

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **Inheriting Fear: A Collection of Short Stories**

**Jeffrey A. Snider, Master of Fine Arts, 2008**

Thesis directed by: **Professor William Henry Lewis  
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*Inheriting Fear* is a collection of fictional short stories that examines several subjects and themes, including identity; concepts of community; adoption; religion; familial responsibilities regarding aging, gender, tradition and generational conflicts; and, social and political violence, racism, classicism and suppression, particularly involving American Indian characters and culture. Settings include suburbia, a West Virginia coal mine, Senegal and watermen communities on Chesapeake Bay. Many of the stories investigate the art of storytelling and how that art is integrated into everyday lives and history.

**Inheriting Fear: A Collection of Stories**

by

Jeffrey A. Snider

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Advisory Committee:

Professor William Henry Lewis, Chair  
Professor Maud Casey  
Professor Merrill Feitell

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*For Heather and Charlotte*

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## The Generator

Power went off around eight-thirty Sunday morning and a grim silence fell over the small house. The washing machine halted in mid cycle. The incessant hum of the refrigerator quieted and bubbles stopped rising in the fish tank. Ishi, the Maine Coon raised his head from the couch to look around. The family sat still in confused disbelief, expecting the power to come back on any moment. Everything stopped except the even tick of a green, ivy metal wall-clock in the kitchen that ran on batteries. As their ears adjusted to the quiet, the sound of the clock emerged like a lone soldier marching somewhere distant, but marching along a line that never moved closer or farther away. Their minds struggled to differentiate one tick from the next.

The family remained still while neighbors, who rarely did more than wave a mechanical greeting to one another, emerged from their homes and gathered on the street. Their voices seeped through the sheetrock walls and mini-blind glass. Ishi uncurled and pulled himself up on his furry haunches to the edge of the couch. He was alert. When Martha pulled her ash blonde hair back tightly into a ponytail, Ishi struck at her with claws out, then fled to another room.

“I can’t sit around all day waiting for something else to happen,” Martha said and went to fold the load of laundry that had nearly completed a full dryer cycle. Church services were cancelled, so she was still wearing the rebel gray sweatpants and blue, smiley-face tee shirt she slept in. Even though Martha and Tom had been married eleven years, Tom still roused to watch her walk in those gray sweatpants. And Martha knew it.

Tom poured a second cup of coffee from the cooling carafe. He got the half-and-half from the dark refrigerator and held the door open as he stirred a little into his cup. The escaping cold gave him a chill. He let the door slam and went to the table to finish reading yesterday's newspaper. Eight year old Lucy kept pushing the power button on the television until he snapped for her to stop.

"But I have to do something," she said.

It was after nine o'clock by this time.

"Let's get dressed," Tom said. "We'll play in the snow."

Tom watched himself dress in the full-length mirror behind the bedroom door as if staring at a traitor. Over a decade of pushing papers was taking its toll. He could barely see the youthful form under the slow drifts of flesh. His body was maturing into a pear and he struggled to pull the blue jeans up over his meaty hips. It had been awhile since he wore jeans. The long john shirt pulled tight, cutting off the circulation, so he stretched it until the seams snapped and holes ripped in the armpits. He put a blue Calvin Klein tee shirt on for cover and to add another layer. Bending over to lace up his boots was uncomfortable, but Lucy's smile made it all worthwhile as she poked her disheveled toboggan head in without knocking.

Ishi wedged between them, forcing his way out the sliding back door onto the snow covered brick patio. He usually slept all day, but he was bred for this kind of weather and the power outage made him uneasy. He was a big cat, muscular with thick black and white fur that was long, not the long tangled pretty of show cats that needed brushing every day, but an evolved oily length that

resisted water and kept him warm. Prey could barely see him against the snow, his black splotches blending with the ground. He was beautiful. Martha didn't like the cold and stayed inside cradling a mug for warmth and to keep it warm.

Land in the neighborhood was not divided equally. Streets did not always meet at right angles, blossoming out from the sole entrance road. It was clear that over the years, huge plots of land were parceled out to different families or developers who had their own ideas about land use. From an airplane, the area appeared to be a haphazard quilt where each section had a particular style that didn't function as a whole.

The family's house was one of thirteen identical structures on thirteen identical lots that formed the west side of Washington Street, each lot a perfect rectangle cut so narrow that the houses could not face the road, so they were built sideways, one facing the back of another. Several houses hadn't taken down their Christmas decorations yet; the light strands were dark and limp. The backyard butted against two other sections of larger, split level homes built on lots that were wider, but that weren't as deep. Lucy laughed ahead leaving footprints in the snow.

A cold front would push into the area that night and forecasters were calling for temperatures well below freezing, by far the coldest of the year, but the day would be nice, above freezing with the sun shining bright and golden as only it can after a snowstorm. The sky was blue. It was a wet snow that had fallen the night before. Trees were weighted fluffy white and the ground fall was perfect for snowballs and snowmen. The gutters tapped and gurgled the sound of melting



snow. The power being off on a Sunday was a good excuse to ignore their chores and responsibilities. Tom wasn't much for nonsense, but he had fond memories of winter and wanted Lucy to make her own. It was Tom who threw the first snowball.

After a short battle, Lucy emptied the snow out of her green mittens. Her hands were aching cold, but she was laughing and didn't want to go back inside yet. They began rolling the first section of a snowman when George and his daughter, Phillis, walked over from next door.

"A utility pole fell across the road where you come into the community," George said. He wore an unbuttoned camouflaged coat, black combat boots and faded black jeans with cracked buffalo leather gloves jutting out from his back pocket. When he spoke, he shifted his right foot back and forth, plowing the snow and mud as if working the earth. "They're not letting anyone out or in. They say lines are sparking in the street and sprawled across driveways and yards. It's a real mess, but at least they'll have to send someone out to fix it right away."

George lived in the area his entire life. He had the strong hands of a mechanic and was a hero among the locals for fixing their cars at a discount. He liked to hunt and fish and spent Sunday afternoons working outside with the radio tuned to NASCAR. The kind of person Tom usually avoided.

"Did you see it?" Tom asked.

"No, but I heard it from a good source."

George's daughter, Phillis, was a few years older than Lucy and as cagey as a starving gray fox. She always seemed to be in trouble, but Tom liked how

she watched out for Lucy because Lucy was small for her age, the smallest in her third grade class. When they first moved to the neighborhood, a bully picked on her until Phillis bloodied his nose. She was kicked off the bus until Tom had a lawyer friend draft a letter notifying the principal that the school would be held financially responsible if Lucy came home with even the smallest bruise.

Phillis's matching snowsuit and scarf were a glowing red that hurt Tom's eyes. A bubblegum bubble popped in her mouth while she and Lucy rolled the middle section for the snowman. The effort was rushed and awkward. Lucy's mittens were too big for her, soaked and kept falling off her hands and she was frustrated because Phillis wouldn't let her do much. Lucy hit her with a little snowball while Phillis heaved the midsection on top and it slipped. The bottom section split under the impact and it all crumbled. Phillis cursed under her breath and wrenched Lucy's arm. George laughed when she drove Lucy head first into the snow. Lucy came up red-faced and sobbing.

"It's time to go in," Tom said.

The family used up the ham for lunch and both Tom and Lucy had a glass of milk. After the first few bites, they seemed to chew in unison with the sound of the marching secondhand on the ivy clock.

"I feel like I'm wasting the day," said Martha, who had put on a sweatshirt. "I called the electric company, thank God we kept the old phone, but all the recording said was that they were aware that power was out in our area, but

they were receiving a high volume of calls and would restore power as soon as possible.”

Tom found some batteries for the old radio. The news station said that over two hundred thousand people were without power in the listening area. Utility crews from all over the state as well as neighboring states were working overtime, but it would be several days before they could restore everyone’s service.

It was almost one o’clock. Martha was chilly, but her feet were sweating inside the furry, blue slippers Tom bought her for Christmas. They hadn’t realized how loud those slippers scuffed across the linoleum. Her footsteps echoed throughout the entire house. They decided to go for a walk and Lucy hopped back into her boots, but this time, Ishi didn’t look up from his warm place on the couch.

Martha was dressed as if they were migrating across endless miles of frozen plains. Her coat was a blue, waterproof sheen that puffed out fatter than a marshmallow. Her jeans were packed tight with long johns that were neatly tucked inside boots fringed with fake blue fur. Her scarf was a long, woven black and white pattern wrapped at least three times around her neck and once around her face so that only her bright blue eyes could be seen. With the black furry hat and navy-blue coat, she looked like a beautiful, bizarre Russian flower. Not a single molecule of air would pass through. Lucy laughed out loud. Tom chuckled as they stepped out back.

“I don’t like the cold,” she said and walked a little stiff.

The snowman had been resurrected and wore a bright red scarf, but it was already beginning to show signs of weakness in the sunshine. A carrot drooped and a couple of rock buttons had fallen. It appeared to be sinking into itself. Lucy laughed at the bright pink tongue made of bubblegum that stuck out at them.

“I don’t believe this snowman is a true survivor,” Tom said.

Splotches of ground appeared in particularly sunny places and their footsteps churned up mud with every step. Martha was anxious to get the walk over with, but Phillis came outside, and as if nothing had happened, asked Lucy what she was doing. Lucy was trying to save the snowman, adding and reshaping handfuls of snow, but he was melting. She thought Phillis’s scarf was making him too warm, but Phillis wouldn’t let her take it off. Tom formed heavy snowballs and threw them towards the back of their property at the shed and trees. His arm was stiff and most of the snowballs fell short of their target. George came out a moment later and said that the fallen telephone pole had been removed and people could go in and out of the community again. He watched Martha.

“I hope you two weren’t planning anything frisky,” he said, laughing.

“It’ll take Tom all night to pluck you out of that get up.”

“What does ‘frisky’ mean?” asked Lucy.

“It means they’re going to...” Phillis started to answer, but Martha cut her off.

“I’m so glad to see that you’re well,” she said to George. “Where’s Deb?”

George’s wife, Deborah, pulled open the door and greeted everyone. She was wearing an elegant leather overcoat that didn’t fit properly. She was thick

like her husband and the smooth brown leather was permanently creased where her body pushed against the hide. She and Martha had become familiar through the children, but she didn't speak much to Tom.

“Did they say when power will be restored?” asked Tom.

“We can't get through,” George replied, “but the crew is gone. I'm worried that they needed to order a new pole. We may have fallen to the bottom of the list.”

George and Deborah were going to the store and maybe over to Deborah's brother's house for awhile because he still had power. Phillis and Lucy immediately whined that they didn't want Phillis to go because they had to save the snowman. Tom plowed the mud and snow with his boot.

“We'll be back by dinnertime. Do you need anything?”

“I don't think so,” said Tom. “We should be alright.”

George and Deborah drove off.

Phillis and Lucy raced ahead. They were going to visit Ben, an acquaintance of Tom's who lived several streets over. Lucy knew the way. Traffic was heavy now that the community was free to move again. The girls advanced a few steps in the wet road. Tom shouted for them to get off the road, and they'd crowd into a thin line of dirty slush along the edge of the pavement until the vehicle passed. In the crisp air, the pavement stank of tires and exhaust fumes.

A sound that made Tom think of a lawnmower hummed in the distance, but as they clumsily marched forward, the sound increased to a constant blaring noise. It could have been a snowblower, but the sound of a snowblower fluctuates, growling deeply as it gobbles and spits out mountains of snow. As they arrived at Ben's house, which was illuminated by electric light, Tom realized that the sound was the proud roar of a generator.

They were greeted at the gate by Ben's Bloodhound, Knox. Tags jingled from his green collar and he yawped what sounded like utter joy at the sight of these unexpected visitors. Standing on his hind legs, he was taller than Lucy. A few years ago, he would have jumped the fence, and Tom noticed the spreading gray along his muzzle, but the excitement was more than he could contain. He was acting as if he were a puppy again. "Who's a good boy?" Lucy said, as she giggled a shiny licked face. A dark streak of slobber crossed Tom's sleeve. "Who's a good boy?"

"This is why I don't want a big dog," Martha said.

Ben climbed down from the ladder butted against the shed gutters he was cleaning out. He was a couple of inches taller than Tom and much bigger in stature, partly from the amount of beer he drank, but he was also bigger boned. He helped lay block for several foundations in the community and discovered that he liked the area, so he built a home for himself, but his voice wouldn't let go of that native southern drawl that made him popular at the local bars.

At the head of the nearly dry driveway was parked Ben's one-ton work truck fitted with a plow on front. His street was noticeably clearer than the others

in the community. Various projects were scattered around the shed, covered by dripping blue or gray plastic sheets that were tied neatly around the bottom by three-quarter inch rope. Nearly all of Ben's neighbors' driveways were cleared.

"He's a hell of a watchdog," Ben said, polishing something made of chrome with an oily rag. He spoke loudly over the constant sound of the generator. He was wearing a light jacket and laughed at Martha. "You guys headed to Siberia?"

"I don't like the cold."

With smug affection, Ben kissed Martha on the cheek, removed the glove from his right hand and properly greeted Tom.

"Hello, Ms. Lucy," he said with a bow. "Who's your friend?"

"Phillis."

"Hello, Phillis," Ben said and held out his hand for her to shake. She looked surprised and uncomfortable as if this were the first time a grown up had ever offered to shake her hand. "And what's your favorite color?"

"Pizza."

Ben laughed a deep, smoker's laugh. Lucy and Phillis chased Knox out into the yard where the contrasts between shadowy and sunny places were striking.

"I'm going out to get some gas for my generator, here shortly. How are y'all doing?"

"Colder and colder."

“On my way out, I’ll drop off my old generator. It’s not the best, but it should keep you from freezing tonight.”

The sound of the generator motor ran down and a silence drifted around the yard. The light inside went out.

“I shouldn’t be out of gas yet,” Ben said, looking at his watch.

Phillis was standing next to the quieted generator. Ben wasn’t married and didn’t have any children. He was usually a patient man, but didn’t like people touching his things. He shooed the kids away and pulled the cord. The generator roared and within a moment, light came back on in the house.

“Let’s make sure the old generator still works before we lug it over to your house,” he said.

It took several tries, but the old generator started after a few sputters that cleared the carbon and condensation from the carburetor and gas lines. It was loud. Ben shouted instructions and showed Tom what all the knobs and switches did before shutting it off and heaving it into the truck bed. Bits of rust flaked off as if it suffered from a painful skin disease that spread from the spool to the spark plugs, covering every inch not smothered in soot or oil leaks. There wasn’t room for everyone in the front cab, so Martha and the girls stayed behind to play with the dog before walking home.

Tom and Ben put the generator on the brick patio out back. They placed it close to the house so that it wouldn’t be visible from the street. The snowman was melting into a single mass. The carrot and tongue lay on the ground, but if



the snowman could hold on a little longer, he'd make it through the night. Their footsteps crunched in the shadowy places. Tom got the gas can from the shed, sloshing the little that remained to feel how much was left after filling the tank. Ben suggested that they run the cord through a slightly open front window rather than the back door to keep the fumes from drifting into the house.

Ishi was disinterested until the generator fired up, then he darted from his spot on the couch and started howling. Ben hated cats. He left. There was nothing they could do about the sound.

Tom pulled the refrigerator out and plugged it into the extension cord. The generator groaned under the energy strain, but the compressor hummed and the light came on when he opened the refrigerator door. He got the space heater from the shed, turned the knob up to the maximum level and plugged it in. Again, the generator groaned, but continued to roar outside.

Phillis's parents hadn't come back yet, so she went inside with Martha and Lucy. Tom plugged a lamp in, but it didn't work. He checked the heater and the fridge. They weren't working either. The generator was still running, but the internal breaker had blown. He went outside and pressed the reset button on the generator. The sun was nearly set and the cold poured in every time he opened the sliding door.

"We can't use anything else," he told Martha.

"Can we make coffee?" she asked.

"I'll unplug the lamp and make some," he said.

He used the rest of the bottled water, but every time he turned the coffee maker on, it blew the breaker. He turned the heater down lower, but it still blew the breaker. He unplugged the heater and this time the coffee maker ran through the entire cycle. Martha found a deck of cards, so the kids played war in the remnants of daylight in Lucy's room. Once the coffee was done, Tom plugged the heater and the lamp back in, but the breaker blew. By now, the small house was cold. They started to see faint traces of their breath and the cups of black coffee looked as if they were on fire. Tom opened and closed the sliding door quickly until finally finding a balance that didn't blow the generator.

"I'm going to run up to the gas station and stop by the store for bottled water. What else do we need?" Tom asked.

"Bring home something for dinner, like subs or pizza or something easy and hot."

As he approached the main entrance to the community, however, traffic couldn't go through and several people were huddled together in the road addressing each other with animated gestures. Horns honked. An agitated line of tail and head lights glared and swerved as drivers negotiated three point turns on the narrow road. In a low lying area, near the same place where the utility pole had fallen, the weight of the refreeze had caused a tree, several feet in diameter, to fall across the road. Frayed roots had ripped a hole in the ground and the hole had filled with water covered by a thickening layer of rippled ice. The toppled tree looked like a heavy abandoned glove. Tom found his place in line and waited for

his turn to turn around. He drove by Ben's, but Ben's truck wasn't there and his house was dark.

Martha lit more than a dozen candles. The generator was still roaring, but the lamp wasn't working.

"That was too fast," Martha said.

"A tree fell. The road is closed again," said Tom. "What happened?"

"I can't get it to work," she replied. "What are we going to do about dinner?"

"I'll fire up the grill."

Ishi was still howling. He clawed the door and darted in front of anyone who moved. Martha was beginning to look tired and the kids started to argue.

"Ishi's been doing that the entire time, but we can't let him out tonight because of the cold and he'll run away from the generator."

"The telephone lines are dead too," Tom said, holding the dull receiver.

Phillis asked if her parents were home, but they weren't. Martha said that the road was closed again. "You might be stuck with us tonight," she said.

Phillis had had about as much fun as an eleven year old could have with an eight year old. The house was getting colder.

Tom grabbed some matches and yesterday's newspaper before going outside where the sound of the generator was deafening. Exhaust fumes created a thick smog in their backyard that seemed intractable to the bitter winds. It hovered around Tom, burning his eyes and choking his every breath. He hit the reset button and the light came back on inside, but it was off again by the time he

returned with the grill. It was difficult getting the fire started and he had to work for over an hour to cook the hotdogs.

They sat around the coffee table in silence, chewing tastelessly, their unwashed faces barbaric in the flickering candlelight as the brutal sound of the generator blared all around them. The walls barely seemed to buffer the racket. The lamp finally had to be unplugged to achieve a working balance between the heater, the refrigerator and the generator. Tom poured the last of the gasoline into the tank.

They closed the doors to the bedrooms and the bathroom to keep as much heat in the living areas as possible. Phillis was restless. She teased Ishi, chased him off of his spot and draped his blanket around her shoulders. He growled and swatted, but she wouldn't leave him alone. He dug his claws in and kicked her with his back legs while grinding his teeth into her skin. She yelled and slapped him hard across the skull. He hissed and ran off. Tom told her to leave the cat alone and looked to the empty driveway next door. Phillis said that she wanted to go home.

Martha and Lucy played a frustrating game of go fish by candlelight while Phillis sulked. Martha kept telling Lucy that she wasn't going to play any more if Lucy didn't play right. Lucy protested that she was playing right and retaliated by taking her mother's king, waving the royal card in her mother's face. Her mother walked away, kicking the cards across the floor. The dimness of the room emphasized the wildness of their movements. Tom turned on the radio as a diversion for everyone, but the news was not good. The melted snow refroze

across nearly all roads. The major highways were treacherous. Anyone who was not in a life threatening situation should remain where they are. Efforts to restore power had nearly halted. Even if the tree had been removed, they couldn't go anywhere.

They pushed aside the coffee table and laid out sleeping bags and blankets. The bedrooms were freezing, so they'd have to bunk together

The heater was still working, but the room was getting colder and Martha was worried about the fish. She checked the tank thermometer and it was well below the yellow, safety line. The fish were swimming slowly. Tom pushed the heater under the tank so that they'd benefit from what little warmth it produced. Phillis tapped against the glass, laughing as the fish darted back and forth. Lucy screamed and tried to shove the older girl away, but she was too small and Phillis easily threw her aside. Phillis cried that she wanted to go home. Ishi discovered the window where the extension cord entered the house and was trying to press his face through the tiny crack. His nose was bleeding. Tom felt the ruckus spreading over him like Russian Knapweed prickling against his skin.

Martha went to the window to soothe Ishi, but he ducked and dodged her affections. The flicker of a passing shadow outside caught her eye.

"Tom," she shouted. "I think I saw something."

"What?"

"I thought I saw something!"

A giddy glimmer of hope flashed through Tom.

“Maybe George and Deb are home,” he shouted back. Phillis flung open her sleeping bag and hopped up, but the moonlight shined across the empty driveway next door. Tom didn’t see anything out front, but the wind was blowing like crazy and shadows danced across the neighbors’ walls and sparkling ground.

“What if someone tries to steal the generator?” Martha asked. “We don’t have a telephone. Or worse, what if someone breaks in tonight? We’re one of the only homes with a generator. What if our community road is still blocked? The police can’t protect us!”

“Everything will be fine,” Tom said, watching the words come out of his mouth and shrugged off her fears with an unconcerned look.

Ishi fought valiantly, but Tom was able to wrestle him into the spare bedroom, paying no attention to the dark streaks of blood seeping through his long john shirt where he’d been wounded. Shut in the room, Ishi howled louder and louder and clawed the carpet at the door. The generator noise was much quieter. From under the old bed, Tom tugged a leather shotgun case strap. It was heavy with the gun inside, but the weight felt good in his hands as he laid it on the bed. The jagged, metal teeth of the zipper were embedded along the entire edge of the case, but once opened, the inside was lined with soft fur that cradled the gun and caressed Tom’s cold fingers. He grabbed a handful of shotgun shells and loaded them one by one until the chamber was full, then pushed the extras into his tight, blue jean pocket, so that he appeared to have an erection. For the first time since morning, Tom felt good. He held the gun like a private coming to attention,

then deftly raised the butt to his right shoulder, staring down the length of the barrel while placing a bead on his shadow cast against a wall. Like a skilled marksman, he held his breath while the trigger finger waited for the order to fire. After what seemed a long time in this position, he carefully lowered the gun into the open case on the bed, forced Ishi away from the door and squeezed back into the living room.

“Are you sure he’ll be alright?” Lucy asked over the noise of the generator and Ishi’s howling.

“He’ll curl up in that old comforter,” answered her mother. “Besides, he was bred for this kind of weather. He’ll be fine. Don’t worry. He’ll be fine.”

She pulled a blanket around her shoulders and walked to the sliding glass door. The generator didn’t seem to be moving, but the sound of the motor was still blaring. She was getting a headache. The slouching snowman stared at the house with his one remaining eye.

Tom shined a flashlight on the plastic face of the ivy kitchen clock. It wasn’t truly late, but he suggested that they hunker down for the night and try to get some sleep. Tomorrow would be better, but Ishi was still clawing at the carpet and howling.

Tom looked through windows on every side of the house before lying down with the others.

The generator stopped.

Tom and Martha snapped straight from a restless slumber. The world was black except where the moonlight reflected across the windows and fish tank.

“It might just be out of gas,” Tom whispered, but Martha’s ears hadn’t adapted to the quiet and she didn’t hear him. Tom got up quickly and the girls stirred. When Tom opened the door, Ishi bolted from the spare room. He had quieted.

“What’s going on?” one of the girls asked.

Tom used the gun barrel to push open the mini-blinds in the spare room and the metal scraped against the glass. Gusty winds pounded against the front door and windows. The streets were colorless. He couldn’t really see anything except the gyrating shadows of tree limbs that danced to a haunting rhythm of their own. At the back door, he saw that the generator was undisturbed. He and the snowman stared at each other and waited.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Now be quiet!” Tom demanded.

The backyard was thick with layers of fog under the ancient sky.

Through the whistling wind, they struggled to focus on the sound of the ivy clock, but it was impossible to hold the rhythm. Ishi pushed in between Tom’s legs. Martha heard the distinct click of the hammer being pulled back on the shotgun. Tom might have seen something out near the shed.

“I’ll be back in a second,” he said.



Before Martha could protest, he slid open the door. Ishi slipped through and bolted away from the house. Tom stumbled out onto the icy brick patio and marched towards the shed, the sound of his steps cracking the thin layers of ice.

Moments passed. Martha stood up, paced from window to window, leaving her greasy fingerprints on the glass. "It's alright," she said, huddling together with Phillis and Lucy. Martha felt the need to say something, to help them all feel better, but they were focused on the ringing in their ears and the sight of their breaths when they exhaled. An old fish slowly floated, rising belly up. Tick. Tick. Tick. A shot was fired. Tom emerged from behind the shed carrying Ishi, limp in his arms and bleeding from a huge hole in his side. Everyone screamed and kept screaming.

## **Firebossing**

The latch on the door of his Ford pickup was broken, so Wayne Ashcraft had tied off a leather bridal around the steering column, then looped the bit end around the inside handle to hold the door shut when he drove. The door bounced and rattled as the truck galloped across neglected West Virginia mountain roads.

It was the middle of a cold November night in 1968. Wayne was drunk and couldn't go any further. He pulled off the road near a stream where his family used to picnic when he was a boy. His head bobbed and rolled, struggling against cheap whiskey as the truck slowed to a halt. It was the third time this month that the foreman told Wayne he was too drunk to work his shift. He peered with one headlight across the bent necks of uncut grass, down the sloping bank to the water where his grandfather and father first taught him to fish. The headlight went off and the engine roared silent. Wayne fell over onto the seat and slept.

He stirred, but didn't wake until something shook the truck hard. A curled strip of duct tape that held the seat together tugged some skin on his hairless arm. His head jammed against the passenger side door. He swore that he heard something loud, but his mind was choked with dust from the drill he felt boring through his skull. It was still dark. He instinctively looked to his watch, but couldn't see the time on the face. A yellow miner's helmet and Davy Lamp lay on the floor among crushed beer cans and empty pint bottles. His legs ached with stiffness. As he pushed against the door to stretch them out, the leather strap became taut and a sharp pain shot through his ankle. He curled like an injured worm, grimacing in pain and a guilt for not remembering what he'd done to injure

himself. The first light of morning pressed against the sky behind a distant mountain. He lay back down and rolled over, pulling his coat snug around his shoulders trying to keep from the chill.

“Wayne,” a voice was shouting. “Wayne! Wake up!”

Charlie King was pounding on the window. The balls of his thick hands smeared the glass with wide black streaks. His chin and neck jiggled as he shouted. He was as strong as an ox and unusually heavy for a coalminer. Several of the old timers didn't want him on their crew. They had become superstitious with age and knew the price of gluttony.

Wayne rolled off the seat and the edge of a beer can dug into his side. He realized that he couldn't have gotten very far from the mines, but all he could see was the intensely bright sky that somehow seemed covered in soot. He squinted to see black tears streaming down Charlie's thick face.

“The mine exploded! Consol No. 9! It's burning!” Charlie was yelling.

Wayne had to get onto his knees before he could heave himself upwards into the driver's seat. The thought of his father working the cateye shift crossed his mind and he started the truck. Burning oil spewing from a hole in the manifold immediately filled the cab. As he pushed the accelerator, Wayne felt the forgotten pain in his ankle again. Charlie left his car and climbed into the passenger seat. The pickup coughed and shook, but the transmission clunked into gear and they drove off.

“There was thirteen of us workin the A Face section near the main slope,” Charlie said. “I was doin my fireboss run. Air samples was clean and the gob lines looked alright, but the conveyer belt was stopped. When I called Sam to send down a mechanic, he screamed to get everyone up the slope.”

“So what in the hell happened?”

“With the goddamned machines, who could know for certain, but I’d been sayin for weeks the exhaust fans at Llewellyn wasn’t actin right. Rock dust is always thin and somethin sparked somewhere. But, you know they ain’t sayin nothing.”

As they drove around the mountain, flames were shooting seventy-five feet out of the Llewellyn Run shaft on the west side down in the valley. Mods Run intake and exhaust shafts were smoking heavily, but Plum Run was the worst, circled by scorched earth more than one hundred feet in diameter. An elevator had been blown several hundred feet out of the ground and lay inside a crushed Plymouth that was still burning. A few other cars were also on fire, pelted by flaming debris. The sky filled with black and gray smoke billowing from several mine shafts. Hundreds of people were gathered from all over those mountains. Although he knew most of them one way or another, even the ones from other towns, the number was more than Wayne could fathom because he had never seen so many people in the same place at the same time, not even for a wedding or a funeral, because there was always at least one shift on duty and another whose shift was next.

There were police cars and fire engines from as far away as Morgantown. A barrier line was established to keep most folks at a safe distance. Reporters disguised themselves as miners hoping to break through the line to get the inside scoop. A helicopter buzzed above while television and newspaper crews scurried among the crowd from citizen to citizen. Wayne could see the groups of people shifting about, moving in clusters here and there, huddling to bow their heads in prayer. Their movements seemed very delicate to Wayne from that vantage point on the mountain. They seemed to flutter, bouncing against the police barrier. Wayne thought that this must be how God sees us.

Gravel scattered as the pickup ground to a stop. Sirens were blaring. A crane was moved into place with a hoist bucket near the Mahan shaft. Wayne grabbed his helmet and tried to keep pace with Charlie who hurried toward the barrier, but Wayne's lame ankle caused him to struggle farther and farther behind.

Barbara Toler, whose stomach was huge with her third child, was propped up on a picnic bench. Three of her neighbors, Mrs. Decker, Sally Cartwright and Helen Stoneking, busied themselves around her. They each greeted Wayne with a concerned nod.

“Wayne,” Barbara said soberly, “Dennis is still down there.”

Her husband Dennis had been friends with Wayne for as long as they could remember. Growing up, Dennis wanted to play third base in the Big Apple for the Yankees. Everyone said he had the arm for it too, but ten years ago, he and Wayne dropped out of school because they didn't see the reason for it and began working in the mines. Dennis and Barbara were married when she turned

seventeen. Their boy was born the following Christmas. Little Melissa came along thirteen months later.

“What time did it happen? Do you know what shift was on?” Wayne asked.

“The first explosion shook me out of bed at 5:30 this morning,” Helen Stoneking said, “ten miles away.”

“Have you seen my father?”

They all bowed their heads and shook no.

Barbara was folding and refolding a starched white collared shirt over and over.

“I brought this for Dennis in case his clothes get burned off. It’s his best Sunday shirt. He’ll want to look good if those reporters start talking to him.” Her face was blank, but her lips were twisted into a crooked smile. “I forgot to bring his pants, though. I was in such a rush. I hope he won’t be cross with me. He wasn’t supposed to work today.” She paused for a moment. “He’ll be out soon.”

Wayne thought of the foreman, who smelled the whiskey on Wayne’s breath the night before and turned him away.

“You shouldn’t be here, Barbie,” he said. “You need to get home or to the hospital.”

Everyone around them chimed in agreement.

“Where’s your Momma?” Wayne asked. “Is she watchin Missy and your boy?”

“I’m just not going to move from here,” she said. “I just can’t. If I go to the hospital, they’ll make me stay there four or five days. But, if I have the baby here- here at the mine site- they’ll declare it a ‘dirty baby’ and won’t allow it in the hospital.”

Her dark hair waved from side to side as she shook her bowed head. Her hands still folding and refolding. The gray and black smoke changed to white and was settling in the valley around them like fog.

“You’ve got to go, Barbie.”

“No. I’m just not going to move from here.”

Wayne brushed a piece of her hair aside and kissed her on the forehead. When he squeezed her hand, she pulled against his touch. He held fast a moment, but as soon as he let go she refolded the shirt.

Wayne’s sister, Esther, approached him in the crowd. She and their neighbor, Mrs. Parsons, had set up a table with coffee and food for the workers and families. Esther handed Wayne a cup.

“Daddy’s still down there,” she said. Her voice was calm.

She was a few years older than Wayne and although Mrs. Parsons helped for a spell, it was Esther who took over the household responsibilities after their mother died of bird fever. While their father worked in the mines, Esther scrubbed laundry, pounded dirty rugs out on the line, cooked meals and made certain Wayne didn’t forget his chores. Esther was cruel in ways that their mother was simply strict, so it didn’t take long for Wayne to respect her word. When

their grandfather got sick, she cared for him. Wayne could still hear her arguing with their grandfather, forcing him to eat even when there was no more hope. In the evenings, she'd hold his head while he threw up that dark blood. Esther never married. It was her pet canary their mother was burying when she got sick with the fever.

“They won't tell us anything,” she said. “I heard some men got out, but that's all.”

Charlie pulled Wayne's elbow.

“Hello, Ms. Ashcraft,” he said, removing his helmet and nodding. “They ain't lettin no one into the mines, not even rescue teams, but they found a crew in the Mahan shaft.” Charlie's entire body was trembling. “Crane's liftin 'em out now.”

The policemen watching the barriers allowed Wayne and Charlie to pass through. A crowd of miners, firemen and local officials stood in a circle waiting. They were silent. They listened to the metal workings of the crane and the occasional squeal of metal, slowly, but steadily winding the long cable around the spool. Yellow smoke that smelled worse than rotten eggs was wafting up around the bucket. The fire had spread underground and was burning the gob lines. It took several minutes to raise the three-man bucket to the surface. Helmet lights shined brightly against the sunless sky. When the first three men emerged, a cheer billowed out among the crowds. The men's faces were black and bloody with scratches and pocked holes of missing flesh. Their boots were soaked to the shin and dripping black. The concussion from the blast caused one of the men to



bleed from the eyes. They all were sick and vomiting as the bucket slowly descended the six hundred feet back down for another load.

Mrs. Parsons pushed the circle of men out of the way to get through the crowd. She was a short, solid woman with a crooked finger that bent backwards where it had been broken and never set properly. Her husband, Raymond, and their son, Randall, were still in the mine.

Mr. George Wilson was a wiry coal cutter near retirement age. He bent over at the waist and tried to cough the smoke and gray-black debris from his lungs, but he was too weak. He untied a black-smeared, faded red bandana from around his neck and wiped his lips. Mrs. Parsons stood before him, brushing some of the dust from his silver hair. They had known each other forty years. Her eyes were red and bursting. Smoke stained her cheeks with tears.

“Can I get you something, George?” she asked. “Some water or apple pie? It’s your favorite.”

“No thank you, May,” he said to Mrs. Parsons.

Wayne listened to Mr. Wilson cough and thought how strange apple pie sounded to him at that moment.

“I made it for the Sunday brunch after church, but....”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anything about Ray or your boy,” he said. “I was in the 7 South section. I think they were working one of the Main West sections. I was lucky. Just lucky.”

Flames continued to burn from the Llewellyn intake and exhaust shafts. Thick black, gray and white smoke billowed from the Mods Run shaft to the north. Plum Run caved in like rotten fruit.

“There were eight of us in the South 7 section,” Mr. Wilson said. “We heard the explosion and the power went out. We stood for a moment and thought we were safe, but as I was going to the telephone, there was a whoosh-whoosh sound and we were blasted with coal and rock dust that knocked us down. It came quickly. Even with our lamps, we couldn’t see.”

A crowd was gathering around Mr. Wilson when the second load of men reached the surface. Another cheer rang out. Someone said that there were only two more miners in their group to be rescued.

“We crawled along the coal rib down to the power center, about three hundred feet. By this time, we could see a little better and could walk, so we headed to the nearest shaft. We were waiting when there was another explosion and we were knocked down again. We knew it was coming, but it came so quickly...”

George Wilson’s eyes glazed over to some place Wayne could not see. A fireman led Mr. Wilson to the first aid station.

The crowd was still standing around the empty circle where Mr. Wilson had been when a limousine was escorted through the barrier. The momentum of trailing dust swarmed forward along with the reporters and cameramen who had been kept at bay. The chauffeur opened the back door. Tony Boyle, the United Mine Workers’ president, emerged in a pin-striped, three piece suit with a red

rose in his lapel. The camera lights came on and microphones buzzed in front of him.

“As long as we mine coal,” Tony shouted over the sound of the crane, “there is always this danger of explosions. This was a safe mine.”

Questions were screamed and pencils frantically scribbled until the scoop bucket rose again. One of the last two men pulled from the mine was Wayne’s father, Bud. It was ten-forty-two a.m. Wayne felt an immense joy that sent him down thankfully on one knee. Tony Boyle marched over and was the first to shake Bud’s hand. They exchanged a few hopeful remarks. Wayne’s father coughed and stared at the burning shafts across the valley that cradled the coal seam.

Wayne’s sister appeared from the crowd. Esther hadn’t cried until she realized that the last cheer was for her father. Now she sobbed and held on to him as tightly as she could. It was the first time anyone had ever seen her cry.

Wayne’s grandfather used to take Bud down into the mines before they were wired with electricity. Horses pulled tons and tons of coal in cars along tracks day and night. Bud used to bring them apples and carrots and a handful of sugar cubes when he could sneak them past his mother. Some of those horses spent their entire lives underground. They even mated underground. The mines were in their blood. Pulling coal cars was all they knew. They were bred for it. One of Bud’s first jobs was building a stall in the darkness of a dead shaft.

Wayne thought of this story as he pushed his way towards his father. With Esther clinging to him, Bud scratched at the fine, black dust that packed every pore of his dirty face. He was still wearing his yellow helmet. Wayne noticed how his father seemed to cower in the light of day. Black seams were embedded within Wayne's battered hands.

"I thought for sure I'd lost you, son," Bud said.

Esther pulled Wayne into them, forming a three-way embrace. His father's overalls smelled of yellow gob smoke. Wayne grimaced as pain shot across his ankle.

"Did everyone get out of the north sections?" Bud asked.

"I don't know," replied Wayne.

"Weren't you assigned up there?"

"Yes."

"With that gimpy leg, you must've been fireboss? Where's the rest of your crew?"

"Foreman wouldn't let me in the mine last night."

Near the Llewelyn shaft, pieces of the combination lamp, bath and supply house were smoldering across the landscape. The ventilation fans on both Mods Run and the Llewelyn shaft were mangled. Everything within a hundred feet of Plum Run was razed.

"You were drunk again, weren't you?" Bud asked.

Bud's thick neck puffed out like a copperhead and Wayne felt the muscles in his father's shoulders and back grow taut.

The pain in Wayne's ankle sparked as he shifted the dust with his boot, but he stared his father straight in the face, not lowering his gaze from his father's bloodshot eyes. The commotion of the scene heightened when the roar of the crane engine ran down to a halt.

"Who was lookin after your crew, boy?" Bud asked, his voice rising in anger.

"How the hell would I know?" Wayne replied.

Wayne noticed the burning in his lungs. He listened as the shifting feet and murmurs of the people around them merged with the muffled grumbling from underground. There was an unnatural warmth on the surface of the ground.

"They shouldn't've been down there at all," Wayne said.

Esther stopped crying and stepped away. Wayne could sense that she wasn't frightened, but she was not going to intrude. She even looked pleased to Wayne, who turned to see his father surveying the people around him. Mrs. Parsons. Charlie King. Policemen and firemen. Other coal miners including the men from the crew who hadn't been escorted to the first aid station yet. The smudged, twisted faces of co-workers and neighbors who still had fathers and sons and brothers and friends trapped somewhere in the dark maze below.

Wayne thought of the men on his crew, who'd been doing their jobs when the first explosion occurred and started a chain reaction that decimated the valley forever. He thought of them dying or dead in a world not meant for mankind.

Bud paced back and forth, clenching and unclenching his fists. Wayne could see the shame in his eyes, but there was also a gladness and Wayne knew that they both sprang from the same source. Wayne was alive.

“Boy, you should’ve been...” Bud started to say, but instead reared back and punched his son in the face. A gasp rose from the crowd. Wayne staggered. Pain shot through his head and he couldn’t find his balance on that lame ankle, but his mind shifted from stupor to clarity and he actually smiled as the grainy taste of blood trickled down into his throat. Bud came quickly to throw another punch, but Wayne pivoted, bringing the weight of his body down onto the side of his father’s leg. Bud crumbled to the ground, down onto his hands and broken knee. The light on his helmet beamed brightly against the top of the valley’s surface, but it was useless in the open air.

Wayne limped off, through the familiar faces to his truck. It roared to life and sped off.

Several explosions occurred throughout the morning, into the night and over the next several days.

Gray shades of smoke sometimes giving way to yellow flowed into the sky for over a week. Several attempts to enter the mine were unsuccessful. The intense heat of the fires caused the ground to cave in some places. Holes were bored into the ground for air samples. On Thanksgiving Day, officials decided that life could no longer be sustained in Consol No. 9 and the families were notified.

Mrs. Parsons wore a bulging black dress. Her face was clear and humble behind a terribly frilly veil. Charlie King stood next to her. Hundreds of familiar shuffling feet, sobbing voices and scratchy throats filled the air while smoldering fires still growled beneath the ground. The entire area was unnaturally warm. Cameras buzzed and flashed. Several limousines graced the parking lot. The sound of a voice, less than one week old, wouldn't be comforted. Reverend Cowden provided a tearful eulogy for his flock. After a moment of silence, a bulldozer engine fired up and a dense puff of smoke rose into the sky like a prayer. Bud Ashcraft leaned on a cane near the entrance of the main slope next to several other miners. The mine would be closed indefinitely. The miners and their families would migrate to other mines and other towns among the mountains. One of the supply stores had already settled up and closed. Bud's polished black shoes were dusted white with limestone as the bulldozer pushed the first load into the hole. By nightfall, every opening to the mine was sealed. There were seventy-eight miners still on duty, but it was the only way to deaden the fires. Wayne Ashcraft was driving his truck somewhere through Ohio.

## **Fermentation**

We were making the weekly migration to my parents' house for Sunday dinner. The steering wheel of our ancient Volkswagen Rabbit shook so violently once we got up to speed on the highway, that I could barely hang on. Lois, my wife, seemed to enjoy the rough ride and settled deeply into her bucket seat, slowly opening and closing her eyes. I could see in the rearview mirror that our four-year old daughter, Mary, however, was grouchy, hot and sweaty, and not sleeping. She squirmed and grunted and looked as if a pestle had been used to pound her and the fancy pink dress into the toddler-seat. Sadly, her stuffed white teddy bear was taking the brunt of her frustration as she squeezed and twisted it into hideous, unbear-like shapes.

Even though Lois has come to loath this weekly ritual, she looked fabulous. Her dark hair pulled, not too tightly, into a ponytail that bounced around her neck, dancing along the seams of the long-sleeve dress she wore when the autumn weather became chilly. The dress's rusty, reddish hue accentuated her stout French figure without making her appear too plump or slutty. She noticed that I was looking at her out of the corner of my eye.

"When will there be time for us?" she asked, as we rattled past the strip mall that stood on the border of my parents' neighborhood.

"I promise to make an excuse for next week. We'll do something," I said.

"That's what you said last week," she replied.

"But, father is making the family sauerkraut this week," I said. "We have to be here."



“Why?” she asked. “I hate sauerkraut and Mary is so finicky, she’ll never try it.”

At first, she ate the sauerkraut to be polite, but she hasn’t touched it in several years. It’s too acidic, she says, and she doesn’t care for the slimy texture. It stinks regardless of who makes it or how old the recipe is.

“It’s important to my father and to me. He only makes it once every year. Besides, it’ll keep you from getting scurvy,” I said, but she didn’t seem at all concerned about developing the horrible disease.

“How much longer?” whined Mary from the backseat.

I swear I can smell it as soon as we turn onto my parents’ street, that familiar stench of fermenting cabbage. Ever since he could walk, father has made or helped to make sauerkraut from scratch, just as his father and all of the other males in the family had done before him. The smell reminded me of the hours I spent learning the process as a child. At first, I enjoyed working with my father. He entrusted me to use a knife when I was only three and invented a gentle clothes pin to pinch my nose when it was time to scoop off the scum. We’d lean down over the crock buried more than halfway in the ground in the backyard. We removed the wooden lid and carefully pulled off the canvas cover that had to be cleaned before we could put it back.

“Alright, son,” he’d say. “Take off the pin for a minute. You need to learn the smell of good sauerkraut. If you can’t tell when the process goes bad, it’ll make you really sick.”

I'd grumble, but knew from his serious look that I had to do it. The smell was terrible, but slowly, I learned to tell the difference. No matter how careful we were, the process failed once in awhile and if the season wasn't too late, we'd start all over.

As I grew, I realized that I couldn't get rid of the smell for weeks. I tried special soaps, lemon juice and powders. I couldn't stand cologne and felt strange wearing it to school. It has been a few years since I made it myself or helped.

Their house was not quite a McMansion, but it was close. One of rows and rows of similar, grand homes built by the same developer along the suburban fringes of Philadelphia. Each house had similar designs and colors, but from a distance, they all looked the same to me.

Falling leaves had already been removed from most of the manicured, bright green lawns, including my parents'. There was a strange, beat up little car in the driveway. It was rusted around the fenders, dented in several places and it wasn't possible to tell what the original color had been. It wasn't local, but the bulky tag holder was covering the specific state, so I couldn't tell where it was from. I assumed that father had complained about something and one of the lawn maintenance people probably had been sent to finish some ridiculous task.

Mother must have been watching constantly out the window for us because she was on the front porch before I could unbuckle Mary.

"There's my good boy," she shouted. Then she turned back into the house and shouted, "They're here!"

We had come for dinner nearly every Sunday for three years, but mother always acted as if she hadn't seen us in years.

"Hello, mother," I shouted back.

She was wearing a horribly pastel blue dress suit, that was too small for her, with puffy pads that appeared to push her shoulders up to her ears. Since father's steamfitter business had become very lucrative fifteen or so years ago, mother had started dressing in overpriced, seemingly fashionable clothes. Large, hoop earrings couldn't hang properly from her ears because they rubbed against those false shoulders. A matching, thick, gaudy chain hung low around her huge breasts, bending upwards onto her stomach. Her makeup was too thick, trying to hide her age, and with her head of freshly permed, brown hair on top of her short, round figure, she reminded me sadly of a clown.

Mary's dress was crumpled in back like a bunny's tail, but before Lois could smooth it out, Mary darted across the lawn towards her smiling grandmother. I could imagine my father screaming at me when I was a child to keep off the grass and to stay on the brick walkway.

I pulled Mary's bag full of toys, coloring books and crayons, a just-in-case change of clothes, tonight's pajamas and a baggy of dry cereal from the trunk. I grabbed the bear from backseat as well.

Lois adjusted her black suede coat fringed with fake fur. She held a tissue to her nose to mask the smell, then took my elbow as we walked up towards the house. Mother came down and gave me a hug that was awkward, since my hands

were full with Mary's bag and bear. Mother's perfume and hairspray were overpowering. I'm sure that she couldn't smell the sauerkraut.

"Hi Nancy," Lois said to her and kissed her on the cheek mother presented.

Shortly, mother beamed, "I have a surprise for you." She was absolutely giddy and the folds of neck jiggled.

"You know I don't like surprises," I said.

Just we were about to climb the steps, my younger sister, Amelia, emerged through the front door. As I was looking up at her, I couldn't believe that she was here. We hadn't seen each other in more than two years, since she transferred from Penn State to the University of New Mexico out west in Albuquerque. We hadn't stayed in touch.

Amelia's blue eyes were steady and held my attention and she looked healthy, not like the straggly girl that left home for the Southwest, but as a woman full of curves and confidence. Her skin was bronze, almost glowing. Her long hair was lighter than I'd remembered and she had braided a black leather strip into a single strand that fell to her left shoulder. The roots showed where deep red streaks had been dyed. The red matched the color of the stone in her nose ring. She was dressed in faded black jeans, a University of New Mexico tee-shirt and tattered sandals that were covered in a fine red dust. Her toenails were jagged as if she'd ripped them off the ends rather than pruning them with clippers. She hugged herself, chilled by the crisp Pennsylvania air.

"It's great to see you," I said, setting down Mary's bag.

“You too,” she said.

We paused for a moment, looking at each other, before hugging. I could feel the bones of her ribs and back. I was still holding Mary’s stuffed bear. Amelia giggled as it tickled her arm. The smell of sauerkraut hung in the air, but Amelia had a new scent of her own. It wasn’t offensive body odor, rather an earthy smell like clay. She wasn’t wearing makeup or perfume. Her hands were rough to the touch with hard set lines. Red dirt under her fingernails curled along the rim of her cuticles.

“I’ve scrubbed and scrubbed, but that red clay won’t come out,” she said. “I’ve been helping a pueblo make bricks out near Santa Fe.”

Father walked out onto the porch. He wore a suit every Sunday, but this week he chose the formal black one with a pressed white shirt and black bow tie, in honor of his sauerkraut. His burly build never looked right in a suit, even ones tailored to him because his upper body was so much larger than his legs and the cut of a suit with the extra material accentuated the top-heavy imbalance. Yet, when you shook his hand or slapped him on the back, he was solid. His salty beard was freshly trimmed, as was his gray-brown hair. Grandfather’s silver cufflinks sparkled when father extended his right hand, between Amelia and me, for me to shake firmly. He held a half-empty glass of dark beer in his left hand. He drank the rest of the beer and handed the glass to mother before leaning down to hug Mary.

“How is my precious granddaughter?” he asked.

“Good,” she said.

“You sure are pretty,” he said. Mary moved close to me. Father frowned and stood up.

“How are you, Lois?” he asked. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to him.

“Fine,” she said. There was no expression on her face.

Kneeling to Mary’s height, Amelia asked, “Have your parents told you about your aunt?” The tone of her voice wasn’t the typical childish mimic of an adult speaking to a little girl. If she hadn’t been kneeling, I would have thought she was talking to Lois or me. “The last time I saw you, you were just a baby.”

Mary wrapped her arms around my legs and shied her face into my khaki slacks, but Amelia took her hand and tickled her sides until their laughter shook the porch and Mary let go.

“I brought you something,” Amelia said, standing up, and pulled from her pocket a brightly polished stone carved in the shape of an animal. It was dark gray with blue eyes. Mary loved animals.

“The Picuris call it a fetish,” she said. “This is a wolf. It holds great power and if you care for it, it will give you some of its strength.”

Amelia kneeled again and handed it to Mary, who took it in her hands with a wow and ran her tiny fingers over every marbled angle and curve. It was beautiful.

“What do you say?” I asked.

“Thank you.”

“My friend made it this summer during the San Lorenzo Feast celebration. He was hiking early that morning and the stone called to him,” Amelia said. She lifted her head and howled like a wolf. Mary laughed.

“He said that the stone had always been a wolf, but it took millions of years for someone to understand.”

Mary lifted it to her ear with eyes wide open.

“All of my babies are home,” mother said.

“Let’s get inside,” said father, looking at the foam slide down the side of the empty glass in mother’s hand. “The lamb has been slowly roasting all day and of course, the sauerkraut is perfect.”

Mother sets a nice table each week, but as in years past, father had the dining room set perfectly for this occasion. The good silver. Salad and dinner forks to the left. Butter knives turned to face each plate and spoons to the right. Crystal wine and water glasses that seem to praise God when you slide a moist finger around the rim. Dry clean only white cloth napkins embroidered with silken fruit bearing vines, propped on the center of the good china plates and salad bowls, hand-painted in the old country. The tablecloth smoothed and elegant. Tall candles in antique silver holders ablaze. Father is the eldest sibling and since he has a son of his own, he inherited most of the old family heirlooms. Grandfather’s portrait hung in this room and presided over the preparations. The finery created a strange juxtaposition, because the sourness that filled the house seemed intensified by these cultured baubles, all in the name of sauerkraut.

According to legend, the family recipe can be traced all the way back to Adam and Eve, or the Big Bang, depending on which family member you hear it from. Of course, each generation has added their own touch or they've removed something superfluous to suit their individual tastes. My father is no exception, as grandfather told how father committed the cardinal sin of adding a little rice wine during the fermentation process, because, as he claims, we owe our sauerkraut to Ghengis Khan who crammed it down the throats of every man, woman and child between the Great Wall and Alsace. Well, he didn't get all the way to Alsace, where our forefathers hail from, but what no family member seems to change is the process of fermenting layers of thinly sliced young cabbage with sea salt, tamped over and over and over in a traditional stone crock, infusing each layer with the primary ingredients, juniper berries and peppercorns, and now, rice wine.

We were all seated when father brought in the boneless leg of lamb, roasted medium rare with garlic, rosemary and olive oil, kosher salt and freshly ground pepper. Pink juices pooled in the bottom of the serving dish. Golden rivers of butter ran through the valleys of speckled potatoes. Two dusty bottles of cabernet sauvignon were uncorked and allowed to breathe. We were starving. The sauerkraut was brought in last. Juniper berries turn black when cooked. Mary pinched her nose. She was seated next to Amelia. Father's place was at the head of the table with mother at the other end. I sat across from Mary between Lois and mother while Lois sat between me and father. If Mary had been a boy,



we would have been the perfect boy-girl-boy-girl all the way round. The candle flames danced in honor of the great feast.

We bowed our heads and held hands, forming a squared circle, while father said grace. The dishes were passed around the table. Wine was poured, but when I offered, Amelia refused. Father carved the lamb and placed several slices of brown and pink meat on each plate that was passed to him. We all waited for father to finish serving before we started eating.

Mary didn't like the potatoes because they tasted funny and she wouldn't try the meat. There was no way she would eat a Brussels sprout. She would only eat bread with butter and drink her milk. Lois' plate was lacking sauerkraut and Amelia was only eating bread, potatoes and Brussels sprouts. The bitterness of the Brussels sprouts heightened the cacophony of smells in the room. The lamb melted in my mouth. I could see in father's face that he was pleased.

The conversation focused on Amelia. She was doing well in school, studying to become a librarian. She was working weekends with her boyfriend, Max, who was from the Picuris Pueblo. After getting out of school and working a few years to save money, they wanted to open a library in Picuris that could house, not only a regular collection of books for people to use, but stories recorded by their elders and artifacts of their history for visitors and their own people. Their language was long extinct, but at least they could save something of their heritage. Max was studying philosophy.

“What's your boyfriend going to do with a degree in Philosophy?” father asked Amelia. “Do the want ads have a section for philosophers?”

Father rested his knife and fork on the china and stroked his beard. The muscles in his forehead contracted and the lines deepened. His eyes were bright blue.

“He wants to make the world a better place,” she said, “and to help his people. You wouldn’t understand.”

“That’s all well and good and maybe I don’t understand the great minds of philosophy, but I know that he won’t be able to anything without food in his stomach or a roof over his head.”

“He knows how to survive.”

“Are his parents paying for this degree in Philosophy?”

“The government pays for his school because he’s Native American.”

“I see. How much money has he made this year?”

“He doesn’t have a job.”

“So he’s made nothing.”

Father was appalled. He took a long gulp of the dry wine without savoring it and poured himself another glass.

“There’s more to life than money,” Amelia said.

“Nothing will come of nothing,” father said in a regal tone. “And, if he thinks he can change the world by gazing up into the stars, he’s a fool.”

Amelia stopped eating. Her shoulders rounded into a slouch and a sadness rose to her eyes like clarified butter. It was the same look she had when father found out I had been teaching her how to make sauerkraut. She was about nine years old, so I must have been thirteen. I couldn’t understand why, but father was

furious. It was the only time I remember being truly frightened of him. He stood there ranting that this was something that only I was to do. He screamed and screamed at us until Amelia ran sobbing to her room and wouldn't come out. When Amelia had gone, my hands clenched into pubescent fists, and I stood glaring at my father. It had never occurred to me that father was capable of such rage, but when he saw my fists and the anger in my face, he quieted and stood firm. Regardless of my anger, I was afraid and did nothing. Amelia hadn't eaten sauerkraut since and father never offered her any. I thought about Amelia crying as a child and looked at her emotionless face now.

“Ghengis Khan was nobody when he was born and he didn't conquer the known world shelving books or dishing handouts,” father said. “The bleeding hearts like to say that Khan committed murder and rape, but it was from this destruction that great civilizations are born. He was a great man.”

A dizzy wave of adrenalin rolled over me as I felt Amelia's sadness again, and, the temperature in the dining room suddenly felt warmer. I'm sure it would be another few years before we her again.

Mother masked her worried face with a sparkle of teeth and asked if anyone needed anything from the kitchen, but no one responded. Lois tried to rub her naked toe provocatively inside the cuff of my slacks, but I jerked my leg away. Mary said that she was still hungry. I looked across the table of dishes still full of food and told her to try the sauerkraut and meat, but she scrunched her nose. I gave her a stern look and pointed at the food still on her plate. She cowered.

“Look at your degree, honey,” Lois said. “You may not have changed the world, but you’ve turned out to be a great father and husband.”

“I paid all that money for you to become an inventory manager,” father stated.

“My degree has served us well, thank you very much,” I said. I couldn’t stop becoming angry. “My job may not be in that particular discipline, but without that degree, we would still be living here. I’m everyone at this table would love *that*.”

Mary started to whine that she was starving and that nobody cared that she was starving. Nobody loved her.

“I forget, *honey*,” I said to Lois. “What was your degree in?” There was an unforgivable pause. “That’s right, you dropped out after your junior year.”

I don’t know why I was directing my rage toward Lois and Mary, but I was.

“You know I dropped out, *honey*,” she growled. “There was something more important than reading the pompous works or arrogant, narcissistic, ass...” She glanced at Mary, who wasn’t used to hearing this tone in mommy’s voice. “Nevermind,” Lois said, and stuck another forkful of lamb into her mouth. “It doesn’t matter.”

Until she had to drop out, Lois studied literature and had been a better student than me. She stared down at her plate. There is something dangerous about knowing someone too intimately.

“You could have been a lawyer or doctor or governor,” father said. “You always got good grades, but you allowed yourself to be tempted by the flesh.”

He glanced at Lois. Sweat dripped down my sides and back. I used the napkin to wipe my face. Amelia was sitting there, watching me without expression.

“Maybe I should have become a steamfitter and worked with you, *father*. That way, I could earn a living ripping people off just like you.”

I thought about how much I hated being an inventory manager; about how much I hated working for my boss and parasitic company that did nothing but move things. We didn’t build things to make peoples lives bearable or install the pipes that carried heat the way father did. We didn’t plant or harvest crops to feed people. The company I worked for bought things that other companies made, marked them up to a hefty profit and sold them to someone else who marked them up even more until they eventually reached consumers. I grabbed my wine glass, but when I jerked it upwards towards my mouth, the bottom clanked the plate and chipped. My instinct was to be afraid and I avoided eye contact, but immediately the fear boiled off to something else.

Father didn’t shout or even raise his voice. He sat straight up in his chair with a smug look on his face. He slowly sipped the wine, inhaling the bright bouquet, before speaking each word carefully.

“You sit at my table, eating the food I paid for every week, sometimes begging for money because you can’t support your own fucking family and then you have the nerve to degrade how I make a living. You won’t even continue the

family tradition that connects us to our ancestors. You're not a man, you spoiled, ungrateful brat."

Mother began to cry. Lois was clearly torn because she didn't know that I had been taking money, but that shame was masked by her disgust for my father. I looked down at the dish of sauerkraut speckled with blackened juniper berries. I was furious at myself more than anything else.

After a few moments of quiet around the table, Mary, who had been either oblivious to or in the silence, simply forgotten what had happened, groaned as if she were dying of hunger.

Father's fork hit his plate. There was a bit of sauerkraut dangling in his beard when he looked me straight in the face.

"Can't you at least make her eat and stop making that pathetic noise," he said.

"I'll make you something, darling," mother said quickly. "Do you want a grilled cheese sandwich?"

Mother was clearly glad to have a reason to leave the table and Mary brightened at the sound of grilled cheese, but in my rage, I wouldn't let it end so easily.

"No," I nearly shouted. "You will not make Mary a grilled cheese sandwich," I was choking back the sour bile rising in my throat. My voice was pushing it upwards from somewhere deep inside my stomach. A place that I had refused to acknowledge, whose inception began the first time I saw Amelia's face

sad and frightened. The first time I applied for some menial job. The first time I made sauerkraut.

“She will eat what everyone else is eating,” I growled, and pounded her tiny plate with heaps of sauerkraut. “Eat it!” I shouted. “Eat it and you’d better eat every last bite!”

Mary burst into tears. Father smirked.

My wife was on the edge of her seat, waiting to strike if I raised a hand to Mary. Her eyes were focused and quick, sensing every movement I made. She fingered the edge of the tablecloth. Mother and Amelia had the same wide-eyed expression as Mary. They couldn’t believe what I was doing. I heard the sound of the knife as father cut another piece of meat on his plate.

The faces faded and my mind sunk into darkness until I recognized the hate I had bubbling inside. I hated what I had done and the stench of it reeked out through my voice. I was too much of a coward to challenge the alpha-male. I hated the nothingness I was cursed to live like the immigrant generations before me, the fisherman, carpenters and Surkrutschneiders or Choucrouitiers, all of them with blood traced back to Alsace, the land of salt, conquered by Charlemagne for the Holy Roman Empire, and before that white nomads or dirty villagers, no identity until centuries later they were assigned to the cruel Franks. The nameless generations who lived for nothing, only that blue-black season when young cabbage is harvested in its prime and the juniper berry is ripe for picking, who pound layers and layers of cabbage and salt year after year because they’re afraid

to scrub clean the fermented stench of the cowards cowering as the great Charlemagne clopped by and changed them forever.

And then a face appeared from the darkness. Mary. Her face showed utter fear. She was afraid of me, her own father. Her entire body seemed to shake in that uncomfortable dress. She couldn't understand the complexity of my thoughts or the days and years that had grown the frustration of those simple words I screamed at her. She was simply afraid that I was going to hurt her and nothing else mattered. I've never been so ashamed.

My face softened and I smiled. I held Mary's hand and told her everything was alright. I was sorry for yelling at her. I didn't mean it. Stop crying. Everything was alright. Was she still hungry? She doesn't have to eat the sauerkraut.

"Perhaps you're right, father." I said. "Maybe I'll make a batch of sauerkraut this year."

"Are you sure that you have the time?" he replied without much interest.

"Some things are worth the time," I said.

Father was still agitated. It must hurt a father to allow the shame he feels in his son to surface like that. He shook the ice cubes in his glass and without a word, mother hopped up to fetch the pitcher. Lois cringed every time this happened. She hated to see such of submissiveness to him, of all people. I could tell that she was still on edge. Amelia hated it as well, excused herself abruptly and left the room. I felt horrible for letting this happen during her first visit home



in years. Sunday dinners were never exactly fun, but they usually remained civil. Mary squirmed and noticeably cleared her throat.

“You may be excused,” I said to her.

Mother started clearing the dishes and Lois was more than happy to go after Mary. I listened to the water run in the kitchen, the echo of chiming dishes, and the clumsy sound of weighted dishwasher shelves being pulled and pushed. Mother didn’t hum or sing to herself when she worked. She was silent. She didn’t expect any thanks or recognition. Father went to the liquor cabinet, poured a short glass of Scotch from the decanter, and took a cigar from the drawer.

I followed father out to the front porch.

“You know, father,” I said, sitting in one of their stiff, white wicker chairs, “the reason Ghengis Khan didn’t finish conquering the known world is because he was thrown by his horse during a hunt. He was sixty-six by this time and the stories aren’t necessary based on fact, but apparently, his physique had become top heavy. The injuries this master equestrian sustained from the fall were fatal. Of course, there is a valiant, dying speech attributed to the moment, and the people praised this great leader by carrying his body back to his birthplace, and singing a gloriously corny funeral song.”

“I suppose no one will do that when I die,” he said.

“Why would we?”

He actually seemed taken aback by this cold retort. I saw in him, just for a moment, that same hurt he inflicted on Amelia.

“I think I will make the sauerkraut this year, father,” I said. “With your blessing, of course.”

“Really,” he replied, taking the unlit cigar out of his mouth.

“I’ll have to use your stamper and stone crock,” I said.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said. “But, you’ll have to start within the next couple of weeks or the weather will be too cool.”

“I know.”

“The first three days are the most important,” he said. “You have to tend to it every few hours or it’ll rot instead of ferment and become poison.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ve made it twenty times.”

“But it’s been a few years and it all hinges on the details. Can you get off work either Friday or Monday?”

His voice was becoming excited in a way I hadn’t heard before. Making sauerkraut was deeply important to him.

“Probably, but if not, Lois can tend to it one of those...”

“No,” he cut me off. “You have to be the one who makes it from beginning to end. That’s important. This is the male tradition.”

“Alright,” I said.

“All of the utensils need to be sterilized by hand, but you cannot use a cleaner or a sponge. And nothing metal or the kraut will develop a metallic taste. You need to boil the stamper, wooden plate and canvas cloth in a huge pot, then let them dry completely in the sun. You rinse out the crock with scalding water, wipe it out with another clean cloth and rinse it thoroughly several times with

scalding water before setting it out to dry in the sun. There can be no water present.”

“I remember.”

His voice was almost desperate. I remembered the patience he had in his voice when I was younger, very different from the harsh tone he used with his employees. And, I could see in my mind the precise way his hands moved while he cut the young cabbage with a butcher’s knife, each slice quietly falling over as the blade deftly descended upon the cabbage head again and again.

“Where are you getting the cabbage and juniper berries?”

“I don’t know. Safeway. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Are there any ripe berries left on your shrubs?”

Although juniper berries are native to North America, father had several shrubs imported from a region along the German side of the Rhine River. It takes three or four years for juniper berries to ripen, so the same shrub will display all stages of bloom.

“It’s been several weeks since I harvested the ones for tonight’s dinner, so there might be enough by now. Wherever you get them, remember that they have to be washed, but the skins must be allowed to dry completely. I know a local farmer who can probably get us some good cabbage. It won’t be young, but there is a huge difference between his cabbage and the purified crap you get at *Safeway*. They wash away much of the natural yeast that is necessary for the fermentation process.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“I haven’t had time to teach you everything yet,” father said. It seemed like he was engaged in making one of his big shot business deals. “You needed to get a feel for the process and how important certain stages are, like stamping as much as possible the layers of salt and cabbage together; when to add the rice wine, and keeping the air out during the entire process. Do you remember the smell during the first few days when we skimmed off the scum that rose to the top of the brine?”

“I do, but the process never failed for us, so I won’t be able to tell the difference if it rots.”

“You need to be able to tell when the process is failing because the difference between good and bad is very subtle. If it’s indistinguishable to you and it rots, God Himself won’t be able to save you from the bathroom. Only the water sucked out of the cabbage itself by the salt can make the process work. I think your grandfather sabotaged me once to teach me a lesson. I thought I was dying.”

He paused and fingered the edge of his chair.

“Maybe we could do it together again,” he said. “Why don’t you stay here next weekend. Bring Lois and Mary and your little mutt, Techichi, too. Don’t bring the cat. Mary can have Amelia’s old room.”

“I’ll have to run this by Lois first, but it...”

“I see,” he said. He struck a match and puffed on his cigar. He seemed to savor the way the smoke rose, spreading thinner and thinner. “Well, perhaps next year we can plan more in advance.”

“No, I mean, we’ll talk about it on the way...”

I felt as though all the life was bubbling out of me, as if the endless years were stamping down upon me.

“Sure,” he said. “Well, let me know.”

Then he inhaled the sweet bouquet of twelve year old scotch, sipped and closed his eyes, enjoying the smoky burn all the way to his belly. My mouth watered.

“Amelia might need to marry this philosopher of hers,” father said.

“Really? I didn’t think she was that serious about him.”

“She might be very serious, apparently. She’s leaving tomorrow morning. I doubt that we’ll see her again for quite awhile unless we visit that damned pueblo.”

The end of his cigar brightened and a thin trail of smoke curled up into the air. The smell was a nice contrast to the sauerkraut. Being inside and immersed in the heart of smell, I had become acclimated and didn’t notice it after awhile. Outside, watching the setting sun cast a bright red glow across endless suburban roofs, fading into the blue-black of juniper berries along the eastern horizon, the smell returned. It was dark in Alsace on the other side of world. Father waved to a passing neighbor, stood and stepped down off the porch to survey his home. A spike must have loose where a gutter sagged. He furrowed his brow while

running a finger along the crumbling mortar lines of the foundation. They would need to be patched. The hole where he buried the stone crock to ferment the sauerkraut was in the backyard as were the juniper berry bushes. I looked, but there weren't enough ripe berries for another batch.

## Scarecrow

Since my mom had a stroke, Sharon and my six-year-old stepdaughter, Samantha, have been going with me to my parents' home. Dad's health has been deteriorating for decades so that he's useless around the house. Rehabilitation has gotten my mother to where she can speak and get around with a walker, but she gets words and names confused. She consistently calls Sharon, "Misty," the name of Mom's cat from forty years ago. Neither Mom nor Dad can write checks or comprehend mail. They are not old enough for Social Security, so they don't qualify for State or Federal support. While I change light bulbs, fix leaky toilets, clean out the gutters, run to the store and drive a load of garbage to the dump, Sharon and Mom sit talking in the living room, at the kitchen table or when the weather's nice, out on the front porch looking out to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge while Samantha plays with toys we bring from home.

"When are you two going to give me a grandbaby?" Mom asks Sharon every time we visit.

"Ask your son," Sharon replies.

"You two would have a beautiful child. And smart."

"I think so too," Sharon says.

Either she forgets what they had been speaking about or she can't think of anything else to add, but after a few moments, Mom starts talking about a completely different subject. Mom can't tell you what she had for lunch, but she tells stories from my childhood and before. Sometimes, she begins in the middle of a story as if she'd been thinking about it the whole time and all of sudden, the

switch to start speaking is flipped. Sharon says it bothers her at times, like waking up somewhere that you've never been without remembering how you got there.

"Reverend Fitzgerald called," Mom told Sharon, "and asked if we still wanted to adopt a baby. Yes! Yes! Yes! We told him," her voice rising and more clear, but sagging on the left side of her mouth. "He said there was a pregnant, unwed teenager in the parish whose father wanted to find a good Christian home for the baby.

"We had been to Social Services and adoption agencies, sitting in waiting rooms for hours and hours. The women were always crying. Many were hysterical, rocking back and forth while their husbands told them that everything would be alright. Countless couples for only a few babies as if there was an assembly line of birthing mothers in the back room.

"Coming home after the third or fourth time, I said that I wasn't going anymore. Eddie and I agreed that we'd have to find another way. Shortly after that, the reverend called and we knew our prayers had been answered. God was giving us a baby and when he was born, he was everything we prayed for."

"We need to get going. Do you need anything else before we go, Mom?" I ask.

"I don't think so," she replies.

We go into the living room to say goodbye to Dad, whose been watching TV the entire time except when barking out orders.



"I want a hug from Samantha," he says tightening, his hold. "I love you, Sam."

"I love you, too," she winces.

"Sharon, too."

I feel her gag as she leans over, barely able to get her arms around him.

Dad and I shake hands.

"I'll call you and Mom tomorrow, after work," I say.

"Okay. I love you, son."

"Me, too."

In the family room, we repeat the ritual with Mom, but I give her a hug and she tells me how much she loves me. "I love you, too," I say, and load up the car with Samantha's toys. I try not to look at Mom when we leave. She always looks so sad, wedged against the front door, leaning on her walker, trying not to lose her balance.

"Are you sure you don't want to have any children?" Sharon asks on the way home. Samantha fell asleep as soon as the car started moving.

"Yes," I say.

"Are you sure you're sure?"

I don't respond.

"You're such a good dad," she says.

This is a conversation we've been having more and more frequently. There doesn't seem to be any point explaining again that I just don't want children of my own. I can't put it into words. It's just the way I feel.

Sharon asks if it would bother me if she looked through the folder Mom kept with my adoption paperwork. I'd never read it, but I tell her to go ahead.

"Do you want me to tell you about what's in the folder?" she asks, after she'd read through it.

"I don't care."

"There really isn't that much. Your mom said that she has a picture, but I didn't see it. There are a couple of cancelled checks. I don't think you'll want to know for how much."

"Who are the checks made out to?" I ask.

"One is to the lawyer and the other to your real grandfather. You won't want to know the totals. The rest are legal documents; one signed about six months before you were born, another signed a month before, and one signed when the adoption was finalized two years later. Since your mother was a minor, your grandfather's name is on the documents as well. Your mom, I mean your current mom, Deb, said that your dad drove your birth mother to the lawyer's office to sign the final papers and that she cried the entire time. Your original name is listed as well."

"What original name?"

“On the final adoption papers, it states that your name is being officially changed. It’s actually the same name, but your first and middle names have a different spelling and of course your birth mother’s last name.”

Before I was born, dad volunteered with the Big Brother organization, spending time with boys without fathers. He was assigned to two brothers in the neighborhood where I grew up. Dad taught them how to fish and play baseball. I was told that I was named after the brothers.

“My birth certificate doesn’t have any other name.”

“I guess it was changed.”

“Can they change a birth certificate?”

“I guess they can change anything.”

"Do you want to know the name?"

"No."

My parents were given custody when I was three days old. I don’t know anything about those three days. I imagine my natural mother's face pressed up against the nursery glass, watching me sleep among the other babies. Her hair is greasy and matted. She leaves greasy fingerprints next to her breath. None of her family came to see me, I’m sure, whether they knew I existed or not. A smiling someone passes and asks which one is hers. She smiles for a moment and points to me in a little blue blanket. "He's a good lookin' boy. You should be proud," and they shuffle down the hall. I wonder if she was allowed to hold me during those three days.

Dad always tells the story of when they brought me home the first time.

“I took off all of your clothes and laid you naked down on the bed. I counted every finger and toe and made sure that all of the other parts were there too,” he said winking at Sharon. “Everything was in the right place and I knew they worked because you peed all over yourself and the bed.”

Except for funerals and weddings, I don't remember going to church, but when I was in college awhile back, Aunt Sally told me about a time she and mom went to get me from the church nursery. It was before services ended. I was only two or three months old. They were chatting. I imagine them in their proper Sunday clothes, the sound of their high heels and chatter echoing down the long hallway, off the linoleum floors and painted cinder-block walls. I picture a window in the background casting their shadows forward. Curling announcements tacked to cork boards flutter when they stroll by. Before Aunt Sally looked into the nursery, Mom whispered, “Oh my God!” and ran to the ladies room. When Sally looked up, she recognized but didn't know the young woman rocking me in her arms next to the empty crib as I quietly slept, wrapped in a tiny white blanket. I imagine the young woman smiling, but Aunt Sally didn't say.

In elementary school, I never liked family tree assignments. I don't remember a time when I didn't know I was adopted so when teachers would announce what was required, I raised my hand to ask what I should do. They

stuttered that I was excused from the assignment. The following day, I'd listen to stories about grandparents or great-grandparents and foreign countries or families who'd migrated from southern states or the great plains.

We used to visit Grandpa Gil, Dad's father, after Grandma Ida died. I don't remember her death, but I recall going to West Virginia where Grandpa lived. My aunts and uncles were jealous because I was his favorite. Being the youngest of my generation was part of it, but Grandpa knew me better than my cousins because we visited so often. The summer I turned three, one weekend at a time, Dad put a new roof on Grandpa's house. Each Friday night for two months, we drove four hours across the Appalachians. Mom and Dad worked all day Saturday and until lunchtime on Sunday. We ate lunch and drove home. Occasionally, one of my aunts and uncles would be there, but not the same ones and not every time. Below the pounding above, Grandpa sat in his chair with a whiskey and soda-water, watching television with the volume turned up while I raced Matchbox cars around an oval throw rug on the floor.

During the week, when Grandpa called the house and I answered, he'd joke, "You're lookin' good." Our visits became less frequent over the next year or two. Somewhere during that time, Grandpa remarried. I have no idea how he met someone to marry because I rarely saw him out of the recliner, but she outlived him and her family inherited all of his money. I don't remember visiting West Virginia again until his funeral when I was a teenager, but I always kept our joke alive.

When I was old enough, Dad gave me a .22 rifle that belonged to Grandpa Gil. Grandpa used it to help feed the family when work as a coalminer was slow. Dad has four brothers and three sisters so keeping them fed was not an easy responsibility. Grandpa hunted small game with it in the surrounding woods, but he also won turkeys, hams, cakes and pies at Sunday contests after church. The women would go off and make supper while the men gathered to smoke, drink and shoot. I think Grandpa gave the gun to Dad during that first summer after Grandma died. Apparently, this didn't sit well with my Uncle Buddy who told Dad that he shouldn't pass the gun along to me because it should stay in the family.

"Your mom won't stop complaining about your dad," Sharon says one day on the way home. "He does this and he doesn't do that,' constantly. She yells at him all the time. I don't know how he can stand it."

"What else can she do?" I reply.

"I don't know, but she found time to tell me another story about when you were little. She came home from work early one day to find you standing in your crib, crying. Your dad was supposed to be watching you, but went out for a drink. She didn't leave you with him after that. She said that by the time you were ten, you watched him more than he watched you."

"I've heard that one before."

"She talks a lot about your Dad before they got you. All of the drinking. Questionable car accidents and flings with barmaids. One of the women actually

called and spoke with your Mom. Did you know the scar on his stomach is from a brawl when someone pulled a knife on him? They were apparently fighting over a woman who needed a ride home.

“We need to get them assistance,” she continues, “You’re killing yourself taking care of them, taking care of our family, working overtime so I can stay home with Sam, remodeling our house. You’re being pulled in too many pieces.”

“I know, but we’ve tried Meals on Wheels and hiring someone to clean and cook, but they didn’t like the food and this person didn’t do anything and this person was stealing...”

“I know. I know,” she says.

The car climbs up across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

“We can’t afford some fancy home and they wouldn’t move into one even if we could afford it.”

“You certainly fit the mold,” Sharon says. “They say that children of alcoholics tend to be caregivers.”

I turn my head to glare at her. The thought of being categorized that way infuriates me.

“What the fuck do you mean by that?” I ask.

“Keep your voice down and your eyes on the road. Sam’s in the backseat. I don’t know what it means. Christ, don’t take it out on me.”

“You’re the one who said it.”

“I know.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“All I know is to keep working.”

Only by accident do I learn the name in the first place. After reading my adoption file a few days ago, Sharon was searching it on the net. I was looking up something and when I clicked the search area, the long list of previous searches appeared. My wife had put the name in quotations. It was first on the list.

I point to it on the screen. “Is this my birth mother’s name?” I ask.

She is silent, but not still. “I... I don’t know what you want me to say. I’m sorry.”

“Whose name is this?” I ask pointing to a second name.

“Your real grandfather’s.”

I read through the documents in the folder. Parties of the first part agree that parties of the second part can have custody of the infant to be born after date of birth upon the infant’s release from the hospital, and they by this agreement release the hospital of any liability for delivery of the infant to the parties of the second part. That all parties to the cause are Caucasian and of Protestant faith. My existence is reduced to legal bullshit and two cancelled checks totaling less than a day cruise.

The “i” in her signature is like mine.



*\*Daughter in search of birth mom, born 10/1/73. \*Bmom ISO son, born 7/4/80. \*ISO half-brother. \*Mother, where are you?*

Page after page, messages posted on the internet like bottles adrift in the ocean. The words from terrified people hoping that the next click or phone call will be a familiar voice never heard before.

I saw a woman on a metro bus with a nose like mine the other day. Certain cousins teased me when I was younger, telling me that I had a “nigger nose” and this woman’s was a spitting image with the same indentations on both sides of the bridge. She also had blond hair and brown eyes, a tiny frame of skin and bones, and seemed older than she looked. She was tall for a woman and appeared to be in her early to mid-fifties. A wedding ring diamond sparkled in the light. Another story I’d heard was that my natural mother remarried and had other children.

The bus driver waited a few extra moments at my usual stop, looking in his angled mirror for a nod or sign from me, letting him know one way or the other if I was getting off, but I stayed dumb in my seat, trying not to look at the woman. The driver slammed the door shut with an unnecessary surge forward, pushing us passengers deeper into our seats. I didn’t want to seem creepy, but I couldn’t stop glancing at her. I picked at the skin around my thumbnail until it bled. A tiny drop pooled on the surface like a lava cone as I pushed on the bottom of my thumb. Before it dripped, I licked it, savoring the familiar taste, trying not to look at her. Another drop pooled and I smeared the silky stickiness with my

index finger until the color absorbed. The woman didn't seem to notice me, but I felt as though she was constantly watching.

She rose while the bus was still moving, but I waited. When she got off at the stop, I leapt from my seat and rushed to the door which closed on my backpack to the delight and consternation of the driver. On the sidewalk, I realized that I had not been to this part of town before. The woman didn't look back continuing on her way. Away from the closeness of the bus, my heart sank back into place and I felt ashamed. The woman turned a corner and was gone.

My stepdaughter, Samantha comes into the spare room while I'm reading the paper at my desk. She's wearing her princess costume even though it isn't Halloween. She lay her head on my arm as if she were about to go to sleep.

"I want to go to the park," she says.

"What does your mother say?"

"She said to ask you."

"Well, I don't know..." I say, drawing out the words.

"Please. Please. Please. Please. Please."

"Sharon, do you want to go to the park?" I yell. "We can take some hot tea and watch the sunset!"

"Okay," I hear from the living room.

The community park is next to the Bay and a chilly breeze is blowing on shore. We are the only ones here. Samantha runs from one piece of playground

equipment to another, calling from each one before swinging or sliding or jumping or climbing with a big smile on her face.

“Is Samantha going to her dad’s tomorrow?” I ask.

“As usual,” Sharon replies.

“Mommy! Watch this!”

“I’m watching!”

“Be careful!” I yell.

After a moment, Sharon looks at me and says, “You still don’t want to have a child of your own? Look at her. She’s wonderful.”

“I know she is, and I consider her my own, but I don’t want any more children and I don’t want to have this conversation ever again.”

“It won’t be like when you...”

“Sharon, will you please let this go?”

“Mommy, did you see that?” Samantha blurts out laughing from the dirt at the bottom of the slide. She jumps to her feet and runs back around to the ladder. I remember when she was younger and I stood with my hands and arms poised like a safety net while she labored to the top of the slide. It used to take her several minutes to get to the top and sometimes I’d have to lift her up that last step. Once she was secure, I’d run around and catch her at the bottom, swinging her up over my head and back down to the ground. “I want to do it again,” she’d giggle. Once in awhile, she still needs me to get her off the monkey bars.

It’s a beautiful autumn sunset tonight. I like to climb down on the huge rocks that line the shore. As a teenager, I used to go to the Bay every night even

when it rained and stand on the heavy bulkhead beams, listening to the waves. Kneeling, I can hear the sound of them lapping at my feet. The salty smell is thick in the stiff wind that blows from the deepening red horizon. The sound is loud in my ears. It always seems windier at dusk.

A piece of drift wood sends a shiver through me as it taps against a rock. I stand up and turn to face the park. I smile as Samantha chases her mother in and out of the jungle gym. I can see Samantha stop a couple of times to catch her breath because she is laughing so hard. I think I can hear them, but their voices are muffled.

## Snakeheads

A long time ago, they called it Turtle Pond. Lydia told a story of the great fish in the pond. She said people would go to the water and never return.

The story is about a girl who became pregnant. Her father felt shamed and pointed his finger at every boy in the village, but no one had known his daughter and he returned to his home. He cast her out of the family home when she refused to speak the name of her unborn child's father. She went to the pond where she sought shelter in a hollow log. When it was time to give birth, she tried to crawl out, but she was stuck like a swollen blood clot. She cried for help, but no one would help push her through. She gave birth while staring at a small circle of leaf covered ground just beyond the shadow of the log. There were no baby screams. At the thought of her stillborn child, sadness and relief streamed from her eyes dripping into the soft grain of crumbling, ashen wood.

The people looked on in silence as the girl cried alone inside the log.

And suddenly an overwhelming gasp echoed throughout the surrounding woods. There was a flop on the ground and a fish fell into the pond.

After three days, the girl was able to back out of the log. She sat on a large rock next to the pond and watched her fish swim in circles around and around. He was a sunfish, happy to see his mother for the first time, who smiled proudly as he leapt out of the water, but she wept because she could not swim.

Day after day, she watched as her fish grew, swimming in circles, larger and larger. The people of the village gathered on the opposite side of the pond. The girl went away.

Many winters passed. People from the village went to the pond and never returned. The sunfish swimming in circles, larger and larger, causing a tide that washed the feet of the people standing on the banks, their feet sinking into mud.

“I thought the fish ate the people,” Ian said with his feet out of the water.

“Not all of the people were eaten,” Lydia replied perched on a large rock, skimming the surface with the sole of her foot. “The story goes that brave men were consumed when they dove into the water to kill the great fish. It is also believed that the fish would walk on land to devour the people.”

“Fish can’t walk on land,” Ian retorted.

“Others say that the fish could speak and lured many villagers into the water.”

“Fish can’t talk.”

Paul quietly listened, drawing circles in the mud with a twig.

Paul idles in his car on the shoulder of East-West Highway, trying to remember the way Lydia told those stories passed down from her father and grandfather. Paul sees the subjects clearly in his mind, but he can’t hear the inflection of her voice or the emphasis she placed on particular words like *balance* and *relationships*. From the pavement stretching out in front of him like a rolling spool of string, ghostly heat rises. Paul wipes beads of sweat from his face as he looks through the car window, down to the quarantined pond, to the men scooping out the dead fish and animals. He remembers watching Lydia tell her stories for hours on her front porch or at the pond during sun set, her long,

straight black hair like her father's pulled neatly into a ponytail, flowing down her back or bending around her neck like a dark river.

“Lydia!” he yelled, flipping a turtle away when they were children.

“Lydia!”

The water swallowed his shoes and socks, spreading up his pants leg.

“Lydia!” he shouted again. The harsh tone bounced back from the trees. His legs moved forward, churning the water into mud, sending wave after wave further and further. The echoes were unbearable, striking a discord with what seemed actual sound. “Lydia!”

He bent to dive when she rose with a handful of mud. It seemed that she had been under water for ages. Paul's entire body seemed to crumble as the rush of blood subsided.

She labored to the bank and smeared her muddy hands over his face.

They wrestled into the water and he felt her skin for the first time. She broke free and swam back to the middle of the pond. He flailed behind, weighted by his uniform, awkward in his shoes. Their splashing laughter resounded. He seized her ankle and reached for her head, but she kicked high in the air and dove down again. This time she brought up a tiny root in a handful of mud as he treaded water. She smeared his head again and they smelled the swamp mud smell as it streaked down into his eyes and mouth. He quit laughing and dove, but one of his shoes kicked off and he became confused. The pressure in his ears tightened. He sunk whirling. Whirling. Whirling. His vest rising and twisting around like a

straight-jacket. His instincts screamed a mute scream and his lungs filled with water, the expelled bubbles leading him to the light. He broke the panicked surface flailing and choking on water.

Lydia found a small white stone in the clump of mud.

“Help!” he gasped. “Lydia!”

She put the stone under her tongue, wrapped her arm around his chest from behind and pulled him to shallow water. He sank into the mud, crawling on hands and knees to the bank.

Walking back through the woods, they didn’t say anything to each other. Lydia chuckled at the squish of Paul’s footsteps, missing one shoe.

Paul’s mother, Isabel, was a stout Italian woman. From her front steps, she called to Lydia’s father who was out working in his yard. He stuck his shovel upright into the ground and crossed the street to speak with her.

“Have you seen the children recently, Mr. Clark?”

“No.”

“Do you know where they were going?” she asked in an old world accent. “We have a function at the church tonight. The priest personally requested Paul to help during Easter ceremonies this year.”

“I’m sure Paul will perform his duties well. He is a good boy. Unfortunately, Lydia didn’t say where they were going, but they were headed in the direction of the woods.”



“You should come to St. Mary’s with us this year for Easter. You can sit with us during mass. Lydia and Paul could start going to Sunday school together and if you convert, they could go to communion and confession together.”

“I don’t believe that my wife and I will be able to attend the mass, but I will ask Lydia if she is interested.”

“What church do you belong to?”

“We do not belong to anything like that. We have our own places, annual gatherings and stories that we hold sacred.”

“Are they Christian?”

“No.”

“Then you have never been Christened or Baptized? You’ve never been saved?”

“Saved from what or who?” he replied.

“From your sins. From the devil,” her voice rose like a preacher.

“There are too many devils. We cannot be saved from them all.”

“Well, either you believe in God and go to heaven or you don’t and go to hell. How will you get into heaven?”

“The same way as you,” he said and started to walk away. “If I see the kids, I’ll let Paul know you are waiting for him.” He went inside rather than returning to his yard work.

A few minutes later, Lydia and Paul appeared from the woods. Lydia jumped up and banged the yellow and black “Dead End” sign with her hand and

Isabel looked up from sweeping her front steps. Paul was slouching and seemed to limp. Isabel watched them like an eagle stalks prey, ready to sink her talons. She could not believe the barbarous sight before her.

“What have you heathens been doing?” When she got angry, her Italian accent became more pronounced.

“Nothing,” Paul replied.

“Don’t sass me. You’re soaked and covered in mud! Where’s your other shoe? Were you swimming in that pond?” Her body was rigid with a hand raised. Paul instinctively shuddered.

“Yes, but we...”

“Paul, you are grounded!”

“But she pulled me in...”

“I don’t want to hear it,” she cut him off, shooting a bitter look towards Lydia who was standing on her front porch across the street. Her father emerged to see the commotion and meet Isabel’s glare, but remained silent.

“Look at your filthy uniform. It’s ruined. You are not allowed out of the house for two weeks,” declared Isabel. “What would I do if something happened to you?” Her wrath ignited when Paul’s wet ear slipped from her punishing grip.

Lydia’s father waited until Isabel pushed Paul inside and slammed the front door before he spoke.

“Did you swim to the bottom?”

“Yes. I brought mud up and smeared him with it.”

Her father smiled. “That sounds like fun. You know, I couldn’t swim to the bottom until I was eleven.”

“Paul is not a good swimmer. He wore his clothes and swallows the water,” she said, holding the white stone in her palm.

Ian’s family moved to the neighborhood when Paul and Lydia were twelve. He was the same age, but taller than Paul with stylish blond hair and blue eyes. His family bought one of the new houses a few blocks east. They moved to Maryland from the south or mid-west. Their contributions to the local Baptist church were highly esteemed every Sunday.

On a Saturday, Ian followed Lydia and Paul through the woods. He watched as they stopped to gather wild blackberries and red raspberries. It was after Labor Day and the humidity was low. Berries were ripe for the harvest.

Paul and Lydia knew someone was there, but continued quietly. They worked quickly because they wanted to get to the pond to watch the sun set. The red and black stained their fingers like ink. They took only enough berries for a treat because a doe and her fawn fed from the bushes. Sometimes, they would be feeding as Lydia and Paul approached, fleeing as soon as they caught the human scent. Lydia and Paul listened to them gallop off through the branches and drying leaves. The day Ian followed, there were fresh tracks in the soil.

When they turned towards the path to Turtle Pond, Ian approached.

“I’m Ian,” he said.

“I’m Paul and this is Lydia.”

“Where are you going?” asked Ian.

“To the pond.”

“I’ll come too.”

At the pond, Lydia and Paul set the basket of berries between them on a large rock. They unpacked the bread they’d brought for the turtles and fish, tore the white slices into pieces and dropped them onto the bank just out of the water. Quickly, slider turtles clambered to feed, stepping on each other, their shells clumsy out of water, grinding closer and closer. Lydia and Paul stayed above on their rock, eating one berry at a time, sucking all of the flavor from each one.

Yellow blended into red and darkness as the sun touched the vibrant horizon behind them.

Ian squatted and grabbed a few berries.

“I’ve never had berries like this before,” he proclaimed and grabbed another handful. The black and red juices ran down his chin, staining his white starched collared shirt as he laughed. His mouth stuffed with as many berries as it could hold. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve when there were no more.

“Those stains won’t come out of your shirt.”

“So?”

Ian picked up a rock and skipped it across the pond.

“Did you see that? I bet you can’t skip one that far,” he declared.

“We don’t throw rocks into the pond because we like to swim. The rocks hurt our feet.”

Ian picked up another stone and skipped it just as far.

“Do the turtles bite?” he asked.

“Of course, but I don’t think they see very well. Watch how they eat.”

Ian leaned over and touched one on the head. It snapped at his finger as if it were a white piece of bread. He kicked the unrepentant turtle back into the water. “That bastard tried to bite me!” he said kicking a different one onto its back. He left the turtle rocking back and forth on its shell, its head and all four legs whirling.

“You shouldn’t have touched it,” Lydia said, gently flipping the frantic turtle upright. It’s flat belly rubbing the ground as it scrambled back to the water. She threw the rest of the bread away from the bank and the turtles went away. It was the first time she and Paul left the pond before the sun had completely set.

The berry bushes were bare the following week and the deer tracks were gone.

“Look at a tree,” Lydia said to Paul a few days later when Ian was not around. “See how the small branches feed into bigger and bigger boughs that all feed into the trunk of the tree growing out of the ground. Father says that when you look at a map, all of the creeks and tributaries that feed into rivers that feed into the Chesapeake Bay look like a tree growing out of the ocean. It’s the same as looking at the side of a mountain. The water and wind have worn crevices into the rock that become wider towards the bedrock.” Paul noticed how they resembled lightning bolts as well. Lydia watched the ripples grow from the splash of a minnow. The tiny ripples bounced off the bank.

“Trees grow toward the sun,” she continued, “finding a balance among the other trees so there is enough sunlight and rain to feed them all. When something is in the way of a tree, it learns to grow around it in order to survive. Just like the water. When something is in the way, it flows around it.” She paused for moment. “Only the rocks and mountains last forever.

“Everyone believes that they and their people are the center of the universe. That they are chosen. When you listen long enough, they’re right.”

Lydia and Paul stayed at the pond until the red sun set, holding hands, quietly listening to the croakers and frogs feeding on bugs at the surface.

It was after Thanksgiving a couple of years later. Christmas lights were strewn along every angle of the façade. An electric Santa pulled by eight shining reindeer chanted “Ho! Ho! Ho!” from the roof. The yard was freshly manicured. Paul and Lydia stood for a moment watching the flashing lights when the side-porch door opened.

“Don’t go to the front door,” Ian said. “Come in this way.”

“Your parents must spend all of their spare time working in the yard,” Lydia said.

“We don’t work in the yard. We pay a company that sends a group of spics out here to do it.” Paul shot a quick look at him.

“Sorry,” Ian said. “I thought you were Italian.”

“My mother is Italian. My father’s father was from Spain.”

“I meant Mexicans, anyway.”

“That’s a shame. It’s a lovely yard,” observed Lydia.

They entered through a storage room adjacent to the kitchen. Shelves packed with cans, bags, and other containers of food covered two of the walls. Two full-sized refrigerators hummed in a corner. Dusty bottles of wine lay in a rack mounted next to a cabinet filled with liquor bottles of every shape and color.

“My parents like to entertain,” remarked Ian, “Each year, they have a huge Christmas party with all of our relatives and friends. Last year, the governor stopped by with some people from Dad’s office. The first year was funny because we were eaten out of house and home. The party was just getting going and we were completely out of wine and the only food left were saltines. We sent most of the serving staff out for more supplies, but of course, everyone was leaving by the time they returned and we ended up throwing most of it away. Mother said ‘never again’ the next morning and had this room remodeled and stocked by President’s Day.”

He led them down a hallway to one of the living rooms where about a dozen teenagers were standing or sitting near the white brick hearth. A blazing fire flickered across polished, redwood floors and pearl white walls. Drapes made of red fabric were embroidered with black and yellow crescents hidden in the folds. On the coffee table, end tables and resting in sconces on the walls, candles burned nearly to the nubs and puffed every once in awhile when the air was disturbed. The room seemed too large for an intimate gathering and yet not quite large enough.

The boys were dressed in dark sport coats, ties and slacks. The sport coats of the older boys had an insignia embroidered over the left breast. The girls wore white blouses or sweaters and proper skirts.

“Everyone, this is Paul and Lydia. They live a few blocks away on Nanticoke. Paul goes to St. Mary’s. Where do you go, Lydia?”

“Fairmont Heights.”

“That’s a public high school, right?”

“Yes.”

“Paul and Lydia are the ones who led me to the pond we partied at last week.”

“Wasn’t someone shot at Fairmont Heights last week?” someone asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s an awful school. Why don’t your parents send you somewhere else?”

“We’re not Catholic and we can’t afford the other private schools around here,” replied Lydia. The others smiled and turned back to their chatter.

“What do you want to drink?” Ian asked.

“I’ll take a soda,” Paul replied and the people nearby laughed.

“My parents are out and I have a fully stocked bar.”

“Except during communion, I’ve never drank alcohol,” said Paul and Ian chuckled.

“The blood of Christ it is,” said Ian, pouring a glassful and handing it to Paul. “And for you, *madam*?”



“Nothing, thank you.”

“I know what you’ll like, a Manhattan. I’ll add extra sweet vermouth so you won’t be able to taste the whiskey.”

“Just give her fire water,” one of the boys joked and the others laughed. The sheen of her long black hair reflected the red and yellow of the fire. A coal exploded from a burning log into the fireplace screen. Everyone but Lydia jumped. Ian spilled some of the whiskey. Startled ice cubes clinked from glass to glass. She watched the coal burn into white ash, stuck in the screen, while the others rubbed out imaginary burns in their slacks.

“I won’t even charge you the twenty-four dollars,” Ian said, handing Lydia the drink.

Lydia relocated to a chair in the corner. The air was much cooler away from the fire, but sipping the Manhattan warmed her inside. The burning sweetness smothered her tongue. One of the young men thought he recognized Paul from the St. Mary’s soccer team and asked if he played.

“Yes,” Paul replied.

“You almost won the championship last year.”

“Yeah, our goalie got sick and the backup misread an attack during the playoffs.”

“We play you next week and we’ve got a pretty good team this year. You’ll have your hands full.”

Unlike the watery wine at communion, these spirits were uplifting to Paul. He moved closer to the fire. “Even though our captain graduated, we’re

still solid," he replied. "One of our forwards has already been contacted by a pro-scout."

"Oh yeah. Which forward?" he asked.

"Joe Brant."

After a second glass, Paul moved closer to the fire. He rested his arm on top of the white bricks, in the same posture as the others.

"Ian, I hear your parents are investing in a development company," someone said. A few of the others hushed.

"Yeah," he said, looking around the room, "but Dad doesn't want me talking about it." Looking at his friends, he quickly gestured at Paul who was taking another drink and they nodded.

"Come on. What's your old man up to now?" another voice prodded.

Ian finished his drink and contemplated the fire through his empty glass, making the others wait. Once the room was silent except for the crackling fire, he curved his lips into a smirk. "You know how father is involved in real estate," he said. "Well, the county is building a road through the woods past the dead end at the bottom of the hill where the streets converge. They're going to turn the pond into a public recreation area, but we've invested in the rest of land on both sides of the highway. There's a plan to build townhouses, single family homes, and a new strip mall."

"They can't build a road here," Paul blurted out too loud. "What about the woods and our trails?"

"That's the county's decision."

"But the pond is sacred. Why didn't anyone tell us?"

"It's not public yet."

"Then how do you know about it?"

Ian shrugged his shoulders and excused himself from the group.

"Ian's dad knows how to play the game," someone said as Ian sauntered toward Lydia. "He's the man."

Lydia's glass was empty.

"Let me get you another."

"Only half full this time," she giggled.

Ian's face flickered in the light as he filled her glass to the brim.

"Come sit with us," he said.

"You and your friends don't seem to want my company," she replied in a tone that was unintentionally playful, "and your fire is scorching." She felt uneasy looking at the glass in her hand, but a cloudy sense of euphoria settled around her and she drank. Her words felt muddy coming out of her mouth, but also giddy. She tried to stand, but lost her balance and sat down again in a fit of giggles. Ian smiled.

"You look like you need another sip."

"Maybe I shouldn't," she said, regaining a bit of composure.

"Come over here," a tall young man with dimples called out from the sofa.

Ian held her hand and herded her towards a place in between the young man with dimples and a young woman with blond hair and dark roots. As Lydia sat down on the soft white pillows, she felt as if she were falling over a cliff.

After a few more drinks, the others thanked their wonderful host and departed chuckling at Paul and Lydia, who had fallen asleep on the couch. Only the young man with dimples, Ian and another young man remained. They huddled next to the fire, glancing over their shoulders at the sleepers. Paul roused when the fire popped as loud as a gun.

“We’d better get home,” he said, looking around at the dark, empty room. His eyes couldn’t focus and he swayed back and forth.

“You’re trashed. Why don’t you let us drop Lydia off at her house?”

“No. I’d better walk her home.” His words seemed far away.

“You can barely take yourself,” Ian rebutted. “We’d be happy to do it. You can ride with us.” The others uttered something sharp at this, but Ian silenced their outburst with a look.

“We’ll take you home first,” he added. “You can sit up front.”

Paul passed out in the front seat. In the rearview mirror, the driver watched Ian and the young man with dimples grope Lydia in back. Confused and barely conscious, whirling like a gyre, Lydia couldn’t understand what was happening to her. Her eyes saw a hazy darkness blinded by painful bright flashes that seemed to glut the entire car. She felt the numb sensation of her hands being forced over pleated slacks until her hand was scratched by a plastic zipper and rubbed against smooth flesh. She felt insistent, grabbing hands all over. As the

car stopped in front of Paul's house, the world was tumbling and Lydia retched, throwing up onto everything in the car. Paul gagged as the stench blasted him out of the door.

"God damn whore!" Ian shouted, kicking the door open. He stamped out of the car and wiped the dripping vomit from his sport coat. The vomit splattered onto the street and his red leather shoes.

"Get that disgusting bitch out of my car!" demanded the driver, who felt the warm, rancid ooze on the back of his neck seep into his collar. The young man with dimples smashed his foot into her side while Ian grabbed her arm and pulled her out. Paul winced as Lydia's head thudded against the pavement. Her shirt was stretched and disheveled, stuck in the metal teeth of her unzipped zipper.

"God damn it!" Ian cursed as he slammed the back door. He zipped up his pants and jumped into the unoccupied front seat. The car squealed away.

Lydia retched again. Her stomach ached with dry heaves and she squirmed on the pavement like one-half of a worm cut in two. The bottom of her denim skirt was pulled tight above her hips. Paul stared a moment at her faded red, cotton panties. A bare breast aroused and shamed him. He touched it. His rapid breath was thick, illuminated by the fluorescent street light. Speeding headlights were coming down the street. Paul dragged Lydia up over the curb as quickly as he could. The car passed without stopping. Lydia's knees bled and darkness spread through the torn, disheveled fabric around her elbows. The porch light at Lydia's house clicked on and a face moved aside the curtains. Paul left Lydia splayed on the stiff brown grass and staggered home.

“I knew this would happen,” Isabel told Paul the next morning. She was pleased to see sweat beading on his forehead as he climbed the ladder again and again to hang Christmas lights and garland. At every rung, his butt hurt from the paddling his father had given him earlier. Paul had already raked and bagged the last of the dead leaves that were crammed into the corners of the fence, the flower boxes and every other nook of the yard. Every beat of his heart pounded inside his head like a bass drum.

“You are not allowed to see Lydia or any other member of that ungodly family again. I don’t want to see you sitting on her porch listening to those ridiculous stories. I don’t want you going into those woods either. You get into nothing but trouble out there. Don’t look at me that way. You two did this to yourself. Now stop lollygagging and get back to work. You still need to clean out the gutters and I want the shed straightened and swept. You obviously have a great deal of free time on your hands and if you’re old enough to get drunk like a man, you’re old enough to work like one.”

After a long bath, Lydia emerged from the steamy bathroom in fresh pajamas and a towel wrapped around her aching head. The cuts stung and the bruises were sore to the touch, but she felt clean again.

“What happened last night?” her father asked at the kitchen table.

“Paul and I went to a party at Ian’s. Do you know him?”

“I know of his father.”

“His parents were out and he gave me a drink called a Manhattan. It was too sweet, but I drank it anyway. I didn’t realize how much it affected me until I couldn’t stand up. Everything was funny for awhile, but I can’t remember much.”

“Why did you do this?”

“I don’t know. Everything seemed alright at first. Other than Paul, I don’t have many friends and no one that I call to hang around with. I wanted to meet someone else my age in the neighborhood.”

“The people who own those new houses are very different from us. They do not look at the world the same way that we do. You will need to be careful if you decide to deal with them.”

“Ian said that they are going to build a highway through our woods.”

“I have heard this too, but many of our neighbors do not wish to fight it. They say that their property values will go up and that the highway will make travel much more convenient. But there have been rumors like this for years. Did Ian say when this would begin?”

“He didn’t say when the road will be built, but it sounds as though the wheels are already set in motion.”

Isabel would not reconsider Paul’s punishment so he and Lydia quit spending time together. Lydia tried to pass him notes asking him to meet her in the woods, but Paul didn’t want to get into trouble. He never replied. She considered going to Sunday school in order to see Paul and get into Isabel’s good graces, but Ian and his friends started showing up at the pond nearly every

weekend with a few swiped liquor bottles or a couple of cases of beer. They stole wood from construction sites and in the woods near the pond, built a little fort that could hold about eight people. If Lydia decided not to attend church, she could either stop going to the pond for fear of running into Ian and his friends or she could go and join them. They could not be ignored.

By late spring, Lydia was spending more than weekends with Ian and his friends.

Dark circles grew under her eyes and her walk lost its pace. Her grades suffered.

Just after Independence Day, on an unusually pleasant Saturday, Lydia's father sat with her on the front porch. It was mid-morning and she had just gotten out of bed. Her head ached and she rubbed her pounding eyes and temples. She smoked. He listened to her inhale.

"Did you see in the news that coyotes have returned to neighborhoods near here?" he asked.

"No," she answered, exhaling smoke through her nostrils.

"Your grandfather told me that several packs of coyotes used to live in the woods. All of this used to be woods. Our house and one on the next street were the first two for miles around. This is why ours is different from the others. Your grandfather believed that all of this land would be ours forever. But, someone planted stakes with bright little flags and soon, a hundred houses were built where woods and fields once were. The coyotes left. Now, they have no where else to go so they have returned."



“That’s great. I’ve never seen one.”

“No. People are afraid of coyotes. They kill what they fear.”

“I see.”

After a few moments, her father continued, speaking clearly, choosing each word carefully.

"Remember the story of the great fish?"

“Yes. I used to tell it to Paul.”

“Grandfather said that Coyote remained after the great fish had killed or frightened away most of the other animals. The great fish seemed to favor the cunning beast, allowing him to eat the scraps and walk unharmed wherever he chose. The people were starving and cold. They were afraid to leave their village because the fish would raze their homes or kill them in the woods as they hunted and gathered what scarce food remained. Coyote told them that he knew where to find food and warm clothes. Some of the people chose to follow him, but they never returned.

"The living elders gathered.

"The great fish is angry with us and will not show mercy. We are hunted on our trails and in our woods. We gather food with the peril of our lives. Our homes become widowed. We wait to be delivered from this land, but are deceived. In our waiting, we have watched for a nation that cannot save us. Our lamentations sound unheard."

"Did coyote know the young girl?" Lydia asked.

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"The elders knew that they could not appease the insatiable fish. The people went away."

On a blistering, humid day in August, Lydia followed Paul to the pond. The fruit was dried up along the dusty trails. The woods seemed covered in dust. It hadn't rained for several weeks and the drought scourged the entire state. Leaves decayed along the edges, brittle to the touch. The pond waters were as low as they had ever seen. A few dead fish floated among beer cans, used condoms, and pond scum. The turtles and frogs were covered in the swampy muck. Starvation and heat made them aggressive. The horseflies were pitiless. Lydia swatted one on her neck. Its blood trickled until she smeared it across her sweaty skin. Countless more swarmed around her shoeing hands.

Paul stood on the rock, throwing pieces of bread to the clambering turtles. Their dry mouths made a horrible sound unlike anything Paul had ever known. Even the sunfish and croakers were fighting over the scraps. He heard Lydia approach.

Without facing her, he said, "There was a time when you would make me jump because I couldn't hear you come. I'd laugh and act as if I knew you were coming, but it always made me mad. Not because of you, but because of how you made me feel about myself."

"I thought you weren't allowed to come here any more."

“Mom is visiting her sister this weekend and I wanted to see the pond again. I’ve missed being able to come here. I’ve missed you.” He waited, but she said nothing. He saw the simple fort surrounded by trash. “Where’s Ian?”

“I’m not allowed to see him anymore. His father threatened to call the police and make things difficult for my father if I called or stepped onto their property,” she replied. “It doesn’t matter. Ian won’t talk to me anyway.”

“I see.”

“Paul, I’m pregnant,” she said coldly. “I’m being sent to a boarding school and mercy home.”

“Is it Ian’s?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” she answered. She stood below on the ground and the angle allowed him to look between her breasts to a swollen belly. The sun was directly behind him, forming a merciless halo around his head as she peered up into his shadowy face. She noticed how much he had grown. She could see the shape of the man he would become.

He handed her some bread and she smiled. She threw the bread to the turtles and reached into her pocket.

“Remember the first time we swam in this pond?” she asked. “I found a white stone. I’ve carried it with me ever since. I want you to have it. It’s polished smooth by water and time and the oils from my fingers.”

Paul stepped down and the sun blinded her. The pain was sharp and she instinctively looked away. She handed him the stone and whispered a name in his ear.

She removed her sandals and stepped into the dense scum that seemed to swarm around her ankles. She stopped swatting at horseflies and they fed. After a couple of steps, she felt a sharp pain and lifted her foot. Blood ran thin down her heel, forming a red pool marbling in dark algae and bits of bloated white bread.

Her face turned ghostly pale. “Maybe your mother is right, Paul,” she said smiling. “Maybe there is a Catholic god.”

During the summer after graduation, Lydia returned from boarding school. Paul hadn’t seen or heard from her in two years. A For Sale sign stood in her front yard. Unforgiving machines with thick metal jaws began clearing the woods for the new East-West Highway. The old trails to Turtle Pond were gone. Construction workers were clearing space for a parking lot and tennis courts. New apartment and shopping complexes were designed to overlook the pond and its manicured beauty. The county commissioner decided to change the names of the streets in the surrounding neighborhoods to create a more appealing, marketable theme “celebrating the American passion for exploration and discovery.”

“East-West Highway hastens towards completion,” the commissioner announced borrowing an old line. “We are on the threshold of a destiny higher and better than any county has yet fulfilled.”

Turtle Pond became known as Captain John Smith Recreational Park and Pond. Nanticoke Street changed to Coronado Avenue. Piscataway Cul-de sac

changed to Lewis and Clark Court. Now,” the commissioner declared in a honey-tongued voice, “we have room to live.”

Paul sat with Lydia on her front porch. Her skin had become sallow. They could hear trunks snapping like twigs and massive engines endlessly churning. Smoke rose behind the remaining line of trees.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Paul.

“I’m going to New York with some friends,” she said lighting a cigarette.

“You’re not going to college?”

“No.”

“Did you hear that Ian is going to Yale?”

“I heard.”

“Why don’t you stay here with me and take some classes,” he said too cheerily. “You could write the stories you used to tell when we were growing up.”

“No. The schools won’t want them. I’m going to New York,” she smiled showing neglected teeth. “I want to follow the game. You’re staying in Maryland. You can tell the stories. They belong here anyway.”

“I don’t know the stories like you do. You must write...”

“Why?”

“So they can be saved.”

“Stories are meant to change. They belong to the land as well as the people. Things happen and the stories are told by new people. The past is still a

part of them all the way back to the beginning, but they grow and move. If they are written, it would be as if they were stuck in the same season.”

“But they’re your stories. And the stories of your father.”

“No,” she said. “We belong to the stories,” but she hesitated and turned. “I’ve been told not to tell them anymore anyways. They’re nothing more than primitive tales that weaken the spirit.”

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

He listened patiently to her drag on a cigarette; she inhaled the smoke deeply and held it for what seemed a long time.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe.”

They sat quietly and listened to the sounds of construction. They watched a thick cloud of dust rise beyond the line of trees and obscure the sun.

“Whatever happened to the people who survived the great sunfish?” he asked.

“What?”

“You remember. The young girl and the sunfish.”

She smiled, remembering. “The people left the area for many generations, but they told the story of the sunfish and the young girl to their children. The land where they moved became very dry. There was no place to plant crops. There were no more animals to hunt. When they were starving and the time came for them to move again, a young woman and a young man stepped forward and said that they wanted to return to the land of their ancestors. ‘We want to eat fish from

Turtle Pond, hunt in the ancient woods, and gather berries and nuts as in the old days.' The others feared the great sunfish in the pond and the coyotes.

"The two young people said that they could slay the terrible fish. They had seen the way.

"They journeyed to the ancient woods and felt strength in the sacred land. The young woman gathered deadwood and built a huge bonfire on a mound above the pond. The young man gathered four round stones as large as he could carry and placed them on the bonfire. Now, there were many great fish swimming in circles larger and larger. The young man and young woman tended the fire for three consecutive days and nights without sleeping, keeping the coals as hot as the sun. At dawn on the fourth morning, they used a solid oak bough to push the stones out of the fire, rolling them down the mound with the sounds of hoof-beats into the pond. The waters boiled. The many great fish jumped high, flailing, sinking their great jaws into each other as the waters evaporated around them. They tried to climb out to safety toward the young man and young woman, but they could only fight amongst themselves, pulling each other back down into the hole where the pond had once been. They were burned on the red hot stones. Only their skulls and bones remained.

"The people returned and built another village, never forgetting the great fish and the young girl and the young couple. In time, rain filled the pond with life again. It is said that this will be the beginning of a new world: the fourth and final world."

"What happened to your baby?" Paul asked.

“I had to give him away,” she said, looking at the dust cloud.

“To whom?”

“To a couple who attends a Baptist church near the boarding school.”

“Will you ever be able to see him?”

“No.”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know.”

Paul read both newspaper stories on the same day: “Local Fisherman Catches a Northern Snakehead in Captain John Smith’s Pond” and “Local Woman Found Buried in Brotherton, New Jersey.”

“Lydia Clark, twenty-two, of Maryland was discovered yesterday buried in a wooded area of Brotherton, New Jersey. She and her fiancé, John M. Chivington, lived in a New York City suburb. New Jersey and New York detectives believe that Ms. Clark was interred approximately three days before she was discovered. Her body was mutilated and she appears to have suffered a severe blow to the head. However, there is evidence that she was buried alive. Her body was found by a local youth out hunting. Mr. Chivington, a respected thirty-three year old stockbroker, had not reported Ms. Clark missing. He was not charged.”

“Two months ago, Andy Jackson caught a strange looking beast with the shining body of a fish and the head of a snake. Inside its powerful jaws were



long, canine-like teeth. Thinking he'd caught an endangered species, Andrew took a snapshot and released it back into John Smith Pond. He sent the picture to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources where it sat in a pile of red tape until someone realized what they were seeing. *Chana argus argus*, commonly known as the Northern Snakehead is an old world fish, native to the Orient and northern Africa. The fish is known for its insatiable appetite and its ability to "walk" on land, using its almighty fins to push it from one body of water to another.

"These fish are like something from a bad movie,' the U.S. Interior Secretary remarked. 'They consume virtually anything in their path. They can travel across land and live out of water for more than three days. They reproduce quickly. They have the potential to cause enormous damage to our valuable recreational and commercial fisheries because they will feed on native fish, amphibians, crustaceans, small reptiles and mammals. They are likely to compete with native species for territory. They will spread parasites and pathogens into native species as well.'

"Several snakeheads have been caught in John Smith Pond, which is located only two hundred yards from the Little Patuxent River. It is possible that they have already discovered the Little Patuxent River that feeds into the Patuxent and the Chesapeake Bay. This species can be extremely aggressive. They are tireless in their resolve and steadfastness. According to a University of Maryland scientist, 'We could be witnessing ecological genocide.'"

“Maryland’s Legislature has officially added the fish to the list of invasive species. Anyone who catches a Snakehead should NOT release it back into the water, but should kill it by any means necessary. It is not sufficient to leave it out of water as it is capable of crawling on land. The fish should be bled to death and reported to the local authorities. Rewards have been offered in some areas.

“A meeting between scientists and Federal and local officials concluded that the best action will be to destGeorge all Snakeheads in John Smith Pond.”

On television, the Maryland Governor held a conference that discussed many of the complicated details concerning the snakehead problem, but his judgment was simple, ‘Exterminate the beasts.’”

The lines in Lydia’s father’s face had worn deeper. The skin on his fingertips was cracked and scabbed. His hair cropped gray. While Lydia was at the boarding school, he fought hard to stop the county’s construction of East-West Highway, but new neighbors threatened and harassed him. The day the papers were signed on television with great political fanfare, he broke his hand punching a hole in his living room wall. Until moving west last year, he used the Nanticoke Street address on all correspondence. Paul did not speak to him at the funeral even though the two men stood next to each other. There were no goodbyes or exchanges of addresses. Not even a nod.

The pond is poisoned.

Paul wipes the beading sweat from his face and stinging eyes before looking down at John Smith Pond from his car parked on the shoulder.

Overnight, barbed wire fences were erected around the entire recreational area.

Paul's stomach growls. "I must stay until the sunset," he thinks, rubbing the small white stone.

Inside the fence, men in yellow bio-hazard suits row canoes scooping out several generations of snakeheads and indigenous species. Several tightly tied, black plastic bags are stacked on the path. The late fall day is unseasonably hot and humid. The napkin Paul had been using to wipe his face disintegrated into a white filthy mush in his hand. He pulls his soaked shirt from his chest and stomach. He can barely stand to smell himself. There is not a cloud in the sky and the sun is almost white, it burns so hot. Paul tries not to imagine how awful it must be in those protective suits.

Scientists used rotenone, a natural herbicide made from the legume family. When the canister seals were opened and the pond sprayed, the rotenone burned out all of the oxygen. Croakers, sunfish, turtles, frogs, snakes, everything in the water suffocated and drowned with the snakeheads. Scientists used this particular herbicide because it burns itself out naturally. The pond will be habitable again in less than a month.

"Excuse me, sir." A policeman raps on the window and Paul jumps. "Is everything alright, sir?"

"Yes officer. I was just watching..."

"You can't stay here. You'll have to move along."

“I used to play in these woods when I was growing up.”

“Yes sir. You need to move on.”

“Just beyond that dead end over there...”

“Yes sir. Have you been drinking or taking any kind of drugs?”

“I swam in that pond. We called it Turtle Pond. I need to stay here until the sunset.”

“Sir, I need to see your driver’s license and registration. What’s your name, sir?”

“My name?”

A white daddy longlegs walks over Paul.

“Yes sir. Your name.”

Paul turns away from the sun. “My name is Saul.”

## **The Door of No Return**

They heard voices and scattered into the brittle shrubs that grow along the muddy inlet. The refugees couldn't rely upon the black skin of a new moon to hide them. It was well known that men in this area could see in the darkness. As Mbaye crouched, he felt the weight of the xalam snug against his back, its strings made of twisted fishing lines turned inward to mute their sound.

Mbaye did not know how many others were trying to escape, but he knew by the centuries old smell of harvested fish in the breeze that they were close to the rendezvous point in Thiaroye. The salty ocean seemed so close, Mbaye's mouth watered. The same wind blowing onshore carried the lapping sounds of the waves just beyond the dunes, but Mbaye had to focus not on where he was going, but where he was now, hiding and listening for footsteps. Since the British and Spanish began secretly paying rewards for potential asylum seekers migrating to the Canary Islands, local midnight militias were sprouting all along the West African coast.

Mbaye's skin was of deeper blue-black than most from the Gambia and smooth, very smooth, but this was not comforting as he listened to the laughter and crude jokes of the approaching militiamen. The British and Spanish paid whether the migrants were dead or alive. Local fishermen stopped leaving the harbor before dawn and paid as much attention to the setting sun as they did to the fish caught in their dripping, frayed nets, bleached by sun and saltwater, because they feared the mercenaries at night.

The militiamen voices spoke in a familiar Wolof dialect, but unlike Mbaye's Gambian accent tinged with English, these were saturated with French of the Senegalese capital. As the voices and crunch of booted footsteps grew stronger, Mbaye felt as though the layers of dust and desiccated shrub leaves were swirling up from the baked ground, choking his lungs. A rush of adrenalin staggered him for a moment and his mind wandered back to the musky scent of freshly tilled earth. His breaths were labored, but faint. He felt a snap under his shifting foot.

The voices quieted. The chirps of countless insects swelled to the silence. Mbaye froze as the point of a knife stuck into his side. The threat of the metal steadied his nerves, grounding him back in the moment. He knew it was Amadou N., one of their group, who was so close, Mbaye could smell the cooked millet and ground nuts of sweet *madake* on his breath. In the darkness, he was not even a shadow.

Amadou N. did not speak French, English or Wolof. He was of Serer ancestry from a northwestern region in Senegal and only spoke his native Serer tongue. The Serer were a proud people, but found their power diminished by generations of Wolof majority. Amadou N. was short with the thick arms of a blacksmith. The people deserted his village after years of drought and warlord raids. He was always accompanied by a friend and translator, Ndeye, who was also Serer, but had learned Wolof and bits of French and English in the village markets, peddling his family's baskets from Matam to Banjul to Dakar.

Mbaye felt the seam of his long shirt, rubbing the soft material between his fingers. It was nearly impossible to tell in the darkness, but its color was a deep turquoise rather than black. Now that the voices had hushed and were waiting, the color seemed to scream out in the night.

A match flared to light a cigarette and the militiamen voices rose in laughter, indifferent to the fear they instilled around them. There was no movement in the shrubs, even after the heavy footsteps had faded. Only the oblivious song of insects. A trickle of blood soaked into the turquoise of Mbaye's shirt from the pressure of Amadou N.'s knife. A human voice barked like a rodent and was quickly answered from several haphazard places off the path, and the earth exhaled, but the pressure of Amadou N.'s knife lingered. There was no order here.

"That close," Ndeye whispered in Serer.

The sound of Ndeye's voice seemed to make up the metal's mind as the sharp point was withdrawn and pushed back into its protective sheath. Mbaye turned quickly to face Amadou N., but he had already gone ahead. Mbaye stuck his finger into the hole where the knife had been and became angered by the insult. He readjusted the xalam on his back and followed as the others moved toward the sea.

Mbaye was superstitious about this area below the Cape Verde peninsula. It looked out to Goree Island, a place known as "the door of no return," where it was said the ghosts of slaves, sold over the centuries to Arabs and Europeans by

feuding tribes, capsized the splintered *cayuco* boats, packed like sardines with desperate men and women, trying to escape their Motherland for dreams of prosperity on European soil.

Being unwed, Mbaye was still considered a boy in his village even though he was twenty-three and stronger than every man he'd ever met. His father died when he was seventeen and Mbaye worked the family farmlands along the north-central shores of the Gambia River by himself. After years of beating the half-starved, dumb oxen to death, Mbaye pulled the rusted plow himself through sun-baked dirt, trying to force life into the dusty seams where water was too scarce, only to see the rains come early that last year, drowning the few sprouts that speckled the landscape. His strength and stubbornness were both admired and pitied by his neighbors.

Several small groups converged at the meeting time, an hour or so before dawn. They were a mix of tribes from all over western Africa. Wolof, Fulbe, Serer, Soninke, Jolof, Tukuloor, Mandingos, Malinke, Baols. They were mostly tattered men, many no more than scarecrows, but also a handful of veiled women, every one of them holding at least one child either by the hand or cradled in their arms. There were no elders present, only the young and middle-aged.

The shallow *cayuco* fishing boat they would use to escape could not have been more than twenty feet long and there was no canopy to shade them from the sun, only the exposed, wooden ribs that held the boat together. The three hundred mile voyage north would take over a week, if everything went well. Several



planks were rotten and soft. Three buckets floated in more than an inch of water in the bottom of the boat and it was clear that these simple buckets were vital to the success of the journey. A low-powered, rusting outboard engine hung off the back of the boat. The tiny bow was packed with fuel drums, water casks and food. Not enough for fifty people. Mbaye touched one of the curved sides and picked at the flaking, bright blue-green paint. This comforted Mbaye somewhat because the color was known to keep evil spirits away.

The shuffling people did not speak as they waited.

In addition to the xalam, Mbaye, like the others, carried a small satchel that scarcely held enough food and water for a few days. He made his satchel from a change of clothes with the corners held together by safety pins. But, some people held leashes to goats or chickens in crates. They had not known or understood what to expect and knew that they would need something to eat or barter once they arrived at whatever Utopia they envisioned. *Passeurs* were brutally candid when describing the perils of the journey to freedom, but for the desperately poor to leave what little they had and to go with nothing was beyond their scope of reason, so they pulled carts of important things and dragged mangy cows. What remained of the abandoned relics, deemed worthless by scavengers, strewn the coastline for miles.

Finally, a tall man in fine, white clothes arrived and began giving instructions. The skin on his face was dark and pocked. He carried an intricate walking stick with a heavy brass head, and when spoke, it flailed with his hands like a conductor's baton to express what he spoke to those who did not speak his

Wolof tongue. The refugees would have to get on the boat one person at a time, except for mothers and fathers with children, filling in from the back to the front. They could only bring the small satchels. A place must be left for Karamo, he said, pointing to a black, stocky man next him, who had been tinkering with the engine.

“Karamo,” the tall man said, “is captain. He run the boat and know where to go.”

Karamo’s eyes were hidden, but his teeth shown white in the darkness.

“This man carry xalam,” Amadou N. said, pointing at Mbaye.

The tall man said that it must not go. At first, Mbaye didn’t realize that they were speaking about him, but Karamo began marching towards him with something between a smile and a sneer. It wasn’t until he was standing directly in Mbaye’s face, that Mbaye could see Karamo’s yellow eyes. Mbaye fingered the hole in his long shirt. Since he had sold his lands to pay for the voyage, there was no going back.

“My grandfather famous *griot*,” Mbaye said, holding up his hands to keep Karamo from grabbing him. “My name Mbaye. I need xalam to protect boat and people.”

There was commotion among the people. Some of them recognized the name. Stories told about Mbaye’s grandfather had been passed down. Although *griots* were not as respected as in the old ways, their songs were honored by the great kings and said to hold divine power, bringing the past and present together as one. The people were afraid to disturb this divine power. Karamo hesitated.

“Besides,” said Mbaye, “It very small and thin. No need much room.”

Everyone was anxious to get under way. With a wild wave of his arms, the tall man made the decision to allow the instrument. Mbaye and Amadou N. glared at each other's shape in the darkness.

The tiny *cayuco* motor sputtered out beyond the shallows, past Goree Island, turning north once land was barely visible in the distance. They had to look out for warships that patrolled these waters, but unlike the militiamen who hunted for profit and cruel sport, sailors saw the refugees as an inconvenient distraction from fulfilling their higher purpose of protecting the lands of the crown.

With the *cayuco* loaded, it's buoyancy barely kept the waters from crawling over the sides. Several people took turns throwing out bucket after bucket of water that lapped in from the waves and seeped up through holes and cracks in the bottom of the dugout. Many had never been off the land and became seasick. The passengers shifted and scrambled to allow those stricken to sit next to one of the sides. Mbaye was not sickened by the constant motion of the sea, but he gagged from the constant sound of people being sick and the stench that rose from places where they hadn't made it to the side. Mbaye felt especially bad for the children who were ill and he shared some of his water with those near him. The boat was so crowded that he felt as though he couldn't breathe at times. His body would shake and those around him cleared a path to the sides, but then he

would calm down, thanking them for their efforts. The constant sun and heat of the day, even with an occasional ocean breeze, could not ease the wretchedness.

After less than a day, Mbaye hung his sappy shoes over his shoulder and pulled his knees to his chest, holding his painfully pruned feet out of the water as often as he could. Others did the same. Fortunately, the constant motion took away most of their hunger, but this left them weak, dozing often, leaning against one another to keep from toppling over into the filthy water in the bottom of the boat. Bodily functions were especially difficult and messy. Men laughed at the shy women who had to hold on to someone as they attempted to hide their naked bottoms, hung over the sides tickled by the hungry waves.

Mbaye passed the time, glaring at the back of Amadou N.'s head. The brass handle of the knife sticking up from the sheath was blinding in the sunlight.

By the third or fourth day, their muscles and joints ached from not having any room to move and everyone had eaten the little bit of food they carried in their satchels. Karamo remained steady at the engine, which also steered the boat, always keeping the land in sight to their east. A baby whined continually because its mother could no longer feed. Some tried to find landmarks along the distance.

“That a steeple,” a man said. “I know that steeple. We make islands in no time.”

His voice was shaky, but hopeful, boasting a heavy French-Wolof accent. His dark skin shown through a grimy, green shirt, stained with sweat and white salt. But, the others did not rouse to his good tidings. It was better to simply exist

moment by moment, maintaining a disciplined patience. Hope was vital, but anticipation came at a high price.

Amadou N. was one of the last people to get on the boat, so he and Ndeye were close to the bow and had unofficially appointed themselves as guardians of the food and water. Though starving like the others, they didn't justify additional amounts for themselves, but they were militant in how food was rationed. Only when someone appeared to be on death's door were they given a drop of water or tiny morsel. It sufficed to keep them alive, but the taste made them feel hungrier. Mbaye raged against their position. Who were they to decide who should eat and how much? Weakness was a blessing because Mbaye had no strength to act against anyone other than death, regardless of the injustice. These were defeated people reduced to the bare minimum of life itself, the mere hope of seeing another day.

People used whatever they could to cover any exposed skin. The once shy women now pulled their dresses over their heads or covered their children, exposing tattered undergarments or nakedness. Again, weakness and the overall depravity of circumstance proved a blessing as the men were not tempted. There was no need for gender. Mbaye longed to be pulling the rusty plow through the barren fields, his head covered by a straw hat. He loved those moments when he paused in the shade of a palm tree to take a cool drink of water from the skin and admire the work he had done. As he watched the boat push through the water, he thought it very sad how the waves immediately consumed the work they were doing. The white bubbles showing their path began dissipating immediately.

As the sun rose on the fifth morning, a skinny man who had been seasick the entire trip did not wake. He hadn't been able to keep down any food or water. Eventually, blood was all he had left to purge and there was nothing anyone could do. The people were afraid. The spirits had followed them from Goree and were climbing aboard to punish them for abandoning their homelands.

"We should have stayed and fought," a woman screamed, her veil hanging from one corner diagonally across her face. "We have forsaken our ancestors. Mercy, Allah! Mercy, Allah!"

"Mercy, Allah!"

"Mercy, Allah!"

The voices rose, chanting louder and louder. Some jumped to their feet, lifting their hands to the harsh, cloudless skies, rocking the frail boat, dipping the sides into the ocean mouths. Others pushed forward to bow on their knees, hands clasped in ardent prayer. The buckets stopped. The bottom quickly filled with water. Karamo rose from the back, lifted a wooden club and smashed it into the back of an hysterical man. The man toppled forward, his unconscious weight fallen upon two rows of passengers.

"Silence," Karamo shouted. "Silence! No ghosts! No punishment! *You* kill us all!"

The people could not hear Karamo through their lamentations.

Amadou N. grabbed the handle of his knife and stared into the eyes of Mbaye, but Mbaye's focus was inward. He did not see Amadou N. climbing over the wooden ribs towards him. Mbaye recognized this as a moment of death, not

just for himself or the poor man who died of seasickness, but for all of Africa. For the ancient lands now ruled by people full of murder and barren skies of relentless drought.

“Mercy, Allah!”

Mbaye’s fingers were clumsy, but he took the xalam from his back. The five twisted, fishing-line strings in the *ardine* leader tuning. Amadou N. was closing. Mbaye was no longer exhausted or starving. His thoughts were not clouded. The sounds were distant, but clear, from a timeless place that knew nothing of tongues. The strings felt solid and good. Mbaye had been taught the funeral songs, but had never performed them in ceremony. Funeral songs were as much about hope as they were about respect for the dead. Funeral songs were for the living.

Mbaye tapped the hollowed, wood resonator in answer to the melody he played on the top strings along the dowel. The three drone strings added girth to the song. He rocked against the person next to him. He felt the music moving through his fingers, down deep into something untouched by the horrors of the journey. People stopped to listen. They gathered around Mbaye and kept Amadou N. outside the circle. The boat became still. Karamo lowered his club. No one knew the name of the man who died, but they knew he was of them, their people.

Mbaye played the xalam.

Several rejuvenated arms began tossing bucketful after bucketful of water over the sides.

The xalam's resonator was from an old tree toppled by winds during the rainy season when Mbaye was a child. He watched his father saw the a length of a thick bough, then cut that piece in half and removed the bark in the old way. After using fire to char sections of the milky wood, Mbaye's father dug out the innards one hunk at a time. The thinness of the walls, *nderr*, was greatly admired. He meticulously cured the sheep leather before stretching it over the hole and tethered dowel. The edges had smoothed naturally over the years.

When Mbaye finished playing, he opened his eyes. There were no cheers. The people had moved back to their listless places, but Amadou N. sat before him, still holding the knife in his hand. His face was wet with tears, but he twirled the sharp point against the calloused skin on his thumb. His eyes could not let go of the irrational hate towards the man with the xalam. The translator, Ndeye, was at the bow, guarding the food. The sun was at its highest point. Four people had died. Their bodies with bashed skulls and swollen bellies were blessed and tossed overboard. Karamo tended to the motor.

Mbaye's music, though precious, had not saved them from their fate.

Mbaye slid the xalam around to its place on his back. He tied his shirt around his head. Amadou N. rose and thrust forward, driving the knife through the center of Mbaye, piercing the taut sheep's leather of xalam on Mbaye's back. Mbaye did not try to stop him. That wretched last sound of the broken xalam was the last thing Mbaye heard and awoke the rest of the people.



They crowded around Amadou N., even his friend and fellow Serer, Ndeye. Karamo brandished the wooden club. The boat rocked, but there was no fear among them. Amadou N. twisted with this knife in hand.

“I kill all you!” he shouted. “I leader!”

Someone from behind pushed him and Amadou N. lost his balance. Karamo shook the boat and Amadou N. fell over the side. The buoyancy of the boat lifted as he fell. The long, rolling waves of the ocean were no longer threatening, quickly separating the *cayuco* from Amadou N., whose rancid shouts faded with each, slow rolling wave.

Mbaye’s body was wrapped and blessed. The xalam was given to a boy whose father had been killed during the struggles. The boy strummed the remaining strings awkwardly. The people looked forward to the north, hoping for signs of the famous turquoise waters that surrounded the Canary Islands. These people were the brave ones who had risked everything for nothing more than hope. They knew there was no going back to their homelands, but they were bringing the past with them into the new age. Karamo tended to the engine, keeping his eye to the east.

## Extra Spice

The Swamp Circle Saloon was built in the fifties about a hundred yards from the docks to serve the migrant crab pickers who worked every summer for a nickel a pound and lived in mud-floored shanties nearby. Only crab shell mounds and splintered bits of ghosts remain of the shanties, but the Circle, as locals call it, kept going and became a favorite for watermen who stopped in for a drink and greasy burger after pulling crab pots or trot lining all day. It doesn't offer much in the way of ambiance, but it's a good place to get a beer and a shot cheap.

Joe doesn't look forward to Saturday or Sunday mornings anymore. To make ends meet the past few years, he's been paid under the table for nine bucks an hour selling crabs for a guy named Dave. During crab season, they meet every Friday at the Circle to discuss the upcoming weekend. When Joe arrived this past week, Dave, who is well known throughout all of the local bars, was buying drinks for a couple of women who looked like lost biker groupies, but they giggled too much. They were dressed in tight black leather skirts and braless tank tops. Joe nodded to the bartender who quickly poured a shot and a beer for Joe.

Dave is almost a third generation waterman, but he doesn't work the water. He sells the crabs and oysters pulled from it. He's a self-proclaimed crabman as displayed by a large custom solid gold crab with a broken claw that dangled in a tuft of chest hair from a thick 18k gold chain around his neck. He stands six feet three with an endless suntan and curly blond hair and always carries a lot of cash.

“Good to see you,” he said, rising to shake Joe's hand. “I seem to be in need of some assistance. This here is Hickory and she is Dickory,” he said and

the women giggled. “Normally, it wouldn’t be no problem, but I’ve only got enough gas in the tank for one of these fine ladies tonight.”

Joe worked on Captain Abe’s boat all morning and mended crab pots all afternoon. He wasn’t in the mood for company. He just wanted to know how many bushels he was picking up in the morning and from whom; he wanted cash for propane and gas, and the change bank; and he wanted a few drinks in peace. Dave had been Joe’s friend since high school, but Joe never liked drinking with him.

A fog of expensive cologne and powdery cheap perfume greeted Joe as he sat down across from Dave. The smell of bleach, sweat and crabs rose from his seat in an airlessness comprised of stale beer, cigarette smoke and grease. There were two rusty air conditioners mounted in opposing windows that didn’t seem to be doing anything except making noise. Even the hustle and bustle of people didn’t really move anything and when the door opened, there was nothing outside but heavy August humidity that didn’t provide any breath of fresh air, but rather sucked more air out. Joe wouldn’t have been surprised to see the walls buckle from the pressure.

“My name is Joe or Joey, but it won’t make me smell any better. Sorry, I’ve come straight from the shed and haven’t had a shower. I wasn’t expecting company.”

“That’s alright,” Dickory said. “You can’t tell one smell from another in here.”

Her smooth makeup wasn't quite able to hide years of bad acne, but Joe thought she was pretty in her own way. Her hair was recently colored blond and pulled back into a long tight braid that curled like a fishhook around her neck. Through the smoky bar light he couldn't tell if it was black or blue mascara perspiring along the wrinkles around her eyes, but she wasn't old, just declining and something in her confident voice made her flirtatious giggles sound fake. She said her name was Stephanie.

"I'm a receptionist for Dr. Wilson," she said. "He's a dentist in Deale."

"I haven't been to a dentist in years," Joe said.

Hickory's real name was Michelle or Shelly and Dave had taken a liking to her tongue stud. She was a cook for her cousin in the Countryside Deli near Wayson's Corner. Her stringy black hair hung down into her face, but it couldn't hide the fact that she was noticeably high. She and Dave leaned in and whispered to each other. Dave stood up and said that they were going to go out to his truck for some fresh air.

"Hold on," Joe said. "What about tomorrow?"

"How did Cap'n Abe do today?"

"Not good. A red tide drifted into his pots. We must have thrown out twenty bushels of dead."

"Damn. That's what everyone else is saying. Everyone was wiped out around here. I've scraped up a few bushels that are cooling in the box to get you started. I guess I'll drive to Virginia in the morning and get as many as I can find. Here are the keys to the van. The money bag is under the front seat. Damn I

don't feel like driving to Virginia tomorrow." He dropped a twenty dollar bill onto the table. "Come on, Hickory. We'll be back."

"What's a red tide?" asked Stephanie.

"Sometimes, when there's a drought like this year and there's no wind for awhile, all of our shit that's dumped into the Bay causes a reddish algae bloom that floats in the tide suffocating anything in its wake. Fish, crabs, jellyfish, rays... It's eerie working through one. The stench is unbearable because all of the fish float to the surface and cook in the sun. It broke my heart today when I saw a four foot rockfish. Wasted. Nothing but waste. And I hate the sound of dead fish banging into the hull of the boat."

After a few drinks, Joe and Stephanie had run out of things to say to each other. Dave's truck was gone. Michelle had driven so Joe gave Stephanie a ride home. They didn't have sex or even kiss. He said it was nice to meet her and drove off.

When Joe woke in the morning, he was soaked with sweat. He lived in a camper that sat on a tiny piece of secluded property between two horse farms. Rather than paying rent, he worked on the owner's boat a few days each month. Dust bunnies trembled and clung to the heavy wire mesh of an oscillating fan. Different shades of brown pocked foam peered through tears in the harsh fabric that served as his mattress. One of the torn edges had worn a raw spot on his back. A gold-framed picture of his daughter faced the bed from the counter where fruit flies hovered around a clump of hardened red jelly. He hadn't seen or

heard from her in more than three years, but she was doing good with her mother and new father. Some dishes had to be moved before he could wash his face in the kitchenette sink.

The camper smelled like shit. There was no septic on the property and rather than towing the camper every few days to the dumping station thirty miles away, he ran a rubber pipe twenty feet from the sewage tank to the mouth of a creek, but there wasn't enough pressure to clear the pipe every time so the cycle of waste lay there until it was so bad that Joe dragged the hose inside and flushed everything out. But when there was drought, the creek dried up and the excrement pooled.

He dressed and drove to Dave's house. Dave's truck was still there.

Several years earlier Dave converted a trailer like the one Joe lives in into a crab truck. At the end where Joe's bed would be Dave built a walk-in refrigerator box that can hold about thirty bushels of crabs; three propane burners were installed in place of the dining benches and table; the tiny kitchenette was replaced by a stainless steel triple sink; the bathroom was completely removed and the area used for setting pots of cooked crabs; and a huge rectangle was cut out of the back wall for a hinged door and serving counter.

There were about ten bushels in the walk-in box. If Dave didn't go to Virginia, Joe might sell out early. He had enough spice and bags for the day. He filled the water jugs from an outside spigot, secured the pots, and started the one-ton van. In the bag under the seat, he pulled out a bundle of twenties rubberbanded together after moving the snub-nose .357.

Joe had been robbed a couple of years ago at gun point. It was the end of the day during the busy Fourth of July weekend and Joe and a hired teenager were exhausted. The sun was setting and they were just about out of crabs when a group of customers wanted several dozen, but they wanted to see the sizes. Joe placed a few crabs on a pot lid for display and told them that this was all he had, but it was getting dark and they wanted to see the entire pot. When he opened the side door to give them a better look, a couple of their cohorts stuck handguns in his face demanding money. His helper came out of the walk-in box to see Joe being dragged out and shoved to the ground. Joe was forced to kneel execution style with his forehead to the ground and his hands crossed behind his back. He felt the barrel pressed against the back of his head while someone went through his pockets. One of the gunmen grabbed the cashbox and punched the helper in the stomach. He crumbled to the ground in a winded heap. The entire event took only a couple of minutes, but it seemed like hours to Joe. He savored every grain of dirt that pushed against his forehead and the dust was like gold to his nostrils. Even the pressure of the gun in the back of his head was wonderful. As long as I can feel that pain, I'm alright. I'm still alive. He was minutely conscious of his breathing. He heard whimpering. Just focus on the pain. It's the pain that matters. And then it was over. Car doors slammed and tires sang out along the highway. He could still feel the gun in the back of his head.

With an arthritic moan Joe and the van pulled the crab-trailer out of the driveway.

It was eleven o'clock when he pulled onto the spot just outside the Beltway. He'd stopped by the hardware store to fill the propane tanks and the gas station to fill the van and generator. He placed fluorescent signs along the highway showing that he was open for business. He quickly graded the crabs into different pots by their sizes and fired up the burners. The first pot of steamed crabs was ready by noon.

He cooked continuously. With the August heat, he didn't have to worry about the crabs getting cold and business was steady enough to keep it all rotating.

“Good afternoon. What can I do for you?”

A tall black man wearing a pink Polo shirt stood with his overdressed round wife looking over the counter.

“What do your regulars look like?” he asked.

Joe put a couple of crabs from each size of both males and females onto a basket lid and leaned out to show them.

“Regular, medium, and large males. Small and large females.”

“How much for large males?”

“They're goin' for forty-five dollars a dozen.”

“You've got to be kidding. I remember when these were called medium and sold for fifteen dollars.”

“Yes sir, but unfortunately, we've had a bad season.”

“What do you think, honey?”

“Can we get a half dozen?”



“Sure,” Joe said. “Would you like extra spice on those?”

“Are they any good?” the next couple asked.

“They’re pretty good. The last shed was a couple of weeks ago.”

“What do you mean by shed?”

“About the time my girlfriend starts getting’ cranky each month, there’s a full moon and depending on the water temperature, within a few days all of the crabs shed their shells and another one hardens in its place. It’s how they grow and how we get soft-shells. But as the new shell hardens, the crabs can’t eat and all of their meat is used up. These are about half-way through the cycle so they’re pretty good.”

Joe looked up to their shiny black BMW.

“This must be your first time stopping here,” he said. “I’ll tell you what. If you buy a full dozen, I’ll give you fourteen and you come back next week and tell me how they were. If you didn’t like them, I’ll give you a dozen free.”

“You have a deal.”

“Extra spice?”

“What?”

“Would you like me to sprinkle some extra spice on your crabs?”

“I guess so.”

“I’ll put it on the side.”

As he exchanged the crabs for the money, Joe noticed a dark red car that seemed vaguely familiar make a u-turn at the traffic signal and speed off, but

customers were waiting so the thought was quickly forgotten. He put a twenty into his pocket and the rest into the day's revenue box. Once he had helped the wave of customers and put the last bushel of crabs on to cook, he saw that it was only about two-thirty and looking forward to the night off.

These lulls were nice for catching his breath, but they allowed him to realize how hot it was inside the crab trailer. Between the propane burners and the summer sun, he felt nearly as cooked as the crabs. Next to a half bushel of dead crabs in the walk-in box, he grabbed a Coke and enjoyed the syrupy cold burn. The exhaust fans made him oblivious to most of the traffic outside. He rubbed the scar on his leg that is the exact height of a pot handle and swatted a biting horsefly. Blood trickled down his calf. Spice had gotten into the cuts on his hands and stung. The steamed in spice and grime on his face was like makeup.

As Joe removed the last pot of cooked crabs from the burner, Dave pulled up with his truck packed full of bubbling bushels.

"Abe and the other guys had a good day. I got fifteen from them and another fifteen from Virginia. How's business?"

"Steady until a minute ago."

They moved most of the bushels from the truck to the walk-in box as if passing buckets of water to put out a fire, keeping a few out to work with. Joe put on a pair of thick green plastic gloves and pried open one side of the first basket. Unlike the crabs that cooled overnight in the box, these were fresh out of the water, hot and wild. Their claws were lightning fast and ruthless, but Joe and

Dave worked deftly and soon had three full pots cooking and a few baskets of graded sizes ready for the next round.

Joe kept going through crabs while Dave helped customers.

“How've you been?” a thin girl in faded cutoffs and flip-flops asked.

“Hey darlin’? I’m doin’ great. It’s been awhile.”

“You’re not up here as often as you used to.”

“I know, but I’ve got other business matters to attend to. You know how it is,” he said with a grin. “Besides, Joe here has been runnin’ things just fine. What can I do for you?”

“How are they running?”

“Sideways.”

She laughed even though she’d heard it before. “It’s just me today so I only want a half dozen large females.”

“Extra spice?”

“Lots.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

He handed her the crabs and pocketed the money. He noticed a dark red car make a u-turn at the light.

“Thanks darlin’. You have a blessed day.” After she drove off he asked Joe what Michelle’s car looked like.

“I’m not sure. I didn’t see it last night because what’s-her-name didn’t have the key. We walked by it, but I didn’t pay much attention.”

“I think I just saw it make a u-turn.”

“What does it look like?”

“A dark red sedan; a foreign model I think.”

“I saw it earlier too. Did something happen last night that I should know about?”

“No. I mean we had a good time and I dropped her off at the Circle this morning right after I heard you pull out. I couldn’t see who was driving. Maybe she wants to hook up again tonight.”

“Maybe.”

Joe looked at the .357 stored under the serving counter, but customers were coming up to the window. Dave counted crabs and collected the money while Joe cooked and graded. Joe’s eyes were sore from constantly rubbing sweat off his face. The rest was numb. He focused entirely on grading and cooking, grading and cooking and didn’t realize that he had gotten ahead of sales.

“It’s getting late,” Dave said, “Don’t cook any more unless you want to stay here all night. Let’s start cleaning pots as they empty.”

Fortunately, there was a line of customers. Dave took the orders and money. Joe bagged.

“I need a dozen large males, Joe. Forty-five dollars, please. Extra spice? Two dozen regulars. Fifty dollars, please. Extra spice? Three dozen small females. Thirty dollars. Extra spice?”

Bushel baskets, steel lids and empty pots sloshed in every nook and cranny of the crab trailer. They had sold everything except a pot and a half of regular males. The sun was setting. Colors and objects were becoming

indistinguishable grays of dark and light both inside and outside. There were several bushels left in the walk-in box, but they would keep until the next day. The stream of customers had stopped when Michelle appeared at the service counter.

“Hello crabman,” she said.

“Hey baby. What’s going on?”

“I thought we could go back to your place again.”

“That sounds good to me, but I need to take a shower once we get there.”

“Me too.”

He turned to Joe. “I’m taking off. See you in the morning.”

“Hey Joe,” she said as they were leaving. “Stephanie really liked you. She might be at the Circle again tonight.”

Joe looked out to see Dave’s truck pull away with Michelle following in a white compact car. That wasn’t the car I saw last night, he thought, as the traffic light changed and the sparse traffic moved on. A few more cars passed by. Whatever’s left by the time I finish washing pots will have to sell half-price as cold crabs tomorrow, he thought. This was a pretty good day for Dave.

The sky darkened. He secured the empty baskets and clean pots and started to bag up the remaining cooked crabs when several car doors slammed. He looked out and saw a dark sedan, but he couldn’t tell what color it was. He pushed the money box further under the counter and brushed against the .357. Two men dressed in baggy dark clothes walked up to the window.

“How’s it going?” Joe asked.

“Do you have anything left?” one of the men asked.

“All I’ve got are regular males for twenty-five dollars a dozen, but since it’s late, I’ll sell you three dozen for sixty.”

“Can we see how big they are?”

Joe put several crabs onto a basket lid and leaned out to show them. He was certain he heard more than two car doors slam, but there were only two men and their car was empty.

“Do they all look like this?”

“Yes. They’re all about the same.”

“They aren’t very hot.”

“It’s closing time. I want to get out of here and go home.”

“Can we see the pot?”

It was nearly nine o’clock and the sun had set. Joe placed the lid on top of the spice box. He fingered the .357 under the counter as if grabbing a set of tongues and felt the eyes of the men watching his every move. Remembering the grains of dirt pressed into his forehead when he kneeled for execution, Joe wiped his face. These aren’t the same men, he thought. These aren’t the same men.

One of the men had slipped out of sight. The door was bolted.

“They’re all the same,” Joe said. “I’ll give you the whole pot for thirty bucks.”

He took a bag and opened it, feeling the rough brown paper against his skin.

“What do you say?” Joe asked. He reached down under the counter and placed his hand on the .357.

“You want extra spice on those?”

## Starving

My daughter, Gale, was in bed asleep when I got home. I peaked my head into her room and listened to the sweet, seven-year-old breaths, subtle among the constant bubbling of the fish tank filter. I twisted the mini-blinds closed to block out the street light that cast stripes across the cluttered floor. A warm, colorful glow from the butterfly nightlight emerged and I stood content for a moment, but the room had that murky fish tank smell, as if it were a pond rank with life on a humid summer evening, and I had to get out.

Our simple, three bedroom, one bath rectangular house, was built sideways on a narrow lot, so that the front door looks directly into the back of our neighbor's house. Inside, the living and dining areas are the same room, separated by a loveseat and the flat brass piece of trim that runs along the floor between beige carpet and hardwood flooring. From the dining area, a sliding glass door opens to three rusting iron steps, where a nice deck should be.

I was glancing at the newspaper while I ate reheated chicken and rice with a half-glass of a pinot noir from a bottle that had been open too long. My wife, Sharon, tapped her foot next to me. She was wearing the tight, white tee-shirt I liked.

“Your mother called three times tonight,” Sharon said.

Mother had suffered two major strokes over the past five years and was living in a studio apartment in an assisted living facility.



“Is everything alright?” I asked, placing my finger on the last word I read to hold my place in the article. I didn’t look at Sharon, but tried to look into the darkness of the backyard through the reflection on the back door.

“She said the staff wouldn’t give her any pain medication and she wants you to stop by tomorrow on your way home to talk to the director, so I suppose you’ll be late again. She also misses Buster and wants him back. She promises that she’ll take better care of him this time.”

My head drooped. Buster was my mother’s cat. My parents got him from the animal shelter after mom’s first stroke. He was a black and white, domestic shorthair well beyond the kitten stage. He liked to curl up on mom’s chest under her chin as she lay all day on the couch watching television. About a month after my father died, I had to take Buster home to live with us and our cat, Olive. He had been shitting everywhere because mom wouldn’t clean out his litter box. It became unbearable as she kept turning her thermostat to ninety degrees, so it was like walking into an oven of roasting shit. It makes me gag just thinking about it. The director called and said the conditions in the room were unhealthy. She wasn’t going to allow the cleaning people back into my mother’s apartment until the cat and stench were gone. When Sharon and I cleaned the place the following weekend, the food in Buster’s dish had become a rancid, brown, fuzzy clump. His coat was grimy and disgusting to the touch. I hadn’t noticed how thin he’d become. When I put him into the cat carrier, his bones were like flower petals pressing against my hands. That was also the first time I had ever heard him meow.

He brushed against my shins under the table and wouldn't stop meowing. It was his way of begging for food. And attention. I picked him up and placed him on my lap. He wasn't gaining any weight. Sharon grimaced. I stroked Buster's head to keep him from lifting his head to sniff my bowl. Mother used to hand feed him from her plate. I wasn't helping to break this bad habit.

"And the director called this morning," Sharon continued, as I lay my fork down quietly, "to say that this was the fourth day in a row your mom refused to come down for meals, so we'll be billed for the extra services."

I scraped the rest of my dinner into the garbage and stood at the sink, swirling the last swallows of wine to the very top of the rim. The bouquet was still rich with oak, mild tannins and hints of vanilla and black cherry, but the once soft edges of this complex vintage had soured from too much oxygenation. I poured what was left into the sink. A single, pale red bead dripped down the side of the glass to a shallow pool curling along the base around the stem. I wiped it and rubbed the slick, velvety liquid between my fingers. Eat, drink and be merry, I thought.

"Did the director say anything else?" I asked. "Was her sugar level high?"

"She didn't say," Sharon answered from the other room.

"I'm going to bed," I said.

Buster followed me down the hallway in full voice. As I entered the bedroom, Olive burst out in all her striped gray-brown glory. She was a tabby. She hissed and struck at Buster. The fur along her spine to the tip of her tail

puffed up. Buster cowered. He tried to strike back, but he had been de-clawed. A deep, vicious growl rumbled from somewhere deep in Olive's belly. Buster was silent. He had lived with us for several months now, but Olive had never accepted him. Olive's back arched and she swatted the empty air as Buster turned and slinked back the way he had come. Olive was still growling when I closed the bedroom door behind me.

I undressed and hung up my suit pants, keeping the seams straight. The closet was a bit musty. It feels good taking off a tight fitting undershirt at the end of a long day. I ran my hands over the cool skin on my arms and fleshy white paunch. In with the good, out with the bad. The gray in my hair had sprouted within the past few years. We kept a small blanket at the foot of the bed that was covered in gray-brown fur on Sharon's side. Olive slept there for hours every day. The spot was still warm.

Sharon came in soon and smiled. She slid against me, running one of her fingers along the inside elastic of my boxer shorts.

"You know what they say is good when you've had a long day," she said.

She let her clothes fall to the floor and walked to the other side of the bed.

We were looking at each other's grinning faces as I turned off the light.

We slid in between the smooth sheets towards each other, our hands wandering among hair and skin, but something cold seemed to cling to my foot. I moved it back and forth, but the cold was tacky and when I reached out, the top of the comforter was damp. My fingers smelled of concentrated cat urine, an early symptom of the incurable kidney disease that Buster was diagnosed with. He was

letting Olive know that he had staked claim to my side of the bed. As if he were proud of what he'd done, Buster was meowing outside our room.

Sharon snapped the light on, pounded her feet onto the floor and pulled on a black nightgown.

“This is ridiculous,” she said. “Now, he’s peeing on the bed. He walks in and out every room all day long, meowing for no reason at all. He’s trying to drive me crazy. I hate that cat.”

“He misses my mother,” I said. “And he’s not used to living with another cat. This is difficult for all of us.”

We started keeping the bedroom doors closed. Poor Olive began sleeping on the floor pushed up against our bedroom door. I moved Buster’s food and water bowls and a litter box into the third bedroom, which served as our computer room and didn’t have a bed at all. We hoped that he would claim this room as his and wouldn’t try to compete with Olive any more.

The assisted living facility was like an apartment complex, but the rooms were smaller and the staff provided additional services, including cleaning, laundry and meals. There was an exercise room and twice each week, a trainer came to work individually with residents who needed extra attention or motivation. It didn’t have the medicinal smell or feel of a hospital ward, but it smelled of old people. There was always an underlying current of urine or feces in the air. It was where people came during the final stage of their lives because there was no other place for them to go.

Dad's health had been failing when mom suffered her second stroke. At the time, they were still living in the old house. When she stabilized, they moved her to a rehabilitation center. Mom had lost the ability to swallow and the right side of her body was numb. After three months of therapy, they were able to remove the feeding tube. The insurance company refused to pay for her stay any longer in the rehab center, and since dad was barely able to care for himself, mom stayed with us for a few weeks.

It was hard. We rearranged the furniture to make room for her wheelchair. Her weight had increased to more than two hundred-fifty pounds, so it was difficult for her to move herself and for us to move her. The rehab center had been able to get her to stand, but she couldn't walk on her own, even with a walker, and although she said that she would do the leg exercises as her doctor instructed, she would never do them. She needed help bathing, partly because her muscles were too weak, but also her girth was too broad for her reach. And she was lazy. Just getting her in and out of the tub was harrowing. Sharon did most of this work, but on weekends, I took over the responsibility. Her naked body appeared unnatural, like a thick curtain of draping layers. I had to lift her huge, sagging breasts to wash between the pink, flabby folds. There were sores on her back and bottom that wouldn't heal. We could never seem to get rid of the unwashed smell from her privates, no matter how much we scrubbed. Every day, she asked over and over, "When can I go home? I want to go home." Dad wasn't to the point of needing a nursing home, so we moved them into an assisted living facility.

The director insisted that I call her Tracey, but she always addressed me as “Mr. Smith.” She appeared to be middle-aged like me, but had she been about six inches taller, she could have been a super model. She was too thin and so pretty in the face. Only once had I seen her without a suit jacket. I found the brown sweat circles on her blouse under her arms so arousing, it was difficult at times for me to speak with her. I had to constantly remind myself to look her only in the eyes, but her eyes were empathetic for what the residents and their families were going through and I found them just as alluring.

The receptionist was a pudgy woman with the same Creole accent as most of the nursing assistants. She greeted me by name and didn’t wait for me to ask to speak with Tracey before buzzing her.

Tracey emerged in a stunning, charcoal-gray suit.

“Have you spoken with your mother tonight, Mr. Smith?” she asked in a silky, authoritative voice.

“Not yet,” I replied. “I wanted to speak with you first.”

“Your mother’s not doing very well. We’ve tried getting her to participate in the social activities, but she refuses to do anything, even bathe. When was the last time she was evaluated psychologically?”

“Not since the rehab center.”

“I think it’s time,” she said.

She handed me a printout with several names of psychiatrists in the area. Another appointment and another day off work, I thought. Originally, my boss

told me to take as much time as I needed, but for the past year or so, his approvals had a hint of accusation. I imagined Tracey without her suit jacket.

“Mom said that no one would give her any pain medication yesterday,” I said.

“She had been given the prescribed amount as well as a supplement of over-the-counter pain relievers. I don’t think her mind is processing feelings or thoughts clearly.”

I knocked on the door, but mom didn’t answer. Inside, the smell was of unclean flesh and excrement that had been festering in a closed room. The thermostat was on full blast. Mom was in bed, snoring. Her body glistened with perspiration. The room was cluttered with cupcake wrappers, dirty laundry and dishes of untouched food. Her stomach draped over the side of the bed. Her adult incontinence undergarment needed changed. I was tempted to turn and leave.

“Mom,” I shouted. “Mother.”

Her eyes blinked open, but took several moments to focus. Once she recognized me, the left side of her lips smiled, bending the creases in her face. She tried to push herself up in the mass of soft stained pillows. Her short brown hair was greasy, flat on one side and sticking straight out on the other. Her hands were clammy as I struggled to help pull her into a sitting position. The loose skin was difficult to handle.

“Hi son,” she said.

“Hi mom. How are you today?”

She smelled so bad that I nearly gagged.

“Not so good.”

Her smile was gone. There were yellowed pictures of she and my dad when they were younger. I tried to imagine her before the strokes, working in the yard. She had cultivated two rose bushes that had blossoms the size of my head, one red and the other pink.

“Why didn’t you bring Buster?” she asked.

“I came straight from work,” I said. “I couldn’t take him to work all day.”

I stood for a minute, hoping that I’d get used to the smell.

“They say that you won’t take a bath or come down for dinner.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“But you have to keep yourself clean. Have you been doing your exercises?”

“No.”

It was like talking to a child.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to stay here,” she said. “The people are mean to me. I want to live with you.”

I didn’t know how to respond. My eyes hazed over. She had done nothing but complain when she stayed with us before. I don’t think we could do it again. Sharon and I had fought constantly under the stress of caring for her, but it was good for mom. She ate well and had family around her. But, I couldn’t ask Sharon to do it again.



“But, you didn’t like staying with us the last time.”

“Yes, I did,” she was pleading. “I want to live with you.”

Her face contorted on the left side, twisting into a mask of harsh, convulsive whimpers. She reached for my hand but missed. I sat on the bed next to her.

“Please, son. I need to get out of here. Please.”

Her voice was muffled. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Since her second stroke, I’d seen storms of tears burst forth followed by huge guffaws of laughter, but this was different. This was desperation.

“I don’t want to die in this place. Don’t let me die here like your father.”

Their newlywed eyes stared at me, smiling inside the rectangular, brass frame that held something more than upright memories of happier times. They were my parents turning in the arc of life.

Mom tried to move, but the bed sagged and she toppled over onto her side, off the side of the bed down to one knee. I thought of Gale seeing my mother this way, stinking of soiled diapers in her wheelchair in the living area. I tried to think of the questions she’d ask and our answers. How would she understand what was happening?

“We don’t have the room, mom,” I said.

Mom was still tottering between the bed and the floor. How would we take vacations? We couldn’t keep Buster’s litter box in the spare room if she was living there because the concentrated smell was ghastly. Sharon wouldn’t be able to go back to work. There were too many variables. It was paralyzing.

“I’ll exercise. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do. Please,” she said.

I’d have to build a wheelchair ramp. We might need to widen the doors. She was always soiling her bed even with the undergarments. Her list of medications would have to be managed and loading the wheelchair in the car for her constant doctor’s visits.

“We’re not set up for this. You need the special care they have here. You remember how hard it was in the bathroom.”

“Please. Don’t forsake me, son.”

“I need to speak with Sharon,” I stammered. “I don’t know.”

“Please, don’t forsake me.”

I had to sit in the parking lot for awhile because my entire body was shaking. Could I do this to Sharon and Gale? Could I leave my mother in such a state of misery? I rested my forehead against the steering wheel. I saw her naked body in the bathtub, drooping over the special bath seat. She liked the feel of the warm water against her skin.

Sharon could see the pain in my face when I walked through the front door. Buster was meowing, locked in the spare room. I opened the door and he sauntered out.

“Buster kept bothering Olive,” Sharon said. “And he threw up twice today.”

Throwing up was another symptom of kidney disease. I picked him up. You'll be gone soon, I thought and stroked his back. He purred. The vibration should have been comforting, but I knew that he was happier with mom. She was always there when he wanted affection and he didn't have to compete with any other cats.

Gale was in her butterfly pajamas.

"She wants to live with us," I said.

I should have waited until Gale was in bed, but I couldn't think clearly. Sharon just stood there in shock.

"Who wants to live with us?" Gale's tiny voice asked.

"Grandmom Smith," I said.

"She can sleep with me," she said.

"I don't think your bed is big enough for both of you."

"Yes, it is. It'll be like a sleepover every night."

Sharon and I looked at each other. There was only the pure emotion of sadness. No logic or decisions between right or wrong. Buster tried to climb up from my arms around my neck.

"It's not that simple," I said.

"Why not?"

I didn't know. What was there to ask? My mother was unhappy. She needed help. Should this be such a complex question? But, the burden was too great. Mom could live another ten or fifteen years. There would never be any rest day in or day out. No vacations. No nights out. This wouldn't be like

nurturing a child to maturity or nursing a sick person back to health. She wasn't going to get any better. With the right side of her body numb, she would always be unbalanced. The help she needed would be endless. I couldn't live without hope. I couldn't devote our lives to such a fate.

“You know that I'll stand by whatever decision you make,” Sharon said, “but, remember...”

She didn't have to say anything else. I placed Buster down.

Mother called several times the following week, leaving tearful messages on the machine, begging me to come get her. Tracey called twice. I got up and went to work. I did my job and came home. Buster would climb up into my lap on the couch as I watched television or read after dinner. He followed me around the house. We had to lock him in his room at night. He wouldn't stop meowing. Day after day after day.

When the hospital called, I answered the phone. Mom had suffered her third major stroke. She was completely paralyzed. Her vital signs were stable, but she might not be able to ever live without the machines.

Our neighbor agreed to watch Gale, so Sharon and I could go to the hospital, but only I was allowed in the room to see mom on the intensive care floor. There were tubes and wires hooked up to her arms, legs, chest and crammed down her throat. They tried to hide the hanging colostomy bag under a

sheet. Beeps and flashing lights. The machines appeared to be more alive than my mother.

I took her hand and squeezed. There was no response.

“Mom,” I said. “Mother.”

Her murky eyes opened and scrolled to see me. Her face was frozen. Emotionless. I smiled, but the left side of her lips didn’t curl upwards as they did before. Her eyes fluttered away on delicate wings to somewhere or some time that I couldn’t see. There were no paintings or pictures in the intensive care unit. Mom’s lips seemed brutally pink among the sterilized white. I held her hand, but there was no response.

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

Only a still face looking out to the darkness. There was dried blood in her right ear. Her arms and neck were bruised where the IV’s pierced the skin and were taped.

“Are you ready, mom?” I asked.

Her eyes turned towards me and moved up and down just once. I was shaking again.

I had to tell them to stop feeding my mother.

This wouldn’t be like watching the people shown starving on television, they said. They said, people going through this didn’t suffer like that. They drifted into another state of mind that peacefully faded into death. Your mother

would be comfortable, they said. Sometimes, it happened quickly, but it might take a couple of weeks. If the patients couldn't move or talk, I asked, how did they know that they weren't suffering? How could they know what was going through their minds?

They would move my mother to a room where friends and family could visit. It would be best if we came back the next day because they had to disconnect everything and clean her up. I listened to this, staring down at the linoleum I scuffed with my black dress shoes. Someone from hospice would contact me.

Sharon drove home. Buster started meowing as soon as we arrived. Gale was still awake.

"Tomorrow," I said to her, "we're going to say goodbye to Grandmom Smith."

My lips were quivering.

"I thought she was coming to live with us." Gale said.

"No," I said.

"Is she going away?" Gale asked.

"Yes, but she's not like you remember. She can't move any more."

Tears rolled down my cheek curling around my chin.

"Okay," Gale said.

Her voice was cheerful. She couldn't wait until tomorrow. She was looking forward to seeing grandmom Smith. She didn't care that it was to say

goodbye or that it would be the last time she saw her before the funeral. She just wanted to be with her grandmom. I looked through the sliding glass door to the darkness in the backyard and wondered what Gale would decide when my time comes. Everything in the room seemed drained of color. I smeared the tears across my face. I reached down to stroke Buster. The wetness matted his fur, but he purred. Through the sliding door, the darkness sat calm and patient, but my reflection was in the glass. I picked Buster up and realized I was hungry.