

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: MILLERS HEIGHTS: A NOVEL

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This novel-in-progress probes the connection between faith and guilt within a religious context, exploring the role that the latter has in shaping and inspiring the former. From this foundation, it investigates popular belief and the tenuous relationship between organized theology and popular belief, which derives less from dogma and more from personal experience and folk tradition. These more abstract concepts come together in the religious struggle of Pastor Mike Williams, who, in light of his father's death, begins to revisit and wrestle with the guilt that inspired him to faith through the lens of folk story and historical inquiry.

MILLERS HEIGHTS: A NOVEL

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2011

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For as long as anyone alive could remember, Creek Valley had been known for exactly two things: its fog and its churches. The valley was just west of Millers Heights, a short drive along Route 27, first out of downtown and the suburbs that had snuck up around it, and then out into the open country between Millers Heights and Belford, its “sister” town. It was shaped like a boat, narrow and long, and Shallows Creek, which it’d been named after, ran down its center, murmuring and gossiping in its own private language. Thick bands of trees clotted the creek’s banks, a mangy clutter of roots and fallen branches domed over by a dense canopy, which dimmed the woods to a lasting dusk. On the other side of the trees, open fields spread wide and eventually sloped up into the valley walls. But, unlike the creek, the fields were silent and didn’t have a thing to say; any whispers stayed behind the trees, which hoarded them tightly.

In all honesty, though, Creek Valley wasn’t really a valley. It was the boat-shaped foot of a stairway of hills that tumbled from downtown, at the summit, and hit a stop at the valley floor. If it’d been as deep as Millers Heights was high, then folks would’ve been right to call it a valley. But it wasn’t. It was flat, narrow, and not at all deep.

If anything, Pastor Williams thought, it was a shallow pit.

He came to the valley the day before his father’s funeral and under one of those skies common to late spring, when the morning fog that haunted the valley didn’t seem to break so much as simply rise up and stretch across the sky. It was the sort of sky that preceded a storm, but, more often than not, the storm never actually came. Instead, the threat of it made the air heavy and damp.

He thought about how different this moist air was from Kentucky, where his congregation was and where it'd been hot and dry for weeks. He'd come from there two nights before, and, even if he hadn't looked at the road signs, he would've known it when he reached Barnes County. The air just changed. It gained mass and body, and he'd known with that first labored breath. Home, as it always did, had welcomed him with air that felt like it became a liquid in his lungs. Unlike Kentucky, in Millers Heights it was never dry. Here, there was always something clamped to his skin.

Ahead of him were the valley's two churches: the one everyone called "the new church," and the one everyone called the "old church." His eyes first went to the one straight ahead: the new church, or, as it was properly called, Christ Our Redeemer. It was built into the slope at the northeastern edge of the valley, right at the intersection of Route 27 and Route 13, the old postal road to Philadelphia. Along Route 13, it announced its name on a simple white sign with big, black letters—"Christ Our Redeemer Church Established 1917"—next to a gravel drive that led down to the church's parking lot at the bottom of the hill. The sanctuary was at the top of the slope twenty yards from the road, and the two-story box connected to it was where the offices and classrooms were.

In all the years he'd gone to the new church, he'd thought that, in the morning fog, it looked like a sudden cliff rising from the ground, a sheer protrusion that was part of the land itself. The fog stripped the color from its granite walls and reduced it to a shadow, dark and sharp lines in an indistinct fade. Its steeple, the most visible thing in the valley, he thought, was like a lightless lighthouse at the edge of a gray sea.

Inevitably, though, his attention drew away from the new church and towards the other one, which was his reason for coming. It was his father's favorite place in all of

Millers Heights—or, if not favorite, then the one that compelled him the most. The old church hid a few hundred yards from the new church, concealed back in the woods at the center of a clearing in front of Shallows Creek. In the dim morning fog, the steeple was barely visible from the road, dissolved into the vague mass of black treetops. While the new church seemed to defiantly burst up from the earth and reshape the land around it, the old one seemed entrapped in the clay and mud, each morning choked back and swallowed into the trees.

He glanced back over his shoulder, as if someone at the lip of the valley had called his name. No one was there, of course, just the half-mile of empty air separating him from his parents', though now only his mother's, house. I had to get out of there, he thought—in the past tense as if he was already back there, explaining to his mother why he'd left. I needed the air.

His father was James Williams, a former Baltimore cop who'd moved to Millers Heights and become the owner of the local hardware store. Though most people knew him as the guy who sold saws and recommended one electric drill over another, James was also an amateur investigator, a historian of sorts. For two decades, he ran his store by day and spent his weekends looking through archives and questioning descendants. Most everyone in the county knew him because his name appeared in Barnes County Herald every few years, detailing some mystery his sleuthing had resolved. As he walked, Pastor Williams remembered the inscription on a medal his father had received from the County Historical Society: *To James Williams for keeping our past alive so we may never forget those who made the present.*

But the old church, he thought, had bested even his father. Ahead of Pastor Williams, it loomed just above the tree line, still standing though it was over 150 years old. He cut through the lawn behind the parish house, where Pastor Learner, the man who'd confirmed him and who would bury his father, lived. The rear of the house was dark, and he couldn't tell if Pastor Learner was in or not. No rush, he thought. It's not like I won't see him. He pushed through the bramble at the eaves of the woods and then slowed, easing over the roots and sticker bushes tangled at his feet.

For a brief moment, he thought about the eulogy Pastor Learner would deliver the next day, about the edited history of his father's life that he would have to give. A history that didn't include any sort of illness, that made his father's death peaceful and unremarkable, with the quiet grace of a star going dark in the sky. A history that would straddle the divide between a lie and a heroic fable, that would somehow fit cerebral rot into God's great architecture and assert that the Lord, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, had wanted it this way.

The woods were quiet and overwhelmingly still, like they were frozen in a single moment and couldn't push forward. It was everything that his mother's house wasn't, he thought, not at all a place congested with voices. Before leaving to come to the valley, he'd been crammed into the kitchen, a box just too narrow to be called a square. Conversation had swirled around him, and the words had just clung together, a muck of questions and condolences.

In the kitchen with its ochre walls, he'd overheard his mother speaking to his Aunt Carolyn. He'd been standing nearby, not listening to his Uncle Jack. She'd spoken

like a teacher trying to impart wisdom to a child, with a voice like a hard pillow, a bit comforting but more firm. “It only would’ve gotten worse.”

“Yeah,” Carolyn had said. “You never wish for someone to die, but...”

“But it was a blessing.” His mother’s voice again—and he wondered if she’d known if he was there, if she’d still have said it either way.

He ducked under a fat, low-hanging branch. She’s right, he thought. It is a blessing.

There weren’t any dedicated paths back to the old church, but, after a few steps, he heard Shallows Creek and followed its restless voice. He caught glimpses of it between the trees—the water was cold and clear, well-contained by its banks. Little white caps formed where it flowed around stones in the basin, and the tiny falls sputtered as he walked by. Above his head, the clouds were still stretched out like a pale bed sheet; the air remained calm, though, which meant rain was still mounting, or, as was typical this time of year, would only threaten without actually coming.

The old church sat just a little past the falls. When he first saw it, alone and still in the clearing, he almost expected the breeze to become a gale and swallow him up. And he knew part of him wanted that touch of melodrama to shout out that he’d come, something to make it fit with this demonic place of legends and stories, the myths his father had loved even as he’d labored to dismantle them. The air remained quiet and still, though. There was nothing to distract him from that dark steeple set against the gray sky. It was like a finger, he thought, pointing towards Heaven, perhaps accusingly, wondering when God would come and finish what he’d begun, wondering why He’d forgotten it to begin with.

As he stepped inside, he couldn't help but look up and imagine a ceiling above his head, a nave shaped like a boat to remind men of God's salvation. It would have been polished smooth and bright—or, better still, unpolished and knotted to truly recreate that image of a boat, the one that, for so many, signaled God's mercy, but for Pastor Williams, only trumpeted his wrath.

Somehow, he thought, we always forget that millions drowned.

A gust of wind fell on him. It collapsed the nave that wasn't there, and brought it down as invisible fingertips that cupped his face. He no longer saw a vessel of God's salvation but only a boat logged with water and with rot. Sunken, unsaved—a false ark after the flood.

He sat down on top of a flat stone, and he shut his eyes. In his mind, he would carry with him only the image of the dark steeple in front of him. His lasting thought would be that of a blackened, rain rotted steeple that still stood, proudly defying both age and gravity. Each time he felt doubt or desire or remembered his father, he would force that image into his mind. He would think of the wood dissolving, coming apart splinter by splinter like muscles do sinew by sinew. He would think of the entire church doing the same, of the one storm—maybe even the one stretched over his head—that would finally topple its languid steeple. He would think of it careening into the mud, of the fungus and moss that would creep over it and whittle it down. He would think of centuries ahead, when the new church would look the same. Its stones would be slumped out of alignment and crumpling, and its steeple would be a debris field across the belly of the valley.

It's not in the mind's nature, though, to stay still and focused, and even a devoted monk can only pray for so many hours a day. Almost immediately, though, he thought of his father's face—in abstract, in some bright moment not linked to any specific memory. A light bent across his cheekbones and sunk into the dark shallows beneath his eyes, carved out and hollowed by years of late nights spent in his study—a small white room with bookshelves, a desk, and a small green sofa patterned in sunbursts...He refocused his attention, sliding his mind instead to his father's eyes, dimmed with exhaustion, even that glint in his pupils dulled and murky. These were his father's eyes near the end, when they emptied and revealed stillness within him. They were the unwavering glass eyes of a marionette, reflecting the lights and lines of the world without thinking on them, without the capacity for reaction or reason. A marionette guided by habits, who labored over notes and investigations long after his edge had left him.

And there were pale lips that barely trembled as he took his breaths. They were the lips that confused names and tripped through sentences, that paused, open-mouthed, but then only closed as the thought dispersed.

It's a blessing, he thought.

By commenting on the memory, he realized how far he'd strayed from his intentions. He wrangled his mind back onto the image of the decayed steeple, onto the lacerations in its battered stones. He forced his mind to follow the black incisions, to trace over them and imagine their cold, rigid feel. Around him, the breeze began to drift again. He listened to it prowl through the brambles and paw its way through the tree branches. It crept across his face and tickled at his cheek. He thought it as the same wind that now drifted over his father's plot in Millers Heights, an empty hole in the shade

of a tall sycamore. As the same wind that, one day, would topple both churches and spread them, broken and scattered across the valley.

But his mind wandered again. Another thought came to it—his mother didn't need him at home. She had it all under control. There had been no viewing, and there wouldn't be a viewing. She'd explained this to him over the phone. It'd been in that same conversation when she'd told him that his father was dead, that he'd fallen down the stairs and smacked the life right out of his head. Then, also, she'd sounded like a teacher, like she was trying to explain to an eight year-old how life wasn't always fair.

“Viewings are hard on people.”

He'd chucked a shirt in his travel bag and looked into the mirror with his eyes creased into a thin stare, like he was looking at her rather than himself. “Yeah, but...but don't you think people might want to come by and, oh, I don't know, *remember?*”

“They don't have to stare at his face to remember him, Mike,” she'd said. “Or they can come to the funeral.”

He'd thrown a T-shirt into his travel bag and checked, for a third time, that he'd had enough socks. “You can't do this. There needs to be a viewing.”

“It's already done, Mike. I've made the arrangements, and we aren't having a viewing.”

“You didn't even ask me.”

“There was nothing to ask.” Stress was just beginning to crack her voice. She'd sounded like a captain trying to hide from his passengers that the ship was taking on water. “I made this decision awhile ago, Mike. I've had a lot of time to prepare this day.”

“I know, but—”

“Your father wouldn’t want one.”

“What about the family?”

“Everyone’s coming for the funeral,” she’d said. “A viewing’s like burying him another time, except it’s longer. They’re useless.”

“This is absurd. Don’t you even feel vaguely disrespectful?”

“No. Your father’s been dead a long time. I don’t see much reason in making everyone else suffer.”

“So you’re just shutting me out?”

She’d paused, and he’d known exactly what face she was making. It was the one where her lips pursed and bulged just a bit, because, behind them, she was practicing her response to make sure it was just right, quickly checking it over to see if she could make it more diplomatic—or to see if diplomacy was even worth it. “On this one—yes.”

“You know funerals are supposed to bring family together?”

“I forgot you were an expert on them now,” she’d said. “I’ve taken care of him for the last five years—not you—and I get to decide this. I’m sorry.”

“No. You’re not,” he’d said, but any follow-up he might’ve had dissolved into a weak exhale. “I need to go pack. We’ll talk later.”

“You don’t have to come tonight. There’s no sense in you killing yourself too, driving this late.”

“I’m leaving now. I’ll see you.” He hadn’t waited for her to say good-bye.

As he sat there in the old church, he knew she was up at the house chatting and laughing, playing the perfect hostess and everything but the grieving wife. She didn’t

want a viewing, he thought, so here I am trying to have one of my own. Except that it was so hard to get his thoughts to play the part, to stare down the sullen skin and shrunken eyes, or, at least what he imagined they looked like. He hadn't even had the chance to see his own father's corpse.

He tried again to wrestle control over his thoughts. Eventually, though, he surrendered in the way one does to a daydream—when one falls without even becoming aware and realizes minutes later that one has been wholly assumed into a captivating thought. His mind didn't come upon a reminiscence, though, not a daydream about his father and his youth, not about his mother or his family crammed into that kitchen with yellow walls and a growling dishwasher. Instead, the ghosts in the woods, the one who walked between the church's walls, peered into his upturned mind—the fables and tales, the ones he knew so well, intruded on his quiet.

Of all the things his mind instead might have chosen, it settled on a story.

His father had a story about the old church, and this is what came to him as he sat there, padded over by the damp breeze. As much time as his father had dedicated to figuring out what had happened at the old church, he'd always seemed to enjoy the fables and ghost stories just as much—even if they were the lies standing in the way of the fact he'd searched for and never found.

If you go back a long time ago, he'd always begin, before when I was born, before when your grandparents were born, before the Civil War even, then you reach a time when the old church wasn't the old church. When it was, simply, the only church in Creek Valley. His father's voice had a wise and unbreakable omniscience: Back then, it

wasn't rotted or decayed. Back then, it wasn't falling apart. It was tall and cupped by the bright green treetops and not at all forgotten or ignored.

Back then, when they were building it, it was going to be called St. John's, and the pastor who would serve in it was named Reverend John Sutter. He was a devout and passionate man and was a firm believer. He was loved by his congregants—the way we love Pastor Learner, right? he'd sometimes add, as if it were some sort of test hidden within the tale. But some of the folks in town didn't like Reverend Sutter so much. They didn't understand how he showed his love for God, and they called him a liar. Nobody knows what exactly they said or what exactly he did, but we do know that not everybody loved Reverend Sutter.

Even still, he and his congregants started work on the new church. They began building it in the spring and hoped to have it finished by the fall. They got the stones from the big quarry up in Whitedale—it's been empty for eighty years now—and brought them down on wagons. For wood to build the pews and altar, they just used the trees around them. Construction went along smoothly for one month, then another, then another, and, then, suddenly, it stopped.

His father would look him directly in the eyes as he added: It stopped, and it never started again. And nobody knows why.

But, you know how people are—just because they don't know doesn't mean they don't talk. They have all sorts of ideas and opinions about what happened at the old church. Even if you ask around today, you'll hear ones I've never heard before. Some people say the ghosts in the woods scared the workers away. They say that the highwaymen who died back there kept scaring the workers away because they didn't

want a church back there. They were angry at God for rejecting their souls, and they didn't want anything having to do with him back where they haunted. They even visited Reverend Sutter in his sleep and scared him right out of Millers Heights, saying that they'd kill him if he didn't leave.

Other folks, though, say that Reverend Sutter brought the ghosts to the woods. They say he was actually a very bad man and only pretended to believe in God. They say that, actually, he was working for the devil and was secretly killing people for some evil end. They say his evil acts are what brought the ghosts to the woods. He made the old church like a magnet for the ghosts and spirits, and they just gathered there. Eventually, though, people suspected he was up to no good, and they ran him out of town, though his ghosts stayed behind.

But the truth is that nobody knows what happened to Reverend Sutter, though everyone has an explanation. There's even talk that he died right there in the woods, not for any real reason at all, and that you can hear him whispering if you listen real closely. But even that nobody knows for sure. Maybe, his father would say with a smile, maybe he just went straight up to Heaven like Elijah on his chariot. That'd be nice.

It's just that nobody knows.

It was a story that had developed with Pastor Williams as he'd grown, the more lurid parts diluted or omitted until later telling, when he finally got a full scope of the rumors and lies. And it was a story he'd come to better understand as he'd gotten older, as his mind wandered back to it from time to time. As a child, it'd been hard for him to understand how people could love the Lord in different ways. But, as a man of the Lord,

he recognized all the different roots of faith and how some were true and some were false.

Once, he'd asked his father a question after the story: "Do you really think there're ghosts?"

His father had winked, but only said, "It depends on who you ask."

When his intentions finally caught up with him again, Pastor Williams sighed and left the old church for home. He wouldn't arrive at any clarity today.

That evening, night came in the way it does on cloudy days, when there's no sunset to dim the sky and only a sudden, curt darkness. The clouds remained, though, so that the night saturated the sky, and not even a single star broke it. Mist clasped to the windows and bred a sense of suffocation—a heavy night, difficult to breathe, and lit by faraway streetlights.

The sudden dark caught Pastor Williams' family off guard, and they quickly went back to the hotel early in the evening, concerned about driving through mist and the rain that never came. As his mother led the last of his family to the door—"Are you sure you'll be all right, Ann?" his Uncle Jack had asked. "You don't want us to stay the night?"—he sat at the kitchen table and fiddled with the edge of the placemat. It was green and made of some heavy cloth, and he tugged at a loose thread, pulling out more and more of it. It was a habit from when he was young, and it came back to him immediately. I wonder if she'll yell at me, he thought, listening to his mother assure his family that she and he would survive the night.

"We'll be fine. A bit lonely, maybe, but fine. We'll see you in the morning."

When she came back into the kitchen, she finally let herself show just how tired she was. Her eyes drooped immediately, and she crinkled her forehead like she was battling off a headache. Beneath her nose, her lips relaxed, taking a long-awaited rest from a day full of smiles and frowns, basking in the fact that, for a moment, she didn't have to feel anything at all. She ran her fingers through her hair, beginning to gray, and straightened her bangs. He watched her stand at the edge of the hallway, surveying the kitchen and the living room. His eyes followed hers into the living room, looked over the

end tables with faded varnish and the reading lamps that were out of style, at the blank television screen, at the dim, dingy fireplace they'd almost never used.

On the mantel, there was a picture of him as a child in his baseball uniform, orange and black, the colors all the kids growing up had wanted so they could call themselves the Orioles. Beside it was that family photo where they all looked uncomfortable in their dress clothes. His father looked the worst of them all, he thought. Here he was in a suit that looked ill-fitting simply because it was on him, with a ruddy face because his skin wasn't used to being shaved more than once a week, with a grin that was too big and too dumb because he'd never known how to smile anyway. We look like morons, Pastor Williams thought, and he looked away.

His mother was still surveying, though, taking it all in, a familiar place remade in all but the obvious ways. She yawned.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Hmmm?" She turned her head and blinked, as if she'd forgotten he was there.

"No, not really. You want some coffee? I need something hot to drink."

"Sure. I'll take some."

Though she opened and closed the cabinet doors gently, the sound still echoed in the silence. He kept glancing over at the mute television, wondering if he should turn it on. It seemed to him her each motion was quieter than the one before—slowly closing the cabinet, using a minimal stream of water to rinse out the pot, scooping out enough coffee for precisely two cups. But he wondered if she would just tell him to turn it off, call him out on trying to drown the silence with some blathering primetime show. This is why people have viewings, he thought. To have a distraction.

The coffee maker grumbled, and she sat two mugs down on the table. His finger was twisted up in the thread he'd pulled out of the mat. It had begun to redden.

“Some things never change,” she said. He smiled, letting the thread fall away from his finger.

They talked for a bit while they waited for the coffee to brew. She asked about life in Kentucky, he asked about life in Millers Heights, she asked if he'd saved any souls yet, and he answered that he wasn't sure, but he'd let her know when he did. And so the dance continues, he thought while they bantered. Just pretend the elephant isn't here. They'd content each other with small talk until any residue of their argument from the other night slipped past, like a fog they were just waiting for time to burn off.

When the coffee was ready, she poured it, and then they both sipped from their mugs for a moment. He felt the steam curl around his nose and out into the air. He looked over at the coffee machine on the counter, once shiny and white, but now splotted with stains. He couldn't remember it any other way, stained and worn as, it seemed, it'd always been. “You'd sleep better if you'd stop drinking this before bed”—his mother speaking to his father on one of countless evenings.

“I need it to stay awake”—his father's response—“I still have work to do before bed.” And, by “work,” it'd always been understood that he meant digging into some puzzle or riddle, some mystery that had nothing to do with the hardware store where he “worked” during the day. It had always meant the lamp on in his study, a pale light that seeped out from under the door at midnight, 1 a.m. It had meant a yellow glow that had fascinated Pastor Williams all through childhood, when he'd crept up to the door to listen to the sounds of his father's world—pens scratching on paper, muttered cusses, books

opening and closing. Once or twice, his father had heard him—"Go back to bed, Mike. You have school tomorrow."—but mostly, he'd sat there outside the door, wondering what his father was doing, what mystery he was taking steps towards resolving. He'd invented cases his father might be pursuing, dead widows and lost treasures and all the other grand, lurid things that come to a child's mind. Still, he would wait for some hint of what his father might've been doing until he heard some movement or grew bored. Back then, five, ten minutes seemed like an eternity. That child's sense of time remained in his memories, that sense of endless anticipation while the pen continued to scratch the page.

"So you were gone for awhile this afternoon," she said.

"Yeah, I went down to the woods." He bit the inside of his lip. "I needed some fresh air."

She nodded. She curled her fingers around her mug and looked at some invisible point right beside him. "People were starting to ask what happened to you."

"I didn't mean to be gone that long."

"Did it help?" Her eyes shifted onto him. "Getting the air?"

"Yeah. Some."

"Good."

They both sipped their coffee again. As she put her mug back on the table, her eyes slid towards the trembling liquid in it. She stared at the coffee like its waves revealed to her what he'd been doing in that hour when he'd simply vanished from the house. The ends of her pale blond hair swung around her ears, framing the freckles and laugh lines she'd collected on her skin. She kept staring.

"I really didn't mean to be gone that long," he said.

“I know. You said that already.” She waited a moment, then added: “Just don’t do it tomorrow, okay?”

His smile was as limp as hers. “Yeah.”

She stood up and grabbed her mug off the table. “I’m heading up. I’m going to read a little bit before bed.”

“Okay,” he said. “See you in the morning.”

“Yep.”

Pastor Williams finished his coffee soon after she left, and he immediately regretted it. He had nothing else to do, and the caffeine would keep him from falling asleep. For an hour, he tried to read, and, for another hour, he tried to watch television. But there was a familiar electricity sparking in his muscles, not just from the caffeine but also from the thoughts that were marauding about in the not-quite-conscious parts of his mind. He felt like a sentry standing on the edge of an ancient forest, legs twitching because he just wanted the barbarians to arrive already. He shifted and stood, changed channels and paced. But he just couldn’t work the electricity out of his veins. Endlessly, it sparked and prodded until he went up the stairs and came to where it’d been urging him to go all along: the door of his father’s study.

While his mother read in the bedroom, he stood outside the study. While she flipped through the pages of some “true crime” book, he couldn’t help but stand there and remember. Not, though, that he remembered the nights he’d sat outside this door or the afternoons he’d played in there while his father was away at the shop. Instead, he remembered the one thought that had supplanted all the other memories of this room. He

remembered why he'd entered the seminary, and he remembered that he'd almost killed his father. It was a story he told himself often.

The doctors uncovered his father's illness near the end of his college career. For years, the illness bubbled in quiet and made subtle fractures across his father's mind. But, slowly, the pieces began to give way. Proteins failed to make their usual routes and synapses misfired or went dark. Memories bobbed together, the shards of one tearing into another. Like a mirror shattered and reassembled, his mind reflected oddities and errors, but he couldn't see the dark seams where pieces didn't fit, where they'd been wrongly shoved together. The mirror gave off the authority of reality, the illusion of it.

"Sometimes, I think I'm going crazy," his father would say. He'd always follow up by shaking his head, dismissing an absurd thought he'd meant as a joke.

With time, the distortions became more severe. At the store, he lost documents and began to ignore basic safety protocols. At the historical society, the staff noticed him check and recheck sources; in hindsight, they guessed he'd forgotten he'd ever looked at them. Even in little things, it eventually started becoming apparent. He rolled through stop signs and switched lanes without warning. Every few months, he'd buy new socks even while others, still in unopened packaging, collected in his drawers.

Pastor Williams did the research his mother refused to, and he discovered his father's future—not only would he forget memories and speech patterns, but, eventually, he would lose even basic instincts, the intuitions written in his DNA. How to eat. How to not shit himself. His body would enter a waking coma, and his mind, quite simply, would forget how to live.

“Dr. Kirkstein said we won’t really notice too much at first,” his mother explained to him over a staticky telephone. He’d been in the cramped apartment he’d rented during his junior of college, and her words kept getting caught up in the line, echoing and reechoing like voices between trees. “I’ve noticed a few things here and there. But, you probably won’t even notice the difference because you don’t see him that much.” She didn’t mean it as an insult, he told himself, and continued listening. “He’ll seem just like he was.”

“For now,” he said. Sitting at the foot of his bed, he stared out his apartment window onto a lone street lamp in the park across the street. Its color reminded him of an ash left outside a fire, smoldering maroon and orange. It brightened, then darkened. White-hot, then dim, then bruised and purple.

“Yes,” she said back. He could almost hear her smiling despite herself. When she was upset, she only knew how to smile, as if her hurt embarrassed her. “Obviously, things won’t get better, but Dr. Kirkstein says there’re drugs that can help. He says that your father still has some good years in him. It’ll be slow.” Again, she meant to be positive.

The following summer, when home on break, he thought about ending his father’s suffering before it happened; he couldn’t count on life or God’s mercy to end his father’s hurt. The architecture of mysterious ways sometimes allowed for unfathomable crimes. One afternoon, he found his father sleeping on the couch in his study, snoring with a creaky wheeze. The couch was green with little golden sunbursts stitched across it in a neat, orderly way. He looked on his father, whose lips trembled with each shallow breath. The afternoon light was dark and blue, and it poured itself into those trembling

lips, made them purple and swollen. It produced the shadows curving along the contours of his father's cheekbones, protruding above the skin. It clarified and deepened the colors in his father's veins, bright and lurid as they webbed across his forehead.

He imagined the remainder of his father's life. Memory would dissolve, and routine would step in to provide his tether to life and order. Words would begin to fade, and his father's moods would degenerate to single-note variants amid a persistent, gray dullness. Instinct would become slippery, and there would be phantom choking, continual trips to the bathroom brought on by false urges. Phobias and fixations would captivate his father, impel his existence. He wondered if his father would forget how to breathe, or if his father's heart would forget its motions. His father would survive on IV tubes and wheeze into a respirator—his snoring already mimicked the sound.

He picked up the pillow from the other end of the couch and contemplated, for a moment, the sunbursts against the green fabric sky. They were like candles, tiny flames, suspended and unwavering. He held the pillow against his father's lips.

He couldn't hear his father breathe anymore. Not that his father's breath had stopped, but he realized it could. The pillow didn't suddenly jump out his hands—he didn't instinctively toss it aside. He could spare his family suffering and hurt, and he had no reason not to except a nagging sense of wrongness, a lingering qualm that suspended the muscles in his arms and kept his fingers from gripping any tighter, from pushing any harder. The Holy Spirit, he would later swear—in private, since he never shared this moment with anyone. God had stayed his hand.

Finally, he placed the pillow down, the sunbursts and green sky distancing from him as they rejoined the rest of the pattern, now bright and wavering. Nausea filled his

stomach and distorted his eyes; for a moment, his weakness saddened him, but then his body began a revolution against him. He didn't want to kill his father anymore, though he realized he could have. The hurt rose in his stomach and in his throat.

He staggered to his bedroom and fell down on his bed. Dark blue curtains threw folds of blue light across the walls and across his skin. And he prayed—later on, he would consider it the first sincere prayer of his life. The words jumbled inside his head, but they begged for forgiveness. He'd nearly violated nature and simple human morality, and he wanted God's heel to come down and crush his head. The thought made him shudder before God, twist within the cavernous, icy blue light. It was like the interior of a glacier, and he was naked within its frozen, transparent walls. Through it, he could see the world, but everything was tinted in cold blue, dead to him, removed.

He began to speak, but the words just didn't gain any height. They seemed to just smash against the ceiling and echo around his face, going nowhere and reaching no ears but his own, striking some stone slab that had positioned itself between him and the Lord. His unconsidered petitions shattered, and their brittle parts rained down on him, trembling vibrations of his sin.

As his body began to calm, his breath stopped shivering from his chest. Like any penitent after initially confessing, he began to work together logic and argument, to justify himself and earn mercy through those means. It's awful and he doesn't deserve it. He's a good man, and I just don't want to see him suffer. Mercy and love, weren't those God's greatest attributes? Jesus says that love is the greatest commandment; Muhammad, on his night trip to Heaven, saw only one of Allah's 99 names on his altar—the Merciful. Why then, would God do this? What was the mercy in this? Maybe if I

knew why this was happening—anger flared, and he quickly silenced himself. The Lord works in mysterious ways—a common saying, and one that, even if it wouldn't satisfy him later, calmed him in that moment.

Down the hall, he heard his father wake up, his snores stumbling over each other into a startled, dissatisfied grunt at being awake again. Eventually, he calmed, though it would be some time before he could make eye contact with his father again, before his father's snoring didn't make him cry.

By summer's end, he talked to Pastor Learner about the seminary.

"I always knew there was something special about you." An enormous grin crossed Pastor Learner's face. He was lying, Pastor Williams thought, perhaps thinking of someone else. But there was the promise of seeing the world differently, living in it differently—better—and maybe, just possibly, having his sins washed clean. He couldn't say no to the Spirit's calling. After graduation, he entered and devoted himself to the Lord's work.

In the seminary, he discovered the mystics and early saints of the church. Boehme's *The Way to Christ* occupied a special place on his bookshelf, right near the top, right beside his King James. He read it often, lingering on many passages, but none stayed with him like: "When you are thus prepared so that the Eternal Father can see your coming and know that you are returning in this kind of repentance and humility, then He will speak into you and say: 'Behold! This is my son who was lost, who was dead, and is alive again!'" He lingered on Boehme's passion, wrote countless papers on it and read the phrase again and again, desiring that death and resurrection, that intense, earnest want to be reborn, in this life and the next.

But, while he grew in the Lord's way, shards slipped out of his father's mind and never found their way back in. Words slid out, then names, then things he'd been told twenty minutes, an hour prior. All the accumulated events stored within his brain shook, jarred, and some fell out. The things that made him who he was he shook off with each step. Each day, he was a little less James Williams, a little more neither himself nor not-himself.

If he was anything at all by the time he died, it was a dumb-eyed caricature. The Bible, Pastor Williams found, dealt plenty with lepers, but had nothing to say about a rotting mind. His father's illness was an absence in the architecture, something the manual didn't seem to account for. But it fit that architecture, he swore to himself. Somewhere, it snapped in.

It's said that the dead cast long shadows, but, perhaps this is true only in that we choose to keep walking in those shadows. Maybe, somewhere along the line, Pastor Williams could've stepped out from his father's shadow—but that moment in his father's study was what brought him to faith, what defined his ministry. It was the moment that the Spirit saved him and told him not to fear or rage at God, but to seek the things of Heaven, to have the Lord hear his voice again and wash him clean.

The next day, Pastor Williams and his mother arrived at the new church almost an hour before the funeral. There was nothing for them to do, but they had to be there; they were the co-captains of the ship, he thought, and, apparently, it wouldn't sail without them. He killed time by chatting with his family, asking about cousins he hadn't seen in years and offering brief commentary on lives far away from his. He sat and stood, hugged and received hugs, and waited as the seconds stepped out the door.

Each face he spoke to was colorless and gray. The sky was as dim and distant as it had been the day before, and, as the light wove in from the rear of the sanctuary, it stitched pale shawls to everyone's face. The silk haze stretched out the thin frowns and emaciated smiles, and it spilled watery shadows along the carpet, bobbling scarecrow shapes that gawkily mimicked all the hugs and shoulder-pats. The usual condolences criss-crossed in front of him, but even as the sanctuary filled, it kept quiet. The dim air made the words soggy and heavy, kept them close and hushed.

While he spoke to his Aunt Carolyn, he thought about just how pale she looked—as if she'd seen a ghost. He glanced down at his own hands, which had become cast in porcelain, frail and cold. Everyone in the room looked the same, he thought, as if they'd all become cadavers, too, as if it was some act of solidarity.

He kept near the front pew with his mother to his right and his aunts and uncles on either side of them. Before the service began, his Uncle Jack sat at the end of the pew whispering wisecracks. He was the man who sold artificial heart valves, who sustained life and sold what his nephews, Pastor Williams included, had imagined as cyborg hearts, impervious pumping machines that lasted forever, that throbbed in caskets even after the

bone and skin had flaked into dust. He was the businessman turned joker, able to always show himself as a sturdy rock in any storm—leading sales during a recession, jokes during a funeral.

All this to hide how powerless he was, Pastor Williams thought. If only he sold artificial synapses rather than valves or some cutting edge pseudo-jelly to replace the proteins that had seeped out his brother's mind. Instead, he offered comedy; if he couldn't save his brother's life, he could at least decide the tone of his funeral.

It'll get better—this was his initial thought, the pastor intuition speaking up, the words he wished his uncle could somehow hear. But he knew they were too convenient, so he corrected them: It'll get number.

Around him, the funeral brought together folks he hadn't seen in years, or, at most, had only talked to in passing since leaving for college. Just a few pews back, Jerry Kingston, director of the Barnes County Historical Society, sat with his big, thick glasses sliding down his nose. His fingers straightened the few ribbons of blond hair still tethered to his head. Beside him, Robbie Alberts, the former shop hand who now owned his father's store, tugged at and straightened the sleeves of his jacket. Wants to know if he can roll up his sleeves, Pastor Williams thought, trying to reconcile the man shifting in a blue suit with the only Robbie Alberts he had ever known—in jeans and a worn Oxford, blue or white, sleeves up to his elbows even in winter. Robbie stood alongside his wife, Emily, whose body had swollen into a pear-shape because she was hefting around the weight of their third child.

They were talking to, or, rather, being talked at, by Ginny Crenshaw, a neighbor, who looked still more prematurely aged than the last time Pastor Williams had seen her.

Laugh lines had begun to branch into full-blown wrinkles, and the weight that had always haunted her face had only dragged the shallows beneath her eyes even lower. She was the descendant of Commodore Shunter, the navy tactician who Shunter's Point was named after, and almost certainly, she was telling her one memory of his father: how he had located the Commodore's priceless Chippendale furniture after her drunk, bastard father had sold it to clear his debts. It was a story she often told.

Adam Leary, president of the church council, sat several pews back, behind the family and close friends. He was well into middle age and reminded Pastor Williams of a penguin because he was swollen around the waistline and waddled rather than walked. He wasn't alone in representing the church. The church secretary, Sharon Dulaney, sat beside him and his wife, Ethel. Sharon was an ethereal woman who looked fit among all these faces with pale and dusty skin, and her expressions never varied too far beyond a general sedateness. Everything he'd ever said to her seemed to at once confuse and alarm her; it was like the different parts of her face were controlled by separate brains. Her forehead would crease but her lips would stay flat, or she'd smile but her eyes would fix on him with a hollow stare. And her voice matched, shallow and vague as if all those long days in the church had hushed her for good. As if, like some medieval nun, living in God's silence had made her meek.

Pastor Williams wondered how well either Adam or Sharon had actually known his father, if they'd even so much as shaken hands with him, or if they'd ever had a conversation that didn't revolve around how proud he must be of his pastor son. They're here for me, he thought. And I barely even know them.

He looked around for Mrs. Bittner, his old confirmation teacher, one the few people he made a regular point to see whenever he was in town. She was nowhere to be found.

At the start of the service, all attention drew towards the altar. His father's casket was stationed there, in the gap between the communion rails. The light wickered down the smooth veneer and clung to it like wax that hardens to a candle. Everything else it drained of color, but the bier it illuminated. The glare was unrelentingly still, and, during the whole funeral, it didn't shift even slightly.

At the altar, Pastor Learner delivered his eulogy. He was a small, slender man who'd developed a rhetoric to match. It had none of the bombast of fire and brimstone, but, instead, a gentle omnipresence, like when the sun comes down on a snowy field and illuminates the whole wide air. His voice was natural and confident, louder than his speaking voice, but tonally no different. He had lips that effortlessly frowned and smiled at just the right moments, and the word "I" populated his sermons. They were intimate and conversational; it was the sort of preaching better suited for a fishing trip than a great stone sanctuary. But, with his lean cheeks and fully white hair, he didn't need to command. He was the elder statesman, the grandfather whose savvy gentleness softened his listeners and made them hear his words.

"History," he began. "I suppose that would be the easy place to start. Convenient, and as good as any...For once, then, I won't be a stubborn old mule, and I'll do things the easy way. James would've preferred it that way. He would've preferred to be remembered as a historian, or investigator, more than as the guy who owned the local hardware store.

“Because of him, I’ve been thinking a lot about history these last few days. He and I are both immigrants to the area. For whatever reason, we both found our way to this same old town, to this same old country road in this same old spooky valley. I came from Allentown, he came from Baltimore. We both arrived within two months of each other. El and I were just settling in when he came rolling up Route 13 in that baby blue Corolla. You all remember the one; he kept it until it died in the driveway.

Now imagine those headlights like a pair of eyes. Imagine them fishing their way through the gray fog, intent upon a homestead somewhere just beyond.”

He paused for a moment, allowing everyone in the room to indulge in that image, the disembodied eyes poking through the ghost haze. When he was younger, Pastor Williams had thought that the fog was the ghosts themselves, that there were just so many they meshed together into a quilt of cotton souls. He was free to reach out, touch, breathe them in.

“Now, I’ve talked to Ann about this before,” Pastor Learner continued, “and she tells me they took the highway to Route 27 and didn’t come up through the valley. But, even if it isn’t true, I still like to imagine him coming up that way. His headlights pushed through the fog, and that tough old engine growled at the morning. And, if we think about it for a moment, it’s easy to say that that’s what he was in all the years he was here, the light of clarity pushing through the dusty legends. And, in this case, just because it’s easy doesn’t make it not true.

“Now, of course, Route 13’s the road that, according to the tale, Henry Mitchell and Ann Delcrest used to flee from Baltimore. And that’s why I associate James with the

road, because here he was rolling up through the fog with an Ann of his own, following in the footsteps of a ghost story he didn't know yet, but would come to love.

“For those of you who don't know the story, it goes that Henry Mitchell was a down-on-his-luck gambler and Ann Delcrest was the daughter of a wealthy merchant he'd seduced. It depends on who you ask if he really loved her or not. Some say he just in it for her money. Others say he'd had dishonest motives at the start, but was eventually won over by her grace and good heart. Either way, though, his debts kept mounting. He convinced her to flee with him to Philadelphia, where he promised he'd earn them so much money they'd never have to care for a thing in the world...Of course, they never made it there, though. They came up Route 13 with bounty hunters on their tail, so they plunged right into the morning fog to keep their slim advantage...If they were locals, they'd have known better. Thieves and robbers hid in the woods, and they used the fog to cover their tracks. A group of highwaymen ambushed them right in this valley, and their romance or love or whatever it was ended right there. A day or two later, the bounty hunters found Henry's horse wandering through the Millers' orchard.”

He paused again. “But that, of course, isn't the end of the story. The same highwaymen ambushed the bounty hunters on their way out of town, but the bounty hunters fought back and the highwaymen lost to the last...And, if you believe such things, that's where the highwaymen stayed. God made the ground so hard it rejected their souls, and they still wander out there...And, they say if listen closely enough, you can hear Ann Delcrest crying in the south breeze.

“Now, I know it's a ghost story, and I know it isn't true. And I know this isn't much of a story for a funeral, at least not on the surface, but it kept coming to me as I

tried to write this. And the reason for it isn't really the events themselves, but the repercussions. I think James liked the idea that the highwaymen were still around, and that Ann Delcrest was, too. He was fond of all the ghost stories and legends because it meant the past somehow *co-existed* with the present, that the ghosts stood side-by-side with the living and weren't confined to some bygone age. That they still continue to speak to us.

“Whenever he could, he spent his time trying to locate their voices. He was a man who believed in honesty and truth and who was willing to dig as far as necessary to find them. His investigations were weekend affairs that spanned months and years, and, yet, he had a remarkable commitment to them—almost as remarkable as his success. Elias Miller indeed was a relative of John Smith, but, no, Abraham Lincoln hadn't stopped in Bell Forks on his way to Gettysburg. From his study on the second floor of an old country home, James rewrote this county's history on more than one occasion. He was a man who made and broke our past, always looking for truth beneath our tales.”

Pastor Williams' eyes returned to the casket, and he considered his father's face, beneath the wood, his father's pale mouth. The funeral home had stitched his father's mouth shut, had used invisible threads to seam his lips together. They'd pulled the lips tightly, punctured them at regular points, and drawn the strings through vessels that hadn't bled and muscles that hadn't twitched. With their sewing, they'd woven his father into an unbreakable serenity. He couldn't say a thing, couldn't jerk his lips wide to protest, to say he hadn't loved the story because it meant the “past co-existed with the present.” That was too abstract. His father couldn't say that he'd loved the story because of the divine justice, because God had stepped down and given the sinful what they truly

deserved, and wasn't that rare in the course of human events and worth celebrating? The damned wandered the earth forever, and it was a fitting punishment. His father could only listen while his words scrambled behind the threads, periodically bashing into them like blackbirds into windows. Pastor Williams, though, could practically hear his father's murmured objections, the stitched-mouth grunts echoing through the wood. And, more than Pastor Learner, they indicted him, unpunished, frocked, and glorified.

I'm sorry, he thought, meaning for both his father and his father's Lord to hear him. I'm sorry.

"There's a passage from Revelation that I've been thinking of a lot in the last few days. Don't worry, it has nothing to do with stars falling from the sky and seas turning to blood. It comes late, after the Armageddon, when John writes, 'There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' Now that first part's pretty common at funerals, but it's the second part I want to focus on today--'the old order of things has passed away.' It's fitting for James, a man who always dug into that old order. It's tempting now for us to consign James to the past, to mourn him for too long and say he exists only in our memories. But, for him, the old order doesn't matter anymore. He lives in a new order, one that's pushed the old one with all its death and hurt right out the window. The past and its questions have been burnt away, and he stands in what is truly the only order--the eternal order of God. Like the fog that lifts from our valley every morning, for him, the old order of death and mourning is in the past. Its time has come, and its time has gone. God's order has no such limitations. It has no history, only life eternal and everlasting.

“It’s when we remember that God’s order is not the same as ours that we can understand the purposes behind death. It’s when we know that the old order will leave and a better one will come that we can triumph in the glory of James’ passing. Imagine *this*, for a moment—death as a curiosity, as something to be ‘investigated’ because it no longer exists...Death itself as a ghost story. This is the miracle of our Lord’s sacrifice, and the blessing of our faith. Death? Death is history. It has no hold over us, and one day will come for all of us when the fog passes and stays gone, when we too enter God’s order and find James beside us in life eternal. These are the days we drive for. This is the homestead at the edge of the fog. A new order waits for us, one that knows no time.

“Ask James. Of all the mysteries he’s solved, I’m sure he would’ve say faith was the greatest. He most certainly would now, in the light of our Lord’s kingdom. Don’t consign him away, don’t write him off as something in the past. He lives now in place where there is no history, only peace and life...James is at rest.

“Amen.”

Communion followed soon after the sermon, and, of course, the family went first. Kneeling at the rail, he and his mother were the first two to receive the wafer from the assisting elder, and the first two to receive Pastor Learner’s blessing: “Now may the body and blood strengthen you in the one true faith until life everlasting. Amen.” As they stood, he kept himself from looking at Pastor Learner, from accepting any sort of sympathy or consolation that might come his way. As they proceeded down from the altar, he looked out the enormous windows at the rear of the sanctuary and caught sight of the old church, a little blemish on the horizon.

Saint John's. He repeated the name in his mind like an incantation. It revived memories of his father standing in front of that window, looking at the old steeple, as degraded then as it was now. At a distance, it'd looked the same for decades, as if it'd decayed to a certain point and then become immortal. He remembered mornings when his father, in line to shake hands with Pastor Learner, would pause to stare at it. He would hold the line up until an impatient cough nudged him ahead. He hadn't looked every Sunday, but only ones at random when the steeple seized his attention and took him up in its misery.

"Are there really ghosts in there, Daddy?"

"It depends on who you ask."

The ghosts had kept his father away, gotten between him and the fact of what had actually happened at the old church. He imagined phantom fingertips prodding into his father's skull, through his gray hair, through the dry and moist layers of skin, pulling apart the neurons and freezing the synapses. They gallivanted through his father's mind and destroyed bits at random—names, memories, all hobbled and broken. Faint ethereal fingers that pushed through flesh and bone to unthread his mind. How to drive, how to write, how to intuit—the ghosts took everything. They destroyed his intellect, the edge and passion that had sustained him through his life.

This was a convenient explanation, and a bit more consoling than that his father's mind arbitrarily forgotten its functions. Except that ghosts aren't real, he thought, remembering Pastor Learner's eulogy. They're only in my head.

His father also had a story about gravediggers. It came to him while he hefted the casket from the hearse and carried it towards the plot, a trim, rectangular hole in the shade of an old sycamore. He was at the front right, his Uncle Jack was at the front left, and two of his father's old cop buddies from Baltimore were in the back. With four hands lifting and four backs straining, it wasn't too heavy.

The story came to him while he looked at his Uncle Jack's face, finally and fully stern, as if the casket's weight had dragged all the humor out of him. In the days when Millers Heights was still a small, small, town, his father would begin, there were two gravediggers in the whole town. Since not that many lived around here, they didn't need more than two because people didn't die all that often. In fact, they probably could've gotten by with just one, but, out of pity, they wanted the gravediggers to have some company. It was a tough way to live, and digging by yourself could do things to your head.

(They slid the casket up rollers onto the bier. It was something like an assembly line.)

So, then, there were two gravediggers in all of Millers Heights: an older one and a younger one. The older one had outlived his wife and all his children, but he hadn't had to bury them. Out of gratitude and a different sort of pity, some of the men whose wives he'd buried his wife and, later, one by one, his children. The older digger lived by himself in a small shack on the outskirts of town, right at the edge of the first hill. In the morning, he could look out and see the land descend, step by step, into the valley. His entire life was holes and pits.

The younger one had also outlived most of his family, except for his young daughter. They lived together with an uncle of his who worked a little bit of land and had enough to support his family— three sons and a superstitious, gargoyle-faced wife—along with his nephew and niece. Grave digging certainly wasn't the younger man's ideal choice of profession, but it fell his way and he stuck with it.

At home, from the uncle, he heard: "Think yourself blessed enough to have work."

At work, from the older digger, he heard: "The Lord hates those who he makes diggers."

(Everyone took their appropriate positions, family at center and friends on the flanks. Pastor Learner made no hurry to step in front of the casket and get things underway.)

It wasn't pleasant work, but it wasn't hard—achy, but not hard. The older man had no one to lie to about his work; the only company he had in his shack was the same company he had on his long walks home: his shovel. But the younger man had to come up with explanations and lies for his daughter. He told her that he worked on a farm far away from his uncle's. Lying, though, became ever harder with his aunt leering about. After awhile, she made him leave his boots outside the house. They had "evil dirt" on them, she said, and even when it rained, she wouldn't let him keep them inside. So, some days, he came to the churchyard—there was only one in Millers Heights back then, behind St. Peter's Episcopal—with his boots squishing and his feet cold. When he explained it to the older digger, the old digger just laughed. "A little devil dirt ain't going to hurt no one," he said.

Eventually, though, keeping his boots outside wasn't enough. His aunt became adamant that he go to church every Sunday. She said she could smell the "ghost stink" on him. She even asked the pastor if he could bless the younger man with holy water every week to make the stink go away. The younger man, for his part, used to nibble his lips while they sat in church because the people who he'd given to God were right outside.

"Daddy?" his daughter asked.

"Everything's all right," he said.

The older man, for his part, hadn't been to church since before his wife died. "I don't like it there," he said. "All they do is talk about dying."

(Pastor Williams stood within an arm's reach of the casket and could've touched it if Pastor Learner hadn't been standing in the way. Pastor Learner's voice was softer here, more intimate, like they were intruding, like looking down into the hole was some sort of voyeurism and he wanted to keep it all a secret.)

In time, though, the younger man's daughter became old enough to know that her father was lying about what he did. He didn't work at a farm far away because, if he did, why would her great-aunt hate him so much? She asked her uncle, but he lied to her too. Her cousins kept their distance like she had yellow fever all the time, but even they lied to her—because her uncle had asked about them to. Her aunt, though, didn't lie. She thought that, through her niece, she might find a way past the evil dirt and the ghost stink. Her house had become an awful place—even if no one else see it, she could. Everything was covered in it, and everything smelled of it.

“He works in the church cemetery,” she said. “He digs the holes they put the caskets in.”

(“And we offer him...” Pastor Learner said. Like it’d been everyone’s choice to give him up. Or maybe it was, Pastor Williams thought. It was a blessing, after all. His mind went back to the story.)

Since the daughter was too young to remember her mother’s funeral and had only dizzy memories of when her siblings died, she wasn’t frightened like the aunt had hoped she’d be. Still, though, she was curious about the holes her father dug. One morning, after he left, she pretended to be sick and then snuck out of the house and went to town. She was very clever and skilled at keeping out of sight, so no one saw her sneak into town and creep into the graveyard.

The older digger and the younger digger were at the back of the yard, halfway through another hole. It was for a wealthy merchant who’d fallen ill. Neither of them saw her coming, though, and she crept up to the edge of the hole, opposite her father.

“Daddy,” she said. She waved.

He looked up from the hole, and his skin went pale like cotton. Without a word, he dropped his shovel, scooped her up, and carried her from the graveyard. The older digger continued digging.

As he took her home, he shivered the entire way. Even as he told her that she shouldn’t have come and that she’d been very bad and that she had better never follow him again, his voice trembled like it had frostbite. When they got back to the house, she had to leave her shoes outside, too.

When he got back to the churchyard, the older digger looked at him. “It’s not so bad, really,” he said. “You get used to it after awhile.”

(Beside him, his mother kept still while Pastor Learner drew his words to a close: “We now welcome him into the Father’s Kingdom, saved by the mercy and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.”)

Within the next few days, the daughter fell ill. She began coughing in fits—not heavy coughs like someone who has a cold, but shallow ones like someone who has a piece of food stuck in their throat. The aunt knew that the daughter had gotten evil dust in her chest, that if only she’d lied, the daughter would be fine. At first, she wept and sobbed and explained to her husband that it was her fault, though still not as much as the fault of her nephew for taking up that awful living. The uncle consoled her and promised her that it wasn’t her fault. But, as the daughter’s fits lengthened and her health grew worse, the aunt fell into silence. She became more and more quiet, until, at last, both the aunt and the daughter together stopped speaking, for their separate reasons.

On the day of the funeral, the aunt sat with statuesque muteness and couldn’t be forced from her chair. Later on, she would outlive her husband and one of her sons, but she wouldn’t attend their funerals, either. She never spoke again, not even in her sleep.

(As the mourners dispersed, he waited behind, looking around for the men who would bury his father, waiting for them to step out like they were stagehands ready to burst out of the wings now that the show was over.)

The younger digger, the uncle, and the uncle’s three sons attended a brief ceremony. The young digger recognized his handiwork on the merchant’s plot. It was

still brown, packed dirt, and it would be weeks before grass had finally crept over and hidden it away.

He didn't have to bury his daughter. Out of pity, the older digger led the group of men that made the daughter's hole. A few days later, the younger man returned to the cemetery with his shovel in hand, able to compare his handiwork to the older digger's.

The older digger had done a nice job.

(Pastor Williams stayed for an extra moment. I wonder if they'll make me leave, he thought. Maybe he could stay here and keep the stage hands from coming out, keep the casket on the bier and out of the ground.

"Mike," someone said, and his feet, by instinct, led him away.)

The day after the funeral, the telephone in the kitchen rang early, and it woke Pastor Williams up. He yawned, and, even though he knew his mother would beat him to the phone, he still pushed himself from bed. There was no use in staying, in resisting the telephone rings that would eat up the morning. This was the day of endless phone calls, when everyone checked in to make sure “everything was okay.” As soon as that first ring came, it announced to him that he wouldn’t get anymore sleep. The day after a funeral was like a second wake, except at a distance and scattered in little episodes throughout the day. Except that it was more for the benefit of the callers, so they could hear that he and his mother were fine and that his father’s death hadn’t made the sky come down on their heads. It’s mutual therapy, he thought and planted his feet on the floor.

He came downstairs and found his mother pressed up against the refrigerator door, as if pinned there by the words coming over the phone. She wore a green t-shirt emblazoned with a sunflower, and she stood with her head canted and her legs dragging, like a drooping ragdoll gripped in a child’s hand. She rolled her eyes, and a smile flickered across her face, the closest she could manage to “Good morning” while submerged in the stream of advice and babble. “Get out of the house,” “Do something fun,” “Let’s go to dinner”—he could practically hear the words that had her pinched there, all the suggestions for how she could save herself from her grief. She agreed and nodded and assured while he fixed some cereal for himself. He offered to get a bowl out for her, but she shook her head and pointed at the receiver; wisdom on how to suffer would have to fill her for now.

While he splashed milk down on his cereal, he couldn't help but smirk as he watched his mother wrap the phone cord around her finger. It curled and tightened and looked like a noose with infinite loops. His whole life, his father had insisted that they use corded phones after he'd read an article about how the cordless ones could cause brain tumors. That was a different sort of rot, Pastor Williams thought; it had the convenience of cause-and-effect.

Around mid-morning, the doorbell rang in the place of the telephone. Automatically, his mother walked to the front of the house, apparently having deemed herself the face as well as the voice of the family. He stayed in the living room, watching the talking heads on the television banter and fill air. The front door squealed as it opened, as if protesting Pastor Learner, whose voice he heard come from the outside. His mother's voice lifted immediately, sounding not only glad, but surprised that Pastor Learner had come. As he lifted himself from the couch, Pastor Williams listened to them chatting in the foyer; when he got there, his mother was talking about the Pentecost pit beef and whether or not she should make her Jewish apple cake for it.

"It's always a crowd pleaser," Pastor Learner said. That was a lie, Pastor Williams knew, and he knew his mother knew it, too. Every year, as she wrapped up the cake, missing only a slice or two, she joked about how nobody ate Jewish food at a Christian affair. He always said that she made it for herself.

His mother agreed to make another cake and then laughed when the telephone rang again. "Guess I'm playing operator today," she said. She disappeared into the kitchen to assure someone else that everything was fine. The two pastors stepped out onto the porch, with Pastor Learner in the lead. Under the shade of the front porch, he

cut a dim, shadowy figure against the open yard and the striking blue sky. His lips curled into a smile.

Pastor Williams remained just a step ahead of the door, and he stared to the horizon, which was icy and cloudless. The front door safely sealed into the molding behind him.

He smiled. "I'm not used to being on this side of the conversation."

Pastor Learner relaxed into one of the deck chairs; they were both plastic Adirondacks that looked real enough from a distance. "I hear you," he said. "For what it's worth, though, I'm not here to tell you the things you tell everyone else."

"I appreciate that."

"I've been there before, and, trust me, it's no fun." He pushed shoulder blades into the back of the chair. He held stiff for a moment, and then settled into an easy relax, as if to show off just how comfortable the chairs were.

Pastor Williams stayed where he was. "When El died?" he asked.

Pastor Learner nodded. "Reverend Brown came by the day after the funeral. You know how he is, he just goes on and on? He kept telling me about God's plan and Jesus weeping and—well, you know the spiel. Eventually, I'd just had enough, so I turned to him and I said, 'Evan, if you don't shut up, I'm going to choke you.'" He laughed. "I keep thinking I might've actually done it."

Pastor Williams smiled. "So this is just a social call, then?"

"Not quite."

"Call me unsurprised."

Pastor Leaner sat up and turned towards him. He hunched his body over the arm of the chair and propped himself up on his forearms, which were thin and had that strawberry rash color that the skin of all old men has. "I want you to deliver the sermon on Sunday," he said. "It's Pentecost."

"Mmm hmm."

"I think everyone'd like to hear you say it, don't you think? Your sermons normally go over pretty well."

"Yours do, too."

"I know that, but you're in town. They'd like the surprise."

Pastor Williams bit at his cuticle, pulling off a sheaf of skin. "I don't know," he said. "I don't have much time."

"It's Wednesday, Mike," Pastor Leaner said. "Does it normally take you more than four days to write a sermon?"

"I don't know, it might."

"What the heck else you have to do, Mike?" Pastor Leaner asked. His eyes narrowed in and, for a brief moment, they threw off their age for a needle-point incisiveness. They sympathized with him even as they told him he was being a moron, something like how they give two drugs to those getting a lethal injection—one for pity, and one to stick it to them. "Your talk shows aren't going anywhere."

"And here I thought you weren't going to tell me the things I tell everyone else."

Pastor Leaner smirked. "Just because we go and repeat it to everyone doesn't make it any less true," he said. "Come on and do it. Get your mind off of things for a bit."

Pastor Williams' head bobbed from side to side, rattling thoughts around like the dice in a backgammon cup. He kept tossing them, looking for the right numbers, the right reply. His fingertips scratched across the grooves in the doorframe. But the dice just wouldn't turn up his way. "All right," he said. "I'll do it."

"Good," Pastor Learner said. "I think people'd like to hear your story. What's Adam Leary call you? The prodigal son?"

"Yeah," he said and grazed his teeth over his bottom lip. "Something like that."

They talked a little bit more—about how Al Reister, the local accountant, ran the pit beef like a dictator, about how things were going in Kentucky, about how Millers Heights was growing but the new church's congregation wasn't—before Pastor Learner decided to head out. They shook hands, and a tight smile rearranged Pastor Learner's burlap skin; it was a sympathetic one, and Pastor Williams thought it was presumptuous, like the kind a seeing man might make while fawning over a blind one.

"You take care, Mike," he said. "Keep yourself busy, all right?"

"Yeah."

"Let me know if you want me to take a look at that sermon." His handshake left a sweaty residue. "Tell them your story. I think they'll really appreciate it."

"Yeah, we'll see."

As soon as he stepped into the sunlight, Pastor Learner became a study in contrasts—his bristly white skin and his dark, elongated shadow. Pastor Williams watched him and waved as he got into his car and backed out, easing down the rocky driveway. While the car was rolling out, Pastor Williams swallowed in a huge breath of spring air, like it would shake up all the dirt and dust inside him and carry it back out.

He exhaled, thinking, And that's how it's supposed to be done. He could still feel the dust, though. It was in his chest. It was gritty and rocky and pale, but, like a smoker who bears his emphysema in stride, time had taught him to adapt and stop choking on it.

Pastor Williams' first trip to see a mourning congregant had been three weeks after he'd started in Kentucky. He'd visited Andy Walcott the morning after the funeral for Andy's wife, Laurie, after a protracted battle with cancer that made everyone wonder if she should've just given up years before. Andy was a volunteer at the local fire company and was accordingly both sturdy and scarred. He moved with a slow swagger and had a habit of rolling his shoulders then thrusting the blades backwards then forwards, always trying to work out some kink in his spine. His face normally had a rugged complacency, the content grin of a cowboy staring out on his acres, the flat stare of a man not accustomed to feeling surprise. But, for brief moments in the middle of dinners or sermons, he'd just tighten up, twist and shift, jerk his shoulders while his lips wrenched like a rubber band going as far as it could go, and, all in all, look something like all the demon men Jesus cured with regular ease. Then, of course, the pain would stop; the spine cracking would work until it flared up again, reaching out from that one spot where he couldn't reach back.

The first time they'd met, about a week before Laurie died, Andy had had an attack, and Pastor Williams had said, "You should go see a doctor about that."

Andy had stared back at him like he was ordained idiot rather than minister. "Laurie sees enough doctors for the both of us."

Those words had drifted back to his mind as he'd pulled into Andy's driveway. It was a morning soggy with sun. The house was an old rancher with salmon-colored bricks and crooked shutters, and a blond cat without a tag sat on the porch licking itself. He'd found Andy in the garage polishing his old F-150, and, even at distance, he'd smelled the whiskey in the air. Andy's ruddy eyes charted the progress of his stupor, and he spoke like a mannequin might have if able to talk.

"I thought I'd tidy her up a bit," he said. "Give her a good coat of polish."

"How long you been at it?"

"Couple hours, I guess." For a moment, Andy's balloonish face wrinkled, and a thin dot of light flickered in his eyes. "Couldn't sleep a whole lot."

Andy's heavy breath washed onto his face. It was cheap whiskey, in a glass bottle only an arm's reach from the can of polish.

"Nothing like the shine of a clean interior, you know?" He patted the dash gently, like he was counting time on it. "Nothing like it."

"Yeah." Pastor Williams grabbed onto the track for the garage door, steadying himself, waiting for the verbal backlash. Andy couldn't have forgotten.

Andy went back to polishing. "I saw on TV they got this stuff that'll give it that new car smell. You just spray it inside, and wham, it smells like it's brand new."

"Yeah. I bet they do."

"Probably bad for you, though," Andy said. "Seems like all them chemicals are."

Pastor Williams nodded. "I think you're right there."

"It'd be nice, though." Andy looked at him with wide, stupid eyes. "She's twenty years old, but she looks new. She could smell new, too."

“Yeah, she could. You’ve done a good job taking care of her.”

For a brief second, Andy paused. Pronoun confusion—which “her” was it that they’d been talking about? But then he continued right along, finishing the dash. “Yep. She’s been good to me.”

Pastor Williams stood there, fingers still gripped around the metal. But as the backlash seemed less and less likely to come, his grip began relaxing. While Andy went on about the truck, Pastor Williams found his occasional words—cars had never really been his thing—interrupted by this fuzzy feeling behind his eyes and in his temples, as if his blood was drawing away and down into his throat. His veins felt empty, and the moment became more and more remote, and he had a feeling in him like when he watched something that someone else thought was funny, but he didn’t. Andy’s motions were a strange farce, babyish hand swipes paired off with runny words and the whiskey smell of oak and vomit. He could feel himself becoming nauseous—not because of the smell of the whiskey, or at least not it alone, but also because of the man in front of him, the man drinking himself into blithering infancy, fondling his car like a teddy bear. Grief was fine, denial was fine, but this...this was something different. This was a man sticking his head into a river and letting the rush drown out all comprehension. This was going deaf and blind, sticking ethanol plugs in his ears to everything that God might possibly say. This was where life-long denial began, the running because it hurt too much, the temporary spine cracks rather than getting at the true root of it all. This was willful ignorance. This was sin, Pastor Williams realized—and it was pathetic.

“This is good, keeping yourself busy,” he said. “When you finish, you should go take a rest. Stay away from the wheel for awhile?”

A dumb, conspiratorial grin crept over Andy's face. "Yeah."

"You should try and come on Sunday."

"Yeah." Andy's head sagged, and he pulled at a tear in one of the car seats. "I think I'm going to get a bottle of that spray. The new car stuff. I'll let you know how it works."

Pastor Williams stayed a bit longer, but as he left, he knew he'd never see Andy in church again. It was his first experience of attending the funeral for a living man. Jesus could raise Lazarus; Pastor Williams could only bury Andy Walcott. As he walked back to his car, he said "Good-bye," but he didn't say, "I'll see you on Sunday." Andy didn't say anything at first, and Pastor Williams thought he hadn't heard him, but then Andy called out, "Thanks," and he sounded like he truly meant it, like he was truly glad to be left to his hell. No offers of redemption, just a quiet sending-off.

Even still, after he'd gotten in his car, Pastor Williams offered a quick prayer that somehow, despite it all, Andy might yank understanding from his grief. Give him the strength to stare down his demons, he prayed. It probably won't happen, but prove me wrong, Lord. Amen.

With Andy Walcott on his mind, Pastor Williams stood on the front porch and stared in the direction of the new church, its steeple just barely visible over the treetops. The morning air permeated his skin, warmed the muscles within his body, and created a motion in him—a friction, heat motion like rubbing sticks together. "She could smell new, too," he said, imposing Andy's spit-slobber words onto the placid landscape before him,

an open field and a thin band of sky. The words, coming from his lips and not Andy's, agitated the rubbing inside his chest, made it hotter and faster.

He didn't make a conscious decision, but he entirely knew what he was about to do as he came through the front door and went straight up the stairs. He knew that, if he stopped moving, he'd never make it over through that doorway. He had momentum behind him, and that momentum made it so much easier to make the step across the doorway, to enter into the place where he'd nearly killed his father. He stopped in the center of the room, and he stood there.

The afternoon light gave the study an antiseptic gleam. The white gloss fell across a room that seemed perfectly balanced and organized, so far removed from the disarray that his father had preferred. In the bookshelves on the northern wall, the books snuggled together tidily rather than being jumbled, stacked, left askew; rigid organization had been imposed on them, like enlisted slackers learning to stand upright and salute. Along the eastern wall, beneath the window, not a single paper sat on the desk, and the pencils in the pencil cup were sharp with points that glistened in the light. Even the newspaper clippings framed on the wall appeared recently-dusted. The glass shone with the blue-white light, and the glare kept him from reading the brief articles from the Herald detailing his father's discoveries and finds. The entire room seemed like it had just been unpackaged from a box. Standing there, he felt like he could scrape his nail over anything in the room—a book, the desk, even the walls—and hear a piercing plastic squeal. It's like a museum, he thought. Dad was an artifact before he even died.

The couch, of course, was there against the eastern wall as it had always been. Prominently, its green fabric and gold sunbursts shone in the light spilling through the window. He turned his attention away from it quickly; he wouldn't let it chase him away.

Now that he was here, he wasn't entirely certain what he was looking for, but that warm certainty seemed to push him towards his father's desk. It was a thing of childhood legend, nicked and gashed, finished and re-finished, with drawer handles that were different colors because they'd been replaced in different decades. On the center drawer, there was a knot in the wood that rippled out in long, wavy circles, each of them darker than the one before as they deepened from brown to black. He stared at the obscure waves for a moment, then opened the drawer. It was as good a place as any to start. In the afternoon light, he sifted through tax returns (more recent ones since the older ones were in the basement), shipping orders, and all the other paraphernalia of a store owner, all of it contained in manila folders dated and ordered with meticulous precision. He marveled at his father's organization, at the old habits that had left him only in his last years, when receipts from 1989 had wound up with those from 1997, when contracts had vanished and register records had accidentally taken their place.

But as he sorted deeper into the drawer, behind the manila folders and their day-to-day contents, he encountered over a dozen small journals, none of them much larger than his hand and all about as wide as a finger. The journals were of various colors—white, gray, black, marbled—whatever his father could find cheaply when he needed a new one. They all seemed, though, to be more of the sort that a paperback writer or artist might use, something of quiet elegance that announced the importance of the work within. Inside each of the journals were legal documents, newspaper clippings, pages

copied from books, all awkwardly folded and stapled to fit within the binding and pages. His father had scratched notes above, below, beside, and on the actual copies, a myriad of garbled words and cryptic phrases. *Talk to Roger about O.F. Flooding? Bad Wiring?* Scattered in between the documents were journal entries, some brief and others larger, along with hypotheses, phone numbers, and any other relevant information. Everything his father would have needed contained within a compact journal he could take everywhere with him.

The first several he looked through pertained to old investigations, the sort that had earned his father brief mentions in the Herald. In one, his father had sketched out segments of Elias Miller's family tree, suggesting points at which it might intersect with John Smith's and circling one in red, a James Baxter. Another contained clippings about the fire at the Harbor Hotel in Shunter's Point, along with copies of shipping manifests from the boats that had been in the harbor at the time. It was one of the few investigations his father hadn't been able to solve; he'd only concluded that yes, one of the boat's cargo might have somehow caused the fire. Which boat, which cargo—that he'd never figured out.

The journal that contained his father's investigation into the old church was bound in a chalky black cover, dark and dull like coal. He ran his fingers across the cover, some material that reminded him, at once, of satin and leather. A piece of black elastic roped around the left edge held the journal shut. He loosed the elastic, and the binding relaxed in his hand. His fingers eased through the pages, touching only the corners; he was encroaching into a world he'd never dared to enter before.

Still, he began to read. He could recognize the sloppiness in his father's writing, the subtle declines in penmanship that, perhaps, hinted at his illness before anyone was aware. The letters were inconsistent, some rounded and some blocky; where they didn't bleed into each other, they were nearly written atop each other. Since it'd been an investigation that'd spanned years and years, one his father had walked away from and come back to many times, it was a history in ink, a little peephole into synapses and proteins and how they stopped firing. Maybe he was reading too much into it, he considered. Maybe his father had developed some slight arthritis. That was common with age, but what was the point, he wondered, in assuming anything but the worst? He didn't have a reason to excuse or justify it, one cause as valid as the other. Here, in his father's penmanship, he had a chronicle of the early decline.

Over the years of investigating the church, his father had talked to dozens of people—children and grandchildren, nieces and cousins—who either still lived in the area or whom he was able to hunt down. Most helped, but not all—*October 12: Got in touch with Maryanne Lewis' daughter, Carol. She lives down in the city now, over near Eastern Avenue. She didn't really want to talk about home a whole lot. She never got along with her mother—apparently Maryanne used to drink a lot and yell at the kids. John used to beat them senseless, but I guess Maryanne got custody because she only ever screamed at them. Carol said she'd put it all behind her and hadn't been back to Millers Heights in years. I wonder how she explains her parents to her kids.*

If we'd talked for longer, I might've asked her how things are down there. Ann and I haven't been down that way in years. She lives about two blocks over from where my office was—I keep wondering if she passes it sometimes. It's probably a drug store or

market now. Seeing it'd probably break my heart—even if it wasn't ever anything that great. Still, I'd like to go.

He didn't recognize most of the names. Jim Towers. Lewis Hayburton. Lou Stanton. Some, it seemed, were locals, others historians and various acquaintances, some children and distant relatives. His father had looked through photo albums, Historical Society documents, every and all things. But maybe he missed something, Pastor Williams thought. Maybe the answer's already here, and he just never realized it. The lapses, after all, first showed themselves in things as subtle as his penmanship, so it wasn't hard to imagine that something had slid past his father's notice, some detail or tiny nuance.

He could take this journal and see where it led. Maybe the answer was already there, or maybe everything but the answer, everything that would lead him to the moment that sickness and rot had stolen from his father.

The telephone rang again, and his mother was quick to answer it. He could hear her voice as an echo that bounded carried from the downstairs and up the stairwell, the acted graciousness that, even after all these calls, she was still able to pull off.

He closed the journal full of clippings and notes and rested it on his lap. His eyes surveyed the room, all the books stacked on the shelves, the few photos that his father kept—some from his life in Baltimore, some from his life in Millers Heights. He rose with the journal in hand. With slow, conscious steps, he made his way out the door and down the stairs, following the same path his father had only a week before.

His father died in a way he'd heard his mother describe as "how old people die." He'd overheard her say it the day before the funeral, explaining it to one of his father's

cousins. The cousin wasn't a close relative, so she'd been able to ask, "What happened?" without sounding too insensitive. Prying is okay when you aren't too close, he thought. When you are, you aren't supposed to ask anything at all.

His father had fallen down the stairs, his mother had explained. His head had struck the wall and the wooden steps with dull, hollow shouts. The wall hits sounded distinct from when he hit the stairs, his mother said, a more resonant impact that leapt up wall and shook the plywood. When he hit the stairs, the sound was just a sharp smack, the vibrations contained within his head, where they shattered open blood vessels and traced narrow lines in his skull. As she remembered, she'd heard his head hit six times.

When she'd found him, his eyes were bloodshot and wide. "They were just this bright blue," she'd said. "Like all the life in him just sucked into his eyes." Now standing at the base of the stairs, though, Pastor Williams imagined her words in a different way, revealing his father's eyes in a murky purple, like a biological color wheel. Leaky blood and blue irises made violet.

His father's eyes stared out, and, by the time the paramedics arrived, blood had blistered up on his brain. "Swimming in blood"—her hyperbole, but Pastor Williams admitted that was how he saw it, too. A flood infiltrated the porous membranes, overwhelming his father's senses and reflexes, making his tongue fat and slack against the bottom of his mouth, his hands limp by his side.

Unlike her, though, he imagined that the blood was restorative. For brief final moments, before it drowned his father's brain, it filled the gaps with lost proteins and made dormant synapses fire one last exertion. Bioelectric channels the disease had rotted carried forgotten memories, and robbed knowledge could pass again. His brain, in its

decease, functioned as it had before the decay began. The blood spanned distances and brought clarity.

His father's memories, of course, were the last thing to go. They flashed before his eyes, like the supposedly did everyone's, conferring that sense of progression, a road followed, its end reached. A retroactive sense of purpose, and all the comfort that entailed.

Pastor Williams imagined his father's memory reel in the faded pictures that remained from his father's childhood, a mix of images, sepia and colored, as if the world hadn't then decided on its tone and color. His father, at age four, reclined in a lawn chair patterned in white and brown, attempting to read a newspaper he couldn't read in imitation of his own father, his row home squished between the bricks of others proceeding towards vanishing points in either direction. *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and countless other paperbacks of which movies were not made—all on a desk beneath a framed newspaper article on the '58 NFL Championship, beside a baseball autographed by Frank Robinson. That first office, a tiny hideaway far from downtown crammed with cabinets and lit by only a single desk lamp amidst all that dark—of this, no pictures existed, only Pastor Williams' imagination. His father's bride slipping into his baby blue Corolla for their honeymoon in the Poconos. The same Corolla, loaded with boxes, trudging through gray fog towards Millers Heights. The antique, rust-red toolbox the hardware store's old owner left to its new one, who proudly displayed in the front window and kept the old owner's name, Hapner's, right above the door as if the store wasn't really his. And yet, Pastor Williams couldn't bring himself to

imagine beyond this moment because he entered his own life here and felt unright deciding what his father had remembered of him.

Only the choice memories came together, the ones that fit in the end. God's movie reel, and the last affirmation of a plan before the blood choked his father brain to black.

“He was dead when the paramedics arrived...If only I could've been there to watch him.” His mother's finish had been an appropriate one, just a subtle, almost typical, final gesture at emotion. It was an attempt at pity he knew she didn't want, what was expected of her and nothing more. But she was probably right in ending it so simply, he thought, without the grand gestures and dramatics he imagined. The blood probably wasn't restorative. His father probably ended his life with nothing more than a vague impression of a wife, a vague impression of a son, and a vague impression of hurt.

Pastor Williams' eyes lingered on the stairs, as if he was looking at them for the first time, as if some new dent might reveal itself in the worn and tired finish. Only then did he realize his mother was standing beside him. “He died right here.”

She exhaled. “He did. You weren't there.”

It wasn't until later in the week that Pastor Williams learned why Mrs. Bittner hadn't come to the wake: she'd become one of the congregations shut-ins, bound within the stone walls of her farmhouse in the north end of the county. There was nothing specifically wrong with her, Sharon Dulaney explained over the phone, but simply age and weariness, and a stubborn refusal to leave the house she'd lived in for fifty years. Sharon spoke about Mrs. Bittner in her usual flat tone, as if she was continually remembering some trauma that shocked the emotion right from her.

"And, of course," she said, "it was all around the time Mr. Bittner died...And you know Lily doesn't live up here anymore?"

"No..."

"Yeah, they left in March." Sharon's monotone deepened a bit, and Pastor Williams thought it was what she might sound like if she was mourning a battered puppy on the television. "Awful thing to do to her mother, just awful."

"Does Pastor Learner come by?"

"Of course." Sharon sounded vaguely offended. "She's on the shut-in list. He tries to get her to come back every week. He does everything he can."

He said he planned to visit her, maybe even that afternoon. "Well good," Sharon said. "Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

He called ahead to let Mrs. Bittner know he was coming. She replied with a surprise and happiness that seemed the complete opposite of everything Sharon had said.

"Of course, of course," she said. "Do you drink tea? Lemon? Cream?"

He didn't. "Lemon and sugar," he said.

In coming to her house, he had to relearn rural routes he'd forgotten, and he traveled them in a disquieting silence the stereo only half-heartedly filled. They were long, serpentine roads that pierced through the country; while driving on them, they gave off the illusion that they careened to an end in this bank or the next, only for the asphalt to suddenly appear and continue through the trees. Clumps of brown needles littered the roadsides, and, in the trees, cottony pockets clumped to the branches like dust wads, while, in them, caterpillars lay dormant and waiting for the night. As he drove, he felt like an athlete who, when he returns from injury, finds the damaged muscles to be a bit gawky, but surprising and exciting in a way they hadn't been for years. Once or twice, a turn crept up on him, and, after jamming his foot on the brake and twisting his arms to pull around, he couldn't help but smile, shocked and somehow pleased by his mistake. Forgot about that, he'd think, and the not knowing thrilled him.

When he arrived at Mrs. Bittner's, it was mid-afternoon and the sun was set just above the fields opposite the house. They were mangy with weeds, and immediately he could tell that the tree line had inched nearer than the last time he was here, little saplings crushing in on the tired, unbroken fields. Outside her house, he paused to watch her through her kitchen window, placing mugs on the table in preparation for her guest. I could watch her for hours, he thought. Her subtle habits fascinated him, the way she went about the routines that she'd performed for ages. She fidgeted with the mugs, went over to check on the tea kettle, and then rearranged the mugs again, sliding one way, then another. She then paused, gathered the mugs up, placed them back in the cupboard, and then killed the flame under the kettle. Apparently, she didn't want to look like she'd waited for him.

He was still watching when she turned and saw him there. He gasped slightly, embarrassed to have been peering into her life, but she didn't even seem to notice. Her excitement hurried her to the door—he could hear her cane stamp as she went along. The heavy, wooden door opened.

“Come in, come in.” Her voice whistled like a breeze.

“Thank you.”

They sat in her kitchen, a cavernous room with a high ceiling and walls painted a faint shade of red. Two large windows on the exterior walls allowed the smooth afternoon light to rinse in and illuminate the dust drifting through the air. Mrs. Bittner idly chatted with him as she stood at the old gas stove and prepared tea for them both. The pilot light clicked, and an enveloping whoosh filled the room. Beneath the kettle, the blue flame surged up like a geyser erupting from within the earth.

While she made the tea, he couldn't help but notice the age and the wear in her face, not unlike some sort of wounded landscape. Long ravines cut channels around her mouth, pale and small as it wandered on about her children and grandchildren. Valleys sank down on either side of her cheekbones, shallow skin below, and, above, the long, dark recesses that encircled her eyes. When he told a joke, her smile seemed too small for her laugh, too weak to push clear her heavy cheeks and assert itself on her face. It remained pinned down, pressed near to her chin, like a scroll almost flattened except for the slightest curls at the corners.

Her mug clicked as she sat it on the table, and while she continued to speak, his eyes lingered on her hands. They jittered in the white glare that had fallen down on the table, and their long shadows trembled like thin branches in a breeze. Without thinking,

one hand slid atop the other, and its porcelain fingertips massaged the other's pulpy knuckles. She continued on about her granddaughter, who had, rather abruptly, she said, stopped playing with dolls and started chasing after boys. Though she was speaking about her own living granddaughter, her words came out as if commentary on some distant event. "She's too young to be hounding boys. I tell Lily that, but..." she said. "But she just tells me they're growing up faster these days."

"It's probably true," he said. "It's hard to be a kid anymore."

"They don't know what they're missing."

She switched hands as she remembered aloud teaching tango steps to her granddaughter. The tip of her pointer finger traced a circle around a knuckle bulged up in orangey-red tones. It moved with a deliberate, constant pace, mimicking the spin of dancers on a ballroom floor—or the creaky wood boards of her kitchen, where, she said, on the days her granddaughter had visited, she would clear away the table and chairs and replace the squeaky quiet with Argentine crooners on vinyl.

"Is your granddaughter a good dancer?"

"No. No, not at all," she said. "But she was starting to get some of the steps...then Lily had to go and move."

"Maybe she'll keep it up."

Mrs. Bittner kept smiling as she shook her head. "No. Nobody dances like that anymore."

She lapsed into silence, but her hands continued to stagger above the table. She expected him to say something. He wanted to reach across the table to clutch them and stop their shaking, feel their protruding bones still. If he grabbed and held, would he

force the shaking somewhere else? Would it hurt, he wondered, all that vibration and motion suddenly without release? They were old hands, pale hands, ribbed with veins, curled with arthritis. They were the kind of hands, he thought, that his father should've had when he died. The hands of a grandfather who also should've had to lament how his grandchildren were getting older and had stopped caring about his quirks and inescapable habits. The hands of a man who would've had histories to pass on, not only stories but discovered pasts, not about faraway or legendary places, but about the stones and roads he could see from his home. But, at the same time, it was a mercy that his own children wouldn't be able to know his own father as a blithering, stupid fool, a man with a potholed mind who couldn't even write his own name. For them, James Williams, and not the ghosts in the woods, would've been the legend, a glorified thing that couldn't possibly have shared the same body as the dumb jester before them; to them, his father would've been the fiction.

Mrs. Bittner's hands smelled of the lotion she used to keep the moisture in her skin, dryness a small agony she could avoid. Fragrant, like lilacs and hydrangeas. Flowers to hide the staleness in her own skin. But his father's hands had had a funny, musty odor, one that began to impose itself on the wet flower smell. His mind drifted to his father's bright red palms and the black newsprint smeared on his fingers, and he asked himself if, in life, they had retained the stink of all of his father's hunts: digging in dusty folders, picking apart pages in waterlogged books. No, he decided; it was a gesture his memory added, a way of trapping and defining them. They were a workman's hands that bore smells and ink blotches in the place of scars. They did not smell of sawdust like a hardware store owner's should've; they had only that grimy odor of peering into other

people's histories. They dug into the past, and the odor of stale lives stayed with them. Fragrance and coating had no place on them, only the reek of voyeurism.

Mrs. Bittner caught sight of her quaking hands and placed one on top of the other, the top one flattening the bottom one while also anchoring to it to stop its own shivering. She looked at him. "You know, I about cried when I heard you were going into the seminary," she said. "I always like to think it was my doing, but...but that's just me being proud."

He smiled. "I certainly think you helped."

"No, no, it couldn't have been me," she said. "God called you, Mike. He called you loud and clear."

He felt a boulder pinched in his throat, but there was just enough room for him to whisper out, "Thanks."

"I taught confirmation twenty-seven years, and you're still right there." She pinched the air in front of him, as if to snap up this past, perfect student and show him off in case he didn't believe her. And he didn't. He hadn't been remarkable in confirmation. He'd been as bored as anyone else. She'd made jokes about how, if she'd had a boy, she'd have named him "Nebuchadnezzar," and he'd laughed, but that was only because it interrupted a droning talk about Assyrians and captivity. He'd made an art of checking his watch without her noticing—unlike the other students in the class, who she always caught. She was misremembering, but he didn't stop her. "You were a good student. You always paid attention, always listened. Not like those other cretins in the class."

He fought the urge to tell her she was imagining someone else, someone whose life had been arranged for one particular purpose—if not evident to him, then to everyone

around him. He remembered back to a Buddhism course he'd taken in college and all the special markers the Buddha had been born with—golden skin and the impression of a wheel with a thousand spokes on his soles. Lines like spider webs wove across his palms, along with all these other markers, major and minor, to prove his calling to himself and all others. His eyes met hers, and she continued to smile, as if waiting for him to agree that, yes, the marks were all over his flesh. Yes, she wanted him to say, I've always felt the Spirit strongly. Even the Buddha, though, he thought, hadn't recognized his holiness before his calling. Spiritual life had been a surprise to him, even if it had been etched in his skin, in the bottoms of his infant feet, in the dangle of his ear lobes still wet from his mother's womb. Yet, this perfect student who Mrs. Bittner held pinched between her fingers, this student who was he supposed to recognize as himself, he had known his blessedness all along. He met Mrs. Bittner's smile with a bashful one of his own. "Yes," he said, "I guess I've always felt the Spirit strongly."

"How did you know?" Her voice rose into a sweet sobriety. Her eyes widened and lost their wisdom. They became impenetrably and earnestly dark, as if his waiting for his answer to illuminate the markers in her own skin.

Inwardly, he forgave her for asking a question he hated. His mind retreated to the first few weeks at the seminary, when everyone else's words had recounted intense epiphanies or moments of charity or teaching that had suddenly lit their path. His words, meanwhile, had meandered, swamped in their obvious inferiority. He thought about lying and giving her what she wanted—a voice, an answered prayer, a subtle miracle. She wanted an epiphany in any form.

After a moment, he forced the words out of his mouth: “God was a comfort.” It was a great set-up line. “With everything we had to go through with Dad, I just didn’t have anywhere else to go. I prayed—for strength, for Mom...” His heart was throbbing in his chest. The smile on his face trembled in rhythm with his heartbeats. “Once or twice, I think I even prayed for someone to come up with a cure.” She was nodding, waiting for the miracle. Everything was building towards it. “Of course, God doesn’t give miracles on demand. But he got Mom and I through.” This was the chance to amplify the lie, to make it spectacular. “I owe him, I guess.”

She waited for him to say more—and her smile followed his as it flattened. She was disappointed. In his stomach, he felt that knot from the early weeks in the seminary tighten again, the certainty that she could see how fraudulent his story was, how garishly dishonest. Back when he’d first shared his story, his peers had bitten their lips and given him silent stares—out of pity, maybe, or because his experience was inferior, less sincere than theirs? They’d known he was lying to them. Before him, Mrs. Bittner had also fallen into silence, and he wondered if she knew he was lying, too.

She excused herself to use the restroom. “My old woman’s bladder,” she said. Her cane stamped as she disappeared from the kitchen, down a long hall that creaked with her every step. In the later stages of the rot, his father would’ve had an old man’s bladder in a young man’s body, needing to run to the bathroom again and again as his body slowly forgot how to function. In the absence of Mrs. Bittner, his took her place at the table, looking back at Pastor Williams with stiff, wordless lips, ones that had forgotten how to speak except in moments of distress or flashes of lucidity. Pink and chapped, motionless. The gray light traced a white corona around his black, shallow

irises. He looked at his son, who was, not for the first time, trying to imagine a mind that didn't think and didn't dream. A son who wondered where all the stimuli went—all the sights and sounds of daily life—and envisioned them clustered into synapses that refused to fire, huddled at the edge of the gaps between nerves. Energy and matter are neither made nor destroyed, and he wondered if memories were the same, if rather than slipping away, they were just floating in some liquid aether where they'd never be found. He thought of all the impressions that might have gathered in that liminal space of dust and nebulas, just waiting for a miracle that might've suddenly exploded them, the nuclear reactions that would've thrust upon his father the five years he'd missed.

If it was his father rather than Mrs. Bittner, he wondered what he would've said, if he could've talked about Jesus and the Holy Spirit and received anything more than a plastic stare. Faith resides in the soul, of course, but Pastor Williams wondered at the mercy needed to save a man who remembered nothing of his faith. His father went to church through the end, muttered words and phrases, stumbled behind and caught up. "We confess our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed I believe"—was there still faith to confess if his father hadn't known the words, if his thoughts had been blank and the moments had ceased to connect with each other, if his life had stopped at whatever arbitrary date in the past he could still remember? Was faith one those things gathered in the aether, he wondered, and, if it was there, was it still viable?

"Orthopraxis—correctness of practice. Orthodoxy—correctness of belief. Christianity emphasizes belief. Faith and conviction are more important than practice." These were words from a lecture, from someone in the seminary with tired, blue eyes and a bristly, scant beard. Words that had become a maxim, a painkiller when standing in the

pew beside his father, sitting down next to him and watching his eyes wander during the sermon. One couldn't forget faith, just how to express it. Even when there wasn't visible proof, if it was there, it was there.

Pastor Williams held onto that, and in the stiff, dim kitchen, he shuddered. Please Lord, he thought—not for the first time. Please.

That evening, he started work on his sermon. With his notebook and Bible, he settled into a chair in the family room, opposite his mother, who sat on the couch reading. He also brought his father's journal with him, but he sat it on the floor beside the chair, where he couldn't reach it until he'd finished some work. Across the room, his mother sat with what had to be an uncomfortable poise, her back so straight it seemed to be made of sheet metal. She hadn't looked up when he'd entered the room, and she didn't seem to notice at all when he twisted himself around to open up the window. It didn't move and just creaked back at him.

"It's a bit stiff," she said.

He tried again, and it finally budged. "No kidding."

It whined as he pushed it up in its swollen frame, and, when he'd pushed it up all the way, it slid down a bit—a subtle act of defiance. Sitting in front of it, he expected a twilight breeze, but barely felt so much as a whisper. He arranged himself in the chair and felt the sweat droplets drip between his skin and the leather seat. He propped his back up on the arm of the chair and curled his knees up near his chest, using them as a desk for his notebook. His mother continued to read.

"What're you reading?"

“Ethel gave it to me,” she said. She slapped her fingers down on the page. “It’s one of her romance books. Supermarket stuff. She thought it would cheer me up.”

“Has it?”

“No, not really. You know how I feel about this sappy stuff.” She craned her neck, trying to look over his knees and see what he was writing. “What’re you up to?”

“My sermon for Sunday.” He tapped his eraser against the page, as if to confirm that he was actually making an effort. But the page was blank. It glared back at him.

“Why don’t you just use the one you wrote last year?” she asked. “Nobody around here heard it. Be new to them.”

He laughed, but as he looked at her flat, open stare, he wasn’t sure she’d meant it as a joke. “You know I can’t do that.”

“It’d save you some time.”

“I don’t think God would appreciate me cutting corners.”

She turned back to her book. “You’ve thought about it.”

He smiled. “The Devil put it in my head.”

“I bet he did.”

She didn’t say anything more, and he turned his attention back to his notebook, scribbling in and then scratching out words. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her glancing to the side, as if inspecting him to see what words he was writing. She read a few pages, he scratched out a few more words.

She stood up. “Well, I guess I’ll let you wrestle with your demons.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“No, it’s fine,” she said. “I’ll let you concentrate.” She walked away.

After she'd left the room, his eyes wandered from the empty notebook to his open Bible and back again. He took his pencil and dragged words from it, letters that accompanied the scratching of his pencil as it moved across the page. *The Holy Spirit—what is it?* A rhetorical question—very generic. His eraser whittled the letters to faint impressions. Generic, yes but it was a start, so he retraced the letters and continued beyond the question mark. *A tongue of flame? The breath of God?* He could predict the formula. It would be a string of three questions—two wasn't enough and four was too many—except that the device was supposed to culminate in a “No, it's the...” statement. After the questions, he was supposed to arrive at a definition, a pinpoint epiphany. He tossed his pencil down on top the words. “Nobody knows” wasn't nearly as effective as “No, it's the...”

He skimmed the Bible passage, one of the few from the New Testament he considered truly visual. The Old Testament had plagues and floods and the sundering of walls, but the New Testament, aside from Jesus' miracles and the Revelation, was harder to see and touch. There were more teachings and more talking, fewer colossal events and even fewer miracles. It was as if the miraculous had simply left the world when Jesus ascended, he thought, as if the age of anticipation that Christ had left behind was also an age of the mundane and ordinary. Magic and miracles had run their course, and what residue stayed had extinguished itself by the time the apostles died.

It was a spectacle of truly 'biblical' proportions, spontaneous combustion, the air splitting open as if it were a curtain and fire had come piercing in from behind the scenes. But it was the last of its kind. With it, God had shifted and became less obvious; he'd

traded theatrics for subtlety and became less tethered to the substance he'd made. Why? Pastor Williams wondered. Why make yourself invisible and then expect the same faith?

As he imagined it, the flames suddenly ignited on the breeze, trembling and wavering while the crowd below wheeled about. Even if Luke hadn't mentioned it, fingers reached for those flames. Did they burn? Pastor Williams imagined that they didn't, that they were hot and that fingers reeled from them, but that they didn't singe any fingertips or char any skin.

And then everyone began to listen, realizing that even their voices had changed. What they yelled and screamed was as foreign to themselves as to each other, said in languages they rarely spoke if they'd ever even know them at all. Yet all understood. He always envisioned the moment differently than Luke had written it—he supposed he shouldn't, but his imagination wouldn't relent. As his mind told it, they all spoke their fathers' own tongues, but no one had understood and it hadn't mattered. He'd always wondered if that was what Luke meant, that the individual tongues didn't matter because curiosity and wonder, amazement and fear, made for a universal language. The language of God was in faces and emotion, not phonics and grammar. It was intuitive, unlike human drivel.

Maybe that was an angle to run with: faith as a universal language. *English, Hindi, Korean, Spanish, Chinese—there are hundreds of languages in the world. Farsi, Uzbek, Pashtu.* The words came quickly, a list of languages giving way to a thesis: *Hundreds of languages, all these offspring of Babel, meant to divide and separate us, yet isn't there one language above all others? There is: faith.*

Eventually, though, he took the language tangent as far as it could go and met another black space. He poked it with the tip of the pencil, like it was an oil field and if he probed it just write, ideas might start gushing up again. Around him, the twilight cooled into night. A breeze never came, except in a few bursts here and there. The cooler air wrapped between the fingers of his left hand, making the floor lamp behind him feel all the hotter on his arms. He pulled his arm away and scratched at it, wanting to look at the clock and see if enough time had gone by for him to excuse himself. For TV, for a break, for laundry.

“No,” he whispered to himself. If he left now, he wouldn’t come back until ten or eleven, when sleepiness would excuse him after twenty minutes or a half-hour.

Tell them your story, he thought, repeating Pastor Learner’s advice. He poked at the page again and again until there was a collection of empty wells. He drew a circle around the wells and colored it in, making it darker and darker until all the little wells were gathered up into a big one and the hole had actually sunk away from the rest of the page. *For me, the Spirit came in a time of great pain.* He scratched that out and then tried it again, hoping for a different result: *For me, the Spirit* He scratched that out.

He’d positioned himself so he couldn’t see the clock on the wall, and, instead, he just stared at the side of it, listening to it tick-tock. He thought of the journal with all of his father’s research in it, on the floor just out of easy reach. He admitted that it would probably distract him for longer than he wanted, but at least it would also keep him in the family room. He unknotted himself for a moment and snapped up the journal between his fingers. His sweaty knees dragged across the leather, and his pencil in his lap trembled.

He placed the journal right on top of his notebook. He slid his finger along the edge of the journal while he reviewed the list of all of his father's speculations, every one that might have explained what happened except that the Reverend Sutter was deranged and mad. Countless leads and not a single resolution, not even one possibility discredited. Drought, flu, lacking of funding, some sort of major site catastrophe—all were within the realm of possibility.

Even still, his father had kept those pieces connected to the ghosts and the mad preacher. One was a copy of an article from an early edition of the Herald, dated to 1837. *A Veritable Ghost—On April 28th, Henry Adams, a worker at the Littlecrest Farm, gave an account of seeing a ghost while proceeding through Creek Valley. He often walks through the valley on his way home from the farm, but, on that day, he heard several shouts from near the unfinished church that sits in the woods. He went to investigate and heard nothing more, but then he heard very distinctly footsteps running from the church and saw a young man hurrying away. The sight was beyond his endurance, and he stood there surprised when the man suddenly vanished. When his senses returned to him, he reported that the man had a supernatural likeness to the Reverend John Sutter, who disappeared from Millers Heights fifteen years ago. His is now the fourth of such sightings in recent record.*

Bogeymen made page two, Pastor Williams thought. They once counted as legitimate topics for journalists. He tried to imagine the Barnes County Herald now even considering writing an article about a man who claimed to see a ghost. Less skeptical times, he concluded. Yet even this article was tinged with doubt, with an emphasis on accounts and reporting, and only the volume of those reports had pushed it

into print. Still, though, newspapers were made to sell, and even the article's tone couldn't hide that it was written for a less skeptical audience. He remembered a time in high school when parishioners at the Basilica saw a statue of the Virgin Mary weep and how the local news crews had covered it on the six o'clock broadcast. But that was one thing, a rarity in these post-resurrection, post-saint's relic times. The miraculous had so fully emptied out of the world that, when it did appear, even the newspapers turned out despite the accusations of bias, of showing religious preference. Once, he thought, you could find proof for faith everywhere. Not anymore.

A puff of air folded the article in on itself. Pastor Williams let go of it and watched it flatten out amid all the other speculations and clues. Potential leads. Potential insights. Possibly, he thought, nothing at all.

As he came to the pulpit, his eyes shifted out onto the crowd of faces in front of him. The entire congregation sat before him, and behind them, on the other side of the windows, was that wall of morning fog, right on schedule to break and lift off the valley. It was watery and thin, but it made all the faces before him look like shadows. They reminded him of old statues, blackened and weathered, stripped of most detail, but not quite all. While he'd been sitting and Pastor Learner had conducted the rest of the service, he'd thought up any number of ways to reference his return, to expel his discomfort at preaching to people he'd known the better part of his life. A joke, maybe—"It's a bit strange being on the other side here"—to earn a laugh and push out some of the jumpy-leg nerves. But as he stepped up to the pulpit, any joke rising in his throat just seemed gross and heavy. Children who were delivering speeches for the first time made jokes to garner sympathy, not pastors who intended for their message to actually be heard.

The pulpit was narrow. It was made of a dark lacquered wood that was patterned in strips that rose and fell like waves, or like mountain peaks and valleys. A lamp craned over the top, and the yellow bulb in it was in the fits of dying, flickering then steadily bright, flickering then steadily dim. He sat his notes beneath the light, and, while he took a deep breath, he watched them brighten and fade before his eyes.

"English, Hindi, Korean, Spanish," he said. His voice was enormous; it didn't just fill the space, but overfilled it, so he adjusted it, made it quieter. "There are hundreds of languages in the world. Farsi, Uzbek, Yoruba. Hundreds of languages, all the children of Babel. Look it up some time—there're approximately 7300 spoken across the world.

Pashtu, Russian, Chilcotin. Hundreds and hundreds of languages, meant to divide and separate us.”

Now his voice seemed too quiet, a whisper that barely spread beyond the front pews. He made it louder again. “Yet isn’t there one language above all others? Many people say music is the universal language, but isn’t there something even more universal than that? Parents and children, after all, have different opinions about music, right? How many in here over forty actually like the music they hear on the radio?” A few folks laughed, and he could see some smiles. “First, though, I guess I have to get you to admit that you’re forty.” More, bigger laughs, but his voice again seemed too loud, like it was shouting back at him from the corners of the room. It just wouldn’t fit.

“But, no, what I mean is a language even more universal than music: faith. When we think of the Pentecost, our first thought is about fire, of course, and our second thought is about language. Tongues of flame, and then just tongues. Regular old, slobbering tongues. We think of them wagging around and making no sense to each other. We think of Babel on a small scale, people being able to talk to each other and then suddenly divided, reduced to a talking deafness. We make sounds, but suddenly no one can understand. Suddenly, these friends who were all so like us are strange and unusual—and we’re unusual to ourselves. We’re divided.”

He took a brief pause to let the words settle in, to let them inspire a sense of awe at the miracle. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Pastor Learner settled back in his chair, lips bowed into a stony smile like an approving coach’s. In the quick silence, Pastor Williams forced his shoulder blades down a bit, just to work out a kink in the muscles around his spine.

“Now this, of course, might all just be novelty and God demonstrating his power—burning bushes, parting seas, etc. But there might be more. There’re two tongues in this story, right? Our tongues, right, which slobber and spit and cuss...Even when we try our hardest, we still can’t use them right. Even when we’re trying to be as honest as possible, even when we speak the same language and aren’t trying to hide anything at all—even then our tongues can’t get it right. They keep us divided, even when they’re trying their hardest not to. Their words just get in the way. Even in the same language, it’s just babble of one sort or another.

“They’re meat and spit, after all. How much can we really expect from them?”

The congregation had become somber, and a handful of eyes drifted to the floor. “So that tongue’s all about division,” he said. “But what about the other tongue—the tongue of flame? That one’s all about unity. Babbling mouths, but the same exact flame over every head. It didn’t matter that they couldn’t communicate with each other because they all knew what the other was saying. The miracle of faith had gathered them together. The flame showed them that the divisions Babel had made were false. Through the Holy Spirit, they’d been given a new language, one that overcame the divisiveness of the old one.

“What do we make of this, then? What do we make of the fact that the Spirit is within us all?” he asked. “It means that we all have the language of faith somewhere within us. We may forget it from time to time—like any language, it gets rusty without practice—but it’s a language we all speak in whether we realize it or not, whether we use it correctly or not.”

He paused and made a face like a child who doesn't understand a math problem. "Wait? We can use faith incorrectly?" he asked. "Yeah," he answered. "Like any language, you can cuss in it, too.

"But before we get there, we need to first talk about what it means that we all speak this language. Faith is imbedded in us. In everyday life, we make completely secular, non-religious expressions of faith all the time. We have faith that our spouse is loyal even though we can't be there all the time. We have faith that the plane we're on won't come crashing down. Even atheists who fervently deny God express faith. They have no proof, and, thus, their belief is as blind and trusting as ours. That is, it's faith. Faith stamped in all of us. And we all thrive on it in some way or another."

"Look at children and all the things they believe in. Raise your hand if you have a child. How many of them believe in Batman or Superman more than Jesus?" The question prompted the intended response: general, but slightly nervous, laughs. No one wanted to have a heathen child. "That's not an indictment, but a testament. From our youngest years, we believe in heroes and aliens and monsters...and we never shake that belief, despite ourselves. After all, would we watch action movies or still love Luke Skywalker and Indiana Jones if we didn't? We hide belief, claiming maturity and claiming wisdom, but we never lose it. I mean, how many in this room—privately, of course—still believe there are ghosts in Creek Valley?" More laughter.

"We believe. It's part of our character. But we need to make a distinction between true belief and false belief, between honest speech and cussing. Superheroes and ghosts in the woods aren't real—they're fiction, and yet, our belief in them is often greater than our faith in God. Our children derive more pleasure from cartoons than they

do from Sunday School, and we often get more pleasure from movies than sermons. Again, this is not an indictment, but a statement of fact. This is our nature. Like Thomas, we believe more in what our senses can experience. Whatever our reasons, we have faith in false things rather than true ones. We cuss when we should be speaking honestly.”

In his periphery, he again noticed Pastor Learner’s face, but the smile didn’t seem quite as strong. It was a bit more cautious and expectant; he could almost see the corner of it tapping up and down like an impatient foot. He wasn’t following the coach’s plan.

In the rear of the sanctuary, the fog was beginning to lift on the valley. He’d reached the point in the sermon where he’d planned to include his own story, or the story version of the story. His brain fired the words off, his nerves carried them to his mouth, but there was no air to reach them and push them out. For me, I found my fluency during a time of great hurt, he thought, but he could put breath into the words. They were mud shells littering the inside of his throat, and more and more were gathering. The fog was drifting; it was thin enough for him to see it move. It would break soon, and then the sun would wash through the rear. He kept his eyes firmly on the congregation and didn’t move them to the right, to Pastor Learner with his confused coach’s face. The words wouldn’t move, and his tongue seemed trapped under their weight.

But, just as he pushed the upper limits of a dramatic pause, he spoke, without a plan or a direction. “But faith,” he said. “It’s a hard thing, isn’t it? How many people have ever felt a flame above their head or spoken in a language that wasn’t their own?” He smiled weakly. “I didn’t think so. How lucky were the people at the Pentecost? How blessed were they to have something they could point back to as evidence? When they

had doubt, when they had fear, when they simply lacked the willpower to believe? ...It's hard not to feel a certain degree of envy, isn't it? To wish for some...*miracle* that you could always remember when you felt that your conviction and faith weren't enough. You can't much doubt when a tongue of flame once burned over your head. You can't say you never felt God. And you certainly can't say you never felt his love."

He nodded his head. "How much we want that certainty," he said. "How much we would give for it. How much simpler would faith and love and salvation be if we could just have those palpable miracles, something to beat back the Thomas in us all? He had Jesus' own flesh to prove God's love. Those gathered at the Pentecost had tongues. And, for a brief while at least, it became impossible for them to doubt God, his love, and their salvation."

He sighed and looked straight ahead into the mass of faces, the shadows looking back at him. "How many folks in here have at some point doubted whether they'd be saved? It's okay. Be honest. We're in church." His hand was the first to rise, and, with that coaxing, slowly hands rose, one then another; even Pastor Learner's rose, about as high as his chin. "It's inevitable, and we can't help but admire the Pentecost—and be jealous of it, too. Those men there had palpable evidence that their sins would be incinerated and that their salvation was assured. We don't have that guarantee," he said, then his mind, catching up with his tongue, made him add: "Or at least not in the same way. Most of us won't be as lucky or blessed as Moses was, so blessed to have the Lord barge in on his faithlessness as a disembodied voice and a flaming bush. Instead, we have to listen deep and hard. We have only the voice, the voice of God that's so easy to lose amid all the hustle and bustle of daily life, amid all the stresses and the sins. But,

somehow, we have to pay attention for that voice, and we need to embrace it. Somehow, we have to get past all that distraction. Somehow, we need to embrace its promise that the Lord will wash our sins away. That our faith has saved us.

“But that’s the hard part, often, isn’t it? Believing that conviction or belief somehow outweighs our failings. We’re raised in the system of Hammurabi, of equality and not mercy, of ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’ Hell for a sin. Yet, somehow, we’re supposed to change that thought. Somehow, we’re instead supposed to believe that, if we have faith, the rule is nothing for an eye, and nothing for a tooth. Somehow, we’re supposed to believe that, no matter how grievously we wound God, we don’t merit punishment, that faith can somehow equal the wound. We’re supposed to rewrite our sense of law—translate it, even, into the language of mercy.

“It’s hard,” he said, his eyes falling towards the ground. “It’s very hard.”

Again, his mind caught up to him. It urged his lips forward, and it reminded him that he couldn’t end his sermon right then and there. “But that’s where the Spirit comes in,” he continued. “That’s why we need to listen to it. It reminds us that this new law is true and that the old one is false. It reminds us that mercy, and not equality, wins. It’s the seed, the whisper that allows us to believe something so radically contrary to our nature and our laws. That faith somehow weighs out sin.

“Most of us, though, won’t have the benefit of great miracles—only little ones we have to look and listen for. We have to dig for our proof. But even if our task might somehow seem to be harder, it’s no less certain. Listen and the voice will make itself known. Hunt and allow yourself to believe. The Spirit makes it possible, but the choice is ours to believe in redemption—a hard choice though it may be at times.

“What the Lord has given us in the Spirit is a priceless thing. But that belief, that gift, can be abused. It can be swayed and turned to false purposes. What we should use to celebrate God we often use to cuss at him. Moreover, and more often, we just ignore God’s language. We shut our ears, pretend we don’t speak it, or choose to lose our fluency. We come to think it’s the language of swindlers and false promises...But it’s not. If we keep our hearts true and have only honest faith, then God will fulfill those promises. We are the ones who make the language of faith awful or worthless. But, in God’s hands, it made everything we see, and it offers to us the promise of salvation. If it’s been awhile, listen and make the effort. Hear again what the Lord says through his Spirit.

“Now, may these words keep our minds and hearts on Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

The pit beef started up not long after the service, with a break just long enough for folks to go back and change and for Al Reister and his crew to start the pit up nice and hot. By the time Pastor Williams and his mother returned, the pit was already smoking and the first few slabs of beef—a special delivery from the butcher, who was normally closed on Sundays—were hissing, lending their white steam to the charcoal smoke. Al Reister, wispy hair back in a red bandanna, lorded over the pits, not turning away when the breeze blew the smoke into his eyes, not even blinking. When he was before his pits, he had a stern face chiseled like the side of a mountain, like he was some medieval blacksmith rather than the local tax accountant. On those rare occasions when he looked away, that was when his flat, stone lips actually moved—to bark out that too much beef

was going on a sandwich, something he was as likely to holler at the end of the day as at the beginning, or to demonstrate, once again, how to properly slice the beef. “That man is a bastard to work for,” Robbie Alberts had once grumped to Pastor Williams during his one, and only, shift alongside Al. “And this is for church people. Even if it sucked, they’d still say it’s good.”

On the other side of the pit, though, Robbie seemed perfectly content to sit back and enjoy the afternoon, maybe enjoying it even more, Pastor Williams thought, because he’d known better than to volunteer to work this year. Robbie arrived just a bit after Pastor Williams and his mother and took a seat at the head table, snapping up Ethel Leary’s seat after she ran off to socialize. At the other three corners of the table were Pastor Williams, Pastor Learner, and Adam Leary, whose penguin belly already seemed a bit thicker from the beef.

At their end of the table, Robbie and Adam were discussing business at the hardware store, the theme that occupied just about everything Robbie talked about these days. It was almost summer now, Robbie explained, so sales were down because most people had finished their mulching and gardening. Pesticides would be the big item soon—anything to wipe out the ants and grubs and Japanese beetles that the summer would bring. But summer would also bring something else: one of the big chain home improvement stores was opening a unit midway up Route 13, ten minutes north of Greenbriar and fifteen minutes south of Bell Forks and Millers Heights. “We protested the living hell out of it,” he said. “But you know how it goes—the developers rule out here.”

While he spoke, Robbie remained hunched over the table with his shoulders stretched wide, looking as if ready to pounce, to seize some opportunity to survive because another one might not come. This vigilance in his body was etched all over his face—in his eyes, which seemed capable of only worry and exhaustion, and in the swift channels that weight loss had carved out around his mouth. His whole frame had withered into this wary droop, and, after a sloppy bite or two of his sandwich, he didn't touch it again, like he couldn't squeeze anything more around the tumult ballooned in his gut. He had a daughter on the way and a sand-castle business that was waiting for the tide to rush it over; Pastor Williams wondered if some ancient animal instinct was guiding Robbie, one that told him to eat only what he had to and to save for the rest for the kids.

Across from him, Pastor Learner let out a quiet exhale, as if to psychologically prepare himself for his lunch. His plate contained only two things: a heap of coleslaw, milky in color because Joan Richardson had been heavy-handed with the mayo, and an equally hulking sandwich. “Got eyes bigger than my stomach, I think.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Pastor Williams said. “I think we can allow ourselves to be gluttons every once in awhile.”

“No, I guess that's okay. A little sin to keep us honest, right?” He smiled before taking a deep bite of the sandwich, the juice of which splattered onto and dribbled down his chin. As he chewed, he rolled his eyes and pointed at his mouth, indicating that he had something more to say. “So you decided not to talk about yourself,” he said, still clearing the last thread-like chunks of beef down his throat. “In your sermon.”

“Yeah, I...” Pastor Williams exhaled. “I thought it might be a bit too narrow, you know? Thought I’d try to take a broader angle.”

“The metaphor was...” Pastor Learner said. “Well, you made it work. It was good.”

“Thanks.”

“Still, I think they really would’ve enjoyed hearing your story, though.” He took another bite of his sandwich. “Not to say the sermon wasn’t good, of course. A bit abstract—but still very good.”

Pastor Williams smiled sheepishly. “Thank you.”

“Just because a burning bush didn’t talk to you doesn’t make it not interesting.”

“Thanks.”

Pastor Learner kept his eyes on him for another moment, and the gentle coaxing evolved into something more piercing, a drill bit to push under the skin and find out what was gushing and shoving about underneath. Pastor Williams took a bite of his own sandwich and stared at the table.

“So how are things going with the renovations?” he asked, and the conversation steered off in that direction. Kitchens, money management, and council meetings—they laughed over the decidedly worldly parts of their calling. Eventually, Adam and Robbie joined their conversation, Adam offering exact details about the renovations and Robbie telling them they should renovate more of the church because he could use the business.

As the conversation went on, Pastor Williams nodded, and he laughed at the appropriate moments. But, while he was listening, he had trouble keeping himself focused on Robbie. Half his attention wandered to the tree line, to the tower of the old

church just visible before the trees and horizon crushed into the new church's vertical wall. The black steeple, he thought, was like the new church's entire shadow concentrated into a pinpoint, a needle poking up into the new church's glory. It was the shadow that never moved and was there as much at night as at day, a counterweight to the new church's majesty.

Adam left the table briefly to hunt down some of Joan Richardson's lemon bars—she made better desserts than side dishes—and brought back enough for the table. The conversation quieted for a moment while they all ate, before Pastor Learner caught sight of Pastor Williams' odd glances off at the trees.

“So I noticed you cut through my backyard the other day,” he said. “Heading back to the woods.”

Pastor Williams' mouth dropped open just a bit, and his mind froze for a second. It was a sudden gut reaction; he had no idea why he suddenly felt so exposed, but there the feeling was. “I've been going down there to think and get some fresh air,” he said, forcing his lips into a smile. “It's not bad exercise.”

“If you like running from ghosts,” Adam joked, although no one laughed. “Still, that's a heck of a hike.”

“I don't mind.” Pastor Williams squeezed his plastic fork between his fingers and began drumming it on his plate, splashing it in a puddle of mayo and cabbage liquid. “I'll sweat for a bit of clarity.”

“You know your Dad go through there quite a bit, too,” Pastor Learner said. “I used to see him. He always had his journal with him, like it was his spell book or

something. Like he could take it back there and the ghosts would finally just tell him what happened.”

Pastor Williams’ fork hesitated for a moment, then splashed in the milky puddle. He looked at Pastor Learner, trying to find some hidden note, some “tell”—as his father would’ve put it—or some message that Pastor Learner was trying to convey to him and not the others. But Pastor Learner was staring off at the white church wall behind Pastor Williams, like it was the screen at a drive-in and his memory was projecting out on it.

“I always told your Dad I know what happened, but he never believed me,” Robbie said. He turned to Adam to explain: “That preacher drove two kids to kill themselves.”

“Robbie,” Pastor Learner said. “This isn’t really subject matter for a church pit beef.”

“I bet it’s the truth, though.” Robbie leaned back in his chair and shrugged. “I bet that preacher was getting people so worked up, telling them to repent and feel the Lord. Had them falling to their knees and rolling around like a bunch of pigs in dirt. And, then, I bet he told them *that’s* what they were worth. Not the pigs, even, just the dirt. Told them crawl on their knees and pray to God he took them back. And, meanwhile, everyone who did get ‘taken back’ was having seizures. My grandmom went to a revival like that, and she said it was the scariest thing she’d ever seen. People either crying or shaking like they were crazy. I don’t think it’s too much a stretch to say he guilted those kids into hanging themselves.”

“Maybe, Robbie, maybe he did,” Pastor Learner said. “But you know there’s no proof on that. And there’re lots of people who went to revivals back then and didn’t wind up hanging themselves.”

“It makes sense, though, doesn’t it? Isn’t that the point of going to church? To get guilted into loving God? Wasn’t that the point of Mike’s sermon?”

“Not quite,” Pastor Williams said. At least, that’s wasn’t what he’d planned.

“Is that why you don’t come?” Pastor Learner asked.

“I’ve been twice in the last week,” Robbie said.

“Yeah.” Pastor Learner attempted to smile. “And if you come a third, I’m afraid the roof will come down on my head.”

Robbie just stared. He stuck out his hand as if he was salesman showing off Pastor Learner. “There you go, guiltling me, again. This is why I don’t come to church.”

Pastor Williams leaned into the table and offered a patient smile. “The days of fire and brimstone are long gone,” he said. “It all comes down to what you take with you. Look, if those boys hung themselves, then it wasn’t because of what Reverend Sutter said. And, either way, Robbie, what’s that have to do with you?”

Robbie tilted his head and ran his fingers through his hair. “Look, Mike, your sermon was good,” he said. “But if I want to feel crappy about life, I can just open up shop.”

“There’s more to church than just that, and you know it.”

Robbie sighed. “I’m telling you, he guilted those boys so bad, they went and hung themselves.” He bit his lip and shook his head like he was right there beside Reverend Sutter, watching the kids swing and telling the Reverend, “Well look at the

mess you made.” “And then he ran away like a coward and couldn’t even own up to it. I wonder what God thought about that.”

Me too, Pastor Williams thought.

“Robbie, there’s no proof any of it actually happened,” Pastor Learner said.

“Now, come on, can we switch topics?”

“Fine with me, but I know it did.” Robbie leaned back in his chair. “That’s what happens when you tell people they’re worth less than pigs. They start to actually think it.”

“Maybe,” Pastor Learner said, also falling back into his chair. “But when you’ve got a dozen competing stories and they’re all possible, you need some evidence.”

Robbie didn’t say anything immediately, but Pastor Williams could read the response in his face because he recognized it as the same one that had flashed through his own mind: “Well, what about God?”

“It’s a crime,” Robbie said, “guilting those boys into killing themselves.”

Pastor Learner crossed his arms, his evangelizing effort done for the moment. “I don’t think anyone would disagree with you, Robbie. But I think Emily could tell you no one in our congregation’s going to hang themselves any time soon.”

Robbie kept silent, but again offered a verbose expression: cheek sucked in, eyes staring at Pastor Learner like he was the idiot child in the class. He’s right, Pastor Williams thought. That’s probably what Reverend Sutter thought, too.

Robbie didn’t stay too much longer and left with a sandwich wrapped in aluminum foil for Emily, who hadn’t felt up to coming. “One minute, she tells me she can’t keep anything on her stomach. Then the next, she goes and tells me to bring home

a beef sandwich,” he said to Pastor Williams as they shook hands. “But, hey, if she wants her sandwich, here’s the sandwich. No sense in arguing with a pregnant lady.” He invited Pastor Williams and his mother to come over for dinner one evening before Pastor Williams left, and Pastor Williams accepted, saying he’d talk to his mother to see what worked best for her schedule. They shook hands again, and Robbie moved off towards the parking lot, head drooped even as his feet hurried him along.

After he left, the pit beef lumbered towards 5:00, moving about as quickly as puddles grow on a hot day. Even though he barely left the head table, Pastor Williams was dragged from one conversation to another. He recognized about as many faces as he didn’t, but everyone seemed to recognize him. Even the folks he was certain had only joined in the last few years shared the communal pride; every face he encountered offered a smiling variant on this pride. Not knowing him didn’t seem to matter in the least. He talked about other plans for renovating the church (a new kitchen and two new classrooms), about the golf course they’d just put in near Whitedale (proof, he was told, that Millers Heights wasn’t the same place it used to be), about kids and traffic (worse because they just kept slapping up so many houses), and about how much longer he planned to stay (he didn’t know). He spoke a lot about Kentucky, answering questions that made it sound like he was a missionary returning from the mountains of Peru or the jungles of Papua New Guinea. Had he picked up a twang? Had he met any “fine ladies”? Was he sure? How long was he planning to stay down there?

The last of those questions, at least, he could answer simply and confidently: “Until the Lord calls me somewhere else.” But between those moments when he sat and listened and sat and talked and stood and listened and stood and talked, he felt his mind

retreating away from him, as if important parts of his consciousness had holed themselves up in some cave, engaged by something more pressing than the conversation around him. It was a scabby feeling clumped around the back of brain, a numbness from part of his mind dropping off the radar. He could poke it, and it would report back nothing at all. But, then, of course, came another question, and the feeling went away.

Then, suddenly, he wasn't talking anymore; the puddle had filled with vapid questions and vapid answers, and it was 5:00. The crowd had begun to thin out around 4:00, and around 4:45, Pastor Williams noticed that Al Reister was sitting for the first time all day, camped out in a lawn chair with his pits behind him. He had a water bottle in one hand and a sweat-earned sandwich in the other. By 5:00, only a few stragglers remained along with the "important" folks—the Learys, Sharon Dulaney, Pastor Learner, and a few other members of the church council. His mother was helping one of the Sunday school teachers wrap up desserts. He asked Adam Leary what he could do, but Adam slapped him on the shoulder and said: "Not a thing. You sit down and relax. You've done enough for us already."

With nothing else to do, he ducked inside to use the restroom. Since the toilets on the first floor were for children and, thus, uncomfortably close to the ground, he went upstairs. He walked through the halls of the adult education wing, heavily lacquered in the blue of late afternoon. Earlier in the day, in the break between services, the classrooms had been fluorescent white and full with Bible study classes wrapping up for the summer. He'd milled through various classrooms during the education hour. Among other things, he'd stopped to help second graders paint the colors onto clay Pentecost flames. Later, he'd listened in on Pastor Learner's class on the "unknown epistles." This

week's had been Jude, and the entire lesson hinged not on a verse, but on the second heading: **A Call to Persevere**. "There may not be Romans hunting us down anymore," Pastor Learner had said, "but that doesn't mean we don't still have obstacles to overcome."

On the shelf protruding from the wall of the now-dark classroom, Pastor Williams found some leftover worksheets scrawled with lists of those obstacles. Money got in the way of faith; work did, too. Even family was an obstacle. Pastor Learner had asked his students to complete these lists individually so that they would be honest, but, as Pastor Williams read them, he found them too circumspect, too mundane. No one listed death or losing their job; no one had listed feeling alone or abandoned. No one had listed wondering if God actually cared at all. They settled for tangible things, preferring to blame physical objects rather than their own emotions beneath.

He left the worksheets and glanced out the window. The pit beef was coming apart, table by table and plastic-wrapped leftover by plastic-wrapped leftover. The pit was only barely steaming, its flames dying off into a white gauze of smoke.

As he watched, he could feel the scabby rubble peeling off the back of his brain and revealing the cave face beneath it. While tables snapped in half and collapsed down, while chairs were folded in on themselves, he went into the cave, and, at the back of it, he found the two boys swinging. They'd felt so far gone that any hope of salvation had vanished and that the only difference between life and Hell was the rope burn contusions and short breathlessness that bridged the two. It was hardly an implausible story, and it certainly seemed more probable than most about the old church. But, true or not, he thought, it was capitulation, defeat, lying down and dying rather than seeing the long

march through to its end. It was a more active and brutal form of faithlessness than the ones he saw nearly everywhere, the folks who were too lazy or too busy, who had less threatening obstacles than Roman spears but still gave up on the march.

Whether they were fictional or not, he considered asking God for mercy on the two boys; if they were real, his voice probably would've been the first to petition for them in a hundred years. He kept his eyes open wide and watched the festivities come undone, and he couldn't tell if the oily feeling swelling up inside of him was more for the boys or for himself. But he didn't go through with it; he didn't ask God for mercy on them. They'd given up on love and salvation. They deserve mercy about as much as I do, he thought.

The Barnes County Historical Society sat on the edge of downtown Millers Heights, at the intersection of Main Street and Chester Avenue. Formerly the local post office, it perfectly expressed wartime functionality: flat, rigid, and mechanized, it had no use for form or grace. Pastor Williams had always thought it looked like an oversized chunk of sidewalk, anonymous and vague, speckled with bits of glass. The sun brought neither color nor personality to the walls and made them only look more sickly and pale. It emphasized the dusty haze that drifted behind the windows, the mist of weak fluorescent lights struggling to fill a great dark space. Set back off the street, it looked abandoned and forgotten. Appropriate for a historical society, he thought.

He slid into a parking spot in front of it and spent a moment gathering himself. Now I am playing Dad, he thought. This was where his father began each and every one of his investigations. Only a few blocks separated it and the hardware store, so his father had easily been able to cover the distance during his lunch breaks, even if he only ever had the time to pester Jerry Kingston about some quick curiosity. Since no food was allowed in the Historical Society, his father would eat his lunch as he went; he made for an odd sight, tearing chunks from the ham and cheese sandwich in one hand as he clutched a devoured, browning apple core in the other. Pastor Williams sat in the car for a moment and remembered one of those times he'd tagged along, chasing a step or two behind his father's back. Every man had been tall at that age, and his father had been just a mountain of swift-moving lines, shoulders pushed forward as he walked, his cheeks pulsing as he took hurried, incomplete bites. He'd never looked back, always knowing that his son was right behind him, following him past the barber shop, candy stripe pole

spinning overhead, past the Wilkins Avenue Bakery, which had smelled of sugar, and past Dylan's bridal store, where the mannequins in spider web gowns had stared through the windows, longing for the weddings they'd never have.

The hurry always ended at that blank building in front of Pastor Williams, ended with slower, almost careful steps into the big, dim concrete vault. He remember his father tossing his lunch in the metal trash can outside the door, the apple core clanging as it went down, a bell of iron and rot to announce their arrival. The walk back, he remembered, had been slower, less determined. His father had been fulfilled—his questions answered, his belly full, and his son by his side. In that short distance, there'd been no need to hurry.

Pastor Williams smiled. Unlike his father, he'd had to eat his lunch before they left. His father's explanation: "I don't want you to choke."

He stepped out of the car, grabbing his father's journal off the passenger seat. The last few pages in it were still blank, free of his father's thoughts and theories. Waiting for answers, he thought, and left the car behind him. He trudged up the pale concrete stairs outside the building and entered through the main doors. In the foyer, he saw a plaque dedicated to Richard Kingston. *Founder of the Barnes County Historical Society and friend to all*—these were the words beneath Richard's bronze face, beneath his inquisitive eyes and knowing stare. *1906-1987*. Below Richard was the bronze face of his son, Lou, Jerry's father and the second director of the Historical Society. *1934-1999*. But there wasn't a plaque beneath Lou Kingston's because Jerry was still alive and not yet deserving of a memorial.

Pastor Williams passed through another set of glass doors into the interior of the building. Like the outside, the inside also had a cavernous geometry—a long, fat prism interrupted by rectangular pillars to keep the flat, unremarkable roof from falling down. Long windows allowed some sunlight to enter, but the blinds were precisely positioned to force the light down into angular shafts that cut across the floor. The sunlight went nowhere, really, spilling only into the white fluorescent wash that actually made the room seem darker. Shelves and cabinets filled the space with still more lines and right angles, bland units that were some sort of tannish color and contained records, photographs, diaries, and accounts. A few display units sat against the wall, showing off arrowheads and relics from old towns that had disappeared to flooding, winters, and economics. Nothing commanded attention.

As he stepped into Jerry's office—a square box with windows on the interior and exterior walls—Jerry swiveled around in his chair. Even sitting down, he was a tall, lanky man. For as long as Pastor Williams could remember, Jerry had looked older than he actually was because his body had always been elongated and uncomfortably thin. Around his face, the skin was taut and flat, as if there was just enough to stretch over his bones without any excess. His hair was faintly blond, and it clasped tightly to his skull like a cap that was a size too small. Thick black glasses, the kind that had become trendy recently but, on him, just made him look older, drooped down his nose, which jutted out hawkishly from his face. His eyes stayed focused on the paper in his hands, and his lips quickly and quietly mashed over the words he was reading.

“Yes?” he said, as if irritated that he had to start the conversation.

“Mr. Kingston?” Pastor Williams asked. “Do you have a minute?”

As soon as he spoke, Jerry dropped the paper. “Mike,” he said, and a smile split his face. “Sorry. I thought you were Dana. Take a seat.”

“Thanks.” Pastor Williams tucked into one of the two chairs in front of Jerry’s desk. They were old and smelled like burning newspapers, acrid ink smoking up around him. “It’s quiet in here.”

“Yeah,” Jerry said. He glanced out the windows as if he’d forgotten that he was still caught in this geometry of squares and silence. “It’s Monday, the archives are closed. And most of the volunteers don’t come in...It’s not always this quiet.”

“God, I hope not. It’s like a monastery—you’d forget how to speak in here.”

“You get used to it,” Jerry said. “Didn’t seem to do anything to your Dad.”

Pastor Williams nodded. “Yeah.”

“How you guys doing?”

“We’re fine.”

“Good,” Jerry said. “You getting rest? Taking things easy?”

“Of course.”

“Good.”

Jerry’s lips remained open just a bit, looking for a way to sustain the conversation. When nothing came, he relaxed back in his chair and let his eyes roll up towards the ceiling. “So is there something I help you with, then?” he asked. “I’m guessing you’re probably not here to revel in my ‘monkish’ life.”

“I grew up with a monk-historian, so no, I don’t need another,” Pastor Williams laughed. “Though, now that you mention it, I guess I’m here to play one myself.”

Jerry rolled his eyes. “You are your father’s son,” he said. “Which one of his messes have you been digging into?”

“The worst one.”

“The old church.”

Jerry’s eyes demanded an explanation, and Pastor Williams worked the words around in his mind, looking for the way to put them together. “It’s stupid,” he said—that was a lie—“but I get this feeling that he missed something. I mean, this is my Dad. He *should’ve* been able to put it all together.”

Jerry unfolded his hands on his desk, like he was presenting something to Pastor Williams. “Mike,” he said, “there just isn’t that much to put together. I’ve had this conversation before—with your father. My Dad had it with him, too.”

“I know, but I just want to double-check.” Pastor Williams could feel his breaths and words expanding inside him, pressuring up against his chest bone. “I mean, he was sick. It’s certainly possible that he missed something, right?”

“Yes, it’s possible, Mike. But it’s not likely. There just isn’t that much out there.”

“Can I at least see what there is?”

Jerry shook his head. “Archives are closed on Mondays.”

“And you can’t let me in? You’re the director.”

Jerry mashed his teeth into his lip for a moment and then spoke. “Mike, I don’t want you barking up this tree. You’re not going to find anything. Just go home and get some rest.”

“I just want to take a look. I’ll only be an hour.” He shrugged. “I don’t know, I just can’t shake the feeling.”

Jerry lifted his hands from the table and clapped them together, retracting whatever invisible gift it had been that he’d offered and smashing it between his hands. “All right, an hour. I don’t know what you think you’re going to find, though.”

Pastor Williams tapped the cover of the journal in his lap. “I have Dad’s notes. I’m just going to follow him.”

“And you really think you’re going to find something he didn’t?”

“Maybe.” God-willingly, he thought.

Jerry shook his head and pushed himself away from his desk. “Well, you know how to get there. Just put everything back when you’re done.”

Pastor Williams stood up. “Thanks.”

He was nearly out the door when Jerry spoke up again, his voice sounding muddied and dense. “Mike, if you do find something...just be ready to be disappointed. The way these things work, the lies are usually more exciting than the truth.”

Pastor Williams nodded and thanked Jerry again before he left. As he stepped out, he could hear Jerry rummage through the papers on his desk, probably returning to the letter he’d originally been looking at like nothing at all had happened. For a brief moment, he stood in the center of the open, empty vault, the concrete walls that dwarfed all the doors in and out. Instead of closing in, the walls and ceiling seemed to recede away, as if invisible hands were adding blocks to them, pushing the windows deeper and deeper away from him and the ceiling higher and higher. As he walked towards the tables in the center of the room—battered wood things for public use—his footsteps

squeaked across the floor. But, to him, the squeaks seemed tiny within that large space, peeling off across a short distance and slamming into a wall of silence, an unseen but undeniable boundary. There was simply too much quiet around him, too much shiftless air for his footsteps to unsettle it all.

Following the notes in his father's journal, he navigated the card catalogs, flicking past card after card with one object in mind: Reverend Sutter's journal. *March 22*, his father had written, *Leo's finally finished transcribing the journal. It's about time. For all these years, I've been doing this half-cocked. It's kind of hard to figure out what happened without Sutter's own words, right?* And, yet, even the journal hadn't brought the grand revelation. Still, though, it was the best place to start.

He found the journal split into three volumes, two of actual journal entries and one of letters, in a section of book shelving dedicated to the histories of local congregations. He gathered up all three volumes and hoisted them to a table, where he sat and began to skim. *The Journals and Letters of the Reverend John Sutter. Edited and translated by Leonard Ritchie.* Pastor Williams recognized the name as a historian his father had used to badger for information. It was also the name on one of the bouquets slowly dying in their living room—the carnations, maybe, or maybe he was the one who, in the spirit of Maryland, had sent the black-eyed susans.

In his journal, his father had written down a variety of page numbers, most of them from the second and third volumes, the later journals and the letters. Pastor Williams found one of the few empty pages in the journal and then opened the second volume to the first reference: October 21, 1804:

This past day, the Lord has revealed to me a miracle of the Spirit. In the morning yesterday, I travelled south to see a great outpouring of the Lord's work. In a field not very far north of Baltimore, a Methodist circuit minister held a great revival that went from morning until night. Even though none of my peers here would travel with me, I set forth, inspired by the Lord's hand to see the marvels being worked in the south, beneath the noses of these stubborn men here with their hard hearts and pretentious displays. They are my peers and undoubtedly men of robust and great character with strong hearts turned towards the Lord, but their displays are so lacking in heart and spirit. They would have the Lord turned into an idea, a thing to be spoken about rather than encountered and known. They sneer at great outpourings like this one and say that they transform men into beasts. But, are not men beasts lifted up by the breath of God? Are we not dust and ashes given life by the Lord's warm breath? Should we not be reminded of this nature and this breath?

When I came to the meeting, I found a whole host of unconverted souls mingled among those saved by the Lord's grace. But, by day's end, I swear, the host of unconverted souls was much smaller and the host of converted ones much the greater. For the speakers at this great assembly spoke with such passion and fervor, and the hand of the Lord was so much evidenced in their hearts, that many men and women were overwhelmed by the presence of the Spirit and brought to weeping and fits. Many prostrated themselves before God and wept and trembled. They cried out for mercy. The saving hand of the Spirit entered into them and forced out their ignorance, which is the root of all sin, and filled them with a great love and fear of God. Even I felt the trembles of a great flame growing in my heart and felt a power and love within me unlike any I

have felt since those first days I knew the Lord's will within me. I must acknowledge even that I felt a touch of covetousness watching these men and women as they encountered the Spirit and longed for my own conversion, when the Lord passed through me like a great wind.

At midday, the doors were opened and all gathered within for a great meal open to all. Those who did not know each other but before that morning gathered and ate, and there was no conversation that was not about the Lord and his holy and wonderful nature. The convictions that began that day were not false or deceptions, but true and earnest work of the Spirit washing out on men. I do not know how my peers can see such works and scoff and laugh. When great masses of men have convictions fired in their heart, it must truly be the work of the Spirit. I still stand in awe and already feel longing for the moment as if it were five years ago and not just yesterday. These are great times to see the Spirit work so fervently and to be so widely accepted, and perhaps even the Lord's kingdom will emerge among us as more and more come to embrace the Spirit and allow it into their hearts. A new age, I hope, may be arising among us, and I will surely have to see more work of these kinds as soon as I am able.

As he finished the entry, Pastor Williams let his eyes wander up from the page. Immediately, though, they were putting shape to Reverend Sutter's words, to this scene of huge, mass conversion, people toppling to their knees, bowled over by the Holy Spirit and swept up in the bonfire within each of them. The little flame he'd described in his Pentecost sermon fed by so much air and energy that they couldn't stand up, that it set their sin on fire and burned it like a charcoal blaze. He re-read the description of the revival as if a second read might reveal new details, lending touches and sounds beyond

these general observations. His mind struck up the image of a forest glade set beside the walls of a stone church, the sunlight pouring down into the hidden place, as if the Lord had ridden on the sunlight and, through it, ignited the conviction and passion that Sutter had seen. Frightened weeping filled the air and bodies writhed like snakes, unloosing the serpent's influence from their hearts. God ignited hearts and exploded them with his love.

A new age, I hope, may be rising among us. He's right, Pastor Williams thought, but in the wrong way. Half or more of the people he'd preached to on Sunday would've considered the revival nothing more than cheap theatrics. The fire was showmanship, a magician's stunt that was only slightly more impressive because it used words rather than lighter fluid. In essence, though, it was the same; verbal sleight of hand was still sleight of hand. The audience bought the premise, so they bought the performance.

But it wasn't theatrics. The skeptics were wrong. This was an act of the Spirit sweeping down onto these people and igniting a fire that burst through the stone shelled around their hearts. In infinite mercy, God had reached out through a human voice and made himself known to those on the field, felt in their bodies and in their veins, a touch they wouldn't have ever been able to forget because its phantom impression would've shaken them from time to time and never let go. God had reached up from the earth, down from the sky, and out from a human voice. That, he thought, was the different age.

He'd felt the Lord, too, but not as fire and not as passion. I only felt ice, he thought. You shriveled my heart.

A few days later he noticed a brief, undated entry in his father's journal: *William Smith, Rose B.'s great-great grandfather (?) worked on the old church. Was one of the congregants who left St. Peter's to follow Reverend Sutter. I talked to her this afternoon. She didn't say anything, but she knows something. She has a tell—like a child, she can't look at you when she's nervous. Couldn't get it out of her, though. I'll have to try again another time.*

He returned to Mrs. Bittner's later that day, near sunset, when the sun was falling into the trees behind him as he pulled into her driveway. He'd called ahead to let her know he was coming, and he'd had to turn down her offers to make dinner. "I have a question I want to toss your way," he'd explained. "I have to drive up that way to get to Robbie's, so I'd thought I'd stop by." "Maybe another time, though," he'd offered, wishing he could turn down Robbie's invite in order to give her some company. She could probably use it, he thought.

Either way, his brief visit before dinner would have to do for now. The sky was just beginning to flush while he stood at her doorway, the red spraying up from a remote point behind the trees. Most of the sky was still blue, but it was long and deep, further and further removed from the sun sinking behind him. While he waited for her to answer the door, he watched gnats spin about in the shade stretching out onto the front garden. They darted senselessly within their cluster and made tight, elliptical orbits, compelled by some frenetic instinct that looked like nonsense to anyone else. Beneath them, the buds of a purple bee balm slumped; the spokes of its blossom dropped like fingertips, waiting tiredly for the next rain to come.

Even though it was his second visit to her house in only a few days, the tamp-tamp of her cane still jarred him, yanked his mind away from the garden and the shadows encroaching on the walls of the house. “Michael,” she greeted. “Come in. A teaspoon of sugar and a lemon, right?”

“Yes,” he said with a smile, and he followed her in. She didn’t move quite as deftly as she had the other day, and he noticed it immediately. Her steps were shorter and more deliberate, and with each one, her right hip made a heavy effort to move, as if dragging some weight he couldn’t see. In her face, heavy, purple tiredness clumped around her eyes, like bruises that had simply appeared when she woke up one morning. Maybe she’d looked the same when he’d last visited, but her enthusiasm had disguised her frailty, made her exhaustion look dignified and simply added an energy to her steps that, today, she couldn’t hope to copy. He almost asked her if she was all right, but decided not to call attention to it. The other day had been the anomaly, not today. I’m sure she’s aware of it, he thought.

They sat and drank their tea for a moment, at first in silence and then in pleasantries. He told her about how he’d delivered the Sunday sermon at Pastor Learner’s request. Her eyes swelled as he spoke, and, for that brief time, they held a glimmer so different from the exhaustion that surrounded them. “I bet it was wonderful,” she said. “You know I wish I could’ve have gone.”

He smiled and glanced away from her admiration. “Well, I liked it at least. “You’d have to ask everyone else to see if it was actually wonderful or not.”

She shook her head. “I still remember when you were in the seminary, and you came back to deliver your first sermon...Don’t you tell Pastor Learner I said this, but I think you’re better than he is. Got more fire.”

He laughed sheepishly and continued on, giving a brief synopsis of his sermon. She listened with rapt attention as he summarized his message, nodded pensively as he talked about how willingly people embraced bogeymen over the Holy Spirit, about how only one of those two things actually existed, yet people always had stronger faith in the one that didn’t. Her eyes lost some of their glimmer as he continued on; they drifted down towards the table between them. She never stopped nodding, though, taking it all in and staring down into it.

While he spoke, he realized how close she was to being just another one of the shut-ins he visited on a regular basis. She was sharper and more alert than most, but he had that same uncertainty about whether she was focusing on his message or simply milking the company for all she could. Damn Lily, he thought, although he immediately felt silly cussing at someone he barely knew. Yet she’d abandoned her own mother to loneliness and utter dependence on her neighbors, to the miracle of rare guests and the frequent, sticky company of her own thoughts. Finances ahead of blood, she’d committed her mother to old stone walls that likely spoke far too much.

I’m doing what I can, he thought.

“That’s a smart sermon,” she said after he finished. Her voice became slow and quiet; it came out measured and neatly paced, like raindrops plopping down on the same spot, one then the next. “It’s all a bunch of hoodoo, isn’t it? All those ghost stories and

whatnot? But you're right, though...Some days, it's an awful lot easier to believe in them."

"It's okay," he said. "I think, as long as we try, we'll do just fine. Besides they're good stories, right?"

"So you don't believe there's any truth to them?" she asked. "Now I know what you said in your sermon, but you don't believe in any of those ghosts? Not even a little bit?"

His mouth opened to respond, but his teeth never even closed around the first word. The prepared answer had to do with how God judged the dead and how they went to either Heaven or Hell, so that didn't leave much room for wandering spirits, did it? It was logical, even pretty unassailable.

"I try not to," he said. "But I am my father's son."

She smiled; it was faint, content, relieved. "I try to, too," she sighed. "It's easier for you, I bet. These are different times."

"Yeah. But I'm not sure that makes them better."

"When I was growing up," she said, "you never admitted it, but you stayed away from those woods. I think deep down inside—it all kind of sounds silly now—we still believed there were ghosts back there. I mean, we told ourselves and each other we didn't."

"But that didn't mean you actually didn't."

She nodded and dragged her lips across each other. They were brittle, and he imagined they had to feel like sandpaper. "Lily could never understand why I told her

not to go down there. Heck, I couldn't understand it, either. But you just know these things, right?"

He smiled. "How's Lily doing?"

She shifted her head from one side to the other, as if weighing out responses stacked on each shoulder. "Okay," she said. "But, you know she was always more her father's daughter."

He nodded, but said nothing.

Her eyes sunk down towards the floor and blinked several times. She spoke again with that slow, raindrop rhythm. "My husband was a good man," she said. "He was a real good man."

"I know he was. Dad always liked him a lot."

"Good father and a good husband." Her teeth clamped up against her upper lip. "Real good at both."

"Mrs. Bittner," he said. "Why don't you come over to Robbie's with me? I'm sure he wouldn't mind the extra guest."

"No, but thank you." She took another long sip from her mug and glanced at the clock behind him. She put the mug on the table and shook her head, perhaps deciding that she couldn't keep him there forever. She abruptly smiled, and her eyes filled again with that gentle glimmer. "Now what is you wanted to ask me?"

He felt a knot form in his belly, the muscles growing stiff. "I was wondering if you knew anything about the old church."

"Why?" she asked. "You think I'm so old I remember it?"

"No, no. I just thought, since your family—"

“It was a joke, Michael.”

“Oh,” he said, but his stomach didn’t untwist at all. Her eyes had become sharper and filled with a stony hardness, a bit like a boxer’s, at once defending and probing, on guard and looking for a way in. “I just thought, since your family has so much history here, you might know something. Even just something small.”

She frowned. “No, you didn’t come here because my family’s old. You read something in one of your father’s journals. Are you here to finish his interrogation?”

“I’m sorry?”

“No, I guess I shouldn’t put it that way, but it wasn’t too far from it. He used to stop by every few years and ask me the exact same questions. I think he’d wanted to see if I’d become more senile so he could dig his fingers around in my head.” Her fingers clawed at the air, imitating the excavation that he knew his father had wanted to conduct. There was no sense in even trying to dispute it.

“He didn’t meant any harm by it,” he said. “You know how he was with his hunches. He kind of fixated on things.”

“I didn’t know it until then,” she said. “The second or third time he showed up.”

She got up from the table and headed towards the stove. The cane’s tamp-tamp mixed in with the old floor’s squeals. “It’s awful, though, isn’t it? Awful that he died with less sense than an eighty-two year old woman.” She started up the kettle; the pilot light click-clacked like stones scattering across pavement. “How’re you and your mom doing?”

The flame gave off its familiar whoosh.

“We’re okay.”

She lifted up the box of tea to offer him some more, but he shook his head. His cup was still mostly full. “I always told him I had nothing to tell, but he just wouldn’t hear it. And I don’t.”

“I read in his notes that your great-great grandfather was one of the founders. He helped lay some of the stones.”

“Yeah, your father said that, too, like that meant I magically knew what all happened there.” She struggled to keep standing, but she kept beside the counter, stubbornly defying her age and weak muscles. “Never could convince him otherwise.”

“Not even a rumor?”

“Oh, Michael, you know all the rumors,” she said. “Those legends were old when I was born.”

He clapped his hands against the side of his mug, like he was boxing ears that it didn’t have. “But he was your great-great grandfather. Was there some sort of family rumor?”

She pressed her lips together and tapped her fingertips against her forehead, as if pushing her emotion back down inside. It was a reflex gesture, and he guessed it was one she’d developed in all those years of teaching, a way of counting beats that somehow worked out, or at least buried, her frustration. “No, Michael. He never spoke about it, and nobody knows.”

Pastor Williams’ hands stilled, and he focused his eyes directly on her. “What happened after Reverend Sutter left? What did he do then?”

For a brief moment, her expression stumbled. She almost spoke, then quickly closed her lips. She shrugged, then spoke again, having bought that additional half-

second to manage her thoughts: “I don’t know, Michael. That was two hundred years ago. And I think he made a great effort to...to put it all behind him.”

Pastor Williams let his eyes fall to floor. “I didn’t mean to badger you.”

She smiled as the water in the kettle, still warm from when it’d been last used, began to roil. “Sometimes you just have to hear it for yourself.”

He nodded and took another sip from his tea. She poured her second mug, prepared it with sugar, and delicately managed her way over to the table. He didn’t look at the clock, but he knew he’d be late. He finished his tea quietly and quickly, wishing he’d asked for another spoon of sugar to help get through the bitter final sips. The empty mug clapped loudly as he set it down, and she looked up, a certain hollowness suddenly having filled her eyes. It was like her entire focus had gone inward, completely turned around and backwards, but he couldn’t entirely be sure why. Her lips trembled for a moment, and it reminded him of how, near the end, his father’s had used to gobble up the air, trying to squish the words he’d forgotten out of it.

“Mrs. Bittner,” he said. “Is everything all right?”

She nodded and bit her lip. “You should go.”

“It’s just dinner at Robbie’s,” he said. “I really think you should come.”

She got to her feet and snatched up her cane. “No, thank you. I’d rather not be the target of everyone’s pity, tonight.”

They walked to the door, where he could see that the sun was all but gone behind the trees. “Have a good night Mrs. Bittner,” he said. He knew that it was a ridiculous thing to say, but they were the only words that came to him. No pastorly wisdom—he couldn’t manage it—just a generic good-bye.

“You too, Michael,” she said, “And thank you.”

“I’m going to deliver the sermon again this Sunday,” he said. “Maybe I’ll come by and give you a recap?”

“Don’t feel obligated,” she said. She creased her lips tightly.

“Well, have a good night, then.”

“You too.”

He waved as she closed the front door, and she waved back. As he climbed into his car, he noticed her watching him, but when he reached the end of the driveway, he couldn’t tell if she was still watching. For a brief second, his brake lights lit up the air around the car, then he turned and glided down the road.

On his way down the road to Robbie’s, he passed by the old farmhouse at the intersection of Routes 236 and 102. The house wasn’t technically at the intersection, but maybe fifty feet down 236 on the other side of the light. It was an old farmhouse whose owners kept the Christmas lights strung year round because they had a really elaborate display set up and probably didn’t want to keep taking it down and putting it up. Lights trimmed the entire outline of the house, and a big star sat beneath the arch of the roof. He couldn’t remember how long they’d been doing it, but, for at least the last ten years, they cranked the lights up every day of the year except for the two weeks in August they spent on vacation. From what he’d heard, the husband was an important guy down at one of the insurance companies in the city and his wife was the secretary for a big-time trial lawyer. Whether that was true or not didn’t matter because, as their brightly-lit house showed, money wasn’t an issue.

While stopped at the intersection with a Quik Mart to his left—part of a local chain that had somehow managed to stay afloat—he studied the enormous bulbs that lit the house. It wasn't just uninterrupted lines of light, but regularly spaced beads of light separated by darkness. There were no other exterior lights, so the Christmas bulbs—he wondered if it was even fair to call them that since they were up eleven months that weren't December—strictly lit the house, illuminating the angles, corners, and lines. It was like a paper silhouette, he thought, where the light at the edges made sense and shape of the black they enclosed.

The star had a similar design, composed of points rather than lines. At least eight feet across, it had a glowing bulb at each vertex, and it sat with a mesmerizing prominence at the top of the house, eerily bright for such a dark country road. Though it embarrassed him to admit it even to himself, it had always reminded him of some sort of occult symbol, like a pentagram lit in fire. The entire house, for that matter, he thought as he sat there, seemed outlined in bonfires, precisely contained clusters of wagging flames—a still frame that, if advanced even a second, would see the entire house in a united conflagration. It would sit on its empty field and burn brightly because, out here, the sky was truly black without any of that orange haze that surrounded town. But, now, it just hung there in that moment before disaster.

The traffic light turned green. Time had clearly advanced. But the bonfires remained where they were, not scurrying over the wood and shingles, not even flickering. He continued down 236, and the house quickly passed along the left side—fifty feet isn't far—and the bonfire skeleton remained where it was, waiting for time to creep a second forward.

Robbie's house was a brick split-level cornered at the back of a development in the north end of the county, second from last on a one-lane road that arbitrarily stopped in the field next to his neighbor's house. There wasn't even a curb to mark the end of the road; it simply lolled out into the field, as if the construction workers might one day return with their snorting machines and finish the job. From the outside, Robbie's house looked too small to have a basement and two stories, and the windows on each floor appeared to be squished uncomfortably close to each other. A long gravel driveway ribboned up the sweeping front yard, empty except for the stump of a crabapple tree that had come down the summer before. Robbie had never bothered to saw it down, so it jutted up like a knife tip, stabbing the dense blue sky.

About midway up the driveway, Pastor Williams parked his car behind his mother's. As he walked past, he reached out and touched her hood, which was cold and didn't muffle the crinkling noises of an engine cooling down. I'm sure I'll hear about this, he thought, ambling up the driveway.

The front door of the house was an egg white color with small windows that allowed Pastor Williams to see into the foyer. It was a tiled cloister that, through a doorway without a door, led into the kitchen. On the other side of the empty doorway, a shadow animated the wall, an elongated neck and head that nodded and occasionally became mixed with three fingers or a hand. This one shadow darkened for a moment—another one collided with it on the cherry red wall—but no actual bodies appeared, no heads poking out to see if he'd arrived. Maybe they hadn't heard him pull up, and here he was watching shadow puppets, but without anyone to tell him what the shapes were.

The door was probably unlocked, waiting for him to come in, but he stood there instead and hesitated between knocking and ringing the bell. Earlier in the week, Pastor Learner had called and asked him if he could maybe somehow get Robbie to come back for another service.

“Everyone really enjoyed it,” he’d said. “You should think about doing a sequel.”

“For this Sunday?”

“If you’re so inclined...And tell Robbie. Let’s see if we can make it three times.”

There’d been an audible wink, like they were partners in some kind of sitcom conspiracy.

I’m a missionary, he thought, imagining himself like some sort of papal charge sent out to sway a heathen prince. Covert the lord, and the tribe will follow. Except that there was no political or economic incentive here; this wasn’t Jesuits nabbing up gold while expanding God’s market. This was more like medicine, like explaining to a man who looked perfectly healthy that his organs were collapsing, trying to convince him without the benefit of cardiograms or biopsies—God hadn’t yet delivered spiritual x-ray machines to his shepherds—while every expression on the man’s face could be gathered up into a single word—“Bullshit”—followed by a few more: “I feel fine. I am fine.” If he touted his credentials—“I’m a doctor”—the response would be, “You’re a quack,” and he’d be lumped in with shamans and medicine men and all the other outdated farces of stupider times. And it wasn’t even his diagnosis that he was acting on; he’d never found himself able to proscribe another man with “You’re going to hell.”

His hand settled on knocking. The shadows on the wall shifted, grew darker, and then a body stepped out of them: his mother, dressed in jeans and light, springy shirt, delicately stepping out towards the door with red carpet poise. Her face resembled a

plaster cast, entirely without emotion as the tumblers turned; her eyes observed him with a professional disinterest.

“You’re late,” she noted.

“Sorry. I got tied up at Mrs. Bittner’s.” His voice was much quieter than hers.

“I told you you should go tomorrow.”

“I didn’t think I’d been that long,” he said.

“You were supposed to be here a half-hour ago.”

“Can we just go eat?” he asked. “I’m sorry.”

She was about to say something else, but, instead, she pressed her lips together and shook her head. With her hand, she pointed back to the kitchen and led the way, her footsteps just as airy and delicate as before.

They ate in the kitchen rather than the dining room, Emily explained, because she thought it was a more comfortable space. The entire kitchen was rooster-themed—roosters on the canister set, roosters on the wall clock, roosters on the display plates above the window—beaks and black pebble eyes gazing down from every spot in the room. Even the enamel hot pads had roosters on them, illustrations of farm scenes from old newspapers. The one nearest to Pastor Williams—he’d caught a glimpse of it before Emily had hidden it under the green beans—featured a cluster of hens nibbling at the ground, snapping up little pellets of grain. Alongside them and in the background, there was a humble plank shack, and he wondered if Emily had realized it was the slaughterhouse. It didn’t ruin the picture, but, once he noticed it, the hens became less compelling.

Robbie had grilled a steak for the entrée, and, along with it, Emily had prepared baked potatoes along with the green beans. “This is the first time I fired it up this year,” Robbie said. “Damn glad it’s springtime again.”

“He’s been looking for the right excuse to drag it out of the basement,” Emily said.

Pastor Williams smiled. “Glad to have been of service.”

“Well, the next thing you can do is get him to clean out that truck,” Emily said. “Have you seen the inside of that thing? There’s no way I’m going to let my baby in it.”

Robbie pointed at her with the tip of his fork. “There’s nothing wrong with the truck. A little mud never hurt anyone.” Emily rolled her eyes and shoved another bite of steak into her mouth. “And, besides, Mike isn’t going to be around here much longer, are you?”

His mother’s eyes slid to the left and focused on him, even though she didn’t move her head. “Actually,” he said, “I was thinking about staying for a bit longer. It’s almost summer now, so there’s no real rush to get back.”

“Oh,” Emily said. “Oh, it’ll be nice to have someone around the house, Ann.”

“Yes.” His mother nodded, her eyes settling on and not moving from Emily’s face. “Yeah it will.”

“And since I’m going to be around, I’m probably going to do some more up at the church,” Pastor Williams said. It wasn’t the best segue, but it would do. “Actually, I’m think I’m giving this Sunday’s sermon, too.” He said to Emily: “You should come.”

“Of course,” she said.

“You didn’t tell me,” his mother said, just moving her head enough that she maybe saw him out of the corner of her eye.

“I just talked to Pastor Learner this morning,” he said.

Robbie relaxed against the back of his chair, crossing his arms and smiling like he wished he’d bet money on this happening. “So he’s getting lazy in his old age? Going to milk everything out of you he can?”

“Robbie,” Emily said. “Stop it.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it,” Robbie said. “At least Mike’s more interesting.”

“You’re giving two sermons in two weeks?” His mother started at him with a look of mock disgust, like he’d just said he’d been playing with a dead bird with his bare hands. “Oh, dear, I’m not sure I’m ready for you to become my pastor.”

Robbie and Emily and his mother laughed. He forced a weak smirk. “Can you pass the steak, please?” he asked. Always the performer, he thought. He’d never known her to actually lie, only exaggerate what she honestly felt. He’d decided she liked melodrama because it made honest emotion seem petty by comparison. It was a lovely way to win a fight.

As dinner moved into dessert, a blueberry crumb pie, the conversation eased away from Pastor Williams and to the other topic on everyone’s mind: Emily’s pregnancy. With only three months until the baby arrived, Emily explained, the entire upstairs was in disarray. They only had three bedrooms, so Robbie was in the process of helping their younger son, Jack, squeeze all his stuff into their older son, Andy’s, bedroom. There were only so many ways, Pastor Williams thought, of pretending that it was a pleasant

surprise. “Andy’s going to hate sharing his room,” Robbie said, looking down into his water like it was a well with a bottom he couldn’t see. “But, we’ll have to make it work.”

“We’ll be fine,” Emily said, and she patted her belly as if to assure her baby as well as her husband.

After dinner, his mother insisted on helping Emily with the dishes—“We’re practically family,” she said—so Robbie and Pastor Williams settled in the family room, a long, narrow rectangle that stretched from the front of the house to the rear. Robbie settled into an armchair, and Pastor Williams sat on the edge of the couch, arched forward and hands between his knees, as if ready to spring up at a moment’s notice.

“So, on Sunday,” he said, “it sounded like business wasn’t too hot.”

“Nope. And it wasn’t any better today.”

“But it’ll pick up this summer, right? Pesticides and whatnot?”

“A little bit,” Robbie said. He kept his eyes on the television screen. It was an Orioles game, and a double-play had just ended the inning. “That new store’ll have a better stock.”

“You’ll find a way through.”

Robbie glared at him. “The Bible tell you so?”

“Robbie.” Pastor Williams tried to meet his eyes, but Robbie’s attention was already back on the television. On the screen, an overweight man in a cheap suit was touting his used car lot down in Dundalk; “You could save some serious green!” he proclaimed, and bright dollar signs flashed across the screen. The women hired for the commercial—one white, one black, and one Hispanic—giggled and fawned over him and his cars. “Why would you trust anybody else?”

“Because I’ve heard you’re a shitbag,” Robbie replied.

“You think you’re going to make it on Sunday?” Pastor Williams asked.

“I don’t know, Mike. I don’t even know if I’m going to make tomorrow.”

The game started again, the players gently jogging out of their dugouts onto the field. “You should try to come. This past Sunday didn’t seem to do any harm. Looked like you even enjoyed yourself.”

“There was pit beef.”

The Orioles promptly let the first two batters make base, a double and a single. The third came to the plate and, on the second pitch, batted the first two in. Robbie rolled his eyes and smirked. “You know, the whole damn city’s broken. Can’t even find a half-good baseball team.”

“They still have a long way to go,” Pastor Williams said. “They might pull it together.”

“May you be so optimistic at my age.”

Pastor Williams rubbed his lips together and gently nodded his head. “Look, just give it a try. I’m giving the sermon. I can promise it’ll be a good one.”

For the first time since they’d sat down, Robbie looked at him and didn’t immediately look away. He shook his head, and his eyes widened with contempt and pity, like a man with a terminal illness recognizing his symptoms in someone else. “God, you sound like me,” he said. “Look at us both. Both running dying businesses and begging people to show up.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad—for either of us.”

Robbie ran his hand through his hair and gave the sort of smile he probably gave to his kids, watching them eat candy he'd once loved but now just found saccharine and gross. "Jerks like that asshole in Dundalk, Mike. They're the future. Cheap crap sold by thieves."

"I think we'll be okay."

"Nah," Robbie said. "They're going to run us out of town."

"Come on Sunday," Pastor Williams said. "It might give you a little bit of hope."

"God, you're persistent, aren't you?"

Robbie shook his head and looked at the floor, then back at the TV screen, where the top of inning was still achingly dragging on. He said nothing more, and Emily and Pastor Williams' mother came into the room soon after. Emily asked Robbie to change the channel, saying that baseball-induced depression would do nothing good for their daughter. They all sat and chatted for a bit longer, until the night was plenty dark and cool enough for Robbie to close the windows.

"Well, we should get going," his mother said. She rose from the chair and nodded to him, to discourage, he thought, any possibility of staying longer. "Thank you so much."

"Of course," Emily said.

He hugged and thanked Emily and then shook Robbie's hand. "Try," he said.

"I'll see what I can do."

As they left, the night was almost blue for all the stars glowing above their heads. So far north, there was almost no light to speak of, so they speckled every inch of the sky. It took a moment for him to see them, but then, the fine pinpoints of light were

everywhere, revealing themselves after his eyes had adjusted to seeing them. His mother got to her car first and was ready to go, but he made her wait an extra second while he stood beside his and stared up at the felt curtain with all the holes punched in it, wishing he could slot his finger into one of the punctures and tear it further and further, making the light bigger until there was a wide blue-white hole in the center of the sky, a porthole rather than a pinprick. Something that offered a real view of the figures on the stage, the ones just hidden behind the felt—not a glimpse, not a tease, but a real view of the action happening there. The curtains, it seemed, wouldn't open on their own, so maybe, he thought, he could tear open a view.

For the second time in as many weeks, Pastor Williams stepped up to the pulpit. To his right was Pastor Learner, and, before him was that same wash of dark faces, weathered busts with their eyes trained on him. “Failure,” he said. He let the word hang in the air. “It’s an overwhelming thing.”

He thought he heard Pastor Learner cough, maybe questioning both the content and the tone. But he kept his eyes straight ahead, though, and spoke in his normal voice, the one that wouldn’t fit the space around him. “It’s easy to fail,” he said. “We do it all the time. We’re watching a game show and we get the question wrong. We forget to run an errand or get everything on the grocery list except for the milk. We get in fender-benders. We fall behind on our credit card payments. We lie. We cheat. Sometimes, we even steal.

“We fail every day. In big ways, and in small ones.

“The same emotion always follows our failures: regret. As soon as we realize we’ve done something wrong, our immediate desire is to undo it. We wish we’d remembered the milk or we wish we hadn’t made that turn or we wish we hadn’t bought that new TV. Hindsight is 20/20, they say, and, suddenly we can see things as clear as the prophet—except that they’re in the past and not the future. We roll the dice and reel as the dealer takes our cash. Inevitably, we think we’re right, good, okay, and then, suddenly, we’re very, very wrong.”

He allowed another pause, this time in the style of the general confession, allowing everyone to privately vent their failures before their own eyes. His own eyes scanned the crowd, looking for Robbie, moving away from that one scene that would

have otherwise played before them. He found Robbie, about midway back, looking straight ahead as if he had no sins that could bend his head towards the floor.

“We rarely stop at regret, though,” he continued, “just simply wishing we’d done it differently. It’s an awful feeling, isn’t it? You feel it in your temples and the back of your eyes. It’s like a sort of wet shock. Your head sinks and all the blood seems to drain forward, pressing up against the back of your eyes, and, conveniently, you stop seeing. Instead, all you see is the moment as it happened, then how it might’ve been different. You go blind to the world actually in front of your eyes. That one moment becomes everything you see, and, if asked, you would say it was your entire life’s history. Everything else is irrelevant except for this one colossal failure. The other parts of life just don’t fit into the equation.

“But that’s not the end, is it? No, it’s only the beginning. The sadness is the reflex response—often as much a reflex as the choice we now regret. After that, though, we start thinking. Our pride and our ego get blended into the mix. Suddenly, we stop wishing we hadn’t done it and start hating ourselves for having done it. We expect that we shouldn’t have done it. We knew better, we know better. What on earth were we thinking? The thoughts start to clutter our heads, and it’s not like rain. It’s like a...a cannon bombardment. It’s deafening, and there’s so much noise inside our heads that it spills out of our mouths. We start cussing at ourselves. Even those of us who manage great mercy towards each other rarely have equal mercy for ourselves.

“Yet the emotions even don’t stop here, do they?” he asked. “That would be too easy, wouldn’t it? Suddenly that frustration begins to mount, and it becomes huge, bigger than we are. Of course, this isn’t the case with every failure, but we’ve all been in

that moment when the entire thing overwhelmed us, when suddenly that failure begins to have implications that reach *far* beyond the immediate moment. We can feel our insides melting, like our failure is an acid. Or it seems to stand beside us, not a shadow but a presence, almost like another person. It has physical force. It beats us while we sleep and keeps us awake. It takes knives to our stomach, makes us sick and vomit. It has a chemical, drug-like force. It distorts our decisions, shortens our tempers, until one failure spins into two into three and we've become like a wrecking ball in our own lives, smashing down one pillar then another.

“But the real bad ones haunt, don't they? They hang over our heads and occupy every thought and every memory. They find that way to make us sick to our stomachs years after the fact. And, worse still, they find that way to make us feel worthless and useless. Before ourselves. Before God.

“What we're talking about now is worse than stumbling,” he said. “It's falling. It's feeling as if the entire world is a pit and we've collapsed into it. We're falling, and we look up, and we see God receding farther and farther away. He's forsaken us, we think. The sin weighing us down is carrying us so far so fast that he couldn't care less about picking us back up.

“‘You are the salt of the earth,’ Jesus says, but there's more to that saying, another half that we rarely discuss. ‘But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.’ And this how we feel in that moment. We feel that we've lost all our taste and God couldn't, shouldn't care less. We've written ourselves off, and we expect that he's written us off, too.

“We fall. Our faces splatter so deep in the mud that we should just be ostriches.” He leaned forward over the pulpit, grabbing its sides. “We’re down there, trapped in the mud, and we can’t breathe, and we forget that the open air is just an inch above our heads. We’re too busy wallowing and hating ourselves, demanding perfection that we have no right to demand. Man hasn’t been perfect since Eden, and yet we’re still too proud to admit that we’re fallen. We’re too proud to admit that sin is our nature. This is the time when we start blaming other things. This is when we blame the other driver or our wife or our husband or God.

“Oh, yes, we blame God for so much. We get angry and we cuss at him for ruining our lives, for lumping still another obstacle onto our plates and expecting us to somehow deal with it. But we can’t blame him. He didn’t make us risk turning on yellow. He didn’t make us forget the milk. He didn’t make us buy the television. When we stick an intermediary in, someone we blame instead of ourselves, then we prevent ourselves from finding redemption. Instead of asking him to help us up, we scream at him and just keep kicking in the mud. We’re too proud to admit it’s our fault, and we’re too proud to admit that we need mercy. And we’re far, far too proud to beg, let alone to ask honestly and earnestly, without resentment, that the Lord forgive. Sure, we ask all the time, but how many of those petitions are somehow tinged with resentment, with that thought, ‘Well, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t even be in this mess’? We turn away from God when we need him more than ever. Instead of his mercy, we allow failure to rule over us.

“Now there are numerous other passages we could turn to right now, all sorts of wisdom about how to regain our saltiness. Believe and you will be forgiven. Christ’s

sacrifice washes us clean. But these aren't the thoughts we have when our heads are planted in the mud. We only think that we've lost our taste...and salt without taste is dirt. Salt without taste is what Jesus washed from his disciples' feet. This is what we think, and this alone is what we remember of God's word. We remember that we are dirt. Anything else is impossible, we think. Mercy is an absolute lie."

When he paused, it was because he was out of breath. His voice had been trembling, and he'd been speaking in quick, shallow breaths—the way of an amateur, the way of someone who'd lost control. He swallowed twice to put the feeling back in his throat, and he looked ahead. While a deep breath covered his silence, he arranged his thoughts.

"But when in these moments," he said slowly, deliberately, "this is when our trust most needs to go to the Lord. This is when we need to remember. No matter how wrong we are and no matter how wrong we have been, God will forgive us. Even if we've kept ourselves away for years, he will still let us back in. All we have to do is ask and say, 'Please.' All we have to do is *believe* that redemption is possible."

He forced a tight smile, something to draw attention away from his wavering voice. "But first we have to acknowledge our sin before we can be redeemed from it. First we have to raise our hands and say, "Yes, I have sinned" before God can say, "Yes, and you are saved." No more blaming each other, no more blaming God, and, most of all, no more hating ourselves. We all fail, right, so why demand perfection when it isn't in our character to be perfect? Tear down the barriers, own your failures, wear them on your lowered brow, and, most importantly—and hardest of all, I think—let God take his fingers across you and clear your sins away. Believe that he can do that. Believe that no

matter how far you've drawn away from God, he will make you clean the moment you sincerely believe in our Lord's sacrifice.

"Hard, right? Real hard. But it begins by just remembering, by just remembering when your face is planted in the mud that God will help you find your way back. He will help you regain that saltiness. Redemption is possible for all us...hard as that may be to believe at times. And, where there's redemption, there's hope, too."

He pressed his lips and forced a breath out of his nose. "Amen."

He took one last survey of the crowd, at the slow, hesitant fumbling around for hymnals and the eyes that only slowly drew away from the altar. As he turned away to return to seat, Pastor Learner stepped up to him and met his eyes with that same needle-point stare. "Everything all right?" he asked.

Pastor Williams nodded. "It was for Robbie," he said.

Following what was becoming a routine, Pastor Williams visited Mrs. Bittner the following afternoon and again forced down another cup of tea. When he knocked on the door, he could hear her stamp, but, this time, the pace was much more measured and less hurried. Her eyes widened when she opened the door—or as much as they could given the puffy lids that weighed down on them.

"Michael," she said. Her voice lightened, but she didn't smile. "You should've let me know you were coming."

"I thought I'd surprise you."

"Well you did," she said. She stamped her cane against the floor. "Of course, it's not too hard to catch me here, though."

He smiled weakly, hoping it would stand in for words he didn't have.

"Come in," she said. "I'll start the tea."

As usual, they chatted about mundane things for a bit, though he talked far more than she did because her life almost never changed. As he moved from the front door and through the living room to the kitchen, he realized that he'd just covered the entire terrain of her existence. Her domain had become so narrow that there were probably rooms in her own house she didn't visit any more, little colonies she'd spun off because she no longer had the strength to maintain them. There were only a few pictures on the walls, and they were almost exclusively more recent ones, largely of her granddaughter. Softball pictures, school pictures, a couple of pictures of her with Lily. The other photographs contained faces that Pastor Williams didn't recognize, but he guessed them to be nieces and nephews with their own children, too. There were plenty of family photos, he thought, but none of them were of her family. Neither she nor Mr. Bittner was anywhere to be found.

While they spoke in the kitchen, her eyes wandered busily, looking everywhere in the room. The kettle's whistling startled her, but, tump-tump-tump, she hurried to the stove. Her knife slapped against the countertop as she halved a lemon and diced it into wedges.

"Can I help with anything?" he asked.

She grimaced at him and waved her hand. "No, no, Michael. I'll take care of it."

After she finished preparing the tea, she brought the mugs to the table, one at a time. Once they were both settled, she asked, "So you did the sermon again this week, right?"

He took a deep breath and exhaled into his tea. “Yeah,” he said. “I talked for awhile about failure and regret. You know, how we sometimes commit a sin and then we forget that God forgives us... We think it’s impossible.”

She nodded, and he pinched his tongue between his lips, drawing it back slowly until he found the right words to offer next. “I mean, it’s often that we don’t believe that we really deserve to be saved, but that doesn’t matter to him. Deserve it or not, he still gives it... In fact, we don’t deserve it, but we get it anyway. That’s the miracle.”

In her face, he began to see a mirror of what he was hiding. Her eyes began to waver and swing from side to side as she stared down at the table. Her hands dropped from her cup and seemed more to just drift alongside it. After a moment, she finally spoke.

“Do you believe the Lord punishes our sins?” she asked. “Now, I know you’re a pastor, but it’s one thing to say and one thing to believe it.”

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes as shallow as hers had just been while his thoughts also scrambled together, looking for a fit. He repeated the question to himself and felt an urge to just say, “Didn’t you teach me that?”, but he kept silent for another moment. “I... Yes. Of course.” Just in case, though, he added: “But if we ask, he forgives.”

She nodded.

He stumbled out more words. “I’m sorry, but where did this come from?”

Her lips worked at a smile, but never quite made it there. She clamped her hands around her mug and gazed down into it, like the tea leaves were large enough to read and tell her what to say. “I was just...” She stopped then, continued with an exhale, as if she

needed it to push the words out. “Don’t get old, Michael. It makes you think crazy things.”

“Is everything all right, Mrs. Bittner?”

“I was just thinking about one of the stories about the old church.”

He stared at her for a moment, then, struggling for any other response, said, “The one about the highwaymen? I can guarantee you they got what they deserved.”

“No, a different one. You probably don’t know it.”

He frowned.

“It’s an old one,” she said. “It’s about the daughter of a local businessman who snuck out to see that old preacher one afternoon. It’s a real old one. He was already a known trouble-maker by then, and she wanted to see him. She was just curious, just wanted to get out of those house. It’s easy to feel trapped inside a house, and her husband”—she paused here to consider her words—“her husband was a good man, but he didn’t like the thought of her going out too much.

“She went out anyway, though. Snuck out this one afternoon to see him and meet him for herself. She was...curious. Not anything more. No, not anything at all. She found him at the house where he was staying at the time, and they just talked—innocently.” She stopped again, maybe to decipher the leaves, except they were just black ashes as the bottom of her cup. “But I guess a lot of things start that way. They talked, and they flirted, and she snuck out to see him more and more.” Her eyes suddenly shot up to him and her face became stiff. “It’s not right of a wife to do that. She should always be loyal to her husband.”

“Of course,” Pastor Williams said.

“But she couldn’t help herself. She knew she shouldn’t be doing it, but she couldn’t stop. Eventually, her husband found out. The old preacher ran away. He ran far, far away. Her husband didn’t tell anyone though. He didn’t want the embarrassment of having a tramp for a wife. He was a good man like that. Most husbands wouldn’t have done that, but he was a good one.” Mrs. Bittner stopped speaking and looked away, then almost as an afterthought: “I think, at least, that’s the reason he left.”

Pastor Williams swallowed and struggled to look directly at her eyes, choosing instead her mouth, pale and dry with its wafery peels of skin. “I’ve never heard that theory before, Mrs. Bittner.”

“Oh, it’s an old one,” she said. She looked down at her hands and swallowed. “So do you think the Lord punished that woman? Do you think her sins caught up with her when she died?”

He took a deep breath to steady his heart. In the time that bought him, he found the answer he’d been trained to offer. “Not if she asked forgiveness.”

Mrs. Bittner nodded and took another sip from her tea. “Well, you should probably go, Michael,” she said. “No need wasting your time with a boring old lady.”

“Mrs. Bittner, I’m not in any hurry,” he said. “If there’s something you’d like to talk about—”

“Michael, I’m fine.” She offered a sugary smile. “It was lovely seeing you again. Tell your mother I said, ‘Hello.’”

“Mrs. Bittner, I promise that there’s really no rush.”

She had already begun to move to the door. He followed her, exhaling a series of frustrated, half-begun words that he couldn't make into sentences. "I hope you have a safe trip back to Kentucky," she said as she opened the door.

"Mrs. Bittner..."

"Michael, please," she said. "No need to waste your time on me."

Not knowing what else to do, he stepped out and she closed the door behind him. He stood there for a bit, hoping that she'd go back into the kitchen, that he might be able to catch her attention again as she cleaned up the mugs. She didn't, though, and, eventually, he heard the television rumble.