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# The Home Tie

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THE HOME TIE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Christina E. Davenport  
December 2007

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Accepted by:  
Keith Lee Morris, Committee Chair  
Dr. William Koon  
Dr. Kimberly Manganelli

## ABSTRACT

*The Home Tie* is a collection of short fiction that utilizes place as a vital literary element by exploring the southern landscape and giving a candid rendering of the people who live in the region. Outsiders' conceptions of the South are varied, from the genteel southern belle strolling beneath the Spanish moss of her Savannah plantation to the unrefined redneck blaring country-western music from his oversized pick-up truck; from the clergyman greeting his long procession of faithful church-goers to the Klansman still calling his secret meetings somewhere in the backwoods of Appalachia. There is a feeling, both within and without, that we are still in the midst of Reconstruction, in a state of recovery, that we are still battle-worn and eager for secession. These combined fairytales (or horror stories) of the South are neither hyperbole nor whole truth, but they are the chief reasons that *place* is such a vital element in southern fiction. These stories aim to balance the amalgamated myth of "South" with the reality of the characters, to present the reader with a truth about the characters themselves and not a generalization about the place from which they come. For those of us who have lived there, or for others who have seen depictions of it through film or popular fiction, the South does seem to be more than just a region on a map. It is more like a material entity. From its deep-fried cuisine to its sweltering, humid summer days to its distinct southern drawl, the South is palpable, tangible, audible. It is a presence. The objective of *The Home Tie* is to portray it honestly, with all the poverty, ignorance, grotesqueness, absurdity, and racism that has become a part of both its truth and its mythology.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to Brielle Morris.

You are dancing in my heart, girl!!

You are dancing in my heart.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Keith Lee Morris, whose insights and suggestions helped transform my work. I am also grateful to my other committee members, Dr. Bill Koon and Dr. Kim Manganeli. I owe you all a debt of gratitude for taking this on, especially given the short timeline and your busy schedules. I am grateful also to Dr. Wayne K. Chapman, who first encouraged me to pursue a graduate degree and suggested the alluring option of a creative thesis.

I am forever indebted to my family for their patience and unflagging confidence. This is your achievement as much as it is mine. I would like to thank my friends for their forbearance during months of my almost constant frenzy. And to my muse, editor, critic and biggest fan: thank you, Matea. Without you, there would be no stories.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   ANOTHER ROUND .....	12
III.  PROGENY .....	18
IV.  THE WOODWORK .....	38
V.   COYOTE .....	53
REFERENCES .....	75

## INTRODUCTION

*The challenge to writers today, I think, is not to disown any part of our heritage. Whatever our theme in writing, it is old and tried. Whatever our place, it has been visited by the stranger, it will never be new again. It is only the vision that can be new; but that is enough.*

*--Eudora Welty*  
from "Place in Fiction"

Southern writers may well enjoy a distinct advantage over our non-southern contemporaries. The southern renaissance produced a stockpile of exceptional literature upon which today's writers can build and expand. We are also endowed with an endless wellspring of material ready to be cultivated into works of literature as similar and diverse as the inhabitants of the region themselves. Themes common to all genres seem more readily set askew or, as in much of southern gothic literature, perverted by the southern writer: the agrarian connectedness to the land that also bears the stain of slavery in its past, the closeness and significance of the family that can occasionally tend towards the incestuous, the religious piety that approaches ignorant or comedic fanaticism. There is also at the southern writer's disposal a built-in, distinctive vernacular that enriches the work and lends it authenticity. But while the enduring southern mythos provides a backdrop for the work coming out of the Deep South today, it also casts its long shadow over its voice and subject-matter and makes it next to impossible to create work that does not feel derivative. The goal of *The Home Tie* is to draw a realistic representation of the South as I have come to understand it, and to achieve new vision along a well-worn path.

Outsiders' conceptions of the South are numerous and varied, from the genteel southern belle strolling beneath the Spanish moss of her Savannah plantation to the unrefined redneck blaring country-western music from his oversized pick-up truck; from the clergyman greeting his long procession of faithful church-goers to the Klansman still calling his secret meetings somewhere in the backwoods of Appalachia. There is a feeling, both within and without, that we are still in the midst of Reconstruction, in a state of recovery, that we are still battle-worn and eager for secession. These combined fairytales (or horror stories) of the South are neither hyperbole nor whole truth, but they are the chief reasons that *place* is such a vital element in southern fiction. In her important 1957 essay "Place in Fiction," Eudora Welty characterizes place as the "lesser angel" that is, justifiably, cast into the shadows of the greater elements of plot, character, symbolic meaning, and feeling (39). Place, she says, gives one a focal point from which to begin envisioning characters and their lives and actions. This point of origin gives the characters validity and the plot plausibility.

As Welty points out, in order to create an accurate portrayal of the place of which she is writing, the author is always seeing double; within her frame is her picture of the place superimposed with the world's. It is her intent, then, to make the readers see only her vision, under the illusion that it is their own (49-50). The stories in *The Home Tie* aim to balance the amalgamated myth of "South" with the reality of the characters, to present the reader with a truth about the characters themselves and not a generalization about the place from which they come. Again, the setting lends validity, but it does not go so far as to categorically define or constrain the characters within some established

guidelines. It works to fabricate, as Welty calls it, “a chink-proof world of appearance,” which is the primary objective of the fiction writer (50). In *The Home Tie*, the narrative of each story acknowledges the baggage the reader has brought to the work; it picks some up and carries it along, and it leaves some behind. For instance, fervent religiosity is a theme that has been well-established throughout southern literature. So, one needs only strap the King James version of the Bible to a moped, as I did in “The Woodwork,” to provide a symbolic emblem of the greater stream of fanaticism that runs behind the action of the story. This may not have worked as effectively had the story been set in the Northeast, where religious evangelicism is certainly not a part of the regional myth. The setting here gives the characters and plot a stamp of authenticity.

The bit of wisdom from “Place in Fiction” that has resonated with me the most, and given me the best understanding of my own writing style, is the assertion that we must revel in the minutia of everyday life. Welty says fiction has always been “bound up in the local, the ‘real,’ the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience. Where the imagination comes in is in directing the use of all this” (41). In *The Home Tie*, I started with writing the places I know and let the plot naturally branch out from that locus. The instant a story began to edge up on the fantastic or the *extraordinary*, the narrative began to ring a note of falsehood or contrivance. I attempted to fashion the characters and their lives as being painfully, dully ordinary. Aside from the satire of “The Woodwork,” I tried to keep most of the action or drama in the stories understated, putting a great deal of emphasis on the characters’ everyday actions or their seemingly mundane reflections or memories. Details such as a character’s carefully laying a tile

floor, spitting a trail of muscadine seeds, or patting her knee in time with a rocking chair help inch the reader toward my own impression of the characters and make them seem more familiar. The setting and circumstance (usually rural and poor) in which the characters find themselves make their actions more believable. The reader must feel, to some degree, that he was acquainted with these people and this place well before reading the story. His baggage, to continue the metaphor, is now in my vehicle.

But the simple reflection of the ordinary is not enough for author Flannery O'Connor, as she claims that a portrayal of the everyday makes a deeper kind of realism less and less understandable. In a 1960 lecture entitled "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," she asserts that realism in southern literature can also consist of characters that lean away from the typical and toward mystery and the unexpected (40). O'Connor approaches literature from a Christian moral perspective, and her characters are meant to betray through their actions certain ills she has detected within the society around her. Her own moral and intellectual judgments are implicit in the characters themselves, and they generally represent "fallen man" or the "maimed soul" (43).

Certainly the characters in *The Home Tie* fall into these categories, though they may not be of the same breed of grotesque that O'Connor employs. My characters are also meant to reveal the ills of southern society that I have encountered, but their commonness often belies the evil (racism, for instance, in "Coyote") that lies dormant in perhaps every southerner until it is awakened by a specific set of circumstances. In other cases, as in "Another Round" or "The Woodwork," the characters' grotesqueness is merely comedic

and surfaces as something benign and absurd. But as O'Connor says of her characters, "their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity" (44).

O'Connor posits that another reason the southern author has a tendency toward the grotesque is that there *are* so many good southern writers, all employing the same idiom and looking out upon the same scenes, and the individual must be careful that she is not recreating an inferior replica of a work that has already been completed (45). To do so, the southern writer must dig deeper beneath the surface to turn up fresh soil that has yet to be cultivated. When I did my own tilling for the stories of *The Home Tie*, what turned up was something either violent or ridiculous, definitely bordering on what O'Connor would call the grotesque. But for me, there was enough of the grotesque within the ordinary to suffice. As a result, the characters in *The Home Tie* might be called the slightly evolved literary grandchildren of, say, Flannery O'Connor's Misfit and William Faulkner's Emily Grierson. For instance, Ronnie Gullede in "Coyote" displays his "ancestral" grotesqueness only in his actions, in his shockingly blithe disregard for both animal and human life. But Ronnie is not the one-armed bum Tom Shiflet of O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Unless you count hat head and a cow lick as physical deformities, Ronnie does not display outward signs of grotesqueness. Until he takes a turn toward the unexpected by shooting at another human being as he would a coyote, he is essentially the southern Everyman, which makes his character all the more disturbing. On the other hand, Gilbert Prince in "Progeny" does have a crescent-shaped facial scar that hints at his much more deeply-scarred psyche. He is a more typical grotesque who draws stares and whispers in public but who is also

rather assimilated within the community. His “ordinary” shyness and prideful work ethic would also be pleasantly familiar traits to the reader; that is to say, he is not beyond realistic. Betty Ann, the protagonist of “Another Round,” is ironically the most diseased and deformed character of all, yet she displays the most noble characteristics and seems to possess the least amount of inward grotesqueness. Her drawn hands are a symbol for the impetuous feistiness she displayed in her youth, but they are also representative of the positive traits she has carried into her old age: endurance through personal strife, domestic violence, and poverty.

The modern-day grotesque has more worldly knowledge at his disposal. It is unlikely that he has been lost and incommunicado, for months at a time, in some remote wilderness. The outside world has penetrated the South—mass media, mass transit, an influx of outsiders—and the demons have been pushed further beneath the surface than before. For me, the southern grotesque has taken on an unassuming guise that could allow one to forget about his potential for evil. From what I have witnessed and tried to convey in *The Home Tie*, underneath the lolling pastoral visage of the southern landscape, behind the dope-eyed, slack-jawed countenance of the friendly gas station attendant, there still runs a current of shame, hatred, or absurdity that may never run dry. A strong sense of place gives these stories a base of authenticity and truth, and the characters respond to and are partially defined by the circumstances of their setting; the use of the grotesque reveals the disturbing or comic defect that lurks beneath the surface of the ordinary.

In “Another Round,” the main character Betty Ann has had to struggle throughout her life to carve out what little peace she has attained. The elderly characters are clearly not only impoverished in economic wealth, but also in intellect and opportunity. The narrator, who has become an outsider intellectually, finds their chitchat both banal and pitiable. She has broken free from the stagnation that has hampered the older generation’s success. There is subtle imagery of impeded progress—Betty Ann’s feet are like concrete blocks, a stroke slows her speech to a measured utterance of one syllable at a time, the narrator thinks of the women as parked cars—that not only applies to these women specifically, but by extension to the South in general. The narrator’s pager is a constant reminder, to both her and the reader, that there is movement and progress outside of this living room and outside of this small town. The importance and closeness of the southern family is apparent, as the narrator alludes to times when the family members had to support each other through hardship, either by being willing to fight or by sharing a bed and home. It does appear as though the narrator has escaped the poverty and struggle that seems almost like a genetic trait, but she will not be able to appreciate the importance of togetherness that her family obviously values over any amount of wealth or social stature.

Gilbert Prince in “Progeny” is not able to fully escape his past, as secrets are hard to keep amid the gossip of the rural South. Since the incident in his childhood, Gilbert has been able to function within the town primarily through focusing his attention on his work. With each job he completes, he buries his secret beneath the surface of the final tile, and he thinks his past remains hidden between himself and his own masterful

creations. However, when he meets Darla and eventually becomes comfortable in the presence of another person, he allows himself to arrive at a level of vulnerability that he has not reached before. Symbolically, before he lays the last tile in Darla's bathroom, he refrains from carving the half-moon shape into the mortar, signifying that his past no longer defines who he is, at least while he is with Darla. When he sees that his trust has been betrayed, the anger that has been dormant since his childhood again surfaces. In the end, he implies that he is willing to destroy himself in order to exact revenge on the two people who have disturbed the balance he had previously been able to maintain.

The flaws of the characters in "The Woodwork" are much less serious. The story is narrated episodically, almost in the manner of a news ticker. The narrator remains objective while the characters reveal through their actions their ridiculous fanaticisms in response to the new prison moving into the defunct shopping mall. Like the women in "Another Round," they also seem to be products of a small, dying southern town. The textile mills have moved on, and the granite mines do not produce enough jobs to sustain the town. Their reactions may arise merely from boredom and lack of stimulation; they are drawn to the spectacle. The town is normally so devoid of action, they cling to this one event and create somewhat of a carnival atmosphere around it. They gather on the sidewalk to view the warden's home, form ethics committees and welcoming subcommittees, and hold farcical *practice* protest rallies. Many of their actions are also driven by their association with the church. Reverend Clemens is organizing the protest rally, and Roy's church fellowship is calling for a new bus route. The story is most

certainly a comic southern satire, meant as a reproach of the meddling, artificially pious citizens of small towns who have become an archetype of the southern character.

The concluding story in the collection, “Coyote,” explores the nuances of racism and power dynamics in the modern-day Deep South. In this story more than any other, these characters are inextricably tied to the place in which the story is set. Mark is a blue-collar plant manager who has worked hard to buy thirty-eight acres of land on the outskirts of a rural southern town. His power consists in his ability to use the land as he sees fit, to clear it and build a home, to hunt on it, and simply to continue to accumulate it. By building in the middle of the woods, he isolates himself and his family from the outside world, and especially from the black community nearby called Promised Land. The narrator’s mother also takes part in this isolation; she essentially cordons off the yard by laying mothballs and sisal ropes to keep out that which she deems threatening. Mark’s cousin Ronnie displays his power mainly over the animals he hunts. He crafts duck calls to trick them and lure them in before shooting them. But as we come to see, his dominion spreads beyond the animal world. In his mind there is no difference between the black coyote and the black man he finds in his cousin’s yard. Equating the black man with the coyote was meant to show that southern blacks are still viewed as sub-human. I did not want to make the man into a thief, which would seem to justify Ronnie’s actions to some degree. But given the impoverished state in which many southern blacks still find themselves (largely dependent on whites for their subsistence), it seemed appropriate that he might be forced to resort to scavenging like a coyote. The fact that he was

stealing also blurs the lines somewhat, just as the structure of racism in the south is no longer as clear-cut as it used to be.

I have found in my work on *The Home Tie* that I cannot escape the rural southern sensibility that seems innate in my writing, for better or for worse. Attempting to write a story set in a metropolitan area produced an incomplete rambling of *theories* (of what I thought the place would be) that felt both foreign and disingenuous. But while I feel I have much better creative footing on the southern landscape, I have come to find it equally unnatural to write about the place in a positive light. I prefer stories that depict the damaged, isolated, uneducated, and impoverished, characters who naturally provoke both sympathy and disdain. They are products of place, or victims of circumstance; or perhaps they are reflections of the myths and expectations that have come themselves to define southernness.

For those of us who have lived there, or for others who have seen depictions of it through film or popular fiction, the South does seem to be more than just a region on a map. It is more like a material entity. From its deep-fried cuisine to its sweltering, humid summer days to its distinct southern drawl, the South is palpable, tangible, audible. It is a presence. It has been my objective in *The Home Tie* to portray it honestly, with all the poverty, ignorance, grotesqueness, absurdity, and racism that has become a part of both its truth and its mythology. In her concluding thoughts in “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” O’Connor said, “I hate to think that in twenty years Southern writers too may be writing about men in gray-flannel suits and may have lost their ability to see that these gentlemen are even greater freaks than what we are writing

about now” (50). Hopefully I have revealed the hidden “freak” within each of the characters in this collection and conveyed their truths with both sympathy and honesty.

## ANOTHER ROUND

Betty Ann patted her knee as she rocked. She was wearing a pastel green sweater with a white stripe across the chest and pink parachute pants with beige, over-sized orthopedic tennis shoes that Velcroed at the top. She pushed herself back and forth with the tip of the shoes, which seemed to grow out of her thin legs like concrete blocks. Mother told me later it was the rheumatoid arthritis that drew her fingers in so. So really she patted her knuckles on her knees and leaned her head back on the chair. The rest of the room sat quiet, some with lingering grins from the last anecdote of a time when half the family was poor and living together in the same cinder block house, built in three days by Papa Johnny and some of my father's cousins and uncles.

“We had some good times in that house,” someone said.

Betty Ann rocked and let her mouth fall open a little. Everyone sat quiet, consciously not letting the smiles fade quite yet, not before there was time enough passed to look solemn. It was not good to be poor, but it was good to be together. In a little while Betty Ann said, “Have any a ya'll seen that movie *Dances with Wolves*?” Everyone had seen it a decade ago when it was new, and perhaps again recently on television. They nodded yes. “That was the best movie. There wa'n nothin' ugly in the whole thing, you know, no cussin' an'...”

My mother was not good at seeming interested, but she nodded her head like everyone else.

“I love that Kevin Costner,” said my aunt Lottie, who was the youngest of my father’s four aunts, who we called “the Sisters.”

The family had gathered for some deviled eggs and potato salad, and a visit. I had come from my new job in Atlanta in dress clothes. The Sisters sat in polyester hot pants, lined up around the room on a pink sectional sofa--Betty Ann, Lottie, Ruth Neal with her daughter Tina, and Rosa Mae.

Uncle Buster and Uncle Willis were there, too, both sitting with legs crossed in rocking chairs. Uncle Dolphus had died as an infant, at six months old, before my father was born. The story in the family, as told by my grandmother, was that Granny's husband, “who wa'n nothin' but a sot,” came in with some of his drinking friends and told Granny to take the baby—it had been fighting its death from the pneumonia for near a month—to take the baby off into the other room until he was done with the game of cards. Granny said that showed the meanness in him, since the only heat in the house was in the front room where Granny and the baby had just got run off from, and it being the middle of the winter, the baby ended up dying within an hour or two. Then Granny's husband and some ‘a them friends he’d brought home came and took little Dolphus from her arms and buried him out in the Matthews Cemetery, without a proper marker.

So all the aunts and uncles who *were* alive were there in my grandmother’s living room, sitting and talking and remembering and grinning and quitting grinning when it suited. Rosa Mae’s oxygen tank hummed along with her. Uncle Bill on the Hughes side of the family was talking about his hunting and turkeys and how much they weighed. “A

wild turkey ain't hardly fit to eat," he said. "I got two pounds of it filleted in my 'frigerater."

My pager buzzed on my hip and gave me a start.

Betty Ann rocked and didn't comment on the turkey. But she smiled and looked pleasant. I was not sure if she was listening, not listening, or could not hear anyway. But she rocked and patted her knee and kept quiet while the light from the window cascaded down over her shoulders like God's very grace. And then the conversation turned to the real twins in the family and what their names had been. For this line she had a contribution, being the oldest in the room and most familiar with family names. She remembered the names and said them: "Mac Neal and Lucille, and Jessie and Essie."

"That's right," said Rosa Mae. "That's what they were, Mac Neal and Lucille and Jessie and Essie. That was the way people called twins back then, you know."

I snickered and my father, who was sitting beside me, patted me on the knee. These were his people, my people.

Betty Ann was sitting nearby, but I, not sure whether she could hear or not, leaned in and whispered to him that he'd have to tell me that story again later of the time Betty Ann beat up her boyfriend in the front yard of the house on Second Street. He smiled as he recalled the story and started telling it, interrupting the naming of non-twins and long-dead cousins, right in front of Betty Ann.

"When me and Momma and Daddy and Lottie and her kids was all livin' together in that gray house..." The family was already smiling, expecting a good story from the best one in the room at telling them. "We was all just sittin' around one day, and me and

Kenneth was, you know, doin' somethin' out in the yard, I don't remember what. But we was all just sittin' around and everything, and all a sudden somebody come runnin' up. I don't remember who that was, either, but somebody come runnin' up and said, 'Dave's chasin' Betty Ann down the street!' So we was gettin' ready, you know, to take *care* of him, I guess, 'cause they said 'He's comin'!' And me and Kenneth got to fightin' over this shuttle from the mill, 'cause one of us was gonna hit Uncle Dave with it. And I was pullin' it this way and he was pullin' on it as hard as *he* could.” Kenneth had just then walked in from smoking and was already chuckling, knowing what was going to happen next. “And we were both pullin' on that old shuttle and Kenneth finally turned it a loose and it come up and stuck me in the bottom lip right here, and went all the way through.” Everyone squinched their faces up in a moment of belated empathy.

“So there I was in the yard just bleedin' out my lip, and by that time somebody else came around and said, 'Betty Ann and Dave's fightin' on the porch!' So we run around there, and sho enough, when I got around there, I swear, Betty Ann was beatin' the *slop* outta Uncle Dave. I mean she was *takin' him to town*.” He made the punching motions then wiped off his mouth. Betty Ann had closed her eyes and was shaking her head, laughing to herself. “It beat all I ever seen! And then, when she had beat him all she was goin' to—”

“She threwed him out the door!” said my grandmother, as if it was a common enough occurrence so that she could guess with confidence. Uncle Dave, who became “uncle” sometime after this first incident, was always drinking Wild Turkey straight, another sot, and getting himself into trouble with Betty Ann and the Sheriff's

Department. It was an impassioned marriage, you could say, that ended predictably in both divorce and jail time.

“Yeah!” said my father. “She threwed him over the *banister*, you know, off the porch! There must a been ten steps to that porch, and she just put him on the ground.” He sat back on the couch and clasped his hands over his belly. “Did'n ya,” he said to Betty Ann.

“I did,” she said, nodding and looking delighted. Some of the group had gone into a hard laugh and clapped their hands together once or twice. Some of them made comments that pertained to the story and asked questions that started with “What was the name of that man who...” Others guessed at the names and offered different names that sounded similar, some that I didn't think were even names. And as the commotion died down they were back to smiles and grins. And they sat back and remembered and sometimes chuckled quietly to themselves.

Betty Ann pushed the chair back and forth in a gliding motion and patted her knee with her knuckles. The skin on her hands was almost transparent. “Lord Jesus,” she said quietly.

And they all sat and smiled bigger when they made eye contact with each other. And they talked lightheartedly, remembering things from decades ago when they saw each other regularly instead of “every once in a blue moon,” or when they all lived together at different points during my father's childhood. Women and men, the aunts and uncles or some of the grandkids, got up and went back and forth to the kitchen. Uncle Buster returned to his chair with a thick slice of ham onto which he had swirled some

plain yellow mustard. Betty Ann fidgeted in her chair and returned the rocker to the familiar cadence of the afternoon. It knocked a little when she leaned all the way back and squeaked on the way forward. “But I really do love that movie,” she said. She spoke slowly and deliberately through a year-old stroke. “It was just the best movie I believe I’ve ever seen, you know. Nothin’ ugly in it attal. You know, except for that fightin’ with the Indians.”

My pager buzzed again on my hip. It was a traffic alert from the office, an accident on I-85. The wall of women sat huddled before me like cars parked on a roadway. They were, every one of them, once or twice divorced. I had Ruth Neal’s hips.

“I believe I’d a been on the side of the Indians,” said Lottie.

“I believe I would have, too,” said Ruth Neal. Everyone nodded.

“The Indians were fighting each *other* in that movie,” I said, sighing louder than I had meant to. *The Pawnee raid of the Sioux*, I thought. I checked my watch, suddenly anxious to go.

The room nodded, a continuation of the one they’d offered Ruth Neal.

Betty Ann, probably having heard me but maybe not, said, “That was the only side *to* be on.” She pointed her head, for some reason, toward Buster, as if he would have not been on the side of the Indians. And she sat back in the chair, her parachute pants swishing back and forth, back and forth. She laid her head on the back of the chair, her hands at rest on her lap. The years and the arthritis had pulled them into fists for good.

## PROGENY

The Hopkins house had not yet been fully completed, and Gilbert was sweating on his hands and knees underneath the portable fan he brought with him to the job site.

“Won’t you take some lemonade, Gilbert?” Mrs. Hopkins asked again. “You been down there the better part of the afternoon and I haven’t been able to get you to take a thing.”

Gilbert rose to his knees and took the dripping glass. “Thank you, Mrs. Hopkins. I just like to get in and out, so many jobs lined up for this month. Can’t afford to waste time, ma’am.” He gulped down half of the lemonade and handed the glass back to the old woman, who was pleased at having convinced him to drink.

Gilbert Prince had apprenticed with Wallace Vincent for three years after his eighteenth birthday, laying down ceramic tile. After Mr. Vincent died from lung cancer, Gilbert had been able to buy a small truck and purchase most of his tools from Vincent’s wife Linda. Vincent had been the only tiler in town (he made a distinction between masons and those who strictly laid tile), which then made Gilbert the new town expert in tile, which gave his business a running head start. Three months into his solo endeavor, he could be heard boasting about tile he had laid, different intricate designs he had perfected, and the few times when he had laid tile in bathrooms bigger than his whole house. He had been under contract with Janelle Hopkins to tile twelve homes she and her husband were building on Ross Park Avenue. The Hopkins’ houses were not what he

considered bragging jobs. They had selected a fairly common tile, and the design was one that Gilbert could lay in his sleep.

Mrs. Hopkins was making her rounds to the other crews in the house, offering the lemonade to Leroy and the others putting down hardwood flooring in the dining area. When she retreated to the kitchen, Gilbert scraped a half-moon shape into the wet cement beneath the last four tiles. It was something he did in secret, to all of the houses in which he laid tile. A half-moon with tiny swirls and blisters inside that got covered up with deep blues or reds and went completely undetected by his customers.

“Almost finished here,” Gilbert said, wiping the last bits of excess mortar from the surface.

Mrs. Hopkins made her way over to view the completed bath. “It’s a beauty, ain’t she?” she said, patting her hands silently.

“Now, you folks won’t want to walk on this until at least this time tomorrow,” said Gilbert. He got to his feet and took a step closer to the delighted woman. “I heard Leroy tell you folks four to six hours.” He spoke quietly so that Leroy wouldn’t hear him. “But who’s this town’s only ceramic tile expert, me or Leroy?”

“You are, Gilbert,” said Mrs. Hopkins, nodding in agreement. “Twenty-four hours, we’ll wait.”

Gilbert wiped his hands on his pants. “And soap and water, remember. That’ll clean her right up.”

“I know already. You tell me every time, Gilbert.”

The television was louder than necessary in the living room.

“Jim, cut that nonsense down!” said Mrs. Hopkins. “Gilbert, can you believe he looks at that program every time it comes on. He must've watched it three times already this week!”

“It ain't the *same* program, Jan, just the same topic,” said Jim.

“Well I don't know why you'd have any interest in that evolution bunk anyhow. Was they teaching ya'll that when you was in school, Gilbert?”

“No ma'am, but we did talk about it in church some.” He chuckled. “Preacher used to call it *evil-ution*.”

“Well, Jim just can't quit watching it.”

Gilbert tried not to look at the set as the host narrated a piece of explicit footage on the mating practices of chimpanzees. “I don't know much about it. You want to figure them up and bring the check out sometime later on? I wouldn't mind if you wanted to do that, since it seems like you're pretty busy and all. And I got some designs I need to get finished for that Walston proposal I'm doing tomorrow.”

“Everybody in town's talking about that, Gilbert, you laying the tile for a famous person,” said Mrs. Hopkins. She began to sing, “‘I've seen harder times than this before, so I'm not walkin' out the door.’ You know she looks a sight better now than she did when she first left Saluda and run off to Nashville.”

“Yes, ma'am. Well, I hadn't got the job yet.”

“Gilbert, don't be so modest. Everybody who's anybody knows you're the best tile man around these parts. You gonna let me peek at the designs you've been cooking up?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Hopkins. They're for Mrs. Walston's eyes only till she either picks one of them or turns me out into the street, one or the other.”

“Well I'll bring the check over tomorrow afternoon so I can hear how many bathrooms she asked you to do! That sound good to you, Gilbert?”

“That'd be fine, ma'am.” A chimp was shrieking in the background. “I'll be seeing you, sir,” said Gilbert.

Mr. Hopkins turned himself sideways on the couch. “Wait a minute, Gilbert, and let me find that boy. Terrance!” He called for his grandson, who came slinking around the corner wearing only a pair of torn trousers. “Get in here and help Gilbert tote his tools out to the truck.” The boy grabbed a light toolbox, and Gilbert followed him out the door.

Outside the sun was just descending past the pine trees, and some of the heat was wearing off of the day. Terrance told Gilbert how he'd been swimming in the pond back behind the house. “Sure cools you off,” he said.

“I bet,” said Gilbert.

“I can swim from one end to the other without takin' a breath,” said Terrence. He tripped over a tree root, spilling most of the tools out onto the ground. Gilbert knelt down to help him pick them up. Terrance tilted his head to the side and picked up some dry sponges without looking up. “Where'd you get that scar on your face, Gilbert?”

Gilbert rubbed his left cheek as if he had to remind himself of what the boy was asking about. “Firecracker,” he finally said. Terrance stood with his eyes wide. “You go on and I'll get the rest of this,” said Gilbert.

Terrance said thank you and ran off toward the house. Gilbert called after him. “Tell your granny I said just a little soap and water’ll clean that floor right up.”

The Hopkinses lived close to the middle of town, and Gilbert still had one small job to do at the Buy 'N Fly, so he decided to snap on his tool belt and walk over to the store. He went around and let down the tailgate of his truck to take out some mortar mix and other tools. As he approached the store, he could see a banner stretched across Main Street that said “Saluda County Summer Festival Tonight 7PM.” He slapped himself on the hip for having forgotten to register for a booth. He had set one up last year and gotten seven full remodeling jobs.

There was a group of men sitting out in folding chairs on the front deck of the store. He recognized most of them, although one was a stranger. Bill Grep and Bryce Dickert were pool maintenance men, and the other was Tommy Pullman, a dry-wall man who worked most of the houses Gilbert did. The stranger sat with his legs propped up on the porch banister. Gilbert tipped his hat as he walked in and heard one of them whisper, “There he is. That fella that just walked in the store. You didn't see him?”

He waited in line like a normal customer to tell Jean he would be closing the bathroom momentarily to fix the patch of cracked tiles she called about.

“That’ll be fine, Gilbert. Thank you for coming out on such short notice. Frank said to tell you we’ll pay you extra for getting here so fast, since he knows you’re so busy.”

“Don't you worry about that, Mrs. Jean,” said Gilbert. “I'm glad for the business. Forgot to get my booth this year.”

Gilbert stuck a wet floor sign in the doorway of the ladies room and taped a sign to it that said “Temporarily Closed For Repairs.” The men were still talking out on the porch. He could hear their muffled voices through the cracked window. Tommy Pullman said, “He never talks much, even though I see him all the time on job sites. I have to give it to him, though, he gets his shit done and goes on to the next job.”

“So what's so bad about him, then?” asked the voice Gilbert didn't recognize. The men were quiet for a while.

“He's just a little strange, that's all,” said Tommy. “You didn't see his face?”

“He had his back to me by the time you pointed him out.”

“He's got this scar. A little crescent shape right here in the middle of his cheek.”

“I saw him one time when he hadn't shaved for a while,” said Bill. Beard grew in all around it except right there where the *firecracker* hit him.” The other men laughed.

“That's what he likes to tell people,” said Tommy. “But some people knows different.”

There was a silence. Gilbert worked the tool under the tiles quietly to get them up.

“My daddy used to be Saluda coroner right before he retired,” said Tommy. “And he was always going to these dinners with coroners from all over the state, about once a month. Well one night he came home and told us about a man he sat next to from over in

Beaufort that told him about a case he had worked where a boy burned down his own house with his momma and daddy right inside, sleeping.”

“And it killed em?” asked the stranger.

Gilbert pressed hard into the cement to score it for the replacement tile.

“He calls himself Gilbert Prince, but the Princes ain't his real parents,” said Tommy. “His own daddy used to beat him up, from what Daddy could gather, and did other stuff to him I can't even repeat, and finally Gilbert just had all he could take one night. Took his daddy's whiskey bottle and drenched the curtains, lit em up while he was passed out. That's what they say burned his face, when the curtains blazed up so fast. His daddy just slept through the whole thing. He singed right to the couch or something, and the fire department had to scrape him up off it.”

“What about his momma?” asked the voice.

Gilbert mixed a small batch of cement until the consistency was just right. He moved the spatula round and round without touching the sides of the bowl.

“Get this,” said Tommy. “She was in the toilet. Gilbert shoved a chair under the doorknob right before he caught the drapes.”

“Damn. What'd *she* do?”

“I don't think they ever figured that out,” said Tommy. “But he was sent off to a psychic hospital for a couple of weeks to get his faced healed up. Anyway, after they let him outta that hospital, they sent him to live with some people in Dorchester who only kept him a couple months before they sent him back, and I think it went that way the whole time he was growing up. Daddy says the Princes was his seventh foster family.”

Gilbert carved a swirling half-moon into the wet cement before he put in the replacement tiles. "I'm just about to finish up in here, ladies," he called to a group of women that had convened near the Coca-Cola display. "But ya'll won't want to step over here for a good while."

Gilbert wiped the floor clean and took the check from Mrs. Jean. "Soap and water," he said as he walked out the door.

The men slid their chairs back slowly when they heard Gilbert's voice. Gilbert stopped in front of them.

Tommy Pullman held out his hand. "How you been, Gil?"

"Just fine," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"We was just telling Bill's cousin how you lay a mean set of tile," said Tommy.

"I heard ya. I was working right there under that window."

The men all looked quickly at the open window and then back to Tommy. They sat frozen for several seconds.

Bill chuckled and cleared his throat. "Say, Gilbert, you gonna be at the festival again this year? Some of us was wanting to come by and look at that display you got yourself," he said.

"I forgot to register for my booth."

"Oh. You ain't coming to the festival at all, then?" The men smiled and rubbed their hands over the tops of their legs nervously.

"Nope. Going over to the Walston house to show my designs tomorrow, and I gotta get home and finish up one or two of em."

“*The* Darla Walston? The one that's been staying over at Marlene's B & B?” asked Tommy.

“That's the one,” said Gilbert. He shuffled past the men and out into the street, twirling the dirty spatula around in his hand.

Gilbert met Ms. Walston over at the job site. Her house was in the beginning stages of construction. The foundation had been completed, and the frame was almost up. Ms. Walston had gotten a ride over in Hassie Herman's gray Dodge Diplomat.

“Hey there, Gilbert.” Mrs. Herman was leaning out of her car waving her hands. “We missed you at the festival last night. Jean says you forgot to rent your booth.”

“Been so busy lately, it just slipped my mind.”

A deep, sultry voice came suddenly from behind Gilbert. “Well I'm sure I'll be keeping him busy enough for the next few months,” the voice said.

Gilbert turned. “Ms. Walston, excuse me. I didn't even see you get outta the car.”

“Call me Darla, Gilbert, please.” She held her hand in the air and smiled toward Mrs. Herman. “Thank you again, Hassie.” She moved her hand to Gilbert's shoulder. “I'm sure I can find a ride back to the hotel.”

Gilbert felt his cheeks get hot. “I will,” he started. “I mean, I can take her back.” He turned toward Darla, tucking in his shirt. “I'll take you right over when we finish here, won't be no trouble at all.”

Mrs. Herman waved again and backed out of the dirt path that had been bulldozed to the street.

“Looks like it's gonna be nice,” said Gilbert. “I mean the house, even though you can't tell much yet. I think I can do you just right.”

A few wrinkles showed around Darla's lips when she smiled. She was older than she sounded on the radio, but Gilbert couldn't quite tell what her age might be. He thought no older than forty.

“I mean, I could do the bathroom just right, of course,” he said.

“Well why don't we get started, then? Sounds like you're a busy man.”

After having given her an hour-long presentation of his best drawings, Gilbert was surprised by Darla's choices, two of his most simple designs, but he was glad to have the work. He gave her a detailed run-down of the timeline and logistics.

“Looks like we'll get started on this in a few months,” he said as they walked back through the bare door facing.

“We might need to meet a few more times before then so I can see your new designs,” she said. Her dress lifted a little above her knees when she walked.

“I'd be glad to, ma'am.”

“It's been a long time since anybody's called me ma'am, Gilbert. That's nice.”

Gilbert opened the truck door for her.

“That's a gentleman all the way around,” said Darla. “Say Gilbert, I don't spect you've had anything to eat yet, fooling around here with me all evening. Why don't I buy you dinner back at Marlene's?” She held out her hand for him to help her into the truck.

“You needn't go to the trouble, Ms. Walston.”

“I told you, hon. Call me Darla.”

Gilbert felt his face get hot again. There was a chill in the night air, and it would have been unpleasant to roll down the windows. When they arrived at Marlene's, the back of Gilbert's shirt had become damp.

A porch light came on as he helped Darla out of the truck. Marlene stuck her head out the door and smiled. “I kept a plate hot for you, Ms. Walston. Thought you'd have been back an hour ago,” she said.

Darla turned to Gilbert. “Guess we'll just have to share.”

“No, ma'am, I--”

“Marlene, I'll be taking that to my room, if you don't mind. Me and Gilbert ran outta light down at the house, and he hadn't quite finished demonstrating for me.”

Darla had decorated the inside of her room with all her own things. The curtains were a deep red sheer, and the table cloth and bed clothes matched.

“This is nice,” said Gilbert.

Darla smiled and closed the door behind them. “You go on and get started, Gilbert. These shoes have been killing me all day.”

She grabbed a valise from the closet and went into the bathroom. Gilbert sat down at the small round table without touching the food.

Darla must have been in the bathroom a good fifteen minutes. When she finally exited, she was wearing a long black nightgown that was almost as sheer as the curtains. Gilbert sat up straight in his chair.

“Food's got cold,” he said.

“No matter.” Darla pushed the plate to the other side of the table and sat in the chair across from Gilbert.

“You must've had a lot of visitors so far, people bothering you for autographs,” said Gilbert.

“Not too many people been coming around at all, really,” she said. She ran her finger around the rim of an empty wine glass.

They sat without speaking for a moment. Gilbert readjusted in his chair. “I'm real sorry about your dinner, Ms. Darla.”

“Oh, Gilbert.” Darla moved in closer to him and cupped her hands around his stinging cheeks. “I wasn't terribly worried about this dinner, if you wanna know the truth about it.” She moved her hands onto his chest. “Such a gentleman. Probably never occurred to you.”

“I'm sorry?” Her touch felt foreign to him, yet comforting.

Darla moved from her chair and sat down in Gilbert's lap. “You know, don't you Gilbert?”

“Ms. Darla, I've only dated one girl in my entire life. I don't know if this is--”

Darla reached back and put her hand over his lips. “You just hush, now.”

Gilbert moved his hands along the silk covering her hips. Perfectly smooth. He closed his eyes and waited for her to kiss him.

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It was almost fall before the interior walls and floors had been completed in Darla's house. Gilbert had been spending frequent nights with her at Marlene's. He could feel her watching him from behind as he pieced together a sunburst pattern in her downstairs bathroom. Other men were working around them, so Gilbert kept his distance during the daytime. He left his truck out behind the dumpsters when he came to see her at night.

"I just love this design, Gilbert," said Darla. She looked behind her and ran her toe along the back of his thigh. "It's so nice to watch you work." She was smiling.

Gilbert had come to rely on her affections, but he still shuddered when she touched him and found it difficult to concentrate with her so close by. "Thank you, ma'am."

"I'll see you tonight," she whispered before she turned away. He gave her a quick wink.

He worked for hours on the last bathroom, making sure each individual tile was perfectly aligned with the last. The sun was falling by the time he had made his way to the doorway of the room.

Darla came around the corner with a glass of ice water. "Working late?"

The other men had already left the site. Gilbert turned his head around to see her. "I'll be finished in less than five." He placed three red one-inch tiles in a line to complete the last ray. The rest were just white space-fillers. "Why don't you go on down and wait for me?"

Darla kissed him on the head and placed the ice water on the counter. “I *will* be waiting.” She turned from him and removed her top before going down the first step.

Gilbert shifted on his knees and dipped some extra mortar into the remaining space. He rubbed the surface smooth and put the final tiles into place.

Downstairs, he found Darla sitting in the bay window. “Someone’s gonna see you,” he said.

“No matter.” She got to her feet and put her arms around Gilbert’s neck. “You know, I’ll be ready to move in here once they get that carpet finished upstairs.”

“Yeah?”

“So, I guess you won’t have any reason to come around here anymore.”

“Oh, there’s lots of good uses for a tile man.” Gilbert picked her up and sat her on the kitchen counter. He felt her breath on the back of his neck. Her breathing felt constant, like it would be there for centuries.

Gilbert had taken days off to help Darla move her furniture into the house, which had made him fall behind on his other contracts. He stayed busy for a week, only seeing her once. But he had planned to finish early that Saturday and surprise her. Half-way up the drive, he could see that she already had company. A Pullman’s Drywall truck was sitting in the space behind where Darla’s car was parked. Still, no one in town was privy to Gilbert and Darla’s secret, so he parked his truck down the road a ways and walked up to the house. He figured she would be finished settling her bill by the time he got there.

Tommy's truck was not gone when Gilbert made his way around the side of the house, so he decided to sit in the swing on the back deck and wait. Most of the rooms in the house were dark. He could see the reflection of the clouds floating off and getting pink toward the horizon. It was almost dusk before a light came on in the kitchen. Tommy Pullman appeared shirtless in the window, fixing himself a glass of water. Gilbert lept over the deck rail and knelt down in the bushes.

He could still see Tommy in the window. He was talking, but Gilbert could not hear what he was saying. A minute later a hand took the glass from him and tossed the water into his face. Gilbert felt momentarily hopeful until Tommy smiled and ran back through the house. Gilbert crept around to Darla's bedroom window. He could see clear through to the bathroom, where Tommy and Darla lay close to the center of the tile sunburst.

He pressed his back against the side of the house to catch his breath. "Soap and water," he whispered to himself. When he was sure they would not see him, he sprinted back across the yard and into the woods.

At home, he scrubbed his skin until it bled in places, anywhere he had felt her fingers, her breath. He sat down in the shower with the water running over him and traced the crooked tiles someone had laid years before he moved in, probably Wallace Vincent. The scar on his face was on fire, another sort of foreign comfort.

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Gilbert loaded the supplies in his truck. Crickets were crying out as he pulled away from his drive. Darla had given him a key, which he held between his fingers like a cigarette. Fog poured over the truck as it slowed along Broken Heart Road, Darla's private drive which she had named after her biggest hit, "Can't Break My Broken Heart."

Gilbert pulled off in the middle of the drive and left the door of his truck standing open. He grabbed the jug from the bed and took long strides toward the house. Dew had settled on the porch railings. The brand new hinges didn't make a sound as Gilbert unlocked the door and eased it open. He twisted the metal cap off the can quietly and closed his eyes as the fumes rose and made them tear up. Little droplets splattered on the tile as he walked slowly and methodically through the kitchen. The glass of water was still spilled over onto the floor.

Darla's bedroom was at the opposite end of the house. Her door was standing partially ajar as Gilbert approached. He pushed it further with his foot. The two of them lay there naked, entwined in the garnet sheets and each other. The droplets fell silent on the carpet around the bed; Darla's breath against her pillow was the only sound. He doused the covers around the couple's feet. They awoke startled as the gas soaked through the sheets. Gilbert flipped the light switch and held his finger over his mouth.

"Quiet, now. Just stay right where you are. Gilbert just wants to talk." He poured some of the gas into his cupped hand and washed it over his face like aftershave.

Darla sat up and covered herself in the sheet. "Gilbert, what are you doing?"

He sighed and sat down in the chair next to her bed. Tommy rubbed his fingers across the drenched sheets and brought them to his nose, though the smell of the fuel had permeated the entire house.

“Oh shit, Gilbert.” He started to get up from the bed.

Gilbert stood up and took a lighter from his pocket. It was covered in a colorful Aztec design. “You stay right where you are.”

“What do you want here, Gilbert, please,” said Tommy.

Gilbert sat down on the floor and closed the door with his back. “You know, Tommy, you was right about most of them things you said outside Jean's that day.”

“Oh, Jesus, Gilbert. You ain't gonna hurt us, are you? I thought my daddy was lyin' to me. I never believed it, really.”

“Believed what?” Darla wiped the gas from around her eyes. They had already become red and swollen. “What's he talking about, Gilbert?”

“My daddy didn't know much of anything, I'm sure, Gilbert. I'm sorry for spreading lies about you. I was just--”

“There was this one time when I was little. It was raining outside, so I couldn't go out and play in the yard like I usually could. But Daddy told me to get out on the porch while he watched the race. So I got my toys and went off to the screen door. When I got over there I saw a wasp buzzing around and flying into the screen over and over again.”

“Gilbert,” said Tommy, his voice shaky.

“Daddy come around the corner and seen me standing there and said didn't I hear him tell me to get on out there on the porch, and I sorta pointed up to where the wasp was

flying. He told me to go open one of the screens and it would fly out by itself, but I just backed up into his legs. He pushed me off and said, ‘get on out there now before I whoop you.’” Gilbert sloshed the remaining gas out onto the floor in front of himself, and Darla let out a soft whimper.

“I tried to open up some screens, Darla, but the damn thing was already madder'n hell.”

Darla ran her fingers through her hair, working the liquid out to the tips. “I know, Gilbert.” She was trying not to sob.

“I flung it open as quick as I could, but he got me anyway. Right here on my arm. Daddy come out there a few hours later, after the race was over. I just knew he was gonna slap me one for getting stung.”

“That ain't right, Gil—”

“Shut up!” Gilbert rose to his knees and flung the gas can at Tommy. “But no,” he continued. “He just put his arm around me and said, ‘Don't you worry about that wasp, Gilbert. I bet that don't even hurt no more.’ He picked up my arm and dug his fingernail into where it was puffed up. ‘Right after he thinks he’s done got you, he flies off somewhere and dies.’”

Tommy shifted in the bed. He placed a pillow under where he was sitting. The gas was burning his genitals.

“He stings you, he dies,” said Gilbert.

Darla picked up her head. Her lips were quivering. “Did he hurt you?”

Gilbert stood up and glared down at her. He turned the lighter end over end in his hand. Darla scooted back until she reached the headboard. A faint “Gilbert” was all she could manage.

Tommy lowered one leg from the bed. He was working at something underneath it with his toes. “Most people already knows what really happened to you by now, Gilbert,” he said.

Gilbert leapt to the other side of the bed. Tommy put up his knees to defend himself as Gilbert grasped a tuft of his hair and snapped his head back. “I know who told all them folks, too,” said Gilbert, “and I know who it was that told em wrong. He might’ve beat me black and blue, but nothing else. None of that other stuff you told them people!”

Gilbert dealt him two quick punches to the face. Tommy covered his nose with his hands, trying to shield it from the blows. “I’m sorry.” Gilbert punched him again in the stomach, and Tommy coughed and sucked in air like he was choking.

Tommy’s black hair slipped gently through Gilbert’s fingers as he slowly took steps backwards. The moonlight illuminated the scar on his face as he crossed in front of the window. He turned to look out at the cloudless sky. He flipped the lighter over and over in his hand.

Tommy was again trying at something under the bed, perhaps the pocketknife he kept in his slacks. Gilbert turned his head back toward the bed. He was moving in slow motion, seeming barely to mind Tommy and Darla and the soaked sheets in which they lay. Tommy looked at Darla, who had stopped shaking and crying.

Tommy pleaded, “It don’t matter *what* he done to you, Gilbert. Everybody thinks you’re a good, honest man.”

“A good man,” he repeated, distantly. Gilbert brushed his thumb over the top of the lighter. “I got a little wasp blood in me.”

## THE WOODWORK

The City Council convened and reconvened. They conferred with the County Council, teleconferenced with neighboring councils, met with the mayor, Bartlett Sikes, Jr. The issue was discussed thoroughly, and the vote ended 8-1 in favor of the motion. The Revenue Board was especially key in the decision, offering a list of foundering businesses and steep road construction bills.

The city of Alberton was heavily dependent on the textile industry, which most of the town believed was being lost to the Chinese, the Koreans. “Can’t compete. *Couldn’t* compete with them prices,” most said. “No child labor.” Most thought it was a hard row to hoe, with Asia and all, and that’s why the city did what it did. The few operating granite mines were far from supporting its 7,000 residents.

Russell J. Meyers, who had recently taken up residence with his widowed mother, was on the Revenue Board’s list of “Recently Laid-Off.” He was looking for a place. And a job. He had sold his ‘72 Chevelle SuperSport and was driving a late model Suzuki moped, red like the car. He kept a copy of the King James Bible, a large print edition that his grandmother had left him, strapped to the back of it for good luck, good interviews. She had dog-eared several pages in Psalms which Russell had read only once at her funeral in Palm Springs. After that, he shoved the book inside a plastic bag and strapped it to the back of his ride. It had been there ever since, among Flavor Jam gum wrappers,

*Zounds!* comics, and, once, a secret video of his little sister's thirteenth birthday slumber party. It was green like a shamrock. His mother had watched the news of the council meetings closely, hoping for new jobs coming to the area.

The headline was on the front page of the *White County Dispatch*: Briarberry Mall Becomes White County Prison. Some heavy equipment, earth-moving machines, was pictured in front of the dilapidated mall. They had been sitting there for months and were being displayed for sale by Jack Hamrick, another small business owner on the Revenue Board's list, but their presence there had taken on a new meaning and inspired excitement in the townsfolk that action was about to take place, that they were suddenly going to be taken off the market and employed with the renovation of the facility, and the degradation of the town. The article read:

Alberton's concerned citizens are speaking out today after the City Council's decision to convert the abandoned Briarberry Mall into a minimum security prison facility. The prison will house up to four hundred inmates at full capacity, with only half that number being transferred at the site's opening. White County Undersheriff Barbara Lambkin commented last night, "The jail's a good move in the right direction for Alberton; getting rid of the many abandoned buildings and bringing in some revenue couldn't hurt." Alberton Police Chief Donnie Paxton also called the decision "aggressive and necessary." But while officials seem to back the move, a group of anxious citizens

have already begun a letter-writing campaign in a last ditch effort to halt the conversion process. Last night Mayor Bartlett Sikes, Jr. issued this public statement concerning the letters: "The introduction of the new White County minimum security prison facility poses no threat to the citizens of Alberton or to those of surrounding areas. Your homes and property will be just as secure as they have been in the past. There will be little to no interaction between citizens and inmates, and I suspect the facility will act more as a deterrent than as an evil temptation on Alberton's youth. Prisoners on work leaves will be under strict armed supervision. I would like to reiterate that Alberton is proud to take part in the nation's worthy rehabilitation efforts." Residents have been advised to proceed normally, to maintain their daily routines and continue to support local businesses.

Ethel Watson clipped the article and tacked it onto her vanity. She met with her lady's group every Thursday and wanted them to know she was conscientious, "up with the times." Ethel's neighbor George Matters later sent in an editorial on the possible benefits of organizing an emergency task force. It discussed at length his strong belief in a well-armed militia. She clipped that as well and sent photocopies of both artifacts to her son in Tulsa.

Days later Charles Warren, principal of Alberton Middle School, prepared an address to be read over the loudspeaker during morning announcements. "Students.

Good morning,” his voice echoed in the halls. “The new White County prison could one day be filled with citizens from right here in Alberton, with folks from this very school. Your mothers and fathers, aunts or uncles. Your siblings. They don’t discriminate; they’ll take anybody. So mind your Ps and Qs, people...make sure you don’t end up there *yourself*. A new element’s coming to this town. Bad seeds, all of ‘em. So you all need to pull up your pants and tuck in your shirts and make sure you keep yourselves straight. Now let’s have a productive day at school. No incidents.”

The students were indeed stunned into some good behavior, as this particular address was the first read directly by their principal in over two years. The talk was that the sixth graders were especially frightened.

Martha Hensley, in their home at 126 East Maple Avenue, asked her husband in a quivering voice, expectant, “You think they’ll charge admission?” She clasped her fingers together and leaned in towards him.

“Why, God no, Mart. Jeez,” he said as he shook the *Dispatch* back out in front of his face. “What’ll they advertise, huh? Come see the ‘dealers at Wheeler’s,’ the ‘larcens of Carson’s’? Keep all the small time crooks over in the Dollar Buy-All? You can look at ‘em through the Plexiglas, take some pictures. Maybe get you an *autograph* from that mall warden?” he said, chuckling from behind the paper. “Sweet Jesus, Mart.”

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Weeks later Hamrick's Construction had, in fact, been employed, and the remodeling was nearing its completion. There was no large retaining wall set up with watchtowers like many had thought there would be, only a tall chain link fence with whirls of barbed wire adorning the top. It was laid out all around the perimeter. The warden, Joel S. Phelps, had moved into a nice two-story on Haversham Boulevard. He could be seen daily making repairs and filling in flowerbeds around the house. He or his wife seemed to take to gladiolus. A larger than usual number of pedestrians strolled the walks outside his fence; most brought their children and pointed at the second story dormer where a dowel rod had been placed to keep the window secure. The lock had been damaged before the family's arrival. "Look what this town's coming to," some said. "It's already beginning to happen."

Marcus Horner set up a microphone and speaker in the town square to tell about his own experiences being an ex-con. How he'd been incarcerated in the big city, and look at *their* crime rate.

"This thing is no good," he said to a number of people standing nearby. "Ya'll don't have any *idea* what kinda mess goes on in these places. I can't even go *near* spoons or brown sugar."

He proceeded to make some painful but spiritual confessions, concerned citizens drawing near more quickly. By the time he finally got to his parole, folks were so worked up that Martha Jo McCallister began passing out wet wipes from her purse so

people could cool off. Someone had heard there was a fainting. Soon, after a tearful Marcus (who was profusely apologizing to his horrified wife) had been escorted off to lean against a nearby maple tree, Sandra Gibson picked up the mic.

“These criminals...no offense to you personally, Marc... These criminals *can't* come from good people. Most of 'em's probably raised like wild animals. Family can't be no better'n they are. What kind of people are we just inviting into our town? To sleep in our motel and eat breakfast long side our children. It just ain't right if you ask me.” Dozens of people agreed. “*Somebody's gon' have to take some action!*” said Sandra, dramatically running her pointed finger over the crowd. Some women cheered from park benches.

At Sunday service Yvonda Wilkes heard talk of a protest rally headed by the Reverend J.R. Clemens. She spent nearly an hour at Value Mart choosing the color of her picketing poster board. She bought a pair of soft white tennis shoes, the pricey brand that's good for walking in tight circles. She went home and made several drafts of various catch phrases, one of which she chose and painted onto the board in black tempera paint.

Her husband, who worked in the granite mine, came home angry that she had “spent all day dilly dallying” and not cooking his dinner.

She secured the board onto a two-by-four with duct tape and reminded him he ought to be supporting the reverend, too. She'd bought him a sign and expected him to

paint his own words and show up when she found out where the protest would be held. “You a church man, Ronnie,” she said. “You know we don’t need no criminals and thieves and sorry suckers comin’ around here. Mabel Thomas says she heard they got at least three sodomites transferrin’.”

Ronnie rubbed at his face like he was washing shaving lotion off into the sink. “Mabel Thomas ain’t got no more sense than that mutt settin’ out there.” He picked some cantaloupe slices out of the refrigerator and walked toward the living room grumbling. “...listenin’ to that ol’ crazy bitch. She probably on steroids,” he said louder. “Paint my sign...

Yvonda’s retort came shrill from the kitchen, filled with animosity for her husband. “Ronnie Wilkes, you is goin’ *straight* to hell!”

Mayor Bartlett Sikes, Jr. scurried around the house in search of his green necktie, which to him signified peace and tranquility. Four of the town’s women’s groups had scheduled a “practice rally” for that afternoon. Sweat beaded up on his lip as he sucked in his tummy to button his trousers. He worked with the tie for more than ten minutes before getting it to form into a correctly proportioned knot. His wife, who usually dealt with such matters, was not home, as she was a member of Nora’s Knitters, one of the groups participating in the practice rally. Bartlett threw a tangle of suspenders to the floor, partially suspecting his wife of knotting them in an attempt to foil his peacekeeping efforts.

“To hell with em,” he mumbled.

After he had worked himself into a tizzy with the various garments and accessories, he made his way down to the courthouse where a group of about fifty women was pretending to wield viciously worded picket signs.

Above the heads of the crowd, Bartlett spotted two actual signs, revolving around and around each other like shark fins. Martha Hensley, Wanda Jenks, and Russell J. Meyers’ mother, were marching against the crowd of women, in support of the new facility.

Martha Hensley was still holding on to the hope that the prison administrators would grant her request for public viewings of the facility and its inmates. She had pieced together two Bordollini’s Pizza boxes that read, “Lower Admission Prices Now.” She was holding the sign in one hand and nibbling on some homemade peanut brittle in a paper sack. She had also brought fudge. She was letting it be known that she and many other folks in town were on a fixed income, and that exorbitant entrance charges—although the experience would be worth most any cost—would tax the elderly community beyond subsistence.

Wanda Jenks was signless. She simply pranced in her white stirrup pants around the circle with the other ladies, swinging her hips to the cries of the opposing protest group. She occasionally tugged at the cups of her bra, which were apparently failing her.

Russell J. Meyers’ mother held a sign with the phrase “Thieves and Crooks Bring Money and Books.” It was the only rhyme she could think of. “The money might go to help fund the public library,” she kept explaining.

Most of the other women ignored them and worked diligently on chanting in unison. Bartlett Sikes, Jr. had preliminary thoughts of attempting to start them on rounds of Kumbaya. He began to have second thoughts, however, as the women began clapping their hands and chanting, “We’ll burn it to the ground ‘fore we let them come around.” He radioed over for the fire department to be on stand-by.

“Now, ladies.” He approached the group. “Why don’t you all just go on home now. It ain’t like you to stir up such a fuss.”

The women confronted him, as they had rehearsed, turning together suddenly like a flock of chimney sweeps. One woman, who seemed to be the ringleader, ascended a few of the courthouse steps and called out, “Bartlett Sikes, take a hike!” The other women followed suit.

Bartlett’s face reddened as he spotted his wife, marching in place and hollering with the group. “It’s a shame we don’t still do hangings here,” he yelled louder than he intended, “or I’d wring every one of you hen’s necks!”

The women on both sides fell to a hush. Mrs. Hensley and Mrs. Meyers lowered their picket signs, and Wanda Jenks stood with her mouth gaping open.

“Now ya’ll know I didn’t mean nothing by that,” said Bartlett Sikes, Jr. He straightened his tie. “I stand for high morals and fair punishment in this town.”

Russell J. Meyers’ mother pulled up the slack in her hose and took off her high heels. Bartlett did not see her get a running start behind him. She held her picket sign high as if it were a pole vault and broke it over the crown of his head as soon as she could reach him. The crowd of women gasped.

“I come here to support you,” said Mrs. Meyers. “I put *my* neck on the line and you say you wanna wring it?” She beat him with the leftover nub of her sign.

Bartlett made an unintelligible whining sound and did his best to cover his head. “Peace and tranquility,” he muttered.

At a snap of the ringleader’s fingers, the women in the crowd began cheering in support of Mrs. Meyers. Bartlett’s own wife yelled to her, “Get him in the ribs, Linda, he’s sensitive!”

Mrs. Meyers took the advice, dropping Bartlett to his knees. “You just remember my face today when my boy comes in looking for a job,” she said. He held one hand on his pants in place of his suspenders that remained twisted on the floor of his bedroom.

At that, she tossed the nub to Bartlett’s wife and stomped off through the crowd. The women closed in like a swarm of angry hornets as Bartlett Sikes, Jr. lay flat on his back, trying to catch his breath and readying himself for the second coming.

An ethics committee had formed within days of the Council’s decision. It was headed up by George Matters, since most people admired the way he “got at” those Yankee crookmongers in his editorial.

Ethel Watson sat shaky at the first meeting with her camera ready. First on the agenda was to set up a Christian crisis intervention team. The committee planned to send ambassadors out into the schools to supervise recesses, help with lunch trays, and instill all around good morals in the children. Some would also eventually be sent to the

nursing home. Principal Charles Warren was the first to agree to the idea, requesting four ambassadors at the Middle School for the next day's jailhouse grand opening. One for each grade and the special ed. classroom. The group also agreed to send a welcoming subcommittee to the homes of all the newly hired prison guards, the men and women who would be ensuring their safety from now on. Eighteen women agreed to produce baked goods for the event. The women stood off to the side to discuss baking strategy and draw out delivery schematics. They hurriedly scribbled recipes, one asking another to borrow a bundt pan. Ethel Watson took a picture of this.

That evening the town was buzzing, watching for official looking trucks, paddy wagons. A crowd assembled to hear Warden Phelps speak. Channel Five correspondent Julia Michaels was there to cover the story. Someone heard her record the four-thirty preview: "Three, two, one..." she began in front of the camera. "A crowd has gathered this evening in Alberton as Joel F. Phelps— Three, two, one...A crowd continues to gather behind me here at the Alberton Town Hall to listen in on the press conference with Joel S. Phelps, the warden of the new White County Minimum Security Prison. The facility, located just blocks from where I'm standing, was *actually* converted from the town's former shopping mall. I'll bring you more on this breaking story on WKRT news at five."

There were other reporters there of lesser significance. Of course Grady Cross of the *White County Dispatch* was on hand. Several flashes snapped as Phelps approached

the podium and gave a speech similar to the Mayor's former public statement, how citizens and their children were all safe, and how security at the prison, though minimum, would be top-notch. The event later came to be known as Alberton's only bona fide "media blitz."

An hour later, someone reported having seen a "suspicious-looking" vehicle with permanent plates in the vicinity of what had come to be known as The Rock. Some of the town hall crowd had dispersed and lined up along Taggert Street to witness the "moving in" process. Nothing had been organized for this particular occasion, since the City Council had specified no exact time for it to take place. The crowd was fairly sparse, actually, as many folks had gone home to prepare for the real opening. They made little noise as several white busses passed and drove into the back gate of the facility.

"I used to park there," someone whispered. "Right back of the Food Court."

Wanda Jenks stood glued to the pavement as if she were watching a parade go by, as if the procession of men was composed of cub scouts instead of criminals. She waved. Didn't make a big scene flapping her hands and arms, just held her right hand up about shoulder high and folded her fingers over a few times. She bent her knees a little and checked with her left hand whether her hair was still in place. Flirty.

The next morning a group of men who met regularly for breakfast stood outside PondeRose's waiting for the doors to open. One or two of them shivered and rubbed heat into their arms. Daylight was barely peeking over the line of shrubs along the parking lot. The old mall sky dome shone gloriously across the street.

"Place sure has stirred up a lot of ruckus," one of them said.

"Yeah, my wife wanted to know if they'd let her in to see the *convicts* and what not." Three of them grimaced and laughed at the same time. They shuffled their feet a moment. "Told her to find out when they let 'em out in the yard so her and them quiltin' bee crazies can go an gawk at 'em like zoo animals."

"Like a drive through picture show," another one said.

The one named Roy lifted his head. "My wife was saying how the grandbabies could see 'em from the *school* bus out there." Serious faces. "M'daughter's wantin' 'em to put paper over the winders or somethin' to keep 'em from seein' thangs they shouldn't. She was one of them that was writin' the letters." The men remembered. "Anyway, the fellowship's callin' for a new bus route, like they did the time that feller opened that triple X store down the way." Each of the men pressed their fists into their pockets and nodded for some time.

"What'd he call it...Brad's Hardcore Store or some thing," said Roy.

One of them checked the door again out of habit, rattling the windows around the frame. Still locked. He stood back and sighed, looking at his companion and squinting one eye. "Did you ever go *in* that place, Roy?"

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Across town the sky was cloudy but without rain. Russell J. Meyers had finally been employed, as his mother had hoped, by the new prison facility. He was part-time guard of the old mall drainage ditch, which had not yet been secured. He would keep the job until the ditch passed inspection, at which time he would either be terminated or, if he kept his nose clean, considered for internal transfer. Accordingly, he had made it clear that he would avoid any abuse of the power that came along with the job. He had already been propositioned by Mrs. Martha Hensley to take five dollars and some peach preserves to let her get a look at the ditch “where one day a high f’luten’ criminal might escape.”

He eased his moped off its kickstand and ran it down the driveway to jumpstart the engine. He had strapped on some spaghetti and garlic bread, which had been brought the night before by the retiree squadron of the welcoming subcommittee. The morning fog had not yet burned off the rooftops as he accelerated away from his neighborhood. Inside houses, people had begun to ready themselves and make phone calls, but in the stillness of the mist it seemed that, as of 7a.m., no one was really going to make a fuss over the facility’s first full day of operation. There would be hurried activity later in the day—real, live rallies, screaming women and crying children—but as of yet, Reverend Clemens’ Buick sat covered in dew in the driveway, and Yvonda Wilkes’s pink neon “Malls Are For Shopping Not For Crime Stopping” sign, a slogan in which she had come to take great pride, was nowhere to be found.

Inside they were doing things, hastily practicing speeches, women shoving themselves into lycra. Outside it was only the Pittman’s dog Scarecrow yapping at the

gate, the heft of the old machine engines heaving and struggling at the mine, and the King James version moving through the town at 27 miles per hour.

## COYOTE

My father swore up and down he'd seen coyotes around where we live, one even as close as two houses down. He described it passing through the side yard, gray as a shadow, captured first in his peripheral vision then again in his headlights.

"A coyote's usually man-shy," he said. "I mean, a coyote won't even come anywhere *near* a man. But this old gray one—I could tell it wasn't a dog when I seen it—it never moved. It was dark when I passed by and saw it, so I backed the car up and pointed my headlights over toward the right side of the neighbor's house, and sure enough, it was still standing there."

My father's cousin Ronnie sat cross-legged on my recently-dead uncle's worn carpet amidst a pile of hand-made duck calls he'd been demonstrating all afternoon, to the dismay of my frail Aunt Kayreen. He had made a name for himself with them, and even boasted selling one to both of the former hunting governors of South Carolina. He listened attentively and shook his head as if in disbelief of the brazen coyote.

"Right there by the side of the road," my father said. "Just out in the open. Twenty-, thirty-foot away. I've never seen anything *like* it."

During this account I had been skeptical, recalling his admitted eye problems and the fact that there was always a dog hanging somewhere around that yard. But the far-sightedness affected him only when reading the paper, and this neighbor's dog was a Dalmatian, clearly spotted black and white, not gray. A man like my father would know the difference between the two when he saw it. And I could believe there were animals

in the woods surrounding my house that I had never imagined were there. I had seen the proof in mud tracks, in the spoils my father brought home mornings he slipped out to the woods well before dawn, and in the bloody gashes on the face of our meddling bird dog, purportedly inflicted during a scrap with an otter down by the dribble of cloudy water we named Bent Creek. We called our property Bent Creek Farm, had hung a sign naming it that, although we had no crops or animals to speak of other than a constant cycle of lethargic, tick-covered yard dogs. My father called them “scrub dogs,” and many of them had run away, been shot chasing cattle in neighboring pastures, or borne puppies that froze to death even in the mild southern winter.

A doe had once sprung from the woods onto a path cleared through the new pines, nearly t-boning my little brother and causing him to bale off of his bicycle and dive headlong into a bramble of briars. The deer, obviously just as startled as my brother and I, made a sort of spitting sound and bolted back into the cover of the brush. We laughed about it afterward, but the sheer exhilaration and danger of encountering this wild beast had caused my brother, at no more than seven years old, to cry and squeal as if it had taken a tear at his shirt or kicked him as it skidded to a halt and turned back. It was the first one we had seen alive, in nature, and close up.

Ronnie leaned forward like a dog pricking its ears. “A couple years ago when I was on my way down to Florida to take some guys on a hunt, I seen a *black* coyote. And

I ain't never seen *that* before," he said. Aside from being an accomplished fashioner of duck calls, Ronnie was also a part-time hunting guide and outfitter.

My father echoed his claim. "A *black* coyote."

They both said it as if the *e* was silent: ki-yoat.

"I stopped my truck in the middle of the highway," said Ronnie, "took my shot gun right out over the hood. But that sucker was gone before I could even pick up the barrel." He made a scattering motion with his hand. "I shot, you know, in the direction he'd headed, but... I shoot any one of them things I can," he said, "but I'd have liked to had that one to mount, you know." He sat back and crossed his arms. "Pitch black."

Ronnie's dirty blond hair was matted down on his forehead from the faded Ricky Rudd cap he'd just taken off. Aunt Kayreen had cussed him twice for wearing it in the house. Behind him a televangelist was on mute. The haggard-looking preacher had come around the front of the pulpit with his cordless microphone and placed his hand on the forehead of an elderly woman. An 800-number kept popping up on the screen next to the cowlick on the side of Ronnie's head.

This was only the second or third time I could remember meeting Ronnie. He was my father's first cousin, and, though Ronnie was several years younger, the two of them were often together as children, organizing pick-up baseball games in the church field or hanging around the abandoned house that the broom factory superintendent had been murdered in. As they got older they lost touch, as people do, and for me the sight of Ronnie usually meant that someone had either died or been put in jail.

In this case, it was one of the uncles that had passed. I had heard enough stories about Uncle Luther to feel familially intimate with him but had only encountered him occasionally at a family reunion or 4<sup>th</sup> of July cookout. He had unsuccessfully run for local public office—including an ambitious write-in campaign against Johnson in 1964—27 times. Aunt Kayreen had a collection of his political placards displayed in the garage: Luther Gullede for City Council. Vote Gullede for School Board. He was a hard-line conservative. Three years ago, when asked to say the blessing at a family barbeque, he climbed onto the children’s picnic table and said, “I’m damned lucky the good Lord made me an American, a white man, and a Republican. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to stand myself. Amen!” The comment drew an eruption of rowdy laughter-turned-coughing from miscellaneous Gulledeges.

In between failed campaigns, he dealt in junk car parts. Facing his house from the road that split the property in two, you could see fenced pastureland, replete with horses, a pond, and a modest brick ranch-style home. The view from his living room, across the street, was a palette of green Buicks, burgundy Fords, yellow, white and blue sedans nearly rusted out. Luther’s property demonstrated a vital link in the evolution of my family, from poverty to modesty, and was representative of each one of us: common folk from one angle and colorful wrecks from the other. At 20 and away at college, as I was approaching a possibility beyond Ronnie, Luther, and my father’s concrete ceiling, I had come to loathe the inexorable junkyard in me.

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“Oh, I remember what else there was about the night I saw that coyote,” said my father. “While it was walking off into the woods a man come up beside the car. And I had my window rolled down, so of course I jumped ten feet in the air, you know. So anyway, it turned out to be the boy that had just bought the house, wanting to know what I was doing parked sideways in his yard. And I said, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t think anybody was living here now,’ and I told him, you know, what I was looking at. So we introduced ourselves and everything, and finally he tells me the reason he come out there to check was that, right before he was getting ready to buy the place, the inspector called him up and told him there was whole sections of *plumbing* missing from underneath the house.” He paused for dramatic effect.

“What happened to the pipes?” said Ronnie.

“Well, come to find out, whoever originally built the house had installed nice, copper plumbing, and—”

“And they was selling it for scrap,” said Ronnie, nodding his head.

“That’s right.”

I recalled the time nearly 12 years ago when that house had just been built, before we had ever thought about buying property nearby. My mother must have been in the preliminary home-planning stage, though, because on that day she coerced me into my first and only crime of breaking and entering. The house had just received the final touches: a nice coating of bright yellow paint, spindle banisters on the wrap-around porch. But of interest to my mother happened to be the master bathroom, which was on the ground floor but just above eye-level. So she quickly hoisted me onto her

shoulders—houses out there are a quarter-mile apart, surrounded by cow pastures—and fed me through an unlocked window so I could describe as best I could the double-sink vanity and whirlpool tub, both unfamiliar luxuries to me at the time.

I smiled, feeling a bond of culpability with the unknown copper bandit.

“That nigra K-Bass is on the front porch,” yelled Aunt Kayreen from the kitchen. “Ronnie, go’t see what he wants.”

“Mark, you remember K-Bass” said Ronnie. “He used to come around here selling corn to daddy, and helped him in the yard some.”

Through the picture window I could see an elderly black man on the stoop, holding a plate covered with a yellow dishtowel. He was tall and skeletal-looking, dressed in a green suit coat and tie. Thin white sideburns descended from a khaki Fedora hat and tracked haphazardly down his jaw line.

Ronnie got to his feet and arranged his duck calls back into their cases. He looked around for Aunt Kayreen and pulled the Ricky Rudd hat back over his head obstinately just before stepping out the screen door.

As my father followed him into the front yard, leaving me alone with Aunt Kayreen and her elderly sisters, I felt a foreign familiarity closing in on me, the comfortable unease of being surrounded by extended family, whose children my age I barely knew. For several moments I felt the dread of a live specimen just pinned down, anticipated the frustrating awkwardness of my answers to their questions. Like how long was I home for and how did I like school. I knew in their minds they wanted to ask, what

was it like not to get pregnant at fifteen or how did it feel, child, to finish high school, let alone college.

Aunt Kayreen patted me on the back and said, “Why don’t we go fix you a plate, hon.”

My parents’ house sat at the end of a quarter-mile-long dirt driveway off Highway 10, well-hidden from the road by a mix of sweet gums and adolescent pines. The land had been mostly stripped for lumber and newly-replanted ten years before our family razed two of the thirty-eight acres to build a home there. It was the task of us children, my brother and I, to remove the thousands of fist-sized rocks that littered what would become our front yard. After two years of mud and scattering hay bales, we had patched together an acre of young grass, which we did not walk on for yet another season. We had neighbors close enough that we could sometimes hear their voices in the yard, but the 36 acres of thick brush surrounding our house gave the illusion that we were utterly secluded from another life. My father joked that he decided to build here so he could walk around the yard in his underwear if he got the notion, and he did on occasion, if for no other reason than to exercise this freedom.

An additional half acre had been cleared to make room for an out building, which housed the tools my father had kept since going to work as a mechanic directly after high school. Over the span of thirty years he had moved to a job in a machine shop and eventually made his way up to plant manager. This position meant that his tools, save for

the occasional oil change and odd job, lay meticulously cleaned and placed where they belonged for most days of the year. Their perpetual encasement served as a testimonial for him, and for my brother and me, that you do not always end up in the same place you began. His was not the rise of the phoenix, but the deliberate, seemingly-impossible migration of the monarch.

In the years before the grass poked through the unyielding earth which both of my parents had struggled to own, my mother planted a flowerbed around three sides of the house. I spent hours and days of my 5<sup>th</sup>-grade summer vacation with her in the beds, fighting off all manner of pests, from hornets to deer ticks to the scalding summer heat. We lay down a carpet of black plastic to keep out the weeds, then planted an assortment of tea rose and azalea bushes, hostas, lilies, daisies, and impatiens. One afternoon, after my mother had gracefully endured seemingly all of the inchworms, bees, and field mice our home-building endeavor had displaced, a harmless but deadly looking black garter snake wandered into the bed as she was pruning. Swallowing a scream, she rose and backed away slowly. A prodigious shriek burst forth from her gut as she reached the safety of the porch, calling out to my father and running on tiptoes into the house, not minding the caked potting soil falling from her knees onto the new plush carpet. She watched anxiously from the kitchen window as he ran the reptile through with her garden shears. Later that day she took it upon herself to make sure not one more snake made its way past the tree line. Even the most reasonable of people will resort to old wives' remedies to quell their most deep-seated fears, so the final adornments to our happy homestead were a sisal rope laid over the length of our garden and so many mothballs

scattered around the perimeter of the yard that it looked like a hailstorm had just passed through. The dogs dug at them and carried them around in their mouths like ice cubes, spitting them out and picking them back up every few steps.

After second-hand smoking two of Aunt Kayreen's cigarettes and graciously forcing down two strips of fried fat back, I took my leave of the kitchen. I stepped off the front porch and joined Ronnie, my father, and K-Bass mid-conversation.

"K-Bass, this is my daughter Julie," said my father. "Luther would've been her...*great* uncle."

I extended my hand, which seemed at once to unnerve and delight the old man. He smiled cordially and removed his hat. His hair was stark white and cropped short so I could see the scalp underneath. "I hope you've been keeping warm in this cold snap," I said, immediately warming to his smile.

"Yes'm," he replied hoarsely. "Best I can." He bowed his head reverently and handed me the covered dish that no one had taken from him. In his cloudy brown eyes there was a perpetual weariness; the skin underneath had given way to the weight of it and sagged downward in soft puddles.

"You ought to bring K-Bass to see Pa Gullede's truck," my father said to Ronnie. "I've still got it sitting up in my field. Ain't run in, probably, twenty-five years, but I wouldn't mind some help fixing it up if we could."

Pa Gullledge was Ronnie's grandfather but had acted in kind to my father as well. He had died from emphysema in my father's twenties. I do not know the means by which my father came into possession of his truck, but the black '52 Chevrolet had been parked in the back yard of every home we had lived in. One night at dinner its horn began to blow—the battery had undoubtedly been dead for decades—a constant, choking whine.

"I could ride us over there now, K-Bass, if you want to run and get out of them clothes," said Ronnie impetuously. His hands were working a polishing cloth over a duck call. A John boat with a homemade straw blind sat in the side yard behind him.

K-Bass clapped his hands together excitedly and made his way to his car. "Give me ten minutes and I'll be ready for to go," he said. The words were garbled with congestion in his throat. He closed the car door and tipped his hat at me through the glass.

Ronnie leaned back against his truck. "You know, Mark, I'm ashamed to say I wouldn't know how to get out to your house to save my life," he said. "How long ya'll been out there now?"

My father's eyes shot up as he counted in his head. "Going on six years."

The old Buick's engine turned over and over before it started. "He's gon' flood it," Ronnie said before it cranked. We watched him back out of Uncle Luther's driveway and pull into a carport six houses up the road.

"I didn't remember K-Bass living that close," said my father. "It seemed like a mile when we was young'uns."

“Yeah, and his sister and nephew live next door, too,” said Ronnie, slipping the call back into a blue satin sack. “There’s so many of ‘em round here now you couldn’t stir ‘em with a stick.”

Ronnie and my father used common phrases they had learned from Uncle Luther, like “Welfare Beemer” to describe an expensive car driven by a black man, and “porch monkey” or “blue gum” for its driver. Here, this discourse sounded and felt as natural to me as if it were my own voice. It did not rouse harsh feelings within me as it would have back at school, where people knew better. Here the words slid across their tongues easy as the game they killed and brought to the table cooked and seasoned.

It was decided that Ronnie and K-Bass would follow behind us, and my father rattled off a sequence of directions to which Ronnie threw up his hand and said, “I won’t let you lose me.” We could see K-Bass waving from his driveway that he was ready to go. The sun was a red giant spreading out over the junk cars across the street like blood clouding water.

Aunt Kayreen’s house was on the other side of the county from ours, about forty minutes away. There was a ratty dirt road to take to the main highway, and our truck bumped over the wooden slats of the small bridge that had been built several years ago. My father put on brakes as we approached the middle of it. “When I was young you used to have to drive right through that creek to get down this road.” He chuckled, “It just ran straight over the road.”

I looked over the side of the bridge at the narrow creek bed littered with beer cans and tree limbs. I asked, “Didn’t anyone ever get stuck in there?” It was coming on dusk,

and I could see Ronnie's headlights scanning the trees as he eased around the curve in the road behind us. I imagined Aunt Kayreen and family still lingering on the front porch watching the dust settle back over the road. "I'm sure some people did get stuck," my father said, and then we kept on.

Compared to the foliage of the Northeast, where I had been for two years, the endless evergreens here seemed decidedly one-dimensional, though they clung to life and simple brilliance much longer than my maples and oaks. Withered vines of wisteria fell across the woods like sheer drapes, which meant it was almost squirrel season. As a child, when we passed the wisteria in the summertime, the plump clusters of purple flowers climbing through the branches looked like a distant cousin to the muscadines that grew wild on our property. My father would take my brother and me through the woods and pick handfuls of them. We spit a trail of seeds and rough skins leading all the way up to the house, where my mother insisted on rinsing off the few that were left in our hands. My brother and I would lay out on the back deck a treasure of old glass jars and arrowheads that we had unearthed on the trip.

A trek in the woods suggested a near-mystical search for traces of primitive life: tracks, trails, droppings, scratches, bark rubbed off trees, shed antlers. He'd stop suddenly and signal us to get still and quiet by putting the back of his fingers against our shoulders. We would stop our breath, our eyes bulging, scanning. He'd nod his head in the direction of a rabbit or a foraging doe, and once toward a copperhead slithering out

from under a pile of pine needles. We were often in search of what my father claimed was a Cherokee burial mound. It was a shallow rise in the dirt surrounded by a semi-circle of rocks, the arrangement of which could or could not have been coincidental. His great-great-grandmother had been full-blooded Cherokee, and the slaughter of the native-Americans was the only human atrocity towards which he openly showed disdain.

Most times my brother and I would go it alone, beating trails in all directions across the property with blunt machetes. We sprayed a trail of bright orange Halloween hair color across the tree trunks as we walked. These markings led us safely back out most times but disappeared like breadcrumbs in a good downpour. Sometimes we would abruptly dead end on the other side of a cut path at the new electric horse fence put up by the owners of the adjoining land, and other times we would arrive at the lonesome well which comprised the “improved lot” bordering our property. Both of these landmarks were thorns in the side of my father, the first having created a visible partition between what was his and what was not, and the latter having raised the value of the small plot of land well above what he could have paid for vanity. They had halted his imperial, back-woods endeavors to buy all the earth cut through by these dirt paths. As he described it, the parcels together were literally shaped like a giant slice of pie, and the reverend from the nearby Mt. Zion Baptist church owned the best bite. The reverend refused to sell this parcel, for any price, and my father was filled with indignation that he could not by any means compel him to do so.

Over the course of numerous adventures, my brother and I had established ten “bases” throughout the woods, spots off the paths we had cleared big enough for us to fit

in and peer out. Entering Base 3 required us to duck down crab-like under some low-hanging boughs, but then we could stand upright in a clear patch that went ten feet before hitting thick brush. Base 7 had hands-and-knees room only, but there was a secret passageway that branched off and led out one way to Base 8 and the other to a shallow bog near the driveway. Each base was fitted with different tools or supplies, canteens, all-things-camo, cigarette lighters, piles of rocks for the slingshots we carried with us at all times, and Vienna sausages, which we ate right out of the can. The building of the electric fence had divided Base 10 straight in half, and they had placed a sign on it reading KEEP OUT. Abandoning this base had been our one surrender to the enemy, and we retreated after salvaging a string clothesline, a broken piece of telescoping car antenna, and a Mason jar containing a dead mudpuppy floating in creek water. My brother played what he could on his recorder as we marched solemnly across the field: “Hot Cross Buns.”

Our reason for *needing* these bases was never a consideration—we were simply expanding and preparing, clearing and improving. Like our father in his underwear, we wanted to exercise our rights because we had them, on what was ours. We enjoyed a dominion over orb weaver, blue jay and whitetail. Fire ants built tall fortresses buttressed by the pine trees, and they served as target practice for slingshot and pellet gun. At the first onslaught the ants would descend from the interior tunnels en masse and have the structure repaired again before mother called us to supper.

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There were no major landmarks to reference when giving directions to our home. In the years after our family moved onto the property, a fairly nice middle-class development called Stallion Hill had moved in off Highway 10, but the neighborhood was a bit too far away to help locate Merino Road. So we used the “recycle center,” which was a glorified outdoor trash dump, in lieu of the more prominent landmark, Promised Land. Promised Land was an area inhabited almost entirely by blacks, which is why I reasoned that many a license check had been stationed at the intersection of Merino Road and Highway 10, the invisible gateway to Promised Land. This area was the rural, black equivalent to a big city’s Little Italy or Chinatown. One of the first communities of its kind established during Reconstruction, it still represented some of the least educated citizens, the lowest property values, and the highest unemployment rates in the county. It clung to the periphery of the insular white society in town. The one refrain in my parents’ direction giving had become, “If you get to Promised Land, *you’ve gone too far.*”

Ronnie tailed us closely and ran two red lights to keep up with my father. Back at the house, K-Bass had hopped into the back of Ronnie’s truck rather than sitting with him in the cabin. Through the gun rack I could see K-Bass’s head bobbing up and down as he sat contently on the passenger side wheel well. The wind was a force on him, and he kept his eyes shut against the deep descending sun. The honey wheat vibrancy that had washed over the pasturelands during the drive had given way to a queer not-light-not-dark that made it difficult to focus the eyes on an object when looking directly at it. Our headlights scanned the pasture fences and dusk dark crept in from behind as if we had

hitched it up and brought it with us. We saw floating eyes in the fields reflecting the light like bottle caps. “You see em?” said my father, pointing with his head. I smiled and turned my head as we passed three or four deer standing on the other side of a ditch.

A picture came to mind that I had dug out of a closet on my last trip down, of me about nine years old. I was wearing a burgundy Members Only knock-off, my hair tousled and cut short, as I had an embarrassing habit of sucking on a strip if it got long enough to reach behind my ears. I had a goofy grin on my face, and my adult teeth looked too big for my child’s head. Behind me there was a blur of trees and an old red station wagon with one roof rail missing. In the foreground were four pink fingers, my fingers, clasping a handful of downy gray fur. A squirrel was dangling, its legs still poised as if in mid-leap, a streak of blood running down from its nose into its mouth, which stood agape.

I begged to go along with my father on his hunting trips, and sometimes he would wake me on a dark, cold morning when he was only out for small game. Once daylight broke and I could get myself awake good, he might tell me to go grab a stick and knock the daylights out of a hollow tree to rouse the squirrels from their hiding places. I would point out the nests and go to retrieve them as he picked them off from their high perch. I also went with him to the dove fields, again pointing to the skies as the pregnant-looking birds passed overhead. “You have to lead ‘em,” he’d say, though I never held the gun against them myself. Then I was off, traipsing across the tall grass to where the shadow had plummeted as if skiing down a smooth slope. And he had taught me what to do if they were still flapping when I got there. “Make a peace sign,” he said. “You put the

head right there, then snap your wrist.” He said this in a calm voice, going slowly through the motion like teaching me to swing a tennis racket. On my first try, when the wing trembled slightly as I slipped the beak in over my knuckle, I panicked and whipped the bird around wildly like trying to shake fly paper from my finger tips. “Just once, just once,” he said, still calm. About mid-morning I would be tired again, whining, and we would go for the penny candy at Mac’s. I cannot remember the hour or day these outings with my father became grotesque and revolting in my mind.

We turned off Highway 10 onto Merino Road and passed the burned shell of an old farmhouse, the brick chimney still standing and dotted by the rising moon. Our dirt driveway ran uphill for a ways past the mailbox then leveled off and went winding towards the house, with thick forest on either side. In the springtime the rains formed deep runnels and washed the sand and clay down the slight incline and into the street. My father would make several trips a season with the box scraper to retrieve the land and set it back in place. He had loads of gravel brought in and spread over areas that tended to form ruts that shook the suspension nearly to pieces, and every year the gravel seemed to sink down and disappear.

“You bush-hogged,” I said. The field that abutted the road was trimmed short, with clumps of weeds laying flat in wide tire tracks.

“Yep,” he said, “I waited till the weather cooled off so I wouldn’t hit no more bee nests.” He hated a bee worse than anything.

The driveway ran along the perimeter of the front yard and around to a gravel lot in the back. Around the side yard there was an ever-changing array of stiff or decaying

animal parts the dogs had dragged in from the woods. Moles, antlers, frogs, femurs, and *turtles*. The one bird dog must have cleaned Bent Creek out of turtles, and empty shells lay cracked and scattered across the front yard. On the left side of the driveway the elastic branch of a sweet gum bowed under the weight of a plastic grocery bag. It was filled with them.

Crossties were laid in an open square around the parking area to keep the rocks out of the grass. The headlights swung around with the turning truck as we parked, and a glint of metallic brightness burst forth from the edge of the woods and receded back into the dark. The brakes sounded a shrill protest as the truck eased to a stop. The engine sputtered on under its own direction for a few seconds after my father and I slammed the doors shut, then coughed itself quiet like Aunt Kayreen. The gravel cracked and tumbled behind us as Ronnie's truck approached. A cacophony of yips and barks erupted from the pack of dogs at the sight of a strange vehicle. They ran alongside the behemoth Ford with their tongues lapping out at the fender as it crept forward, minding the careless dogs as they zigzagged across the forward-facing beams then back around the tailgate. K-Bass drew his hands up from the bed rails and leaned forward away from the bounding animals. "That's one thing they can't stand," said my father jovially, "is a big, barking dog."

My mother appeared at her post at the kitchen window, roused up from her evening paper by the trucks and racket. The ambient light of the house wafted around her happy features and out into the yard like a subtle breeze of illumination. For a moment the bullfrogs croaked all around us at the back of the house, the space surrounding us

black as soot. Then came the floodlights like a blasting gale. We squinted our eyes at the two bright lamps blazing at either end of the roof, just below the eaves. When the spectral amoeba finished swimming before my vision, I saw that the smile had dropped from my mother's face, as if a stroke had suddenly seized the muscle and drawn it down.

The creeping truck had just made the edge of the woods, where the clearing reveals civilization, when the glint caught my eye once more. My father took a step forward and put the back of his two fingers on my shoulder to get still and quiet. I drew in my breath. There was no doe, no gray fox slipping off through the brush, but a man. A man nearly dark enough himself to blend in with the shadows fringing the yard, save for the armful of my father's Snap-on tools that glistened in the moonlight as he made steady progress along the coniferous fortifications. My father tried to open his mouth and speak. "I—, I—," was all he could muster. His face and not his voice was pleading. My mother stood stone still in the kitchen window.

As Ronnie pulled in behind us he too caught sight of the figure and slung the truck into park before he had gotten stopped good. The man looked almost prehistoric in his movements, never turning his eyes to meet the headlights but dragging one foot in front of the other. K-Bass was standing up in the truck bed, looking out over the top of the cabin. His eyes were wide and dashing wildly between the man and Ronnie and the man and my father and the man and me, unable to land on where his allegiance should fall.

“God damn you, come hep me,” yelled Ronnie as he fought with the gun rack to turn loose a twelve-gauge shotgun. Within the muscles of my arm awoke the dormant instinct to rise and point, but I kept still.

K-Bass shook from the trance he was in and let himself down quick by the side of the truck. Most of the dogs had retreated back to the shadows of the side yard, laying at rest. The yellow one was lapping dirty rainwater from an upturned turtle shell that had laid and bleached out white in the sun.

On the man’s arms there was a slick sheen of sweat, and they bent at a smooth 90-degree angle around the hodgepodge of tools like copper plumbing. To myself I thought, *we have sinned together before*. I imagined every orange line my brother and I had sprayed reconstituted on the trees and glowing before him as he approached from the Reverend’s bite of land, all leading in towards the house like the dotted lines on Highway 10. Perhaps he had caught the scent of them, the tools, like a coyote on a meal. His survival instinct had taken hold and he had tip-toed in, mouth sweating, mothballs crunching under his feet, across the invisible rope line the woods formed.

“I—, I—” my father said again.

Ronnie moved to the toolbox in the back and spilled over a box of birdshot. Casings rained down like gold glitter and rolled around in the metal truck bed. Ronnie broke the gun over the inside of his arm and worked the shells in with trembling hands, dropping a few to the ground. “God damn his hide,” he muttered through gnashed teeth.

When they had first cleared the land the house sits on and hauled out the timber and brush and the dump trucks rode away with the last mess of roots and poison sumac,

my father stood tall in the center of his own private dustbowl. His eyes gleamed as they surveyed the waste of marred earth the backhoe had chewed up. Some thin roots to who knows what still climbed upwards through the air like charmed snakes uncoiling from a dirt-colored basket. My brother struggled toward the edge of the clearing like a pack mule, hunched over and carrying a canvas bag of rocks slung across his back. He disappeared into the brush and let the dead weight of the rocks clunk down behind him. He reemerged carrying the bag upside-down, dragging the long straps through the dirt back towards more rocks. I had worked the tip of my shoe underneath a veinous root that was sticking up through the dirt but anchored at both ends like a suitcase handle. My calf muscle was on fire with the effort of unearthing one end or the other, a way to pass idle time.

“Them’s good at tripping you up if you ain’t watching where you’re going,” said my father, coming up from behind and smiling. His husky frame cast a long shadow down over me. I removed my foot and he chopped the root in half with a hoe.

“They’ll be pouring concrete here this time next week,” he said, beaming.

I made a cowering motion and looked up as if the giant mixer was over my head at that very moment. “Ahhhhh!” I said, and we both laughed.

“And that plot out that-a way is for you kids, in case you want to build here, too, one day,” he said, pointing to the woods just past a newly-delivered heap of sand.

“They’s room for all my family,” he said, taking me into his arms.

My child's heart swelled to bursting against his sturdy chest. An old man in overalls drove a shovel down into the sand pile and the sound echoed out like two swords clashing.

“Shhhing.”

The barrel was back straight with the butt and Ronnie pumped a bullet into the chamber. The two barrels shimmered in the light and rose and sank as if unattached, like the floating bottle caps we had passed in the fields. The long, winding drive was the only way in or out, but the copper bandit shuffled his way back to a thin break in the trees. He disappeared into the dark slow and graceful, chiming like a tinker with a full set of wrenches hanging from his belt loops. He would find base 9 in that direction, and a fresh supply of smooth river stones piled up like cannonballs. K-Bass had sidled up even with me, my father on the other side. Ronnie raised the barrel and steadied it over the hood of the truck. I saw K-Bass's eyes widen. I expected him to lunge for the weapon. Instead, his arm fell across my chest and pulled me in tight. He turned his face.

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