his neck back and sees a chandelier hanging above him, and then a staircase and landing like an indoor balcony, where Lon imagines people are meant to stand and stare at the chandelier. There is a kind of library or study off the hallway. He peeks his head in it for a moment, then makes his way back to the living room.

Lon sits in a chair by the massive portrait of Daniel Boone, and within moments he feels a little hand wrap around his ankle. He looks down and sees Julia, who has army-crawled under the coffee table with a book clutched under her belly in one hand and the hem of Lon's pants in the other. She looks up at him and asks him if he likes animals. She trips over her words, she talks so quickly, and has to stop and start the question over again between deep breaths.

Of course Lon likes animals. He nods.

Julia pulls herself up to her feet, using Lon's pant leg as a kind of ladder. She leans against his knee, and shows him the book she's got. It's old looking and has a blue canvas cover. Lon suspects that Julia nicked the book from a library somewhere in the house. But inside, there are large colored photographs of ocean waves and of dolphins and fish and coral reefs. Judging by the quality of the photography, Lon guesses that the book is from the 1970s. Impatiently, Julia flips to a page where a whole page is filled by a photograph of sea lions swimming through a forest of kelp. She points to one of the sea lions, and says she wants one of them as a pet. She flips the page to a seal resting on a pebbled beach, gasps, and adds that she wants that one too. She keeps calling them doggies, and Lon hides a smile as he realizes that she doesn't know yet what a seal is.

She turns the page, and on it are a pod of killer whales breaching the waves. Julia cocks her head, and asks if Lon can read the page to her. When she looks up at him, Lon shakes his head. Julia nods. She says that it is okay, she doesn't know how to read either. They hunch over the book, and continue to look through the pages.

After a while, Lon looks up and sees Diana watching them from the other side of the room. She greets Lon with a soft smile. He nods.

Without warning, Julia runs off with the book. Lon sits back. It's a very three-year-old thing to do, he decides.

Diana is gone too, presumably to make sure her daughter doesn't do any damage to a book that very clearly doesn't belong to her.

Lon hopes Julia comes back with another book, but she never does. He takes a sip of his bland beer and thinks to himself, *why am I even here?* He gets up and makes a few more rounds of the house, just to give himself something to do.

In the hallway, Lon overhears Neill talking to some old fart in a bowtie. They are discussing the pros and cons of having a death penalty. The old guy is aghast that they don't use the electric chair anymore. Hell, they ought to bring back hangings and firing squads, so he opines. Neill disagrees. He thinks it isn't the government's place to take someone's life. What if they get it wrong? Besides, a person is more than their biggest mistake.

Uncle Junior swoops in and herds the older man in the bowtie away. He cracks a joke about how his little brother has spent too much time out West with all those hippies in Colorado. Neill has forgotten what it is like down South.

Lon looks down into his drink. A person is more than their biggest mistake. He walks up to Neill's side and whistles like he just witnessed something spectacular.

Neill asks if Lon saw that and Lon nods. Neill takes a sip of his drink and says that maybe it is best he doesn't get into those kinds of conversations today. Junior might never invite him over to his house again, and wouldn't that be a shame?

Lon lifts an eyebrow in agreement.

Neill leans back and looks at Lon like he hasn't gotten a good look at him before. Neill asks Lon if he has said he's glad Lon is here yet, and Lon half-shrugs that he doesn't remember. Neill bobs his head and says that, whether he has said so or not, he is.

###

Paper plate in hand, Lon puts together a smattering of Thanksgiving gluttony. Some dark meat from the turkey, some mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and green beans. He grabs some screechy plastic utensils and a paper napkin. He balances all of this in one hand while his drink is in the other as he walks to the fireplace and sits down on the brick hearth. He eats quietly, by himself. Guests amble around the room, talking about who cares what, an indistinguishable mass of men polo shirts, camo hats, and women with starkly dyed hair in pastel blouses and rugged mom-jeans.

His recently discovered cousin Rachel takes a seat next to him. By the smell of it, she's drinking bourbon. She asks if Lon went to Ville.

He looks over at her, not sure what she means.

Rachel says that she went to County High School. Her dad says they are the same age, but she doesn't remember him, so he must have gone to Rubyville High.

Lon nods. That would explain it.

Rachel keeps looking at Lon's neck. She wants to know if someone tried to kill him or something. Like, did someone try to slit his throat?

Lon shakes his head. He mouths the word *cancer*.

Rachel leans over and asks if she can ask Lon a question.

He shrugs.

She wants to know if he saw anything that night. In that room. Rachel knows that Lon saw her in there, she saw him in the doorway.

Lon cuts the corner of his eye to her. He really couldn't give a shit about what she got up to at that party. He shakes his head and takes a spoonful of mashed potatoes.

Rachel is insistent. She presses him. It is really really important to her that he doesn't say anything to her dad—

Lon turns to her, a little more aggressively than he meant to, but still. He pulls down the collar of his shirt and lifts his chin, in case the wreck of surgical scars on his flesh had not been clearly visible before. Is she really that stupid? He can't say shit.

Rachel backtracks. She just meant that if her dad found out about her doing...

Lon gets up from the fireplace. Rachel paws at his arm, but she doesn't get a good enough grip and Lon yanks his arm away from her. She must know anything more will draw attention, which breeds questions, so she leans back and stares at her plate. Lon breathes audibly through his nose, and makes for the glass-paned door to the back porch.

The sun has started to fall behind the mountains. He takes a deep breath. He needs to calm down.

Lon feels eyes on him and realizes that he isn't alone. He looks over and sees Neill sitting in a rocking chair sipping on a can of Bud Lite. He asks if Lon is alright. He looks kind of... Neill doesn't know what the word is for what Lon looks like.

Lon shrugs and runs a hand through his hair. He wishes the crows were here. This whole day has been nothing but an ugly reminder of his disability. He never thought of himself as disabled before, but after listening to all the talk and bullshit and not being able to contribute so much as a grunt, he feels right settling on that word in his mind. He feels disabled. But if the crows were here, he thinks, he wouldn't be so much. He could confide in them, at least.

Neill rises from his rocking chair and asks Lon if he minds getting away from the party for a little while. He flashes a blunt from his chest pocket.

Lon nods.

They walk down a path into the woods behind Uncle Junior's back yard. Neill says that there's a bench down the way. Their feet crunch over dead leaves fallen on the little path, and sure enough, they come upon a small wooden bench with some moss growing from its edges. Neill isn't even sure if Junior knows this is here, but Neill found it last time he was over here, back when they had to go through his father's will. Neill went for another walk much like this one after that.

Neill takes a seat on the bench and lights up. Lon takes the spot next to him.

The woods are beautiful. Lon thinks about walking out into them and getting lost. Maybe he would find his way back, but maybe not.

Neill takes a long puff from his blunt and offers it to Lon. Lon raises his hand in polite decline. Neill insists. Lon shakes his head and points to the scars on his neck. Neill stares blankly like he doesn't fully understand. Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Lon chops his hand at the scars and makes a hissing sound through his teeth. Smoking hurts. Neill nods and mutters an apology before putting the blunt back to his lips.

They sit there, looking out into the quiet woods.

Neill says that this is nice.

Lon nods.

An indiscernible syllable escapes from Neill's mouth, and then he stops. He says he should talk to Lon about something, but he doesn't know exactly how to start.

Again, Lon nods, but he thinks it might have been two quick of a nod. Lon looks down at his feet and thinks that this is stupid— why is he so eager to talk to Neill about anything? He runs a hand through his hair and looks back at Neill, who doesn't seem to have noticed any keenness on Lon's part to be talked to.

Neill inhales on the blunt and lets smoke seep out from the corners of his mouth. He taps the ashes from his blunt and looks out into the trees. He runs a hand through his hair before taking in one last deep breath, and starts talking. There was a lot of stuff he had not dealt with when he married Lon's mother. They were just out of college and Mary got pregnant, and Neill thought that getting married would be the right thing to do.

His voice drops to a murmur and he stops. He sucks on the insides of his cheeks, narrowing his face, and juts his jaw to the side, like there's a small animal caught in his mouth and he's trying to keep it from jumping out of his lips.

Lon waits.

Neill glances at Lon and lets out a sigh. Neill says that his father abused him as a child and as a teenager. Neill looks like he considers explaining that further, but he stops and takes another puff off his blunt. Having something like that done to you by someone you love, someone you trust, is like having your brain stirred in a bowl. All the compartments and things you keep separated mix and it all turns into this lumpy mess. How do you ask your dad to help you with math homework when he... Neill shakes his head.

Even if Lon could talk, he would not. His eyes are fixed on Neill, like he is something emerging from the woods whose full shape has for the first time become clear.

Neill's face contorts into a false smile and he admits that he had really hoped Lon had been a girl. It would have been easier. But he had been an adult and he thought he could stick it out. But it just... Neill finishes off his blunt. He leans over and snubs the embers of it on the wet bark of a tree. Neill knows it isn't an excuse. Lon deserved a father. But Neill also knew that Lon didn't deserve to be in the kind of danger Neill thought having *him* as a father meant. So one day, he packed his bags and removed himself.

At the time, Neill continues, he thought that sort of shit got passed down. He thought people who did that had it done to them. That isn't what it is, though. It's about power. Neill says this like it is a recitation. Like he's repeating a mantra. People who hurt children do so because they enjoy exerting their power over them.

By the time Neill learned that tidbit, it seemed way too late to try and make things right. His eyes are pink when he looks at Lon. He apologizes.

Lon doesn't know how to react, so he just nods.

A crow caws somewhere in the woods.

Neill apologizes again, this time for laying such a heavy subject on Lon.

Through the branches and underbrush, Lon can see four black shapes gliding from tree to tree, closer towards him and Neill, like children hopping on rocks to get across a stream. It takes Lon a while, but once they get close enough, he recognizes Linda at the lead.

Linda calls to Lon. She has been looking for him. It has been a long journey to this place.

Neill mutters that he likes crows. They are supposed to be really smart. He says he saw something on Animal Planet about crows dropping nuts at stoplights, so that when a car runs over the nut, the crows can safely retrieve their food when the light turns red.

Lon smiles. That sounds about right.

He stands, and tilts his head as a gesture for Neill to watch him. Lon walks towards the crows, hands in his coat pocket. Linda chirps, and hops to a lower branch.

Neill says he thinks that crow likes Lon.

Lon extends his arm, and Linda gently lands on it. She hops up towards his shoulder, and croaks to her compatriots.

The other crows hop onto his arms and shoulders. Linda musses Lon's hair gently from his collar. One of the crows on his left arm, Glossy Black, bobs and caws in excitement. They are all so happy they found Lon at last.

Lon looks back at Neill. Every feature on his face has widened. Lon wonders if it is fear or awe that he sees, or maybe some mixture of the two.

Neill asks slowly if Lon has spent a lot of time with these birds.

Lon nods. He has.

Chapter Nine

El Desperado

When Lon pulls up at the launch point on the Ocoee, he folds up his MapQuest directions and sticks them in the Male Birth Control's glove box. Neill had sent him an email inviting him to go whitewater rafting, just the two of them. Neill has an old friend who runs one of the rafting companies and it is off-season, so Neill can get them on a raft for cheap.

The parking area is all gray gravel. Lon wanders down to a spot by the riverside where rubber rafts and kayaks stand in stacks, like the segments of giant misshapen worms rising from the ground. Neill is talking with another man in his forties with a thick brown Grizzly Adams beard and neck tattoos, wearing a flotation vest, sunglasses, and tall black rubber boots.

Neill introduces the man as his friend Jackson, and then introduces Lon as his son.

Lon brushes past this and offers Jackson a handshake, which Jackson takes and, slapping Lon on the back, tells him that they are going to have a good raft down the river today. The air is cold, but also clear. No wind. The water will be just right, temperature aside. They have to share the raft with some Boy Scouts, though. They are the only other rafters signed up for the day.

At Jackson's behest, Neill and Lon step into thick forest-green jumpsuits that zip up the front and scrunch tight around the wrists and ankles. Over the jumpsuits, they wear rubber boots and flotation vests like Jackson's. They strap on scratched up white helmets and are handed paddles. As Jackson forewarned, the rest of the rafters are Boy Scouts, eight loud gangly pimply teenage boys wrangled only by two older men, presumably fathers to a couple of them.

A small, skinny man comes up to Jackson, says something Lon can't hear, and Jackson nods. Jackson calls for them all to gather round, formally introduces himself and the skinny man (named Hank) as their whitewater rafting guides, and gives his safety spiel: keep a hold of the paddle at all times, no reaching out of or leaning over the sides of the raft, no standing up in the raft. He shows them the proper way to hold a paddle, palm over the T-grip. He says that he and Hank are the bosses on their rafts and that if they tell you to paddle a certain way (faster, slower, one side more, one side stops), listen.

Each raft only holds seven people, so they split the group. Lon and Neill join Jackson, along with three scouts and one of their fathers. The others go with Hank.

They approach a bulky black rubber raft at the riverbank. Everyone tosses their paddles inside the raft. Neill pulls up to stern next to Lon. He asks Lon if he's ready.

Lon nods.

Jackson hollers, they all shove the thing into the water, and vault over the inflated sides to their seats.

And they go down the river.

At first, the going is easy downstream. The trees that flank the Ocoee, naked in winter except for the pines, remind Lon of kids hunched over a gutter, dropping leaves into the stream and betting on which one will get to the sewer first.

The scouts chatter amongst themselves. They have their own culture of inside jokes. When the raft goes down its first rapid, one of them shouts *ENTROPY!* and the others laugh. The father looks over to Neill and says some vagary about teenagers, ending it with a *right?*

Lon doesn't see Neill's inaudible response, but he can feel the awkwardness leaking out from him.

During the calmer stretches of river, Jackson tells them about the history of the river. The Ocoee is a tributary of the larger Hiwassee River, which was first settled by the Creek Indians. When the Spanish explorer De Soto traveled through here in the fifteen hundreds, the Cherokee had not yet arrived in the area. The river's name comes from a Cherokee word for the maypop vines that grow along its banks, and contrary to what you might have heard, the Cherokee and European settlers actually moved into the area around the same time in the early eighteenth century. The Cherokee drove out the Creek Indians in a bloody war which lasted over forty years. A century later, many of those Cherokee were forcibly removed by President Andrew Jackson, a Tennessean himself, in the now infamous Trail of Tears. In the century and a half that followed, loggers cut down many of the old growth forests around the Ocoee that miners didn't rip up. After the copper mines shut down, there was an effort to re-green the area, the result of which they can all see now. During the 1996 Olympics held in Atlanta, the Ocoee hosted the whitewater competitions. Since then, the river has been a major draw for kayakers and whitewater rafters. Jackson's narration, well-rehearsed and timed to the river's rhythm, granted majesty to the river.

Jackson tells the starboard side of the raft to backstroke, and they twist around a wide stone rising under the water, like an animal about to breach for air. He tells everyone they are about to head down another rapid and to be ready.

And sure enough, the river rips the raft down. Lon can feel the round rubber sides of the raft bounce against rocks. Jackson calls out commands. Lon tries to keep up with them, everyone

does, but they struggle against the current. The raft pin-balls down stream. Water splashes up onto them, bone-chillingly cold.

As they near the end of the rapids and can see smooth river water again, they bump against another rock. The force sends Lon into the air. For a moment, he can see the raft below him, like he's flying above. He comes down on the round inflated side, and slips into the water.

The coldness chews at Lon's exposed skin before his brain can catch up to what happened and where he is. River currents slap at his sides. Distantly, he hears Jackson yell to him. Don't try to swim, just float there. Legs up.

It might have been five seconds or five minutes of drifting downriver before the raft pulls up to Lon's side. A paddle reaches out for him and Lon grabs a hold of it. Pulled onto the raft like a fish, Lon's jumpsuit has drenched through to his skin. Neill pulls his paddle from Lon's grip and gives him a slap on the back. Jackson says they are almost at the end of their run. They can dry Lon off there.

###

For the rest of the way downriver, the scouts retell the story of how Lon fell into the river, like Lon wasn't there to see it. They tell him Lon shot up like ten feet into the air— no, fifteen feet. When he hit the raft, they thought he was going to catapult them into the water, but instead, he hit the raft and bounced off of it and splashed into the water. One of the scouts says he thought Lon was a goner. Dead for sure. They say that Jackson went full beast-mode to get to him, and

then they all try to take credit for hoisting Lon back into the raft. Only one of them, the one whose father was there, says that it was Neill who actually got Lon back out of the water.

Teeth chattering and body rattling, Lon's fingers go numb as his chest starts to grow warmer—the onset of hypothermia. When they make it to the end, Jackson rushes Lon into a trailer, where he hands him a paper cup of warm water. He says he doesn't have time to mix it with any cocoa. Neill, who Lon didn't realize was also in the trailer with them, offers to help Lon out of the wet gear. Lon strips down to his underwear, with a blanket draped over his shoulders, sipping the warm water. Neill hangs his dripping clothes over a heater. Jackson tells him that it happens sometimes, someone falls out of the raft. In the warm months it isn't so bad, but in the winter, things can go sideways real fast.

Neill says that it was one hell of an adventure.

Lon nods. He realizes that he could have let the river take him. But he had not. In the moment, Lon had decided to float and let himself be rescued. He took the paddle when Neill held it out for him.

Jackson wipes his palms on his legs and says he had better check on the other rafters and make sure they don't run off with any of his gear. He confirms that Lon and Neill are fine to hang in the trailer for a little while.

Lon gives a thumbs up.

Neill sits down in a chair next to Lon. He says when he used to live in Boulder, he would sometimes drive out to go canoeing on the Colorado River. If Lon thinks the mountains here are something, the Rockies are a whole lot more. Neill says he couldn't believe how tall they were

when he first saw them. Eleven o'clock would roll around, and the sun would still be hiding behind a mountain snowcap. He asks Lon if he has ever been out west.

Lon shakes his head. The furthest west he had ever been was Memphis.

Neill says that there's a whole big world out there. It'd be a shame if Lon never got to see it all.

###

When Lon gets home and climbs up onto the roof to tell the crows about it, they hop and bob their heads in excitement. What a thrilling tale! Lon survived frigid river waters. Amazing! It is a feat they cannot hope to attempt.

Lon strokes the feathers of a crow named Wide Wing who became particularly upset by the thought of Lon drowning in the river.

It all turned out well, though. In spite of it all, Lon feels good about it. He and Neill made plans to have lunch tomorrow with Diana and Julia at El Desperado. Sort of like having the meal they should have had all those months ago. Lon imagines that maybe if that had been the case, things wouldn't have turned out the way they did. That he might not have found out about Rose.

The sun has started to set and Lon's ears and nose prick with the chill. He leaves some raisins in the Crow House, and climbs down.

Lon walks into the living room with his hands in his jacket pocket and sees his mom on the couch sitting with her knees to her chest, crying. Lon stands in the doorway for a moment,

unsure what to do, unsure what he has just walked into, then a gust of cold wind reminds him to close the door behind him.

Mary looks up at Lon and tells him that he should sit down.

Lon does this, sitting next to her. His weight on the cushions almost makes her lean over onto him, but Mary adjusts her position and wipes her cheeks. With a sniffle, she tells Lon that she just got off the phone with the principal at the middle school. There has been a sudden death in their community.

Lon nods. He can think of several of the teachers there who had been old when he attended. He waits for the name as Mary calms herself, taking in slow deliberate breaths.

She says that Travis Miller is dead.

A pulse runs from Lon's head down his body.

Mary must see the shock on Lon's face. She weeps again and throws her arms around him. She says she remembers when they were kids getting into trouble, and then teenagers getting into even more trouble... Lon pats her back and she pulls away a little, rubbing her eyes. She apologizes. Travis was Lon's friend. She should be comforting him.

Lon mouths the word *how*, though he has an idea. At that party, Travis had enthusiastically tried to get Lon to do cocaine with him.

Mary shakes her head. She doesn't know. But there are only so many ways a young man in good health can die. Most of them aren't good. She says when she gets information about a funeral, she will let Lon know. She thinks that the two of them should attend. Travis would, on occasion, peep his head into her nurse's office to ask how Lon was doing. Such a sweet young man.

Travis Miller, who used to hand out pubescent justice with Lon in the boy's bathroom, who coined the name for Lon's car, who was at Ruby Red's with Rose... He's dead.

Lon nods, unsure what else to do, and goes down stairs to his room, where he looks through old yearbooks and other childhood talismans before falling into a light sleep, the kind where dreams visit, but are not remembered when they leave.

###

Lon wishes that he was better at holding onto friends. He used to have no trouble making them, but even back then they never stuck around. Each season of life was populated by different people. When Lon was growing up in Rubyville, he had Travis and Rose and everyone else from school. And then he went to college, and his life was full of those people. After moving, Lon doesn't even think he ever phoned anyone from back home besides his mom. In Nashville, what college friends he had faded away into the past as well. And then when he moved back home, everyone from Nashville disappeared too. Lon never had people who he'd describe as a lifelong friend. Every friend he ever had was a friend of proximity.

At some point, Lon comes out from the basement and climbs up onto the roof, where he sits and watches the crows fly around overhead. They tell him that they are looking for his voice. They have checked the caves and the mountains and the fields. They have ripped out the throats of many small animals, but can not find Lon's voice. They worry that they will not be able to keep their end of the bargain.

Linda silences them. Of course they will find Lon's voice. Man speaks, she says.

###

When Lon arrives at El Desperado, Neill, Diana, and Julia are already seated. The open seat at the table left for Lon stands between Neill and Julia, who squirms in a black plastic booster seat.

As Lon approaches, Diana stands to give him a hug. Neill holds out a hand for Lon to shake and pulls him into a hug as well, and they sit down.

Diana brought Lon a notepad and pen. She says that even though her challenges with language are different from his, she can empathize with Lon's situation. She wants Lon to feel like he can contribute fully to any conversation.

Lon takes the notepad and pen and smiles his thanks. The first thing he writes is *Thanks*.

Evidently, Diana had given Julia a notepad as well. When Lon writes on his, she takes hers out and scribbles on it in orange crayon. She presents her scribbles to Lon and tells him that it's her friend Mimi. Lon nods sagely and pretends like it's the spitting image of Mimi. Julia takes her notepad back and, grabbing for a gray crayon, resumes her work.

After ordering, Neill tells Diana all about their whitewater rafting adventure yesterday. Lon is surprised, it legitimately seems like he has not told her until now. Diana gasps and puts a hand on her chest when Neill gets to the part where Lon fell out of the raft.

Julia says for them to wait, then looks up at Lon. She asks Lon if he's dead.

Lon shakes his head. Not dead yet.

Diana laughs and tells Julia that her brother is very much alive. She can pinch him to make sure. Dead people are cold and colorless, and when you pinch them, their skin feels like chicken skin.

Lon holds out his hand for Julia to pinch. When she does, she sighs like a huge concern has been lifted from her mind. It's good to know that Lon isn't dead. Lunch would be ruined otherwise.

When the food arrives, Neill says he has a new dad joke he wants to try out. He sits up in his chair like this is a big to-do.

Diana rolls her eyes and tells Lon that he doesn't need to humor this. Neill has been trying his hand at comedy ever since Julia was born, and it has never served him well.

Neill waves his hand. He has got a really good one this time.

Neill asks: Did Lon hear about the peanut who went walking in the park at night?

Lon shakes his head.

He was as*SALT*ed.

Diana groans an *ay dios mio*. Lon can't help but smirk, like a fishhook has tugged at the side of his mouth. That was bad. But the slightest grin only encourages Neill. He points— See? See?!— at Lon's face. He's funny after all.

Julia leans over to Lon and whispers that she has to go potty.

Lon looks over to Diana, who is already on it. She takes Julia's hand and helps her out of her booster seat. She asks Julia to clarify that she has to go to the bathroom, and Julia nods. Diana tells her okay then let's go and she takes her by the hand off to the lady's room.

Lon looks down at his food and feels Neill's eyes on him. Lon looks up.

Neill asks if Lon is alright.

Lon shrugs.

Neill reminds him that he has a notepad. He can write out what he's thinking.

Lon writes:

Just in a mood. A friend from high school died yesterday.

Neill curses and shakes his head. He apologizes and asks what happened.

With a confidence that he probably should not have, given that no one told him how Travis died, Lon writes down the letters:

OD

Neill sighs. There's a lot of that going around these days. A lot of people have lost hope in the last ten years or so. He blames NAFTA.

Lon bobs his head like that's a maybe, but things seem just as hopeless as they have always been to him.

Neill asks Lon what he wants out of life. Where does he see himself in five years? Or ten?

Lon knows that he can't say what he's thinking: that he doesn't see himself anywhere. That he figures he will be dead by then. So he shrugs.

Neill snaps his finger and points at Lon, jabbing at the air between them. That's Lon's problem, he says. Lon will always feel stuck so long as he lacks direction. People need their ambitions, or else what's the point? He asks Lon if there's anything he wants— a family, to run a business... Neill fumbles and can't think of anything else to list.

Lon thinks this is a depressingly capitalist way to look at life. He writes this down on the notepad and slides it across the table to Neill, who reads it, shaking his head.

Neill says they live in a capitalist country and slides the notepad back.

While Neill has a laugh to himself about Mary of all people raising a socialist, Lon huffs and sets to writing.

Whether life has meaning or not, that meaning isn't going to be derived from personal ambitions— otherwise countless millions of slaves and peasants who died without any say in what they did with their lives would have lived a meaningless existence. *If* life has value (and Lon isn't even sure about that premise) it is inherent. Lon's career goals or lack thereof have nothing to do with what his soul is worth.

The drumstick of his thumb is sore. Lon stretches his hand and stabs the paper a little too harshly with the final period of what he realizes is an overlong paragraph. He slides the notepad back over to Neill.

When he reads it, Neill points at the last sentence like he caught Lon somehow. So does Lon believe in a soul?

Lon shrugs again. He believes in a brain. A soul— something intangible, something separate but somehow married to his body, his life? He isn't sure.

Neill clarifies that what he's getting at is that Lon has to have hope in something. When life gets hard, as it does for everyone at some time or another, people need to believe that one day it will be good again. People need to believe that there will be days worth living to see.

A morbid piece of trivia bubbles up into Lon's thoughts. Neill is right— that's why so many soldiers would commit suicide rather than be captured before stuff like the Geneva

Convention came around. Many people knew that capture meant enduring horrible vengeance upon their minds and bodies. If a soldier had no hope of escape, he might go through the invisible door at the bottom of a poisoned cup, a sharp knife, or a loaded gun.

Diana and Julia return from the bathroom. As she puts Julia in her seat, Diana sees that Lon has been using the notepad. Without reading it, she says it looks like Lon and Neill were having quite the conversation.

As Diana settles in, Neill coughs. He doesn't look at Lon when he says that he and Lon need to talk— or, well, they can't *talk*— but they need to discuss this whole business with the crows.

That comes out of left field, Lon thinks. He stares at Neill, unsure exactly what Neill means.

Through mouthfuls of rice, Neill says that he doesn't think that what Lon is doing—what Mary has told him he's doing— it can't be healthy.

Sharply, Diana murmurs that now isn't the time. She leans over to Lon and says that they don't have to talk about this.

Neill asks when else they are going to talk about this.

Diana gestures to Lon and states that this is a sensitive topic.

Are they all in on this? Lon feels cornered, surrounded. Was this a trap all along?

Neill ignores Diana. He explains that Mary told him, and Neill has to say that he agrees with her, that Lon ought to focus his energy on accessing alternative modes of communication. He points to the notepad like it is evidence. He says that he heard that Lon's doctor had suggested sign language.

The instant Neill says those words— *sign language*— Lon feels his blood wave. He shakes his head. This isn't happening. He can't have fallen for this.

Neill says that he knows this is hard to accept, but Lon has to be realistic. He has to think about his future. He reaches to put a hand on Lon's shoulder.

Lon shirks it off. This isn't right. This doesn't make sense.

Before Lon is sure what he's doing, he has already stood up. Neill says his name like a father would, and that propels Lon to the door.

Lon stops there for a moment when he sees her at the doorway. She isn't supposed to be here. What the hell is Rose doing here? Is this a dream? At eye level, Lon can see the surprise and shame in her eyes. Lon's heart balls like a fist in his chest. Rose croaks out a soft hi.

Lon hears Neill get up from the table behind him.

Shaking his head, Lon barrels past Rose out the door. He makes for the Male Birth Control, and heads out of town.

Chapter Ten

Something to Talk About

Mary's car is not in the driveway when Lon pulls up. Good. As he pulls the ladder from the garage and climbs up onto the roof, accusations fly through Lon's head like bullets. *You never cared. You never listened. You never asked me what I wanted.*

Lon checks the crow house on the roof. An old bird huddles inside. Lon scurries back to the ladder and rushes down it. He goes inside through the garage and rummages through the kitchen for some nuts or some crackers. Finding only a sleeve of stale saltines, he takes them back to the roof.

He knocks on the side of the crow house, and with the promise of crackers, he coaxes the old crow out. It hobbles out onto the roof, and Lon gives it a cracker before lifting the shelter, cradling it towards the ladder.

The old bird croaks at him. He has been tricked. How could Lon do this?

Another crow lands on a nearby tree branch and admonishes Lon as he places his foot on the ladder. How can he explain? They are leaving this place. They are finding a new home. But the crows don't understand. They caw louder and more angrily as Lon descends. Black wings beat at the top of his head. They begin to screech. A claw scratches at the arm holding the crow house to his chest and he tries to wave them away. Then, a wing bats his face. Lon leans back to avoid a flashing talon. And suddenly, he's falling backwards.

The ground isn't so hard, but it takes the air out from his chest. He has to lie there for a minute to allow his lungs to take in breath without twinging. The crow house, he sees, has shattered. Somewhere in the fall, he let go of it. More crows have gathered to see about the commotion, and they jeer at Lon from the branches above him. He crawls to the crow house's broken pieces, the jagged planks of wood cracked and stuck with rusted nails. A dank, rotten smell like a freshly fertilized field makes Lon's nose curl. Feathers and white bird shit spill out from the inside of the crow house like the yoke of a bad egg. The crows shriek. What has Lon done?

Lon runs inside. His diaphragm convulses and his eyes burn and swell. He gets down the stairs into the house's basement, but he has to fight his body from doubling over until he gets to his room. There, his knees buckle, he crumbles to the floor, and he lets out a spine-shaking sob. He curls up and hisses curses from a jaw that feels bolted open.

He doesn't know how long he stays curled up there. But eventually, he regains some control of his body, takes in five deep breaths, and pulls himself up to his feet. A thought brands itself against the inside of his skull. This is all *her* fault.

Lon rips clothes from his dresser and shoves them into a backpack that he had kept in his closet. He jams his laptop and charger, his cell phone charger, his notebook, and a handful of pens in with it. Every breath feels like an affirmation that this is what he has to do. This is how he shows her. This is her fault. This is her fault. This is her fault. As he slings the backpack over his shoulder and grabs up a pillow from his bed, he hears the crunch of tires. She's here.

Up the beige stairs, across the living room, into the kitchen, where the door to the garage creaks open.

Mary asks what Lon is doing. She thought he was supposed to be out with Neill today.

“You lied to me,” Lon says. He’s so angry, he ignores the pain whispering causes in his throat, like gargling hot embers.

Mary rushes to Lon and tells him to be careful, he isn’t supposed to do that, he could cause more damage. She tries to put her hands on his arms, but he steps away from her.

“You lied to me.” He can taste blood on the back of his tongue as he says, “Both of you lied. You and Neill both.”

Mary puts her purse down on the kitchen table and says it wasn’t a lie. She was worried about him, but everything she did just seemed to make things worse. She thought Lon needed his father.

That word *father* strikes Lon like an arrow. He doesn’t have a father. He never did. He shakes his head and presses his eyes closed to keep himself from crying in front of her. “You made me think...” He gulps down a sob and regains control of himself. He says, “You made me think he cared.”

Mary says Lon’s name, and she says that Neill does care. She reaches out again to touch him. Her palm grazes his cheek.

“Don’t,” Lon says, pulling away.

She can tell he’s hurting himself, she says as much, and tells him to stop talking, it isn’t good for his throat. She can get him a notepad— they can find another way for him to talk this out with her. She doesn’t say anything about the crows, who even now call to him from outside, demanding explanation. The crows were never a consideration for Mary. The thought flares back up. This is *her* fault.

Mary tries to touch him, this time with her arms wide for a hug, like he's a child who skinned his knee.

It surprises Lon that it only takes one arm to knock her over.

Mary twists as she falls and lands on her arm. She yelps and clutches it and looks up at Lon. For the first time in his life, she's scared of him. Her pupils shiver as she looks up at him and moisture starts to collect in the corners of her eyes. He takes a step towards her and she shrinks back.

"I'm leaving," he says. He steps over her to get to the door, which he slams behind him.

Outside, the crows have congregated. There's much chatter about what Lon is doing. Why did he destroy their house? He tricked Old Scratch to get him out of it. Why would Lon lie to one of them? What is happening?

Linda swoops down and lands on the Male Birth Control's side mirror. She juts her neck out and lets out a long, low caw. Lon owes them some answers.

Lon tries to tell them it was an accident, and that he's leaving, but they don't understand him. How can something happen that should not have happened? What was done was done. Why did he do it?

Lon doesn't have time for this. Any moment, Mary could barge outside and try to stop him. He brushes Linda off the mirror and opens the car door. She pecks at him, affronted. Lon spits and mouths a curse at her before getting in the car. The old Honda's engine rumbles and shakes as he turns the key in the ignition, but it starts, and he drives away.

###

5:27 p.m. and Lon is at least fifteen miles outside Rubyville's municipal limit and heading east, deeper into the mountains. He passes one of the abandoned towns out by the old copper mines, and heads through another. On the side of the road, the paint-chipped faces of wood slat houses warp and cave in on themselves and trees push their way through broken windows.

Thick gray clouds ripple overhead, like curtains over the setting sun. Lon twists the dial of his radio, looking for something he can listen to that doesn't make him want to punch the console. Evangelical self-righteousness. Static. News about how fucked things are. Static. Christian rock. Static. Ear-torture heavy metal. More static.

Outside the second ghost town, the land opens up into a wide hollow full of dead yellow fields. Farm pastures quilt the hills, and in the distance, a brick church stands sentinel over a cemetery. And like that, the radio frequencies awaken. Lon permits a grin as he lands on a station playing "Black Velvet" by Alannah Myles.

5:38 p.m. and the sun sinks behind the western horizon at Lon's back. He turns on his headlights. He drives to the far end of the hollow, passing the cemetery, when the Male Birth Control shudders. Panicked, Lon looks down at his fuel gauge, but he still has a half tank. Every light on his dash flicks on, and he realizes that he can't hear the low hum of the car's engine anymore. Lon puts on his hazards and starts wheezing curses as he pounds his fist against the steering wheel. The old Honda coasts downhill until it eases to a stop a stone's throw from a church parking lot.

Outside, the wind gnaws at his skin. Lon pulls his phone out from his pocket and flips it open. He can't get a signal. Shit. Shit shit shit shit.

Hands jammed into his jacket pockets, Lon jogs over to the church. The lights are out and the doors locked.

Extra shit.

He walks back to the car, and hopes like hell that someone will drive by. Maybe he can hitch a ride and get a tow or something.

Back in the car, the key in the ignition makes the engine screech, but the battery gets going. Lon turns on the heat as high as he can get it and lets the radio play. He digs through his backpack for layers, an extra t-shirt and a sweater. He throws them over his torso before slipping his arms back into his jacket. Periodically, he checks his phone for the time and for a signal. Time keeps moving, but he doesn't have any bars. He's stuck.

Night stretches over the sky. It's so dark, Lon can't even see the mountains anymore, except that there are no stars where they loom. In the rearview, red flashes cast over the road behind the car, the hillside, and the grass on the side of the road.

On the radio, Bonnie Raitt starts humming.

Lon closes his eyes.

###

Lon stands on the wooden deck of a trireme. The oarsmen row as one over a gemstone blue ocean. With each pull of the oar, they sing a sultry baritone chorus— *Let's give 'em something to talk about.*

Up the deck, at the ship's helm stands a man with billowing brown hair and a shining bronze helmet. A leopard skin cape flaps in the wind. Without asking, Lon knows that he is Alexander the Great.

Lon asks Alexander the Great where they are headed.

Alexander the Great doesn't offer a reply, only points back to the boat's stern. Lon holds a hand over his brow to shield his eyes from the sun, red in a pink and cyan sky. On the horizon, three gargantuan black dorsal fins cut through the sea. The ship is fleeing. They are being pursued.

The oarsmen row.

Let's give 'em something to talk about...

And row.

A little mystery to figure out...

And row.

Let's give 'em something to talk about...

The three dorsal fins rip through the water, closer and closer. They stand so tall, their peaks skewer the red sun burning over them. The middle fin dips into the ocean. Then, in a white and sapphire splash, a huge killer whale leaps from the water in its place. Its white and black jaws grin at the sight of the ship before diving back into the blue.

Lon grabs Alexander the Great by his shoulders and shakes him. What the hell is he doing? They need to move faster or they will all be swallowed by those whales. Alexander shakes his noble head. They will continue at their current pace.

The oarsmen row.

Let's give 'em something to talk about...

Lon rushes to the railing and looks down. An army of undulating porpoises and dolphins race at the ship's side. Their speckled flanks and black beaks transfix him. He peers closer and closer into them, until Lon isn't on the boat anymore. The oarsmen and their chanting are a distant and doomed apparition.

From the safety of his Nashville apartment's black iron balcony overlooking the ocean, Lon watches Alexander the Great's ship. It has escaped to a bowl-shaped cove. Two of the giant orcas guard its entrance, but one of them breaches the cove's mouth. It is so huge, it possesses its own gravitational pull. The waves whirl around it and soon, the entire cove whips up and swirls into a blue and white cyclone. The killer whale emerges from the depths, mouth wide as the mouth of a cave.

It swallows the trireme whole.

Lon cries out in horror, but his voice is lost in the wind. Someone grabs hold of his hand. He looks over and sees Smartypants smiling at him. Lon asks her what she's doing here, but she doesn't say anything. Just smiles. The ocean cyclone rises up the side of the cove and approaches the balcony. A wall of water and porpoises and fish race past them. Smartypants says something Lon immediately forgets. She climbs over the balcony's railing, leaps, and the cyclone sweeps her away.

Lon reaches out for her and wants to call her, but he doesn't know her name. The wall of wind and water surges towards him. He runs into his apartment and slams the glass sliding door shut just in time. The cyclone wall riots against the door as it rips skyward.

Inside, the sound of the storm outside mutes. His apartment is mostly empty. Music plays from a radio on his desk, where a smiling crow bobs to its beat.

Shania Twain is there. She dances in the middle of the room, snapping her fingers, hips swaying, feet jigging.

Let's give 'em something to talk about...

A little mystery to figure out...

Shania Twain says that she loves this song.

Someone knocks at the door. Lon walks past Shania Twain and the crow. Whoever is on the other side of the door calls his name.

Lon?

Their knocking grows louder and louder.

Lon? Lon!

Let's give 'em something to talk about...

It's Rose.

Chapter Eleven

Saint Charity

Wakefulness drags. The knocking doesn't stop. It makes Lon think for a moment that he's still dreaming. And fuck, it's so cold! Lon pulls the collar of his jacket up against his neck. A knock against the window makes him jump. Someone says his name and tells him to wake up.

Like prying open a pistachio, Lon opens his left eye and peers through his crusted eyelids at the driver-side window. The shadow of a person against a rind of frost accumulated onto the glass knocks again. He hears his name repeated in a voice he knows.

It is Rose.

What the hell is she doing out here?

Lon yawns and unlocks the door. She opens it and a gust of freezing air bursts into the Male Birth Control like ocean water flooding a small vessel. Her warm hands race to his face. She asks if he is okay. She takes his hands. Lon's hands burn in the heat of her palms.

Rose tells Lon he needs to get up. She has the heat on in her car. He can warm up there.

Lon wonders if he's still dreaming. Dazed, he stands. His joints ache as she helps him to her old brown Ford Explorer with the cracked windshield. She gets the door and Lon stumbles as he steps up into it. He has to move a bouquet of red roses. As he situates himself in the warmth of the car, he places them on his lap. Rose shuts the door behind him.

Inside, the air thaws Lon's skin. His face tingles against the heat coming out of the vents. Lon puts his hands up against them. The warmth bites his fingers but shit it makes his whole spine rattle like he's shaking icicles from his body.

Rose gets in on the driver's side and asks Lon what the hell he's doing sleeping in his car.

Lon purses his lips and looks at her.

She says that she's allowed to worry about him. He can think whatever he wants, she's allowed that.

Lon leans back into the seat and lets out a long breath. His eyelids hang heavy. His mind feels like a radio catching too many signals on one frequency. He's still a bit looped out from his dream. Lon leans his head against the ice cold window and taps it. He blows a cloud of breath against it and with his finger writes the word *car* and then a fat X over it.

They sit quietly for a while— the only sound, the heat blowing through the vents. Eventually, Lon peels off some of his layers— his jacket, the sweater. Rose watches him. Does she think he's undressing or something? He bundles up the outer layers and holds them close to his chest with crossed arms.

Rose asks Lon if that was his dad she saw Lon with yesterday at El Desperado.

A cruel grin grows on Lon's face. He wipes off his previous note on the window with his arm, and blows another cloud of condensation onto it. He writes the words *dad, mom, home* and then buries them in dripping Xes.

Rose makes an O with her mouth and nods.

They sit. Lon's messages on the window fade.

Eventually, Rose looks over to Lon and asks if he needs a ride anywhere.

Lon shrugs.

Rose says she was going to the cemetery. It's her dad's birthday.

Lon looks out the window at the graveyard. He doesn't have anywhere else to go. He looks back to Rose and nods.

Rose puts her car in drive and they coast around the Male Birth Control, dead on the side of the road, and turn into the small, mostly empty parking lot. She asks for the bouquet in Lon's lap. Lon hands it to her.

This is where Rose's father's first wife was buried, the one he had before Rose's mom, and it was in his will that he wanted to be buried by her side. After her parents' divorce, no one cared. Rose asks Lon if he wants to come with her to his headstone.

The headstone of Rose's father—*Francis "Frankie" Paul Barnes, 4 December 1953 - 29 March 2004*—stands small and nondescript. His first wife's stone next to him reads *Phyllis Martin Barnes, 15 April 1956 - 6 August 1977*. Rose bends down and places the flowers with which she shares her name on the ground and mutters a happy birthday wish. Rose tells Lon that Phyllis had been murdered and her dad never let it go that the police never found the killer. A stranger found her body out in the woods. Someone had shot her in the back of the head and left her there. Lon wonders if any scavengers had gotten to her body before it was discovered. Rose tells him that that was why her parents divorced—her mom was tired of being second best to a dead woman, and her father never quit mourning her. He wanted to name Rose after her, but her mom wouldn't allow it. Lon is glad for that. He thinks Phyllis is an ugly name.

Rose sighs. The mist of her breath dances and dissipates in front of her nose. She says she misses her dad, even though he was a drinker and kind of an asshole.

Lon nods. Better to be a drunk asshole than a charity case tumbling through a rolling mental breakdown, talking to crows, trying to find a voice that does not and can not anatomically exist. *Jesus*, Lon thinks, *what the fuck is wrong with me?*

As though she can hear Lon's thoughts, Rose says that everyone is screwed up. It's just that some people hide it better.

Lon's eyes start to feel hot. A fat tear escapes down his cheek, and he catches himself sniffing. Rose looks over at him and asks if he's okay. Without thinking, Lon puts a hand out and grasps hers. He tries to swallow down his crying, and shakes his head. He's not okay.

Rose asks if there's anything she can do.

Lon lifts his eyes and looks over at her. Rose looks like she had months ago, on the side of the road when she had caught him feeding the crows. Like she stands on a diving board, unwilling or unable to back away or fall into the water. Unsure if the dive is safe.

A breeze brushes her long hair into her face, and she pulls it behind her ear.

Lon turns his body into her and throws his arms around her, buries his face into her shoulder. He weeps. A hesitant hand wraps around his back and pulls him closer. She whispers into his ear that it will be alright. Everything will be alright. She promises.

###

For some reason, Lon had expected Rose and Gil's home to have changed— that there'd be some fundamental and meaningful difference in its layout since the last time he had been there three months— four months?— ago. And yet, the mismatched hand-me-down furniture, the pictures

on side tables, even the stacks of wet dog food containers Gil fed Butterworth in stacks of smiling white terriers had remained the same.

At the door, the instant she catches Lon's scent, or hears an extra pair of footsteps enter with Rose, Butterworth the Chihuahua, round as ever and with the same bulging eyes, bounds from her perch on the couch, growling, and barks at Lon. Rose shoos her away with a gentle nudge of the foot before taking off her boots. Lon does the same, though the act seems uncomfortable and intimate. Walking in this home without shoes feels like making it his home somehow.

Rose says that Gil had gone out of town for a few days. She runs a hand through her hair, using her fingers as a comb, and looks up at the ceiling. He had said he was going to Knoxville, she thinks, but she isn't sure if she's remembering that right.

Lon bobs his head as thanks for this information. Being here with Rose, unmooring and uneasy as it already feels, would mushroom into even more awkwardness and expectation with Gil around. The past few hours had been a test in ignoring awkwardness by indulging in frustration.

They had driven to a gas station and, using the phone at the counter to call a tow company, Rose offered to Lon the couch at her place. Simultaneously, Lon understood the Rose's offer was the only viable choice he had, that in that moment he didn't want to be away from her, and that if he was going to accept, he couldn't let her know that he missed her, that he dreamt about her, as much as he did. He gave only a simple nod— was it too simple, he wondered— to let her know that he'd sleep on her couch for a little while. Rose had then suggested she pay for the tow, but Lon shook his head. She had indebted him enough already.

When the tow driver called Lon on his cell about his car, a man with a high-pitched twang asked Lon to verify that he was picking up the correct vehicle. Lon handed the phone to Rose and she spoke for him. The conversation seemed to go on a tad longer than necessary because the man would prefer that they had been there by the car or something like that, and Rose eventually snipped, asking how many broken down sedans were there out on that road?

But no matter how he cut it, Lon owed Rose for the help she gave him today and will give him for however long it takes for the shop in Ducktown to fix the Male Birth Control, which could take a while if parts need to be shipped in from Europe.

Lon sets his backpack on the floor by the couch. Butterworth leaps up onto its opposite arm, laying herself over her legs, and watches Lon.

Rose gives a sigh and says she'd kill for some tea. She asks Lon if he wants any, and Lon nods.

He sits down and doesn't once in his life remember feeling so tired so swiftly, as though the couch cushions had been laced with Melatonin. Butterworth jumps to her feet at this apparent effrontery and yips at him, tail erect and wagging. From the kitchen, Rose says not to mind Butterworth, that she barely tolerates Rose's presence. She probably doesn't even remember Lon. Butterworth growls as lowly as she can as Lon stares back at her, and eventually settles back into an uneasy sphinx pose— dog body-language for *I do not trust you*. Lon had heard that eighty percent of communication was through body-language. But that remaining twenty percent, Lon thinks, keeps getting him into trouble.

Lon leans back into his seat and rests his head back against the wall. Is it a mistake coming here? Avoiding the obvious conversation had been made easy earlier by all the hubbub

around his car, but in this house it buzzes around in the air like a housefly bouncing against the window— impossible to ignore. Still, Lon can't exactly bring it up.

Rose saunters in from the kitchen, kettle now on the stovetop, and sits next to Lon. She points her knees to him. She smiles.

Lon smiles back.

How did cavemen do this? Huddled around campfires at night, capable only of grunts and simple sounds, did they experience intrigue and betrayal? They must have been rather like the crows, Lon realizes, conjuring infinitely complicated thoughts and imaginings but unable to shape them. Did speech make mankind inept at the older, simpler forms of conveyance, like how automobiles made carriages obsolete and now almost no one knows how to ride a horse?

I feel pain because of you, Lon wants to express, but I also feel warmth because of you.

Can Rose understand this thought from him without words?

She looks at him and watches.

Lon places his left hand on her knee.

A soft breath escapes from her teeth and her smile widens.

Lon hangs his head down and places his right hand over his heart. He mimes crushing it in his palm and letting the rubble slip from his hand.

Rose lowers her gaze and mouths that she knows.

Lon shakes her knee.

She looks back up at him.

He points to his forehead, and draws a line from it to her. As his finger points in her direction, he smiles.

Rose nods and wipes some water from her eyes.

It's this place, Lon thinks. Grapes die on the vine here. Lon mimes driving and points away and up into an invisible horizon. Maybe they can go with Gil when he moves to Atlanta. From there, they can sort out a way to find the beach. Lon raises an eyebrow. Maybe they can all escape together.

Rose blows a calming breath through round lips. She shakes her head.

The kettle starts to whistle, and Rose gets up.

###

Rose and Lon watch *MythBusters* on the Discovery Channel for a couple hours until Rose yawns and says she needs to get some sleep. She pulls a spare blanket from the linen closet and gives him a pillow off her bed.

When she closes the door to her bedroom, through the walls Lon hears her move— the running water as she brushes her teeth and washes her face, the sinking sound as she walks around and undresses, the creak of her bed as she crawls into it, how often she tosses until at last there's silence.

But silence is never silent. The high electric ring of appliances, the rolling hiss and hum of cars driving past on the street, the occasional hoot of an owl— they compose a minor tune to which Lon can tap his toe.

Lon turns eventually and buries his face into the crook of the couch cushions. When he sinks into sleep, he doesn't dream.

###

Lon wakes to his flip phone vibrating on the side table. Lon sits up to see who is calling him.

Mary. It has been two days since he stormed out of her house.

He answers the phone.

A relieved breath crackles in his ear. Mary says she's relieved to know that Lon picked up. She's worried. She asks him to tap on the speaker or do something to let her know that he is safe.

Lon coughs.

Again, Mary sighs. Mary says she wants to talk things through about what happened.

Lon flips his phone closed. The back of his throat feels dry and he can feel his blood rushing now. Anger can be quite the pick-me-up. Besides, what does she think they are going to talk through anyway? There's nothing to talk *through*, unless what Mary really meant was that she wanted to talk *at* Lon. Why else would she bother with the phone call? Mary wants him to do things her way and she doesn't want Lon to have a say. Like always, she needs to be in control. Fuck a lot of that. Lon is doing things his way. There's nothing to talk about.

He slips the phone into his jeans pocket and lies back on the couch, staring at the popcorn ceiling until he hears Rose get up. She slinks from her room like she thinks Lon is sleeping and tiptoes into the kitchen, where she makes a clatter and whispers pointed curses. When gets up and leans against the doorway, Rose apologizes for waking him. She holds her hands up against a leaning pile of pots in one of the cabinets, struggling to keep them from tipping over.

Lon shakes his head, pulls his phone out from his pocket and holds it up. Rose nods and lets out her relief through a thin smile, then allows herself to noisily rearrange the pots in a more stable arrangement. She asks if Lon is hungry, and he nods.

Rose migrates from cabinet to cabinet, and then to the fridge, and back to the cabinets. She has forgotten to go grocery shopping and there's nothing for breakfast— unless Lon is content with rice for breakfast. She blows her hair out of her face and grumbles in frustration. Buying groceries while hungry is never a bright idea when on a budget.

Lon peers into the cabinets and fridge. There's flour and sugar and a little milk. He grabs a marker from a drawer and writes on his hand:

EGGS + SYRUP = PANCAKES.

Rose nods. She can get those. Does Lon want to join her?

For a moment, Lon worries that if they go to E-D's together, they will run into Mary, but he realizes that she's at work right now. He agrees to come with her.

###

What's wild, Lon thinks on the drive over to E-D's, is that Lon and Rose went to school together their whole lives, but only became friends in middle school, and only started flirting with each other sometimes in high school, and *then* only dated for half of their senior year.

But Lon knew Rose and Rose knew Lon when they were still learning how to spell. When their first-grade teacher Mrs. Ellis had Lon go through the list of vocabulary words because up to that point, he had never heard or used the word *an*. Before that day, Lon had *a*

apple, *a* eraser, and *a* open book. They knew each other when Rose did a summer-reading book report in the fifth-grade on *White Fang* by Jack London, and Ms. Klawitter said in front of the whole class that that book was too advanced for her. When Lon ambushed enemies in the boy's bathroom, when they stepped onto yellow buses, when Rose sang in school assemblies, and when Lon started taking guitar lessons— they knew each other.

On a cloudy October day, Lon stepped outside with his guitar case slung over his shoulder, and Rose stepped out of her dad's car, lugging her own case. Neither knew the other could play, but they waved and started talking. How was that the first time they ever had a real conversation with each other?

In the wind of the open car window, Lon surfs his arm up and down. Rose sings softly with the radio, "Soak Up the Sun" by Sheryl Crow. Her black hair swishes in the cold winter air. Lon stares at her.

###

For a week, Lon has slept on Rose's couch. Every night he thinks about getting up from the couch and knocking on her door, but he doesn't know if he likes what those thoughts mean. More than that, though, he thinks about whether she will come out from her room, a tall shadow, and press herself against him. Later and later each night he stays awake with a catch in his throat.

In the mornings, they have breakfast together and sip tea. Rose tells him about any dreams she has had, or reads him yesterday's newspaper she swiped from work last night. Lon doesn't know how to tell Rose what he feels. He feels unsure that he could even explain it to

himself. It isn't what he used to feel, the cocktail of adoration, lust, and love he once had brewing in his veins. Its composition is more complex. But with each pursed lip blowing steam from a fresh mug of tea, or hand grazed while they wash dishes together in the sink, or whispered *'night* before turning out the light to the living room, Lon knows that he yearns for her. When Rose leaves for work, the air in the house smells less sweet, and her absence casts a grim silence over the house against which Lon cannot defend.

Lon creaks Rose's door open, and peaks his head in. A guitar stands in the room's corner. He takes it by the neck, and sits on a lawn chair out on the back patio. And he plays.

There are songs that have been echoing in his mind for weeks, months. He plucks and strums, clumsily at first, which makes him grind his teeth in frustration. But as his hands become more limber, the songs come easier. Playing feels like hearing the voice of an old friend not met in long years.

Eventually, Lon feels that he has an audience. Eyes peer down on him from the power lines and chain-link fence in front of them, a stone's throw from the back patio. Only a gulf of overgrown weeds serves as a proscenium, separating Lon from them.

Linda says Lon's name.

Lon has wondered how long it would take the crows to find him. Unsure what to do, unsure if their pact remains intact, Lon continues to play the guitar. He looks down at his fingers like watching the tide roll over and pull back from the shore. When he looks up again, Linda has landed in the grass. She hops over the weeds, purring with her approach.

Repeating Lon's name, Linda watched him from one eye, the uncanny way crows have to watch anything. Anatomically, they cannot look at anything straight on without their beak obstructing their sight.

Knowing that she will linger there until Lon acknowledges her, Lon greets her with a gentle nod.

Linda takes wing and lands on the arm of the lawn chair. The other crows form a line like a panel on the chain link fence, cautious as ever when they follow their leader. Many are still wary of him after what happened with Old Scratch and the crow house. She asks Lon where he has been.

Lon thrusts his head back at the house. He has been here.

But Linda doesn't understand why. She wants to know what this place is and why he is here.

Lon doesn't have a real answer for that. He returns his attention to the guitar, noodling away.

Gingerly, Linda pecks the butt of the guitar. His voice, Linda deduces. Lon has found his voice at last. She bobs on the lawn chair's arm and opens her beak, releasing a rhythmic *hrraa hrraa hrraa*. It is a good day.

Lon doesn't respond. Linda is being simplistic. Playing an instrument isn't the same thing as having a voice. This whole agreement, this search for Lon's voice, has been a joke from the start and Lon resents this punchline.

Linda says Lon's name again. It almost sounds human. He looks at her, and she glides from the chair's arm onto the edge of the concrete patio. She stands before Lon and for a

moment, he thinks that she seems larger than she should be, as if by his sight she grows. In the dim shadows cast by a sun hidden behind thick, fleece-like clouds, Linda's shape appears less certain than it had before. Lon remembers that night in the woods, the night of their agreement, and he remembers how large and powerful she had seemed then. Looking at her cloud-muted shadow, Lon realizes why. Her shadow doesn't match her body. It is much greater than she is, and of a different figure.

When Lon dies, Linda says, and it is a matter of *when*, he may simply cease to be anything other than a body. Alive and then dead. Death means losing the things that make one different than a rock or a puddle of water. When death comes, quickness ends and stillness returns, as it had before life. That is the way of most things in this existence. That is the way they want it.

Lon tries to discern the shape of Linda's shadow. How long it is, how round and strange the shapes are. When the breeze blows and Linda's feathers rustle, the top of her shadow billows as if it is where a head of long hair should be.

Linda tells Lon that when she died, she wasn't content with oblivion. Linda doesn't know the mechanism, though she knows that a mechanism exists. Lives, Linda tells him, can roll into other lives. Linda doesn't remember being in an egg, but she does remember one morning waking and being keenly aware that she had become a crow and she once wasn't one.

She takes a step towards Lon. On the ground, in the air, her weight feels like that of a person.

When Lon dies, he must keep his word. He might not think the bargain is fulfilled, but Linda can tell that Lon has found his voice again. Even if his voice isn't the same as it had been.

Lon's voice is in this house. Lon's voice is in that guitar. Lon's voice is in what he does next. She repeats herself. When Lon dies, he must let the crows take his flesh. Man speaks. Crows eat. But when Lon dies, he might find that he is not ready to cease. He, like Linda, may decide to continue. He may have a choice. Linda says that if Lon keeps his word, the crows will accept him into their number.

Out front, Lon hears Rose's car roll up the driveway. Inside, Butterworth's muffled barks rush to the front door. Lon wants to go inside, to be there when Rose comes home. He looks to Linda.

She lowers her head. She tells him not to worry. They'll be around.

Chapter Twelve

Hercules' Day

While Chamomile tea used to be Rose's favorite, Lon has noticed that she drinks Earl Gray exclusively now. She says she's on a bit of a kick the first time she brews some and shares it with Lon. Rose drinks her tea with one cube of sugar and just a couple drops of milk. Lon, who never graduated from tea drinking kindergarten, sips what Rose accurately describes as sugared milk with some tea in it. He's too used to sweet tea, she says as she pours steaming water from the kettle into a mismatched pair of mugs. Lon isn't used to actually tasting tea, especially dark tea.

The window over the sink is pocked with raindrops. It is one of those chilly December days in the South when Winter can't quite muster sleet or snow, but drops light grains of water, barely rain, floating and kicking up with the slightest breath of a breeze. It is still Fall, technically, Lon must remind himself that the Winter Solstice is still a week away, but he's hardwired to see December in its entirety as the beginning of the season. Waiting until the shortest day of the year feels tedious.

Rose places Lon's slightly brown and hot cup of milk and tea in front of him and asks what he's thinking about. Lon points to the window, the dreariness outside. Rose sighs as she sits in her chair at the kitchen table, a shaky plastic tetrapod that skips on the linoleum floor with a red plaid cloth thrown over it, and says that she loves days like this.

When she catches him staring at her, he averts his eyes. Too quickly. He wishes he could be calmer. He sips the tea from his mug and tries not to let his breathing get too loud. He has not

told her, nor has he devised an adequate way to tell her that he wants her back. He's too scared that her feelings have moved on and that she won't reciprocate. He doesn't want her to think he's pathetic or opportunistic or some other horrible thing. He doesn't want her to think that this is all because of proximity. However he tells her, he needs her to know that he means it. He needs her to know that he doesn't want either of them to be in the pain that they were in before. That he has forgiven her, and he hopes that she will forgive him.

In the other room something clacks, and Butterworth leaps from the couch towards the front door. The door creaks open, and Gil coos as his chihuahua's feet tick and pitter on the linoleum foyer. Duffel bag slung over his shoulder, and Butterworth in his arms and licking at his chin, Gil enters the living room without noticing Lon. He crosses into his room, and slams the door shut.

Rose leans back and says to give him a minute. She and Lon continue to sit at the kitchen table sipping their tea, while through the walls they listen to Gil sing to himself, tell Butterworth how cute she is, and unpack from his trip to Knoxville. When he swings open his bedroom door, he calls out to Rose. As he struts into the kitchen, Butterworth at his heels, he starts telling her about a guy he met, a professor, and then stops in the doorway.

He looks at Lon, and his jaw drops. He looks at Rose, who smiles as she sips her tea. Gil demands to know what he has missed.

###

Rose fills Gil in on Lon's car trouble, his family trouble, that he has been crashing on their couch since Gil went out of town. After she tells him the whole saga, up through how the insurance company called Lon yesterday and told him to just buy another car because repairing his old one would cost more than it is worth. Gil asks if that's it like he's upset there isn't more.

Rose nods.

Gil shoots Lon a look. Lon shrugs and the conversation is dropped. But the following afternoon, once Rose has left for work, Gil corners Lon in the living room.

He asks if he and Rose are back together.

Lon shakes his head.

Gil demands to know why.

Lon sighs.

Gil knows that getting back together with Rose is what Lon wants. Gil has seen how Lon cuts his eyes at her, how Rose does the same thing, and then they look away from each other like they are in a freaking cartoon.

Lon doesn't know what to tell him. He just shrugs. It is more complicated than all of that.

Gil plops down on the couch. He wants to know why Lon doesn't tell Rose how he feels. Lon cannot help but notice that he has not told Gil how he feels about Rose. But Gil insists that his observational skills are undeniable. He knows what is going on here.

Realizing that there's no way out of this conversation, Lon raises a finger for Gil to wait, and heads into the kitchen to find a pen and a paper towel to write on. He sits down next to Gil and starts scribbling.

Too much has happened. I'm not sure she wants that.

Gil says that's bullshit.

Lon holds his hand up and cocks his neck. He doesn't know what Gil wants him to say... or to write. There just has not been a moment.

Gil asks if Lon plans on leaving again.

Lon shakes his head. He wants to stay.

Gil reminds Lon that couch surfing isn't a viable long-term plan.

Lon pushes air through his nostrils and looks at Gil, who stares back at him like a bull. Lon twists his mouth and sucks in his cheeks as he starts writing down more on the paper towel. Before he knows it, he has filled up the entire sheet of quilted paper:

Yeah, I am in love with Rose again. It's impossible for me not to be. Being around her makes me feel safe and wanted and like I'm enough. But with everything that happened between us, there was a lot of pain and a lot of shame. But you're right—I want to be here. I want to be with Rose. And I am here and I have these feelings, but there is no way for me to know if she has them too. Confessing that could ruin everything. I don't think I can handle being alone again.

As he reads, Gil smiles and whispers that he knew it, he fucking knew it. He rubs his brow twice, then looks up at Lon. Gil looks at Lon again, shaking his head, and laughs. He says that Lon had better sack up and tell Rose how he feels.

Lon raises his shoulders. He doesn't know how to do that.

Gil points to the paper towel and asks him if he has considered writing her a love letter.

###

Lon has not felt this nervous since he was a teenager. When he and Gil step into El Desperado— Lon remembers like being struck with a cattle prod that the last time he was here was with Neill — was that a week ago now?— unable to take his mind away from the note in his jacket pocket for more than a second or two. Gil pats Lon on the back and tells him that he has got this handled.

They walk over to the hostess' podium, where Rose bites her lip and cocks an eyebrow at them. She wants to know what they are doing here.

Gil makes like it isn't a big deal. They wanted to grab some Mexican food. Where else are they supposed to go? Taco Bell?

Ominously, Rose leans over the podium and murmurs that they dare not mention that place here.

Gil grabs hold of the podium, and through gritted teeth, says that if they are not seated, he'll do it. He'll start talking about Tack-fucking-Bell. He's a man in need of a margarita. There's no telling what he will do.

Rose laughs, tells Gil to shut up, and seats them in a booth near the front. When she tells them that their server will be with them shortly, Gil says that he had actually hoped that Rose would wait on them. Rose stiffens and says that she isn't trained yet to be a server.

Gil is about to yank on Rose with an *aw, c'mon*, but Lon taps his arm and shakes his head. With a sigh, Gil tells Rose that he's just fooling. When she leaves, Gil tells Lon that he should give the note to Rose when they leave. Gil rubs his hands and says he can't wait to see Rose's face. Lon shakes his head, but Gil says he's serious. Ever since Rose and Lon broke up,

Rose has been all emo and shit and Gil knows that she missed Lon. He thinks she will be happy to read it.

Their waitress comes over with a basket of tortilla chips, a bowl of red salsa, and asks for their drink orders. Gil orders a margarita with no salt. Lon points to the Dos XX logo on the menu. The waitress nods, repeats the order, and heads off.

Lon sighs and leans back against the booth.

Gil asks Lon if he remembers Sara.

Lon knits his brow. He doesn't know anyone named Sara.

Gil whisks his finger in the air like he intends to concoct a memory. He says Lon should remember her. At the party. Smarty pants.

Lon swallows a walnut in his throat. Sara. Right. That was Smarty pants' real name.

Gil doesn't notice Lon's discomfort as he mentions that Sara is the manager here. That's how he got Rose her job. Gil made the connection. He wonders if Sara is working tonight. Lon hopes not.

The waitress returns with their drinks and asks if they need more time for their entree orders. Lon is ready, but Gil needs more time. The waitress smiles and says she will give them a couple minutes more.

Gil lifts his glass to drink, when a hand comes out of nowhere and slaps it out of his hands. The glass shatters on the floor and green liquid spills everywhere. Deep, cruel laughter erupts from the two men who jump back when the glass shatters. Brandon Armstrong covers his mouth, like it had been an accident, like he didn't smack Gil's margarita from his hand. Next to him, Cargo Pants says that queers get smeared.

Lon stands and so does Gil. Brandon Armstrong and Cargo Pants square up like this is what they wanted.

But behind them, Rose swoops in. She tells them that they need to leave.

Brandon turns on her, calling her a whore, and asks if she doesn't have a cock to suck off right now, bitch!

Before Lon can intervene, the bartender, shaped like an 8-ball and dressed in black to match, gets between them. He rests a baseball bat over his shoulder. He tells them they are not welcome here.

Brandon and Cargo Pants get the picture. They back away and say that they'll go. They didn't want no shitty beaner food anyways.

Rose says she'll get Gil another margarita.

The bartender leads Brandon and Cargo Pants outside. Lon is about to follow them out, when Gil stands in his way and presses his hand against Lon's chest. He tells him to focus. They are here for Rose, not him, not those assholes. Lon licks his teeth, but agrees. He tries not to snarl as he sits back down in the booth. Gil stands there a moment longer, until he seems satisfied that Lon isn't about to stand back up.

Waitstaff swing by with brooms and mops and clean up the mess. In a moment, it is as though nothing happened, like reality had a commercial break and now they were back to their regular programming.

Lon crunches down violently on tortilla chips until the waitress comes over and takes their order. Lon cranes his neck out of the booth and looks at the front door. He feels like he's in

an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. He half expects Brandon and Cargo Pants to re-enter, like they are all notes in a song stuck on repeat.

Gil taps his fingers against the tabletop. His eyes cut to the restaurant entrance, to Rose talking to the bartender, and back to Lon. Gil tells him that he has to go to the bathroom, and to please for the love of god stay put while he does that.

Lon nods and holds his hands up in surrender.

Gil accepts this and gets up, walking swiftly to the bathroom.

Maybe if Gil had not taken so long in there, or if Rose had come over to talk to him, if Lon wasn't alone and brooding over Brandon's words— *don't you have a cock to suck off, bitch!* — maybe Lon would stay. But he can't keep his lips from forming a snarl against his teeth and he can't make the swirling blood in his ears calm. Stomach clenched, throat tight, Lon runs a hand over his scars until he can't keep still any longer. He jams his hand into his jacket pocket, and puts his note to Rose on the table.

He stands up and heads out the door.

###

Brandon and Cargo Pants smoke across from a green and black dumpster in an alleyway beside Ruby Red's. They weigh unevenly and wobble with every step. Cargo Pants brushes against the brick wall of the alley with his shoulder. Brandon, cigarette in one hand, green beer bottle in the other, stumbles over a jagged piece of wood ripped from a nearby pallet.

Brandon curses at the plank of wood, calling it a motherfucker, and kicks it into the shadows of the alley, where the streetlights' glow can't reach. Cargo Pants laughs like that's the funniest fucking thing he has ever witnessed.

Pointing a finger back at the street, at the yellow and green neon lights of El Desperado, Brandon asks Cargo Pants if he knew that that girl is an actual whore, like she's a prostitute.

Cargo Pants snorts and asks *what?*

Like she takes money for dudes to fuck her, Brandon reiterates. Like, he's serious, she is an actual hand-to-god whore.

Cargo Pants says that's Rose Barnes, he knows her.

Brandon says he knows her too. He starts thrusting his hips into the air, the green beer bottle where his dick should be. He moans, spilling beer onto the ground.

Cargo Pants laughs so hard he snorts. He rubs a clumsy hand over his face like he can smear the grin off of it.

That's when they hear Lon. A piece of gravel grinds too loudly under his boot, and they swerve their swerve their shoulders around to see who is walking towards them.

It all happens so quickly. Lon goes after Brandon. He gets a few hits in, but Cargo Pants pulls Lon's jacket over his head. Lon kicks and thrashes. He knows his elbows and his knees land somewhere. He hears painful *oofs*. But they hit him back. Fists ram into his ribs.

Then Lon hears a click, and Cargo Pants calls Lon a motherfucker.

Something like being stung by a briar or bitten lights up Lon's side.

The knife blade goes in and out of him twice before Lon realizes that he's being stabbed.

He doesn't know who it is, if it's Brandon Armstrong or Cargo Pants or both of them, but they are fast and the blade pierces his skin and sinks into his belly, into his chest, and into his back. But Lon keeps kicking and moving, and a couple times the blade slashes at his arm. It gets caught in the fabric of his jacket, and the knife comes loose from whoever's hand.

Lon falls to the ground.

Fuck! Shit! Brandon and Cargo Pants kick rocks and get the hell out of the alleyway.

Lon writhes on the ground. Shaking, he pulls his jacket back from over his face. He feels like a pack of small animals have crawled onto him and begun eating him alive. On his shirt, darkened and glistening wet, Lon can't make out the exact spots where they got him.

"Help..." he tries to call out. "Help..."

He's breathing. He thinks about how he's breathing. Blood sticks to his hands, all over his hands, and he feels too weak to crawl out of the alleyway. He rests his head against the cracked and lumpy asphalt and tries to keep thinking about how he's breathing.

Above him, past the buildings, Lon can see the Big Dipper. The moon grins down at him. Such an idiot. Such a fucking idiot.

Black wings flap and talons click on the asphalt next to him.

Lon reaches out to touch Linda.

She caresses his hand with her head and runs herself along the length of his damp red hand. Linda purrs.

More wings. More tapping talons.

The whole murder is here.

"Help," he whispers. They look over him down long black beaks. "Please..."

###

Rose,

I can't tell you that the last four months have been easy. There is a part of me-- the logical part of me, maybe-- telling me that four months is not enough time to come back from what happened between us. I have been in a downward spiral all this time, and then I got really lucky when you found me sleeping in my car on the side of the road.

I don't know if you are where I am. I don't know how your own journey has changed you, if you have gotten to a place where you can feel what I feel. But I really really hope you have, because I'm an impatient, impulsive kind of guy and all I want is for the rest of my life to be like the last two weeks I have spent with you.

But I am not certain that we will make it if we stay in Rubyville. This is a painful place, not just for the two of us, but for everyone here. One of the things that I have learned in the last four months is that second chances aren't just given, sometimes you have to take them. I know this sounds wild, but I think that we should run off together. I want to run away with you.

I love you.

Do you still love me back?

Lon

Interlude Two

Night

Julia wakes up when she hears the phone ringing from the living room. This happens sometimes when it's nighttime. She's in bed and her parents are up. So sometimes she wakes up and the lights are still on in the hallway and there are still feet thudding around the house. The phone rings, and through the walls she can hear but can't understand her mommy or her daddy talking to someone.

Normally, Julia rolls over— maybe she flips her pillow over to the cool side— and slips back into sleep. But her daddy is talking and even though she can't make out the words, the kind of voice he's using makes Julia want to know what is going on. She climbs out of bed and walks to the door.

Heavy grown-up feet pound down the hallway.

Mommy is pulling a coat on and doesn't notice Julia following her into the living room, where daddy just got off the phone.

"We can call a sitter," mommy says in a loud voice. "Julia's asleep, she won't even notice."

"At this hour?" daddy says. "It's almost midnight."

Julia runs into the living room and jumps onto the couch, smooshing her face into a pillow. "What's going on?"

Mommy and daddy look at each other and don't say anything, but then mommy picks Julia up and says, "Mija, go back to sleep. You shouldn't be up."

Julia doesn't want to go back to bed. She can tell that her parents are upset about something, and it looks like they are about to go somewhere. She asks again, "But what's going on?"

"Lon is in the hospital," daddy says. He digs his palm into his eye and says like he isn't sure Julia knows who Lon is, even though Julia definitely knows who Lon is, "Your brother."

The only thing Julia knows about hospitals is that she was born in one. She asks, "Is he having a baby?"

"No, mija," mommy says. "He's in the hospital because... because he's in danger."

"It could be drugs," daddy says in a quick voice. "He said that he had a friend who ODeD. Everyone around here is on meth or heroin—"

Mommy shushes daddy, something she does when she doesn't want Julia to hear whatever he's saying. After a moment, daddy says:

"This is my fault."

"Mi viejo, no," mommy says.

"No, it is. It's my fault. I should have just been his dad. I should have just *been there*. I shouldn't have gone in thinking I could fix everything after knowing him— I mean really knowing him— for what? A month?"

"Can I come to the hospital?" Julia asks.

"No, you need to go back to sleep," mommy says. She carries Julia out of the living room and down the hallway. Already, daddy has the phone back to his ear and he's talking to someone.

“Who’s daddy talking to?” Julia asks.

“He’s calling a baby-sitter.”

Mommy puts Julia back in bed and tucks her in. She sits on the side of the bed and brushes Julia’s hair from her face, kisses her on the cheeks and tells her to be a good girl and go back to sleep.

But Julia stays up. She hears a car pull up to their house and sees the lights shine in through the window. She hears her cousin Rachel’s voice and her parents talking at the door. She hears the door close, her parents turning on their car, and the car driving away. Julia turns over in her bed and listens to the whooshing her ear makes when it’s against the pillow. Mommy had said that Lon was in danger. She imagines her brother surrounded by monsters and big scary animals. Then Lon is picked up by a bunch of doctors in white coats and they fight away the monsters and animals to take him to the hospital, where all of the babies are.

###

Gil’s stomach feels like it has caved in on itself. It has felt that way since he came out of the bathroom— he was gone for less than a minute!— and saw the empty booth where he had left Lon. Rose stood nearby reading the note with a hand over her mouth. Her eyes held a smile, and if Lon had been there it would have been a moment for the ages— drinks all round for fuck’s sake!

At first Gil hoped that Lon had just chickened out and made a run for it, that the poor guy just couldn't stand to be around while Rose read. That was a salvageable problem. But Gil knew — he just *knew*— that wasn't what happened.

Gil walks Rose to her car. Blue lights flash behind them.

Rose had wanted to go with the ambulance, but the police needed to question her. She had found Lon. His blood was all over her. Her hostess uniform was black, but still it stained everything. Even her shoes.

She had not been as helpful as Gil. Gil answered most of their questions. He told them that Brandon Armstrong and Larry Paulson had attacked Lon. When they asked if either of them had witnessed this, Gil shook her head. Gil told them about the altercation in El Desperado, though. The other waitstaff all made statements corroborating what Gil said.

The police let them go. They offered to drive Gil and Rose home, but Rose had her car. Gil helped her throw her shirt and pants into a trash bag and Gil gave her his sweater to wear.

“I told him to stay put,” Gil says to himself as much as to Rose. “I told that big stupid motherfucking hothead to stay put.”

“Please,” Rose says. “Please don't...”

She has to stop and cry some more. They are only a few feet away from her car.

Gil shouldn't have gone to the bathroom. He should have just held it in.

When Gil ran outside, Rose had followed him, but she still had not caught onto what was going on. Gil looked back at her in the cold winter air and watched it wash her smile away like ice water thrown from a bucket.

Even with the cops parked out front, the barely muffled music from Ruby Red's drowns out everything. It had been that way when they stepped out to look for Lon, too, but there was something else underneath it that at the time Gil couldn't immediately identify. It was Rose who said that it sounded like the cawing of a bunch of crows.

When they found him, Rose let out a shriek and ran into the alley's shadow, towards a black lump on the ground, a pair of shoes peeking out into the streetlight. Black birds flew up into the sky like a curtain lifting over a tableau. When Gil realized what he was seeing, he ran after Rose, tried to tell her to go back into the restaurant and call the cops.

She didn't listen. Rose cradled Lon and tried to wake him up. A gust of wind pummeled her hair into a black arm over his face. Lon didn't move. The gravel and broken glass all around him was slick and glistened in the refracted neon lights from outside the alley.

Gil ran out into the street, where people had begun to gather. He shouted for someone to call 9-1-1. Gil doesn't know how long it took for the EMTs to get there, but the police showed up first. They wanted to know everything. And Gil told them everything, including who he thought was responsible.

Rose's car has already started to frost out in the night. Gil has to yank like hell to get the door to open. He sets Rose in the passenger seat. "I'll get us home, Rosie. Don't worry." He says this to keep the images out of his head. There was so much blood. Lon's hands, dead white, their palms stained red, looked like there were pieces of flesh missing from them. Some of the crows had already started pecking at his body.

###

Neill cannot stop thinking it— *This is all my fault.*

Diana puts a hand on his leg, reassuring him, but she says nothing. The car is completely silent. Neill can't stand to listen to any music right now. The only sounds they hear are his truck's engine and the sound of wheels rolling down I-75 North.

Mary had called him in hysterics. Eventually, he had gotten what little information from her he could. Lon had been attacked and was being taken to the hospital in Cleveland. No one would tell her how bad it was— which means it's bad.

This is all my fault.

"Sometimes I forget," Diana says.

"Forget what?" Neill snaps out of his internal self-flagellation. He looks at Diana. Her skin looks pale, almost green in the passing lights off highway exists.

"When you move to a new country, it's easy to idealize it, you know," Diana says. "Quito was a hard place to grow up in. When I came to this country, everything seemed so much better. Sometimes I forget that there are people here just as evil as some of the people I knew back home."

"I could have told you that," Neill says.

"But I wouldn't have believed you."

###

Rose sits, staring at the washing machine as it shakes and churns the blood off her uniform. She has not showered yet, and her hands and forearms are sticky and crusted brown. She's afraid that if she washes them, she will lose the last pieces of Lon she will ever have.

Crumpled up and stained, Rose unfolds Lon's note to her. She would have said yes. She would have said that they should get out of this town together. She would have been stupid and happy and told reality to shove it. How many times has Rose had to compromise for reality?

Rose presses a thumb against the cracked brown film on her forearm and watches as she peels her thumb away, her skin pulling with it.

She senses Gil standing behind her.

"So... I think we should both get some sleep."

Rose doesn't say anything. She just keeps pressing her thumb against her arm. Tension, release. Tension, release.

"Rosie?" Gil says.

"I don't think I can sleep."

"Yeah." Gil sits down next to her. He's smaller than her, shorter and more slight. When he scoots in to be closer on the floor, his shoulder brushes against her arm. He feels like a kid.

"Why did Lon go after those... those fucking... those fucking *monsters*? Hank had handled it, they were gone. He didn't have to."

"I don't know."

"I was fine. You were fine. Why did he go after them?"

"I know this is probably the worst time to say it, but... Lon's an idiot."

A laugh punches through Rose's teeth. But she pulls it back in with a rope made from guilt. Now is not a time for laughing.

"I mean, don't get me wrong. He's smart," Gil says. "But he's also an idiot."

"Such an idiot."

"*Such* an idiot." Gil throws his arms up. Rose crunches up the smile on her face and looks over at Gil, who looks like he has been watching her, like he's reading her to make sure his cheer-up tactics are working. And they are, even if it makes her feel like shit to feel at all good right now. Gil wraps his arm around Rose. He says, "I don't want to jinx anything, but I think Lon's going to be okay."

"Yeah?"

"I mean, it's Lon. That guy survived throat cancer. There's no way this is the end of the line for him."

"He lost so much blood." Rose remembers the heat, how hot it was on her hands.

"Yeah, but, you know, we must have found him just like a few seconds after those goons ran off. It's fucked up to say, but if you're going to get stabbed..." Gil pauses, then says, "I wonder if the cops have caught those assholes yet."

Rose breathes through her nose. She can't even think about that. She presses her thumb to her forearm one last time, then says, "I think I'm going to take a shower."

###

Mary spends the night sitting in a chair in a hospital in Cleveland, Tennessee. When she dozes

off, she wakes up less than half an hour later. She isn't sure how many times in the night this happens, but the time asleep compared to her time awake feels like the seeds spat out of a watermelon. She has not seen her son in two weeks and now she watches him, breathing— thank God, he's still breathing— hooked up to a blood bag and an IV.

When she got there six hours ago, a night shift nurse told her that Lon has sustained nine wounds inflicted by a switchblade knife. He had lost a significant amount of blood before an ambulance got to him, but the EMTs successfully staunched his bleeding. The knife, still stuck in his arm when the ambulance picked him up, had been used to pierce his intestines three times and there had been concern that these wounds would turn septic after they stitched him up. The other stab wounds to his back and chest were deep but of less concern as they struck muscle groups. Lon's ribcage protected his lungs from any damage. The police had taken the knife as forensic evidence.

Mary had asked the nurse how this happened, to which she responded:

“We don't know ma'am, but a police report has been filed and they will conduct an investigation. If your son regains consciousness, they will question him.”

That word *if* still hangs in the room like a loose string of spider's silk, waving in the breeze after someone has walked through its web.

Neill sleeps hunched over his knees on a small couch by the window. Mary had called him as soon as she had thought to, which was only after she had arrived at the hospital, spoken to the nurse, and taken to the room where they laid him on a bed and stuck him with tubes. He had come with Diana, but the hospital has a policy about only direct family visiting patients

overnight. She and Neill agreed she should drive back home and that he'd call her if there were any updates. She said that she'd return in the morning with their daughter.

A shred of Mary that she doesn't want to acknowledge begrudges them. The chemical stench of the hospital makes Mary feel queasy. She has not been to a hospital since Lon was sick. Neill had not been there then. All of this time, she has wanted to forgive him for that. But on the other side of Lon's bed, he's sleeping like an exhausted father he never was.

A thought Mary doesn't want to have scratches at her mind. They don't have the money for this. It was already hard enough paying off the bills from Lon's cancer treatment. Now this?

Mary is proud. She knows this about herself. She has never felt good about asking people for anything. When she asked Mr. O'Riordan for help, she had never felt so small and ineffectual in her whole life. What kind of mother can't take care of her own child?

Neill stirs. He lifts his head up and locks eyes with Mary. "What time is it?"

Mary checks her watch. "Quarter to five."

"Shit," Neill says through his hands as he rubs his face. He totters to a stand and walks across the room like his knees are jammed. Age has caught up to Neill. He isn't as spry as he used to be, even with the new life he found for himself. "I could use a cup of coffee. You want one?"

"Sure. Cream and sugar."

"Coming up." Neill snaps his finger and points as he walks to the door.

"Neill, wait." Mary calls for him on an impulse. She's so tired, she thinks. She has lost control of herself. She gets up and walks over to him. Neill stiffens up the way he does when he knows something is serious. He used to brace like that when they were together, whenever Mary

geared up for a difficult conversation— a late bill, a joke she didn't like, how many drinks Neill had had. It was like he thought she was going to hit him. It used to make Mary *want* to hit him. But now, she sees a scared boy stuck in a middle-aged man's body. But Neill can't be a boy anymore. "We need to talk about what happens when Lon wakes up."

"You sure you don't want coffee for that?" Neill smiles.

Mary looks back at Lon. His skin has regained some color. His heartbeat has been steady all night. Mary sighs. "We can talk over coffee. But we will talk, Neill."

Neill nods and slips out into the hallway.

Mary sits back down into her chair and massages her eyes. *Is it asking for help*, she thinks, *or is it asking for what's owed?*

###

Cries break out in the woods, cracking like dead branches.

Them! Them! Them!

Linda lifts her head and hops from the bloated remains of a deer on the side of the road onto the ground. The words grow. The whole forest starts to shout.

Them! Two of them! Them!

In the night sky, wide wings circle over a stand of bare oak trees. Two large figures stumble between trees. Their breath, the stench from their sweat, insults the crow flock who let their anger be known.

Linda glides through the woods, banking between tree boughs and overgrowth, to the calls. Crows are not the kings of any woodland, but they are not without power. Linda knows that if her flock goes out to mob any enemy, they will be joined by the mockingbirds, blue jays, and any other birds with nests nearby. She lands on a branch over them, and looks down.

“I think Leena’s place is on the other side of this hill.”

“Dude, the cops...”

“Leena will say we’ve been with her all night. The cops won’t have shit.”

These are the two men her flock saw kill Lon, their strange but much cared for friend. Some of them ate of him. They said it was the only way to fulfill the bargain before other people came and took him away. They didn’t want Lon to die as a promise-breaker.

The rest of the crows have gathered in the woods since then. They look down from branches like Linda does. Long Bill flies up next to her. Linda has lived through nineteen winters, more than any other crow she has known, twice more than most, and she has had four mates in that time. Long Bill has proven the most aggressive of them all. He puffs out his throat and waits impatiently for Linda to decide on what they will do. Linda caws:

Them!

“Shit, did you hear that?” one of them says.

“They’re just crows. Keep walking.”

“It sounded like—”

“It sounded like shit. Keep moving! I’ve got a rubber to waste.”

Linda dives.

Twigs clatter and branches shake. All call out— *Them! Them! Them!*

They mob, they swarm, they peck, and they scratch. One of them makes a run for it. He ducks down and folds his arms over his head. But the other one swats at them. He curses and spits and bites into the air. Linda buffets him with her wings and he steps back. There's a rustle in the bushes Linda knows, and she calls for the crows to retreat into their branches.

The man stands, heaving breath, and looks around. He doesn't understand the sudden armistice. Why did the crows stop?

From the bushes, a coyote emerges, drawn by the noise.

Whatever kept the man standing there dissolves at the sight of the coyote, and he runs back in the direction from which he came, towards the road where headlights passed by and cast long shadows through the trees.

Linda pursues him, scratching at the back of his neck with her claws. She shouts with a voice from her old life, with all the hatred and malice she can bear, with curses she once knew as a being with teeth and lips and a woman's voice. The man looks back at her with wide eyes, his mouth agape. As he breaks out past the trees, Linda slams into him.

Her talons sink into his shoulder. He thrashes and strikes her with his arm, but Linda doesn't let go. He stumbles and trips on himself and they fall into the road. He lands on her and Linda feels the hollow bones in her wing snap. But she doesn't let go. Linda stabs the man's neck with her beak and rips hair and flesh when she can find it from his head and face.

White lights rush towards them and a moaning howl rams through the night.

Death! Linda cries out in her last moment. *Death!*

Chapter Thirteen

Yesterday & Tomorrow

When it began, Lon was at a bar downtown with a couple studio musicians after a day of recording. Between sips of Crown & Coke, Lon started to feel a tickle in his throat. He had a passionate and ultimately circular discussion with an attractive woman at the bar about the current state of country music and how what Lon called *Sequined Cowboys* were getting too much attention. The woman asked what Lon knew about music, and he was about to tell her that he studied at Belmont when his voice suddenly got coarse, and he had to down a tall glass of ice water.

The next morning, Lon woke up again alone in his shitty one-bedroom apartment. His sheets, perpetually kicked to the foot of his spring mattress, matched his comforter, both a patternless navy blue. His eyes felt swollen. He had not slept well that night. His throat felt sore and Lon wondered if he was coming down with something. Hay fever maybe, or perhaps he had developed an allergy. Pollen season was only getting worse with each passing year.

In his boxers and smelling pungent already at— Lon looked at the black digital clock set on his bedside table— 7:15 a.m, Lon groaned and literally rolled out of his bed onto the musty, itchy carpeted floor. “Fuck,” he croaked, and coughed a little bit before dragging himself up onto his feet and trudging past his unused guitar into his matchbox bathroom, where he showered, pissing into the drain. The steam soothed Lon’s throat a little bit, but he still felt like absolute crap.

When Lon went back into his room, he snatched up his phone and dialed his manager, Mike. Two rings purred into Lon's ear before Mike answered. Lon told him that he wasn't feeling well.

Mike tried to blow him off, told him that everyone comes into work hungover sometimes, just make sure not to smell too bad. It upsets the people who write the checks.

Lon tried to explain that it wasn't a hangover. He thought he was getting sick. It could be strep throat or something. Usually anything as mild as a cold got people sent home from the studio. Musicians, especially singers, avoided sick people like— well, like the plague. But the way Mike sighed into the phone that day to Lon what his response was going to be before he even said it. They were already stretched thin at the studio and coming in close on a deadline. Mike needed Lon in. He told him to take a Tylenol or something and get his ass over. Then Mike hung up.

Lon ran a hand through his dripping hair and muttered curses through his lips, each breath like blowing on an ember in his neck. But he smeared some deodorant onto his armpits, got dressed, scarfed down a bowl of Frosted Flakes, and hopped into the Male Birth Control by 7:41 a.m. with enough time to get downtown by 8:00.

As he drove past the Batman Building— the AT&T logo glowing where BellSouth used to be— with Brentwood businessmen and Hendersonville soccer moms clogging up the roads, not to mention people who actually lived in Nashville, Lon couldn't stop fighting his cough. He tried appeasing it with little catches and throat-clearing, but at a stoplight on Broadway, the walls came tumbling down and he doubled over hacking and wheezing. When at last he stopped, he tasted blood on his lips. Red droplets peppered the steering wheel.

The doctors told Lon he was lucky. They said that they had caught the cancer early, that since Lon had no history of smoking tobacco the chances of recovery were high. They told Lon he wouldn't need a stoma, that chemo and radiation therapy ought to do the trick. He had a high chance of full recovery. Six months, maybe a year at most.

But of course that wasn't the entirety of what happened. Promises broke. Surgeries got botched. Budgets ran dry. People made mistakes along the way.

###

Lon dreams he's walking down a pebbled strand of beach, like a cobbled street. Without looking, he knows that his Nashville apartment, where he had entertained Shania Twain and where he had watched orcas swallow Alexander the Great's fleet, has crumbled behind him and stands now only as a red pile of bricks and twisted black metal.

Gray ocean sighs on his right side and white grass bows to him on his left, brown cattails bobbing against an invisible drum. The sun rises over the water like a yellow flashlight bulb peeking up over the rippling bedsheet sea. Overhead, white seagulls and pelicans glide into the distance. The pelicans form a neat line as they turn and dive into the sea, while the gulls turn into clouds and waft away at the horizon. Crabs emerge from their holes and play violins. A breeze blows Lon's black feathers off his body, and he looks at his bare skin, which he doesn't think he has seen so clean or uncovered in many winters.

Walking next to him, Rose hums a melody he wrote years ago. Their feet crunch a simple four-four rhythm. Rose spins Lon and they waltz to his song. It has been so long since they last

danced. Her long black hair whips around them and drapes itself over Lon's shoulders. Lon brushes her hair back from her face and holds her head in his palm.

Rose asks Lon what he will do next.

Lon tells her that he doesn't know what to do. He knows what he'd do if he was not him. But he is him, and he doesn't know what to do about that. He has been one hell of a sinner.

Rose laughs and asks him, haven't they all?

They dance and they dance and they dance to the end, where only light can exist.

###

And here at the end, with the tissues of his flesh severed by the edge of a knife aching to be reunited, Lon spends another morning in the hospital. Lon's hand, stuck with tubes, red, and freshly scabbed from the scratching and pecking of scavenger birds, rests over his neck. His thumb finds its home in the crater of his scars before he even wakes up.

Machines beep. And even though they smell of disinfectant, the sheets are comfortable. They have been tucked in firmly under the mattress to keep him from rolling. Cleaning supplies perfumes the air and fluorescent lights in the hallway seep into his dim little room. Even when it is quiet, there are sounds— distant chitter-chatter at the help desk, grumbling wheels beneath a trashcan pushed by a janitor, echoes of footsteps on the hard floor down the hall. Mary has finally given in and fallen asleep in a chair in the corner of the room.

A beam of sunlight glows through the curtained window.

Quietly, and even though it hurts, Lon hums.

