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Mountain Dolphins

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MOUNTAIN DOLPHINS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Jennifer Lee Jennings
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Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

My creative thesis is a novella entitled *Mountain Dolphins*. It is mostly autobiographical and follows the life of a girl named Genevieve. The first part of the novella, “No Kind of Legend,” is told in first-person, from the point-of-view of a small child named Genevieve. She begins by telling us that she comes from a very poor family in Woodruff, a small town in Spartanburg County. She was supposed to have a brother, but her mom had a miscarriage and lost the baby. Gen’s cousin, Scott, moves in with her right before she finishes primary school. Apparently, his mother and father simply did not want to take care of him or his sister any longer. His sister is now living with Gen’s grandmother. The second part of my novella, “Dig,” continues to follow Gen as she enters higher school grades, but she still manages to carry a sense of aloneness with her. She continues to reach out for any kind of attention. An accident at a family member’s funeral sends her to the emergency room—a negative but needed attention for her. This section becomes more religious and begins to deal with a bit of Southern racism as told by her grandfather. The Big Woman is also introduced in this section. She is a mysterious Southern woman with two very unordinary children. Gen has never seen this woman’s face, but she is a part of her family, somehow. The third part, “Kudzu,” gets to the heart of Gen’s adult character. This is a major shift in the narrative because the themes of guilt and responsibility become a bit darker. The atmosphere at certain places becomes darker, and she is faced with choices she never thought she would have to make. The novella ends with an Epilogue for readers to see how her life turns out and if she has changed from the beginning.

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

My first influence as a creative writer is *Frog and Toad Together*, a children's book mentioned in my novella and one that sat on my bookshelf as a young girl. The main theme of this book is friendship, and what I find so interesting is that I completely veered away from this in my novella. In reality, the characters Scott and Gen are truly like brother and sister, Frog and Toad, but in my novella, I made them enemies. They never really understand or take care of each other, and their world is not as positive or life affirming as two of my favorite children's book characters. I felt like Frog and Toad's life was too simple, and I wanted to explore the darker side of relationships.

Gen and her mother have a tumultuous relationship throughout most of the novella. It is only at the moment when Gen decides to take Sarah that Gen finally understands why her mother raised Scott. Her mother was not being malicious or trying to hurt Gen but trying to take care of a child who needed a parental figure. Gen cannot understand this until it is her turn to become the parent, the responsible adult in her family. Gen does not seek attention specifically from her mother; in fact, she does not seem to target any one member of her family. She wants to be seen and heard by everyone, not one person. Perhaps the most beneficial relationships in the novella are those between Gen and her Granny and Gen and her Papa. I could say "Gen and her Granny and Papa," but her grandparents are two entirely different people. Her grandmother teaches her how to tell stories by telling her own, and her grandfather

influences how she feels about her family identity, realizing by the time she reads the journals, that her entire family ideal is based upon a lie.

As a woman writer, I tend to gravitate toward Southern women writers like Toni Morrison, Dorothy Allison, Eudora Welty, and Alice Walker, but other women writers like Virginia Woolf also inspire my desire to read and write. With Woolf, I find a kinship with her philosophy of writing: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." While women may be progressing in the literary world, a woman needs to be completely separated, not just from the outside world, but also from the canon. This novella has its literary influences, but at the same time, I want to isolate myself from everything that I learned about the canon writers, to create something truly unique. As a writer, one can never remove herself from literature as she is, in fact, writing it, but she can dig into her own mind and experiences and pull out new ideas and new ways of presenting the same literature that is considered the gatekeeper of all that is great in literary genres. Following Woolf's stream-of-consciousness style, I put pen to paper and did not think about the reasons I named a certain character or why the little black boy on the bus was wearing a Ninja Turtles shirt. In the end, I knew it would make sense to me. These are all things that I had experience with as a child.

One aspect of fiction writing that I struggle with is discovering that a writer does not always have a meaning behind every little detail; for example, a reader may find a metaphor that I did not intend in writing it. Realizing this as I was writing the novella, I began to question why we analyze literature, and if we overanalyze it. Does a fiction writer intend for every word to have some grand meaning, and how do we, as readers,

know if our interpretation is right in the first place. This is the great question that all lovers of literature struggle with daily. I began to question my own writing and what I meant by choosing Werther's Original as the Invisible Man's candy of choice. My grandfather always eats Werther's, but is there a deeper connection? I am not sure yet.

With Morrison, I wanted to see how far I could push myself to mirror her type of structural fragmentation, especially with *Beloved*. I argued in Fiction class that this novel is one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, of the 20th century, and I stand by it. Through the novel, Morrison is able to sculpt a unique narrative around two seemingly simple characters, a mother, Sethe, and her daughter, Denver. Through this narrative, however, Morrison includes the supernatural, racism, and a search for one's identity. In my own writing, through the character Percival Jones, I tried to mirror Morrison's accomplishment. Percival Jones is not a slave, but he is descendent of slaves. He lives in a shack on property owned by Old Man Jones. Down the road from the Jones' lives Gen's great-great grandfather. Through Gen's ancestor's journal entries, she realizes that the family and the life she thought she had does not really exist, much like Sethe's realizations through *Beloved*'s supernatural return. I decided not to spend too much time on racial issues because I do not feel that I know enough or have had enough experience with the issue to write about it meaningfully. The only real racial issue surrounds Gen's ancestor's choice to befriend Percival and his family but not to try and save his life in order to save himself. This act is not intended to be selfish but to bring about questions of race relations during the middle to late 1800s. I did attempt to mirror the quick cuts of narration through the vignettes in my novella.

Southern fiction, in general, is very important to be because it represents something that I can connect to because I see it every day. I want readers to see and feel a down-home type of setting. I want readers to feel like they could drive to the towns I write about and find the younger Gen playing in the backyard of a broken down house. I admire South Carolina native, Dorothy Allison, for doing this in her fiction writing, especially with her novel, *Bastard out of Carolina*, and her short story “Gospel Song.” I read *Bastard out of Carolina* in a women writer’s course at USC-Columbia and was inspired by her ability to take her native state and bring it to life. This is the exact feeling that I want to give my readers. I want Woodruff and Greer to become as much a part of their envisionment of the text as the words themselves. In “Gospel Song,” Allison describes, “Driving from Greenville to Greer on Highway 85 past the Sears Roebuck warehouse, the air base, the rolling green and red mud hills” (410). These are places that I see in my own life because this is the area in which I grew up. Being able to read about a place and know exactly what it looks like enables the reader to become a more involved critic. For me, I want readers who know Woodruff and Greer to find a personal connection, but I also want readers who live in California and have never been to South Carolina to imagine these small towns through rich detail. Also, in her novel, Allison explores the complex relationship between Bone and her mother Anney Boatwright who marries a violently abusive man. While Gen and her mother’s relationship is not violent, it carries the same type of emotional distancing as Allison’s mother-daughter relationship. Bone is left, like Gen, to find an identity separate from her mother, which

also follows one of the main themes in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." Mama, the narrator, realizes that her daughter, Dee, is not the younger image of herself.

"Well," I say. "Dee."

"No, Mama," she says, "Not 'Dee,' Wangero Leenanika Kemanjo!"

"What happened to 'Dee'?" I wanted to know.

"She's dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppressed me (301).

Dee changes her name in the same way that Gen reaches for the Big Woman's veil in the Epilogue, to find her own identity and where she really fits in within her family.

Southern dialect/dialogue is, perhaps, the most important element of Southern fiction because without it, the work can pertain to any region of the world. Southern dialect is hard to write, even to those who speak it daily. In my novella, I tried to find a balance between a type of southern dialect that was easy to read but that sounded real, and I found this balance by examining Zora Neale Hurston's short story, "Isis," and Mary Noailles Murfree's short story "The Star in the Valley." Hurston's dialect/dialogue is easy to understand but entirely unique to the South. Isie's grandmother says, "You Isie Watts! Git 'own offend at gate post 'an rake up dis yahd!" (13). Hurston has a good ear for Southern speech, and my dialect is not quite as pronounced as hers, but I attempted to echo some of the ways she is able to pronounce words on the written page. Mary Murfree's dialect is more difficult to understand, but it is still accessible and true to the time period it is set. One character says, "That's Jerry Shaw's house—that's what it is. He's a blacksmith, an' he kin shoe a horse toler'ble well when he ain't drunk, ez he

mos'ly is" (66). Murfree's southern speech is more difficult, but a reader knows that the dialect is southern from the second fragment of the first sentence. So, I intended to find a balance between true southern speech as far as how my family speaks and challenging myself to take one step further and push myself to creating accurate southern speech, or at least as believable as Hurston and Murfree's.

An indirect influence to my novella comes from Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," which I first read in Modern Fiction class and revisited recently in an anthology of southern women writers. I did not realize the similarity of history and its effects on people within "Shiloh" and my novella until rereading it in the anthology. At the end of the story, Leroy's wife, Norma Jean, tells him that she is leaving him, amidst a cemetery of dead ancestor's and the place where Norma Jean's mother had her first honeymoon. Leroy, trying to chase after his wife, realizes his "leg is asleep and his bad leg still hurts him" (295). He is physically unable to discover the real truth behind his wife's decision but is able, on the other hand, to find some type of answer to her recently strange behavior. Gen, likewise, tries to unveil the Big Woman to find out some type of truth about her family but is stopped because of a physical distraction behind her. This connection may be a stretch, but the idea is that history has way of both revealing and hiding Truth, and this is important in most Southern novels and short stories.

I break down the novella into parts and the parts into vignettes. I begin with "The Beginning of Something Wonderful" because it signifies the literal beginning of the novella, but it is special to me because it signals the beginning of my journey in discovering my voice as a writer. A reader may think that all of the small sections do not

create a cohesive plot, but from beginning to end, the reader is able to read the novella as one action chapter that jumps in time from the first chapter to the Epilogue. The chapter headings, such as “Hot Cat,” serve as witty clips of the action to come but helps me structure my novella in an untraditional manner. Some of the titles are Biblical and refer to baptism and forgiveness because I wanted to show a side of Genevieve that has a faith in something and is not entirely self-centered. The section titles flow throughout *Kudzu*, and the vignettes begin to intertwine and connect the plot.

Genevieve’s experiences are mostly my own as a child and now an adult. At the beginning of the novella, the narrator’s voice is younger, not as young as the moments she is describing, but young enough to have a more innocent voice, to make the reader more sympathetic. What I find, however, is that the older narrator of “Mountain Dolphins” is more engaging intellectually because she finally takes responsibility for her own life. What I want readers to realize, though, is the older Gen is much less happier with herself than the younger. The older Gen is still unsure of where she fits in her family, in her teaching career, and in her possible future as an editor. She dreams as much as the younger Gen, but the reality of accepting Sarah shows her that her life is much more challenging than coming up with a lie about a Cherry Icee. The older Gen is a darker character because she really moves further and further away from finding out who she is and where she belongs. All of the characters in my novella are loosely based on my own family, although a lot of the material is new. I do not want to call this novella autobiographical because I feel like it would change the reader’s interpretation of the characters, and I want the reader to distance me from the material.

The first part of the novella, “No Kind of Legend,” is told in first-person, from the point-of-view of a small child named Genevieve. She begins by telling us that she comes from a very poor family in Woodruff, a small town in Spartanburg County. She was supposed to have a brother, but her mom had a miscarriage and lost the baby. Gen’s cousin, Scott, moves in with her right before she finishes primary school. Apparently, his mother and father simply did not want to take care of him or his sister any longer. His sister is now living with Gen’s grandmother. Gen is constantly growing more and more jealous of Scott because he is taking all of the attention away from her, especially from her father who likes to hunt and fish.

In elementary school, Gen grows so jealous that she invents a lie and tells her parents and the entire school about whom she saw at a window. Everyone, especially the popular girls at school, start to ask her questions and want to be her friend. Gen is so excited that, finally, the attention is back on her. This lie drops out of the story after a few vignettes. One interesting point about the conflicts in the novella is that they constantly drop out and come back into the narrative, and one can never tell what time period something is popping back in.

Genevieve goes to middle school and wins a fiction writing prize, which sends her to the writer’s conference in Columbia where she meets a famous author and learns some valuable life lessons. The first half of the novella ends with a tragedy close to her but with everyone at school wanting to know what happened, and she is more than happy to tell them all about it.

The second part of my novella, “Dig,” continues to follow Gen as she enters higher school grades, but she still manages to carry a sense of aloneness with her. She continues to reach out for any kind of attention. An accident at a family member’s funeral sends her to the emergency room; negative but needed attention for her. This section becomes more religious and begins to deal with a bit of Southern racism as told by her grandfather. The Big Woman is also introduced in this section. She is a mysterious Southern woman with two very unordinary children. Gen has never seen this woman’s face, but she is a part of her family, somehow.

The third part, “Mountain Dolphins,” gets to the heart of Gen’s adult character. This is a major shift in the narrative because the themes of guilt and responsibility become a bit darker. The atmosphere at certain places becomes more foreboding, and she is faced with choices she never thought she would have to make. The novella ends with an Epilogue for readers to see how her life turns out and if she has changed from the beginning. Yes, she is an adult, but has she really changed her personality? The reader will meet her husband and two very important little people in her life. These three individuals have truly changed who she once was.

I want my readers to sympathize, on some socioeconomic level, with Genevieve and her family, much like readers sympathize with *The Awakening*’s Edna. The reader is saddened and disappointed at Edna’s apparent suicide, but they do have some feeling (positive or negative) for the character. Most of my characters are round characters in that they elicit some sort of response from the reader. Most will dislike Scott, and some will even have strong negative feelings for Gen’s mother. It is not up to me to decide

how a reader should feel about a character, but there are mannerisms within each of my characters that provide hints for approval or disapproval.

As far as plot, my novella carries a single action, in that it follows the life of Genevieve from a child to an adult. The reader sees her grow up in half as many pages of a shorter novel, but the structure of the plot (as with a novella) stays the same.

Genevieve does something wrong, is forgiven, loses attention, does something wrong, and so on. Only at the end does she do something right, and really, she is not rewarded with what she really wants—her identity. Sarah complicates Gen's identity as much as the fragmentation seems to break the narrative, but both are facades. Sarah is a mirror for Genevieve in the same way that the Big Woman is a mirror of Genevieve. Genevieve carries a consciousness, a developed awareness of making right decisions, not necessarily right for her but for those around her. Yes, Sarah does make her happy, but she does not fulfill her questions of identity within her family and herself. These are some of the themes I explore in which metaphors of mystery, sadness, and sometimes triumph, emerge.

After completing my novella, I went back to Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* because I kept thinking about the main characters and their own search for identity.

While I did not plan on mirroring Robinson's novel, having first read it in modern fiction class, I see similarities that were probably with me as I was writing. The first similarity would be Robinson's Sylvie and my Big Woman. Both are eccentric characters, even though readers of my novella never really find out as much about my characters as Robinson's readers do about Sylvie. I also think there is a bit of Lucille in Gen as Gen

desperately wants (and at the same time, does not want) to escape the tragedy of her family's history and that of her life in general. Sylvie is constantly moving and taking control of her life, which Gen seems unable to do, especially by "Mountain Dolphins." Robinson's narrator, Ruthie, is orphaned, much like Scott, but her desire for attention echoes Gen's character more than Scott's. Much like Ruth's mother is fated to drive off of the same cliff as her father, Gen is fated to follow a path that is controlled by the birth of a new baby. She is stuck in her family's history, which is often a tug of war for her. The folklore surrounding Ruth's grandfather is also similar to the legends at the center of Gen's grandfather's crazy stories. The closer she gets to the truth, the more she realizes is untrue. Ruth's two great aunts, Lily and Nora, are comic characters that resemble the aunts, Jonie and Winnie, of my novella. Jonie and Winnie would rather take a smoke break in the middle of a funeral than pay any attention to Gen who is tugging at the bottom of their dresses. Lily and Nora cannot handle trying to raise two kids, so they go back to the city, much like Jonie and Winnie who passes off their kids to be raised by other family members.

My goal for this novella is bring a new voice to southern fiction. I can never be a Faulkner, a McCarthy, or a Morrison, but I can find a place for my voice. I have always gravitated to southern fiction because it is what I know and what I see everyday in my own life. I appreciate Shakespeare, Joyce, and Dickinson, but there has always been a special place in my heart for southern fiction. Sure, I can find connections in my writing to literature, in theme and plot, but I hope that my voice as a writer is truly strong and

distinct. I wanted to take everything I learned as a literary student and challenge myself to mold the old ideas into a new voice.

PART TWO

NO KIND OF LEGEND

THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING WONDERFUL

As a young girl, before I even started kindergarten, I often sat on the stairs leading to a second floor that I absolutely feared. I never so much as opened that stairway door at night because daddy said some man had died there before they moved in. I always heard something walking around up there at night, and I would bury my face even more into my pillow. When I couldn't take the noise anymore, I would go over to my momma's bed and stare at her until she felt me standing there. Since we all shared a bedroom, I didn't have far to walk, and she always woke up. I loved sleeping in between my momma and daddy.

On the stairs, in daytime, reading Frog and Toad Together, I occasionally looked away from the book toward the top step, swearing I heard something moving back and forth on the cold, wooden floor. Slightly intimidated, I returned to the book and floated away on the back of the friendly frog. My momma opened the door that led to the stairs and found me on the bottom step, desperately trying to choose the right book from the little shelf that daddy built from the rotting dog pen that once housed my favorite dog, Peeker. Nothing fancy but just good enough for his little girl.

"Ain't you cold? You know there ain't no heat on these steps," Momma said.

"No, I'm okay," I replied.

“I don’t see why you got to read on the steps anyhow. Why don’t you read in your room?” she said.

“Cause my room is your room. Nobody bothers me here...most of the time,” I said.

With a quick glance up from the book, momma left me alone to read on the steps, closing the door ever so gently behind her.

JAKE THOMAS

My mom was supposed to have a little boy when I was four years old. His name would have been Jake Thomas—Jake after my mom’s dad, Thomas after my dad’s dad. I would stay at my Aunt Winnie’s and play with my cousin Scott while she and granny went to the doctor. Every time she came back, I would ask her if he was here yet. No, she would say, but he’ll be here soon. She lost him, though. I remember seeing her fingers shaking, trying to turn the dial on our 80s style telephone.

“Yeh...bleeding bad...okay...I’ll come now,” she moaned to the doctor. I rode with my dad and grandma to the hospital and waited for little Jake to be born.

“When’s Jake coming”, Daddy?” I asked, kicking my feet back and forth.

“He’s not coming, Ginny,” he said with tears in his dark brown eyes.

“God don’t want us to have him, Daddy?”

“No...I guess not.” He got up from the bench and walked away, leaving me with my granny who only looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

THEY DON'T WANT THEM

It seems that, in my family at least, no one likes to raise their children. My mom has two sisters, Winnie and Jonie; Jonie had two kids Amber and Carl, and Winnie had two kids Scott and Faye. Granny wound up raising Amber, Carl, and Faye. They could have ended up in foster homes, separated. So, my parents decided to take Scott because he was also in school, and we could go together, just like Frog and Toad, so I thought. Faye was only a year old so my Granny Sadie decided to take her. Scott became more of a brother to me instead of being one to his own sister. I didn't want a brother—I had already lost one.

“Why's he got to move in with us, Momma?” I whined.

“Because he's got nowhere else to live, Ginny.” She shot a mean glance my way.

“Can't he live with granny? She took Faye.”

“No, get used to it. And you better be nice,” she said, her voice deepening with each letter.

“It's not fair, and you know it,” I said and ran outside to play by myself. There wasn't much to do in my backyard. I had a lot of old plates and cups that momma had thrown out, and I used them to play house. There was some type of bush near the back porch with red berries on it, and I used that for play food. When I wasn't playing house, I would grab some of momma's hair scissors (she would cut hair for people in our family because she used to go to beauty school) and cut the grass. I never got far, but it was something to do.

Scott moved in the next day. He didn't have much because he didn't own much in the first place. He brought his clothes and an Alf doll. On one of our family movies, Scott asked Aunt Jonie, "Hey Jonie, you like Alf? I like Alf." What was always so funny was the way he said Alf like it had two syllables. He was two years younger than me and shorter with frizzy, curly brown hair. One of his eyes was blue while the other was a swirl of blue, brown and green.

"I don't have to play with you," I shouted at the little orphan.

"I don't care if you play with me or not. I'll go help with the dogs, then." Daddy always took Scott hunting with him, so Scott knew the dogs better than I did, and he knew how to help Daddy. I asked Daddy to take me hunting with him one time, but he wouldn't do it. "Scott's going this time," he would say. "You can go next time." I never did go hunting.

"No you won't go help my dad, either," I said, kicking him in the shin.

He started crying and ran to tell my mom.

"Go tell, you big fat baby." I ran to hide behind the dog pens because I knew she would come after me, but she didn't this time, and I got cold and scared sitting out there waiting.

Daddy had been hunting since he was a kid. When he didn't have enough money for a dog box, he would tie the dogs in the back seat of Momma's Pinto, that is, until they tore it up one day. The dog pens in the backyard were built out of chain link fence, and the bottom was just the ground itself. Every once in a while you would see a rat sneak in through one of the gaps in the fence to get to the dog food. Scott would tie a

piece of cheese to the end of a fishing pole and sit out there at night, waiting on the rat to bite the cheese.

“Ginny! Get your butt over here, now,” I heard my mom shout. I came out slowly from behind the dog pen that housed Buster, the Rottweiler.

“What?”

“Did you kick Scott?” she asked.

“Nope, sure didn’t,” I said.

“Liar!” Scott said, stamping his blue Converse shoe on the dry ground.

“I know you did, Ginny, now go to your bed,” she said.

I bumped past Scott and whispered, “I’ll get you back, orphan.”

WINDEX

I stayed in my bed until supper, chicken and dumplings. As we were eating, Scott kept sticking his tongue out at me.

“You’re gonna get it,” I mouthed slowly.

Dad went outside to play with the beagles (or maybe they were bird dogs; it changed with every hunting season), and Mom was heating water on the stove to wash dishes.

“Hey Scott, come here!”

“What?” he asked suspiciously.

As he came closer, I whipped out a bottle of Windex from behind my back and sprayed it in his mouth. Of course, he started crying and ran to my mom. I quickly threw the bottle under the table and ran outside to hide behind Buster. I couldn’t help but laugh as my

mom chased me across the backyard. I wasn't scared of getting whipped because I had never gotten one before, and this incident was not the worst thing I had ever done.

TIRE SWING

There were moments when Scott and I got along. One day we were outside swinging on a tire that my dad had hung on an old oak tree that housed the creature we called Mr. Owl. I pushed Scott for a while, and then we switched. He pushed me higher and higher toward that lowest branch which resembled an old man's arm. When I would swing back, I would fly over the pasture covered with cow patties. From up high, it looked like a checkerboard. As I swung forward, I leaned back a little for the trip backwards again. Instead of letting the swing go all the way back this time, Scott stepped in front of the swing and stopped it suddenly. I fell out of the swing, and my head landed on a stump that was reaching out from the oak tree. I didn't pass out or anything, but my head really hurt. I started crying. It was my turn. My mom ran out the back screen door.

"What happened?" My mom screamed as she saw me lying on the ground.

I was faking most of my pain, but my head did hurt.

"Scott...pushed me...off the swing," I sputtered.

My mom told Scott to go to his bed, and my mom and I stayed on the leaning back porch. She rubbed my head and made sure that I didn't fall asleep. There was no way I would have missed this.

HIDDEN

Since our ages of six and four, Scott had been getting all of the attention at home. I felt invisible. On my ninth birthday, my mom bought me a new book, *Young*

Guinevere, and I often sat alone on the cold steps reading the book about the mythical character who grows up to marry King Arthur. She was beautiful and special--a hunter, a heroine, a legend. The dictionary meaning of my name is white wave, white spirit, and white cheeked, just like Guinevere. My daddy wanted a boy, Jake Thomas, but my mom wanted a little girl, nameless. I asked her once why she named me such an ugly name as Genevieve, and she answered with: because I liked it. Sometimes, my mom calls me Ginny, Binkles or Binx, never Genevieve. In fact, I can't remember her ever calling out "Genevieve." Maybe she does not like my name as much as she once thought. For me, my name carries a story, which my fantasy grabs and frantically tries to become.

Genevieve is a form of the Welsh name Guinevere, in which Gwen means fair and white, and Hwylfar means smooth, and with this name, I become cursed, fated to embarrass everyone and only find happiness in a fleeting moment. The letters of my name run out, marking an imprint of some significance that tells me I am more than letters. I am a mortal life, no kind of legend. My name will only become immortal on my white marbled grave, the letters proposed by someone who once loved me. Maybe I won't even belong there.

My fragile fingers traced the outline of the auburn-haired girl who stood so strong in the pictures. I had blue eyes, fat cheeks ripe for plucking, light blond hair the color (but not the feel) of silk, and I was no hunter. My dad took Scott hunting for rabbit, squirrel, and deer every weekend while I sat bundled in a torn blanket. I wanted to jump right into the colorful pages of my book and go hunting with Guinevere. I wanted to be

strong and fierce and cry out like the magical animals in the book, but my cry was a mere peep. I started braiding my hair like Guinevere.

I thought I had finally given up trying to impress my parents. I thought I had accepted the fact that Scott was their pride and joy, and I was just the girl who spent too much time reading. As I walked through the crowded Woodruff Elementary halls, I became anxious to get to the girls' bathroom so that I could take out my book and stare at Guinevere. "Why can't I be like you?" I sat on the school's chloroxed toilet, kicking my legs and singing, "Guinevere had green eyes." I heard that somewhere. One of the girls in my 5th grade class, Andrea I guessed, came and knocked on my stall door.

"Genevieve! You in there?" She called, peeking underneath my door.

"Hey!" I screamed at her. "Quit looking!"

"Teacher says you better get out here in line," she said.

I saw her stand back up, her pink Reebok's still facing my door.

"What the heck are you doing anyway?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm coming, okay? Tell her I'm coming."

"Fine," she said, and I saw her shoes walking toward the door.

I sighed and put my book back under my oversized t-shirt that my mom bought for me at last Saturday's weekly trip to the Tab's Flea market in Greer. The teachers made us leave our book bags outside of the bathrooms so I only had enough time to grab it before the line of squirming girls pushed me through the door. I walked out of the bathroom to a very frustrated Mrs. Foster as well as a line of girls looking at me with disgust. "Sorry," I

said to Mrs. Foster and got in line behind the last girl. The boys were waiting on the other side of the hall, and none of them were looking at me.

I looked back down to my book. My fingers traced the crumpled pages, following the perfect lines of her auburn hair. Her neck was long and narrow; she had the perfect posture. I inherited my dad's hump, which made our heads poke forward and our shoulders slump downward. When I walked down the hallway, I had to remind myself to straighten my back—head back, chin up, ladylike. My mom was constantly coming behind my dad and me and pulling our heads back.

“What’cha keep doing that for?” I said to Mom.

“Cause one day you and your daddy’s heads are gonna roll off like a basketball,” she replied. “C’aint you just imagine that?” I looked up at my dad who stood like a statue over me—he just shook his head. My posture is still very bad, and grandpa always said we looked like one of his chickens before he hung it on the clothesline. He said that after he pulled the neck off, he had to hang the rest of the body upside down to let all the blood drain out before granny could pluck it. I never helped granny pluck any chicken, but I sat beside her in the kitchen and listened to her tell her stories, looking out the window at the chickens dangling, slightly jerking from the gentle breeze. On the line was a headless, upside-down chicken, a pair of overalls, another chicken, a dirty sock, and another chicken. Granny told the best stories while she plucked and washed, except the thing was, they were always true.

CHAINS RATTLIN' AND THEY WEREN'T NO BREEZE

Papa told me one story about his daddy and a KKK meeting. He said Great-Grandpa loved black people and hated when the Klan came around his house and his children. Up the road about a half a mile, they were planning on lynching some man named Percival Jones—he said everyone in town called him Percy for short.

“He was a respectable man,” he said. “He helped daddy many a time when he needed help building the wood caskets for the mortuary. It wouldn’t that much trouble to build one I don’t guess, but daddy always liked Percy’s help.” He said that Percy had told a lie to one of the Klan members down at Harrison’s shoe store on Main Street, something about a pair of shoes gone missing, and the Klan man didn’t like it. That night, Papa heard men running up the dirt road to Percy’s old shack on Workman Road. Great-Grandpa came in and told Papa that they was going to hang him on a tree behind Percy’s house, and he was going to try and stop it. When he got there, they had Percy tied around the neck with an old rope, and he was sitting proud on one of Great-Grandpa’s own horses. “They must have took it last night,” he told Papa. Well, just when the Klan leader was about to lead the horse away from the tree, Great-Grandpa said they “all a sudden heard chains rattlin’ and they weren’t any breeze”. It scared them so much the Klan ran, and the horse ran, too. The tree is still there on the outskirts of Woodruff. I think I have a picture of it. Papa tried to tell me it was a lesson about lying, but I couldn’t figure out what he meant at the time. I loved listening to him talk about our family, about where and whom I came from, and I learned how to tell stories in the meantime.

MAGIC

I quickly stuffed the book back into my faded pink backpack and caught up with line in the hallway. My mind raced with the images of horses, chickens, and bad men. I normally walked with my head down, staring at my pink tennis shoes, fifty cents at Tab's, but that day I just happened to look outside the seven-foot window. I imagined a man bending down and looking in through the window. My mom always told me that I had a wild imagination because for me, small trees could easily become goblins. A brown leaf could easily become a strong horse in a few seconds. A stick on the side of the road was a black and silver Python. Ideas and descriptions began to flow through my head. I knew I would need more to my story than a man standing at window, but the window was a good start. It reminded me of a window in my book that Guinevere walked through to meet the fairies and tell them stories. Think--name, face, hair, clothes. I walked faster and faster, bumping into the preppy girl in front of me.

"Watch it, nerd," she sneered and turned back around to face the front, her straight, blond hair flipping perfectly. I kept my story to myself until after school when my mom and dad would be picking me up.

Their red Nissan truck pulled up at 2:30. Scott and I jumped in the back of the truck, and just as we were pulling out of the parking lot, I stopped them.

"Hey Mom!" I shouted into the sliding glass window, my face and hands plastered to the window.

"What?" she yelled.

"A man came up to me at recess and asked if I wanted to see his puppy" I said.

She stopped the truck and my mom and dad got out.

“What?” she asked again.

I started again. “We were at recess and this man...”

“Yeh yeh. I got that much,” she said. “How do you know it wasn’t the janitor or somebody?”

“Mr. Beetles?” I said. “I see him every day at lunch, cleaning our trays in the back of the cafeteria. Everybody knows him.”

“Where were the teachers? Did anyone else see him?” she asked.

“Mrs. Foster and Mrs. Satterfield were too busy watching Dylan—that boy who keeps throwing rocks at all the girls. I was the only one over there on the slide next to the woods. Nobody likes that slide but me. All the other kids either play on the monkey bars or talk about everyone else,” I replied.

My mom stood shaking her head to the left and right, left and right.

“Ginny,” she said. “I just don’t know about this. You’ve done something like this before. I just don’t know.”

I kicked the side of the truck. “I’m telling you, Mom,” I yelled. “I’m telling you.”

“Let’s just go to the office and tell the principal,” my dad finally said. “You never know.”

“Yeh,” Scott said low enough for me to hear. “You never know with *her*.”

I hit him with my book bag, one dollar at a yard sale in Laurens. We walked in the double doors, just like when Guinevere walked in to tell her story to the fairies.

CHERRY ICEE

I had done something like this before. When I was seven, me and my mom were driving back from the Dollar Store in Woodruff to my granny's house, and I saw that the Icee stand was actually open for once.

"Momma," I said. "Stop and get me an icee."

"No," she said. "You don't need one today."

"Why not?" I said. "Please, I want a cherry one."

"I told you no," she said.

I was really mad because the icee stand, for some reason no one ever figured out, was never open. I didn't plan on it, but I reached up and smacked my momma in the face. She didn't say anything, and my small hand didn't hurt her. It was more of a statement on my part.

We kept going, past BiLo, the Wolverine Den Restaurant, and the bank. Woodruff wasn't a big town, and these were the only three places worth going. You didn't want to go to the mortuaries, which greeted you when you came in Woodruff and when you left. My granny, my mom's mom, lived a few minutes outside of the town, and it wasn't long before we pulled up in the yard. I had already planned on not getting out of the car, out of sheer spite, but when I saw my granny come onto the front porch, I decided I would tell her about me not getting an Icee.

"Granny," I whined. "Momma wouldn't get me no Icee at the stand, and you know it's never open."

Granny wiped her hands on her red apron, stained white from the biscuit mix she had been making for me.

“Now why didn’t you get her a cone?” Granny said to momma.

“Cause she don’t need one every time, momma,” she replied.

“Well I don’t see how it could have hurt her,” granny said. I laughed at my mom because granny always took my side. She looked like she was going to run after me, so I took off toward the car. On the way, I tripped on a root and bruised my knee. I was embarrassed, and I got in the car. I sat there, pouting, crying and feeling stupid for running. My knee was bleeding a little, and my mind was racing. She was going to pay for that one.

UNICORNS

We walked up the fourth grade hallway, cluttered with trash from other students’ book bags, and entered the office. Mr. Conner had already left for the day, but the assistant principal, Mrs. Williams, was still there. I told her about the man, and she sent two secretaries to search the grounds, but they didn’t see anyone. My mom kept a wary eye on me all night. I doubted she believed me; she never did before. As I sat in my white daybed, my dad slowly stroked my straw hair and kissed my freckled nose. I slowly breathed in all of the attention, his at least. Everyone in my family was hugging me and telling me not to be scared. I was now the girl who saw the bad man. I prepared myself for the next school day, my hair braided behind my neck, my backpack snug on my shoulders, and my book cradled in my right arm. The next day at school, everyone was staring at me; they wanted to hear about the man who wanted me to see his puppy.

“What did he say the puppy’s name was?” someone behind me said.

“I don’t really remember,” I replied. “I think he said it was Lancelot.”

HOT CAT

That same afternoon, Scott had stuck one of our kittens into an old microwave that sat on the back porch. When my mom finally heard its faint meow, she blamed me. She was hanging out our clothes on the new clothesline that my dad had put up for us. Scott had tried swinging on the old one. As she clipped the last piece of dirty sock on the line, she heard something that sounded like it was underneath the porch. Stray cats seemed to think that we would take them in with love. It worked for Scott. My mom opened the now brown GE microwave door and saw the wet kitten lying on its back. I guess she thought it was dead.

“Genevieve! Get your hind-end out here right now!” she screamed into the screen window.

“Yeh?” I asked.

“Why in the world would you put your kitten in the doggone microwave?” she asked me, taking out what seemed like a lifeless kitten.

“What? I didn’t put no dang cat in there.” I shouted. “I ain’t got reason to.”

“Reason or not, young lady. You could have killed the kitten,” she said, now realizing that it was still alive, barely. I was so tired of trying to convince her about my story. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Scott’s big head peeping around the house. He had been throwing rocks at my pet goose, Camelot.

“That orphan did it!” I screamed, pointing at Scott.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “And quit calling him an orphan.” Scott came out from around the house.

“I didn’t put no cat in there. I love cats. I even got an eye like a cat. See?” He got up real close in my face. His right eye was the swirl of a blue and orange calico cat, but it didn’t matter. I knew he did it.

“I ain’t getting’ blamed for this one...ORPHAN,” I said and punched him in the arm. My mom separated us, took care of the kitten, and just left us alone. It wasn’t until this year when Scott finally admitted that he did put the poor kitten in the microwave. He had no motive.

I had no motive either for what I did to my momma. After we went home the day I bruised my knee, I was still so mad about not getting an Icee and about hurting my knee. At school the next day, we watched a video about abuse, and I decided that I could make them believe that momma had hurt me. That would teach her to not give me what I wanted. I asked my teacher if I could go to the guidance office, and I told the counselor that my momma had pushed me. I showed her the bruise on my knee.

That afternoon, I was standing outside under the big oak tree where Mr. Owl lived, and the phone rang. My dad answered it. He hung up and came outside and told us that the school had filed a report about abuse. They said that momma had abused me. I didn’t think they were going to call the house. I didn’t think they were going to do anything. I ran into the house, and my mom ran after me. She yelled at me, asked me why I would say such a thing. Didn’t I know what they would mean? They would take

me away from her. I started crying so hard into my Little Mermaid pillow, so hard I couldn't breathe.

After a few hours, everyone in my family knew what I had done. My aunt Jonie came into the bedroom.

"Ginny," she said softly, rubbing my back in circles. "Are you okay?"

I couldn't answer her. I still couldn't breathe. My chest hurt.

"I don't...want to...leave," I wailed into her cigarette-scented shirt.

"It's okay, it's okay," she said. "You're not going anywhere except back to that school and tell them the truth. And if you ever do something like this again, you *will* be reporting abuse."

"I know, I know," I cried. "I won't, I promise."

A TRADE

At school the next day, there was still a lot of buzz about the man I had seen at the slide. A short girl with a poodle-perm named Tess asked me what happened the day before. I told her and everyone about the bad man, telling them in a low voice as if I were reading from my book. Everyone wanted to talk to me and be my friend now. All day long, girls were asking me to trade stuff with them. I came home with all kinds of Hello Kitty pencils and stickers. The next day, the police came to watch the school to make sure that the man did not show up again. I was able to stay in the office all day, helping the secretary put papers in the teachers' mailboxes. Days went by and nobody saw the man. Maybe he won't come back, some said. A special assembly was called in the cafeteria, and I was allowed to sit on stage. Mr. Connor explained the situation to the

students and teachers and told them that they would keep an eye out for anyone on school property.

The entire buzz about the man seemed to die down after a few weeks. I didn't know what to do. I was slipping back through the 5th grade social cracks. As I trudged down the hallway, I spotted a candy wrapper on the floor and stooped to pick it up. Mr. Beetles passed me, assumed that I was tying my shoe and walked on. I put the wrapper in the pocket of my ripped Levis and walked to class. At recess, I ran up to Mrs. Foster, holding the wrapper out in front of me.

"Mrs. Foster. Mrs. Foster. Look!" I said, almost out of breath.

She turned from watching Dylan swing on the gym rope. "What is it, Genevieve?" she asked.

"The man," I stammered. "He was at the slide again. He dropped this candy wrapper. He asked if I wanted some. He said he had lots of it." Since the buzz had died, the teachers hadn't watched me on the slide.. Again, everyone started asking me questions, and the most popular girls told me that I should sit with them at lunch and recess. Sitting there listening to Ashley talk about her next shopping trip to the Gap, I wondered if Guinevere would have told a story like I did.

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BARBIES AND NINJA TURTLES

Momma used to tell me all the time “Little girl, don’t you never be ashamed of where you live and what you don’t have.” But I always was. I lived in a rotting, one-hundred-year-old, two-story house with fake redbrick vinyl siding that had a foundation composed of large boulders. Like a crazy, drunk uncle who doesn’t know whether to sit down or stand up before he just falls over, the house would tilt back and forth when an intense thunderstorm buffeted it. When it was time to get off of the school bus in the afternoon, I would slowly stand up, trying not to make any noise to attract attention to myself, but, of course, the vinyl on the seats would stick to my upper leg and sound like I was pulling Velcro apart. “Shh,” I would tell the seat under my breath as I tiptoed into the aisle. Looking around I saw several other eight year olds snickering as I passed them with my skinny knees facing inward toward each other and my back humped over as if I had to go to the bathroom. “She lives here?” one little blond girl with a pretty pink Barbie book bag and matching pink hair bow would say. One boy who sat at the back looked at me with his big green eyes as if I was the saddest thing he’s ever seen. He kept staring at me even as I stood at the mailbox looking at the other kids who were pointing out the window. “Yeh, they must be poor or something,” I heard the little black boy in the middle of the bus shout. Momma said we weren’t poor, but momma and daddy simply could not afford rent more than \$100. My mom worked at Winn-Dixie on Woodruff Road, and my dad worked at a steel factory. They barely made enough for us to ever go shopping. Daddy grew up right down the road from my house in a two-story, brown house with a caving red tin roof that was heated by a wood stove. He said he had

to share a bed with his three other brothers because there was only one bed and not enough heat. When one boy got whipped, they all did. I always thought that was so funny. Momma and daddy were used to living in shabby houses, so making me live in an old house was not a big deal to them because, like mom would often say, “a house is better than no house.”

I didn't suffer by any means because I practically received all of the dolls and clothes that I wanted, even though they were used and bought cheap from yard sales. For us, shopping at the mall simply was not an option, but we did manage to make it to Wal-Mart, occasionally. Really, the only object of my desire that I was not able to obtain was a proper bathroom, which my parents also had lacked as children. A flushing toilet was a mere dream to me, a contraption beyond our financial possibilities. There was no section of our house labeled “the bathroom,” no door to shut for privacy, just a five-gallon white bucket that had to be taken out twice a day to the field on either side of the house, and no one wanted that job. In the bedroom that my parents, my cousin and I shared, the small bucket with an extremely tight lid sitting disgracefully in the corner would be hiding in shame under a sheet or blanket that one of us would throw quickly over it if we heard a car pull into the driveway. Beside the bucket sat a can of Renuzit Caribbean Cool for any time that we got bored sitting there. The side of the can read Caution: Contents Under Pressure, which was definitely true because the poor can had to stand guard next to that bucket all day. The smells of orange and pineapple were sweet, and the caution that said Inhalation Abuse of Aerosol Products May be Harmful was useless.



A DIRTY GIRL WITH A FOUL MOUTH

I was never allowed to have any friends over to stay awhile or to sleepover because they would have no place to use the bathroom, and my mom was certainly not going to allow them to use or even see the bucket. I hated this, and I always felt humiliated when friends would ask to stay, and I would have to say no. I would skulk off of the bus and into the unmade twin bed that I was forced to share with Scott, hiding under the covers in shame and anger toward my parents for not living in a house with a toilet.



“What the heck’s wrong with you?” Scott asked, wearing camouflage pants and a t-shirt because he had just got back from squirrel hunting.

“Shut up! I don’t walk to talk to you! Go away! It’s none of your stupid business,” I replied.

“Fine, dork.”

I felt like I had no real friends because the only time I saw them was at school or lunch. Because of this resentment, the bucket took on a whole new meaning for me. I began to see it as an unpopular kid whom nobody liked or wanted to see, a dirty girl with a foul mouth that I needed to live with but one that everybody else detested.

A QUEEN’S THRONE

My parents managed to save up enough money to buy us a three bedroom, two bathroom trailer as well as two acres of land in Enoree, which was about twenty minutes

from my old house. When we moved the trailer onto the land overgrown with briars and filled with black king snakes, I was the first to pick if I wanted the small room next to the back door or the slightly larger room with its own bathroom at the far end of the trailer, farthest away from my parents. I didn't have to answer because my parents knew by my suddenly lit-up face that I wanted the room with the bathroom, which was much more significant than any other room in the house. I walked up the narrow hallway, bypassing my bedroom and heading straight for the bathroom. Finally, I thought, I would be able to sit on something that would not hurt. As I opened the door, light shone in from the small window above the bathtub, illuminating the toilet with the grandeur of a queen's throne. Pea green and tilted to the left, the toilet definitely needed some repair, but I sat on it nonetheless, stretching out from top to bottom and relaxing.. I would have to paint it pearl white, though, because green just did not fit its royal capacities. It took us about a month to get all of our junk moved into the trailer, and after finally becoming settled, family members began to come visit us and would actually stay longer than ten minutes at a time. As soon as my Aunt Jonie or Uncle Bill would come through the door, I would grab them by the hand and pull them excitedly toward my bathroom.

“Hurry, come on, you got to see now. Come on! Come on! You just got to see-- it's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen.”

PART THREE

DIG

WITHOUT FEAR

My Great Uncle died the day before Easter 1994. I was ten years old, a diminutive girl with blue eyes hidden behind larger pair of dark, green glasses. I did not know him very well, but there was an overpowering, childlike connection between us. He lived in an old-fashioned two story, white house made of wood slats with peeling, black shutters sitting on a rocky hill in Woodruff, South Carolina. The front porch was broad and empty without even a rocking chair or swing. Just space. Compared to my petite stature, the house was simply intimidating. Walking up to the front porch was like looking up at the bottom of Mt. Everest, but without the fear of exploration. I was a nosy girl, always asking people questions, knowing it was none of my business. By asking questions, you have to make someone answer you, someone talk to you, someone realize that you are there.

JUNKYARD

I remember the backyard well. Barns were scattered everywhere, randomly connected by a chicken pen or two. There was a shed that sat right in the middle of the yard—half of it was closed, the other half sheltered an old, black Ford. I climbed on the back of the car each time we went there, my small hands leaving handprints behind.

“It don’t run no more,” he said one visit.

“Why don’t it?” I said, sliding down the back of the windshield.

“It ain’t worked for years really,” he said.

“Then why you still got it?” I said, with the smugness of a 10 year old.

“I don’t rightly know,” he replied and walked back into the house. He never answered any of my questions with any real truth.

I walked away from the car and to his chicken pens. They were pretty new, but there were no chickens inside. My grandpa had chicken pens, too. Once I even crawled in one when the chickens were out in the yard. I pretended I was a chicken, pecking around on the white and black, polka-dotted ground, trying to climb the little chicken ladders to the second story of the chicken-condo. It was fun until I got stuck between the first and second pen. My right arm was frozen in mid-air, reaching into the box with the eggs, my left leg was turned sideways trying to get my knee into a good, stable position, and my butt was wedged between the doors of the pen. Scott found out where I was and continued to kick me several times in that same tender spot as before when I sat on the bucket to use the bathroom, laughing as if it was the funniest thing he had ever seen. I laughed, too, when I got loose and wrestled him down to the ground, his face smearing the polka dots into a new design.

There was a small shed not too far from the leaning back door that barely managed to guard the back of the house. Through the yellowed windows, I could only see a few broken pots and a shovel.

“What’s in the barn?” I asked.

“Nothing really...junk,” he replied.

“Why you keeping’ all that junk for?” I asked. “I mean, you got all these barns and I don’t even know what’s in them. Do you even know?”

“Well, I know it’s my junk, and you don’t need to know everything,” he said.

I got mad from what he said so I went to the swing set on the left side of the barn. Funny to think about that swing now as it overlooked his garden of tulips and hydrangeas where he inhaled his last breath, turning his face the color of the blue blossoms. He was found face down in the garden as if he had simply fallen down swiftly to catch a bug before it fluttered away.

As I was swinging on the blue and white swing, my favorite one, I saw Scott trying to climb through some broken boards on the shed I was just asking about.

“Hey,” I yelled at him. “You get out of there. He don’t want us in there!”

“Shut up,” he said. “And you better not run to your momma either, you big fat baby!”

“I will if you keep trying,” I called back, walking toward the back screen door.

“Come on,” he said. “Don’t you even want to know what’s in here?”

“No,” I said. “If he wanted us to know, he’d show us. Besides...”

Before I could finish my sentence, he was in the shed. All I could see was the top of his head jumping up and down inside. I turned to go inside and tell mom. I had my hand on the metal doorknob and was just about to open it when I heard a loud crash from the shed. Momma and great uncle about knocked me over when they ran out the back door. Momma opened the door and frantically looked around for Scott. All I could think about

was how all this time, the shed door wasn't even locked. When we finally saw Scott, we saw that his head was pinned between the wall and a steel cabinet that had fallen to the side when he had tried to climb on it. Great uncle pulled the cabinet off of Scott, and we saw that the left side of his face was blue and purple and swollen like the grape that Scott had put into a sling and shot at my dad—hitting him square between the eyes and leaving a red dot for three hours. Momma pulled him out and said we were going to take him to the hospital. When she came by me, she pulled on my New Kids on the Block t-shirt and led me to the car. I didn't even have time to look around the shed but did manage to catch a glimpse of crates that piled high with what looked like diaries, not like the Bonne Bell one that I had, but a leather one or something. Scott was in the hospital for two days. It would be the only time that I would ever feel bad for him.

FUNNY FACE

To be honest, I really don't remember great uncle's face other than his tanned skin, wrinkled with deep lines as if he had made a funny face and it just stuck. No one was prepared for his death, especially me. The phone rang at my house the day he died.

"Hello," my mom answered, tired from decorating cakes at Winn-Dixie. I only heard bits and pieces. "They found...dead in the garden...must've been a heart attack," my granny said on the other line.

"What? Was she there when it happened?" my mom asked, looking down and trying to scoot me into the next room. All I heard was mumbling after that. Mom explained who had died and why and that we would be going to his house later that day.

His wife wanted the family to meet at her house for a small get-together—to make it proper. I think more people came for the food and not the memory. I made sure that those who stuffed their mouths saw the smugness on my face as my top lip curled slowly to meet my nose.

“What you eating for?” I asked my cousin Carl. He definitely hadn’t dressed for a wake because he was wearing a black Metallica shirt and torn black pants.

“Cause I’m hungry, now scram,” he yelled back at me.

I left and walked toward my other cousin Amber, Carl’s sister. I had spent the night with Amber almost every Saturday until she went to Byrnes High and met her boyfriend.

“What’cha doing,” I asked her.

“Don’t bother me now, Ginny...can’t you see I’m in mourning?” she replied, leaning against the mirror to fix her makeup. She had brought her boyfriend along, his six-foot body standing awkwardly in the corner of the kitchen.

“Yeh, I see that,” I growled under my breath and walked away.

The next year, Amber and her boyfriend would run away to Florida, and we would spend hours searching barns and hotels in Pelham, SC. She would call after two weeks, and I would answer the phone, crying after finally hearing her voice. She would say that she wasn’t coming home unless Jonie let her get married. Aunt Jonie would agree, and in two years, Amber would give birth to the first of three children.

Scott was in the back bedroom with the other boys in the family, playing Mario or something on Nintendo. I didn't want to go in there. I was more mature than them. I walked around the big house, examining everyone to see what they were really doing. Those who were not eating were laughing or crying, but I was simply lost, not really knowing what to think about what was going on around me. I was just glad to see my family. My aunt Jonie, who had been smoking since she was a teenager, sat nervously scratching her mouth with her right finger—I guess it was time for a smoke break. She was very skinny, with long brown hair and an even tan. She didn't really look like my mom. She was the oldest sister, half-sister really, and she didn't look like my mom at all. Even in pictures we take today, she still doesn't look like my mom, but they say I do. Before she married my grandpa, granny was married to a man whose last name was Prince. He was Jonie's dad and I think Scott's mom may have belonged to him too, but I'm not sure about that. Rumors have always flown around about whose child is whose. I think momma is the only true Edmonds from my grandpa. There are also two brothers who belong to the Prince side, but we hardly ever see them.

“C'mon, we really weren't even close,” I overheard Aunt Jonie say to my Aunt Winnie, Scott's mom.

“No, but he *was* family,” Winnie replied snidely. Winnie was the middle sister, and she didn't look like my mom either. She had more of an athletic build while my mom looked more like the beauty queen, especially in her high school pictures with her brown, Farrah hair and hot pants. The pictures of her and my dad are hilarious because dad's hair was chin length and curly, and he always wore knee-high socks with duct

taped converse shoes. They went to the mountains a lot with my granny, so almost every picture is posed on a mountain rock. My granny loves to go to the mountains, and we usually end up going three or four times a year, especially around Halloween—for the apples. To think of the three sisters, though, Winnie didn't look like Jonie, either. I'm not sure they really are sisters. Winnie's hair was short and almost looked like a mullet. She had big glasses, a big middle section, and quite muscular legs. She walked a lot because she didn't have a car to get around in. She and Scott's dad were only really married for six or seven years really. They split when Scott's sister was two, I think, which was the reason Scott came to live with us and his sister, Josie, went to live with granny. She wasn't in school, so everyone thought that it would be best to let granny raise her and let momma keep Scott. I didn't really like Winnie and Ed anymore because they ruined everything at home for me..

“Yeh, well, time for a smoke, let's go out back.” They left, stepping past me as I was tugging on their dresses.

My granny, great uncle's sister, seemed happy sitting in the armless, plastic chair, but I knew she was hurting for her loss. Often her brown eyes would fall to the floor causing her black curls to sway loosely and hide her face. Slowly, I stepped toward her arching back and placed my doll hand on her grieving shoulder.

“It'll be okay, Granny,” I said softly, not really knowing what would be okay.

“Maybe,” she replied sadly, “Maybe not.” She looked like she felt much better.

I always thought I was granny's favorite because she let me have whatever I wanted, and when momma wouldn't get me what I wanted, I told on her. It was funny to see her face when I told granny about every little thing I had asked for and didn't get. I didn't see Scott or Josie getting everything like I did, although I assumed Josie did because she lived with granny and papa. Aunt Jonie had videotaped one Christmas when Josie was four, Scott was eight, and I was ten. She started at my house. We got the bikes we wanted, and mine had a "wirt-squirt bottle" I called it. I kept scratching my head in the video. It must have been one of those times when Josie had given me lice from school. I would grow my hair out really long and would then get lice and have to cut it.

We came out of the bedroom slowly, Scott in his Gamecock pajamas and me in my New Kids on the Block gown. My hair was braided back; Scott's was cut short with a rat-tail in the back. We came around the corner and saw our bikes behind the Christmas tree.

"We got em, we got em!" we screamed in unison.

"I told you we would get em, didn't I momma, didn't I?" I yelled.

"I bet Santa got these on sale, didn't he Wim?" Scott said. He never could say William. They always laughed. We opened the rest of our presents. I got babies and a few clothes, and Scott got some cars and stuff like that. There was one present left for me.

"Here you go. This one's from me," Aunt Jonie said.

I slowly opened the present, expecting it to be something wonderful.

"It's a bra," I said with disappointment. "Daddy, she got me a bra."

“Well, you’re a young woman and you need a bra,” she said in her defense.

“Yeh,” I replied.

“There’s one more thing,” my dad said. “Go see if he ate what you left.”

We had left chocolate pudding that year because a thirty-cent box was cheaper than a two-dollar box of cookies.

“He did eat it, Wim,” Scott said. “And he left a note.”

“What’s it say,” I asked, and went and jerked the letter out of his hand. “It says, ‘Boy this pudding sure was good, and you have been a good boy and girl this year. Be good now. I’m watching.’”

“Wow,” Scott mouthed slowly as he looked at Santa’s handwriting, which looked an awful lot like my dad’s. At ten, I still believed, though. Daddy wouldn’t lie to me about something as big as Santa anyway. He always told me stories about how Santa visited him every year in a red station wagon that said something about Salvation Army on the side. At then, I just figured it was the name of Santa’s company or something. I loved my dad’s stories, and I always wanted to be just like him.

JUST LIKE DAD

Twirling around the kitchen and into the hallway, my fingers picking up my white and rose print dress, I eventually noticed the stairs leading up to the second floor, where Aunt Rebecca, great-uncle’s wife, said us children weren’t allowed to go. Instead of disobeying her, I sat beside the cobwebs that mocked my loneliness and boredom. Always desiring attention, I even tried to make them notice me.

“May I have your attention, mister and misses cobwebs”?

“No,” they seem to reply.

I saw my dad get up from the table and walk toward the freshly perked pot of funeral coffee, sitting like a soldier on the countertop next to the unstable metal sink. I realized that I, too, was thirsty and went to get whatever he was after.

“I want some,” I said as if asking was no big deal.

“You’re not old enough to drink coffee. Get a Pepsi or something, Gen,” he said back.

I pouted. “No, I want coffee, too,” I said.

“No.”

“Fine! I’ll get a stupid Pepsi,” I shouted back.

As I reached for the bottle, stretching under my dad’s big body, I knocked his Styrofoam cup of coffee on my arm. I didn’t hear my mom and dad screaming at first.

“Gen, are you crazy? Gen, Gen!”

“Huh?” I asked, unaware of what had happened.

I didn’t feel the pain until I looked down at my arm and saw the pink, bubbling skin peeling back, as if the skin decided on its own that it no longer wanted to be on my arm. When I finally realized what happened, the pain hit me hard. I didn’t scream when I saw my arm, or jump up and down like I had a spider crawling up my dress but just stared blankly and cried softly.

ANIMAL PLANET

The coffee had burned about a four by two inch wide plot of my arm starting at my wrist; it looked like someone had taken a razor and scalped the top, hairy layer of my arm clean off. When everyone else realized what happened, they came running at me.

“What the crap happened?” my granny yelled. I was so glad to see her coming toward me. It had been awhile since she really paid me any attention, what with Josie and all.

“She spilt the damn coffee on her arm,” my mom replied.

“Good gracious. What are we supposed to do?” my grandma asked, picking up my arm tenderly. Someone that I guess was in the family said she was a nurse and knew what to do. She wet a rag and placed it on my burned skin. Ta-da.

“We’re takin’ her to Woodruff hospital,” my dad announced.

On the way to the hospital in our red Nissan truck, I sat between my dad (who was driving) and my mom (who kept staring at me as if I were leaving her forever). The pain in my arm didn’t seem that bad, but I still wanted to go to the hospital. I would at least get an armband. We finally made it to the empty Emergency Room parking lot, its neon letters telling me that for a moment I was important. My dad carried me into the hospital. I laid my damp straw head on his big shoulder. I think I almost fell asleep because I didn’t remember ever going in. I didn’t care.

She’s hurt,” my dad told the nurse. They told us to sit down, and we would be called back in a minute. There was some type of awards show on TV, so I just started watching that. The nurse finally told us to come back, and my dad decided to stay in the

waiting room. My momma wanted to take me back. They took me to a private room and laid me on a cold slab of metal they called a table. My momma stood over me, the light behind her making her look like an angel.

“The light hurts my arm, momma,” I said. She cut it off. The doctor entered, moved a huge, round lamp over my arm and spoke to me in a northern accent that I didn’t like at all.

“Good evening, Mrs. Edmunds,” the doctor said. What about good evening to me?

“Well, it seems she has burned her arm, I see,” the doctor said. He prodded and poked my arm until he was satisfied.

“Her arm is going to be fine...it isn’t going to fall off,” he said, looking at me with a smirk, not a smile. “We’ll need to peel the dead skin off with some tweezers, but it won’t hurt.” He rambled on and on. His voice was planned and unemotional, speaking much more quickly than my mind could process. I was no emergency to him, and the light felt like it could have burned the fourth layer of my skin. As he was peeling the dead skin, the malicious doctor told us that I had a severe second-degree burn. He was right. It didn’t hurt. In fact, it sort of tingled like when your leg goes numb.

I had to keep cream on the wound with a device similar to a Popsicle stick, but with no promising cherry ice waiting to be licked.

We went back to the house on the hill to show everyone my poor, bandaged arm. My dad felt bad because my momma kept telling him it was his fault I got burned.

Whenever we changed the bandages, she would say, “Look, William, look what you did.” I never blamed him, but I loved getting my bandage changed by my momma.

Selfishly, but quite happily, I became the center of that gathering, with great-uncle’s picture taken of him as he was watering his garden last spring hanging slightly uneven in the kitchen.

NEIGHBOR

Granny told me that there was this black lady who used to live down the road from when she was a kid, and this lady would braid granny’s hair every day.

“That’s why I ain’t got no curl in my hair no more,” she told me. She also said that her schoolteacher would take her petticoats and make granny dresses and underwear of them. She never told me why these ladies did all these things for her. I don’t think she even remembers the ladies’ names.

I could listen all day long to my granny telling me stories about when she was a kid.

“We couldn’t afford no real jump rope,” she said, “so we’d tie an end of one of daddy’s ole mule ropes to one of his plow and jump thataway. When he’d see us out there, he’d come after us every time, but we’d just do it again the next day when daddy went to work.”

“What did your daddy do,” I asked granny.

“Well,” she said. “He had a couple different jobs. He worked on a farm some, and sometimes he’d build wood caskets with a black man lived down the road. Caskets

weren't no big deal then—just wood slats nailed together. But my daddy could build a good one, that's right."

"What did you do with your daddy, granny, when he wasn't working," I asked.

"Well," she said and paused. "He'd take us fishing or to the farm sometimes. I picked my share of cotton and beans every day, specially when I got old enough to work."

"What else?" I said.

"Well," she said. "We went to many a KKK meeting, too. Daddy didn't like the KKK. He loved black people—gave em jobs on the farm. But he liked to go and listen to em talk about stuff. I never really paid much attention to the KKK—I was so little then. I remember daddy's face when the KKK man would talk. He would scrunch his forehead up and his big nose would almost reach his eyebrows. We never stayed long, just long enough to see what was going on."

Mama said granny took her and my two aunts to a KKK meeting once in Reidville, SC. They were on their way back from the flea market, and granny saw the meeting next to Joe's Lake and pulled over. Maybe it reminded her of when her daddy used to take her. I don't know, and neither does mama.

I never saw a KKK meeting in person, but I saw the ads—yes, even in the nineties. They'd gather up in Cross Anchor or Laurens and do whatever they do. All the ads would say was KKK Meeting 10pm, nothing else.

THE WITCH FROM GOLDBLOCKS

All of granny's stories made me excited. Every time I saw her she told me something new. They were all true, as far as I knew, but they seemed like so much more than truth. I took all of her stories and added my own details before I went to sleep. My dreams would be a mix of old and new and the completely unbelievable. I never wrote anything down, not in a journal or on scraps of paper.

In sixth grade, my teacher, Mrs. Yown, told us we had to come up with our own picture book, and the winner would be sent to the Columbia Writer's Festival. I wanted to win so bad, but I couldn't think of anything to write either. I tried to twist one of granny's stories into my own, but nothing magical happened. Her stories were all hers.

I took a deep breath, sitting on my daybed covered up to my frizzy straw head with my New Kids on the Block blanket. I eventually fell asleep, and even my dreams were empty. The next day was Sunday so I could sleep late. I woke up about 10 in the morning and started thinking about all of my old teachers and how I liked all of them, well except for one, Mrs. Hall, my second grade teacher. She was tall and skinny, and her chest was hung back like she was posing for a painting, her right arm always in the air pointing at someone for doing something wrong. Most of the time, I was doing something wrong, at least according to her. To make up for being wrong, I raised my hand to answer every math question, even though I was really bad at it, and I even asked for practice homework sheets to work on over the weekend. She still didn't like me at all. She even tried to tell my mama that I couldn't read past a second grade level, even though the guidance counselor said I could read past a fifth grade level. We were tested

every year on our reading skills. When she talked, her hand would push through the gray streaks of hair that ran down the center of her head. She reminded me a little of my Papa's sister, Dorothy, who had gray streaks in her hair. I always heard her say something about witches in her family.

That was it! My story! I had an idea! I decided to write about a witch who lived down the road from this brother and sister. She would have lots of pets, scorpions maybe, and spiders (I hated spiders), but her house would always smell like cookies, and she would always be wearing a big black hat with turkey feathers in it. My book was ten pages of pictures of the skunked witch. I don't remember what I named my story or how it ended, but Mrs. Yown said it was good. I came in sixth place. Bridgett Singer won first. Mrs. Yown said all top ten winners would be going to the festival, but only Bridgett's would be sent down and displayed. Mama and daddy read my story, and they liked it, but it didn't really matter because it wasn't going to Columbia. I didn't want to go either, but mama made me.

INSPIRATION

The festival was boring, mainly because I was forced to go. They separated the kids from the parents and told us that we had to go listen to Bridgett read her stupid story. When everyone got in line, I saw a book stand in the middle of the next big room and decided to sneak over there instead of listening to Bridgett.

I stayed back from the group and made it to the bookstand. There were all kinds of books in there, books about love and haunted houses, books about school. This was

my own space for at least ten minutes until this black lady came up from behind me and scared me out of my socks.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” she said. “I didn’t mean to sneak up on ya.”

“Oh, it’s okay,” I said and moved toward one end of a row of books.

“I didn’t think they’d be anybody in here,” she said.

“I’m not supposed to be,” I replied. “Please don’t tell, though, ma’am. I just didn’t want to hear that girl read her story again.”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “You’re a jealous type, huh?”

“No, I ain’t jealous, ma’am,” I said, stepping toward the lady, “just tired of hearing it.”

“Um hum,” she moaned and picked up a book from the bottom shelf. She had on an egg yellow dress and hat.

“Are you supposed to be playing somebody from a book?” I said.

“Lord, no honey. I wrote this book,” she said, lifting up the book to show me her name on the bottom. “See?”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “What’s it about?”

“Well, mostly about peaches,” she said.

“Peaches? Who’d want to read a book about peaches,” I asked.

“Well I don’t know really,” she said. “I own a peach farm up in Rock Hill, SC. You know where that is?” I shook my head no. “Well anyway, I love peaches, and I know peaches, and it’s easy to write about what you know. But it’s more than just about a bushel of peaches, I guess.”

“Well, who’s in it, “ I asked.

“There’s a little black girl and her family, and they live on a peach farm,” she said.

“So you write about what you know,” I said. “I don’t think I write very well at all. I’d rather listen to stories than write them.

“Well,” she said, “each person has something they’re good at. You’ll figure it out one day.” She turned and grabbed another copy of her book. “Here. You take this one. I really think you’ll end up liking it.” She pressed her large hand on my head and walked out of the room. I put the book under my shirt and went out to find mama and daddy. I told them I wanted to go home, and with another hour ahead of me, I figured I could get over halfway through the nice lady’s book.

IN THE FIELDS OF GLORY

Granny said that when her daddy got older and went to work in the mill, he used to drink a lot.

“Mama and all my brothers and sisters would go to bed at dark,” she said. “But mama would make me stay up and make sure daddy went to work on third shift. I don’t know why I was the one to stay up, but I did it, every night. He wasn’t hard to get up, but boy I just hated to be the only one to do it.’

Granny said that when her daddy would come home from third shift, her mama would take her and her sisters to hide in the field because she knew he would be drunk.

“Mama was so scared of him, plain as day scared of him,” she said. “When she’d see him comin’ down the dirt road, she’d grab us and we’d fly to the field. We wouldn’t

do nothing when we got there. Just wait for dark. We did that every day until the day he died.”

Mama said she doesn't remember great-grandpa ever being mean, but granny said mama doesn't remember everything right.

“Mama,” I said, “Do you remember great-grandma?”

“All I remember of grandma,” she said, “is her black purse. I was the only one who she let go anywhere near that purse, and I was the only one, according to your grandma, that she'd let brush her hair. But I don't remember that, or what she looked like. I guess I should feel special.”

YELLOW RIBBON

I finally got my sixth place ribbon for my book on the last day of sixth grade. I took it home to show mama, but then I remembered it was Scott's birthday that day, so nobody really cared. I shoved the ribbon under my pillow and went into the living room. At least I would get some birthday cake.

“Today's my birthday,” Scott said. “I'm ten years old.”

“No duh,” I said, “You sure are a smart one.”

“Whatever,” he said. “You're just jealous cause it ain't your birthday.” He frogged me in the shoulder and went to shake his presents. Mama used to buy a secret present for whoever's birthday it wasn't, so one of us wouldn't feel bad. But she quit doing that after my twelfth birthday. So I had to sit and watch Scott open a dozen presents of trucks, movies, and hunting crap. Then I had to watch him sneer at me behind his cake candles, lips puffed to blow out all ten in one try. I hated his birthday cake, and

I wasn't even sure if I wanted a piece of it anymore. Mama always made our cakes because she worked in the Winn-Dixie bakery. His always had more decorations on it.

I never got around to showing mama my yellow ribbon and eventually forgot about it until mama was changing my sheets and found it under my pillow.

“What did you get this for, Gen,” she asked.

“Nothing,” I grumbled. “Everybody got one on the last day of school.”

“Oh,” she said and tossed it to me. I went to the trashcan and tossed it in. I didn't care about that story anymore, so the ribbon didn't matter either.

TATER PICKIN'

I loved going into papa's garden in the summer and helping him dig up taters. First he'd pull the plant back, and then I would dig and dig, looking for a tater big enough to put in the pot with some green beans. After five or six plants, we'd have half a Dollar Store bag full. The best way to eat papa's taters is in granny's cooking. Only granny knows how to cook taters with green beans, just like only she knows how to cook my favorite dinner: fried chicken, green beans and taters, and granny's biscuits. She only made that dinner for me.

BECAUSE I KNOW HE HOLDS THE FUTURE

I had been going to church since I was born, I guess. I loved Vacation Bible School the best. We made something, memorized something, or played something every day. The first day of VBS after my sixth grade year, I memorized “Jesus Loves Me” in sign language, and we did as a group on Sunday during preaching. The second day was the day before Father's Day. I was outside on the swings behind the church. Our VBS

counselor called us for pictures, and I guess my foot got caught somehow in the dirt when I was trying to stop the swing, and I fell flat on my face. My shoulder was bruised, and my braid was all messed up. The counselor dusted off my arms, and said “Cheese!” before I could even smile. The picture looked stupid. One of my shoulders was high up in the air, and my other was slumped down. My left knee was bleeding. We ended up making Popsicle stick frames and glued our pictures on top of the frame. I wrote “I love you Daddy” on mine with a red marker.

“Here,” I said to daddy. “It’s my father’s day present.”

“What is it?” he said.

“Just open it,” I said, wiggling in my chair.

“Well,” he said, “what happened to you?” He had worked double shifts and didn’t know about my fall that day.

“Fell,” I said, “right in front of everybody.”

“At least you still took the picture,” he said. “It’s a great picture of you,” he said and started laughing.

“Yeh,” I said, laughing a little too, “a great picture.”

SAVED

By the end of VBS, I knew I wanted to get saved by Jesus and baptized in the water like I had seen the other kids do during the week. On the way home from the last day of VBS, I told mama that I wanted to ask Jesus into my heart.

“He’s knockin’ on my door,” I said.

She laughed, “Where’d you hear that?”

“Preacher said it during prayer today,” I said.

She explained to me exactly what being saved and baptized meant. I told her I knew, and I was ready. She said okay. Daddy took me to the preacher after church on Sunday and told him I was ready to be saved and baptized. He talked to me about sinning, lying, and doing right by the Lord.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” the preacher said. I was fixing to be thirteen. I was pretty sure I knew everything.

“Yes,” I said. I prayed holding my daddy’s hands. “Jesus. Daddy said you could come on in.”

BATHWATER

The preacher said I was going to be baptized next Sunday night. During that week, Scott up and decided that he wanted to be saved too, and the preacher told him he could be baptized with me. I was so mad, and mama could see it, too. I went backstage on Sunday with my bathing suit on, and mama put the white robe on me. She bent down and told me that Scott was going to do everything I did, so I might as well get used to it. She left and went to sit in the audience. I was first to go. I stepped into the warm water and let the preacher tilt my head and body back. I thought he meant to drown me as long as he kept me under. I went to the bathroom and changed my clothes. I didn’t care to see Scott go under. That preacher could keep him under as long as he wanted. I forgot to bring my hair dryer, so I had to walk out front with a wet head, water dripping down the back of my dress.

I felt the cleanest I had ever felt.

4TH OF JULY SPECTACULAR

July 4th was always boring at my house. Nobody on our road really shot any good fireworks, and the old man down the street who shot the good ones died a few months before. The only thing close to a firework was the sound of a shotgun going off at houses around ours mixed in with a few loud yells of “yippee” or “God Bless America” where the last part of America was actually blended to sound like Amerca. Good old Rocky Ridge Road.

On the July 4th after my sixth grade year, we decided to throw a party. We put out our hunting chairs, a couple of duct-taped lounge chairs for granny and papa, and some metal folding chairs we had in the barn. I made a sign that said “Edmunds Family 4th of July Spectacular” and hung it on a post coming down the driveway. Everyone that came in said it was lame, so I wanted to take it down, but mama told me to leave it. It was all for fun, she said.

We had bought bottle rockets, sparklers, firecrackers, and the grand finale was called “The Marine.” Scott and I were both excited about that one.

Car by car, family members pulled into the driveway. My Aunt Jonie and Uncle Don were the first to come since they only lived two trailers up from us.

“You lookin’ a little chubby, Gen,” Aunt Jonie said as she poked my cheek.

“Yeh,” I said.

“No, you really are,” she said.

“Yeh,” I said again. “I believed you the first time.”

Uncle Don came slouching behind her. He walked with a cane even though he was only in his late forties, but she claimed he had a bad back.

“Where’s the damn food,” he yelled. “Why ain’t nobody cookin’ yet?” He was always so rude to everyone, and mama and me didn’t like him.

Next came Aunt Winnie and Earl, her new husband after she and Uncle Ely divorced. Winnie and Ely were Scott and Faye’s parents. Ely came every weekend and stayed with Scott, and Scott would go to his mama’s about one weekend a month. I loved those weekends.

Granny and Papa came next, followed by Amber and Mike. Amber had changed a lot since she got married. She didn’t have any more time to teach me cheers or dance moves, so I pretty much left her alone. I didn’t have anything grown up to say to her.

Mama cooked hotdogs, and they were pretty good. I never really liked hotdogs, though. Aunt Jonie, Amber, and Don complained about the hotdogs like they complain about everything that’s not cooked by one of them. Mama always ignored them, but it always made me really mad.

“One day, mama,” I said, “I’m gonna tell all of them how I really feel about them.”

“Well, Gen,” she said. “You make sure I’m there when you do it.”

I remembered every little complaint or insult, not knowing really when I would get to use it against him or her.

When my daddy and Ely started lighting fireworks, I ran up to daddy and asked for a sparkler, but I didn’t know he had already lit a firecracker.

“Daddy!” I yelled. “Give me one!”

“Gen!” he screamed back at me. “WATCH OUT!” He had already thrown it, and it landed right in front of my foot. Since it was only a firecracker, it didn’t do nothing to me.

“Gen!” I heard my mom scream. “Get your ass over here!” It must have really scared her, but I was embarrassed so I stood behind granny’s chair for a while.

I had planned a 4th of July dance, mixing in all of the moves Amber had taught me. Uncle Ely, though, decided that he was going to put a firecracker in a bottle and put the bottle in his mouth. When the firecracker blew up, it busted the bottle and all but two of Uncle Ely’s teeth, top and bottom. We had to carry him to the emergency room to remove some of the teeth. Two months later, though, he would be eating a whole apple with his gums. I never did my 4th of July dance.

FLOODED WATERS

Granny sat on the couch while I cut out the coupons for her. She never used them at the store.

“How you likin’ school,” she asked, playing with her new haircut. Mama cut it. Mama went to R.D. Anderson for cosmetology, but she ended up working at Winn-Dixie as a cake decorator.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t really like my English teacher. She just got pregnant, so she ain’t gonna be there long anyways.”

“Well, you got it better than I do, Gen,” she said, pointing at me with her long finger.

“What do you mean, granny?” I said.

“Well, daddy used to have to walk with us to school when it rained,” she said.

“See, we had to cross Fowler’s Bridge, you know where that is, and sometime it flooded. Well, daddy would take his boots off and go cross the bridge to see if it weren’t deep enough where we couldn’t cross it too. It never was too deep. Even when it snowed we had to walk clear to Crescent to go to the schoolhouse. We had shoes that would come up at the ends and so the snow would get all up in there. But we went on anyway.”

“I guess I am lucky,” I said, “but did you like your teachers?”

“I don’t remember,” she said and turned on *The Price is Right*.

SCARED OF THE STORM

I hated storms, especially ones with the wind. I don’t remember Hugo coming through, but Mama and Daddy said they took shifts and watched the news that night.

“It was the only time the weatherman got it right,” Daddy said. “When he said we should be getting rain, we got it.”

When we lived in that old house, the storm made everything move. The house wobbled on its stone feet. In the trailer, the wind came through the cracks at the windows, howling like one of Daddy’s beagles. I hated that sound. I hid under the pillows on my bed so I couldn’t see the lightning, but I heard the thunder. Before the storm would even get close enough to be dangerous, I would hear Daddy coming up the hall to turn our fans off. Those were the only times I hated Daddy’s footsteps.

Granny said her mama was scared of the storms, too.

“Oh yeah,” granny said, “Mama hated a cloud. Every time we moved, she made daddy dig a pit. Even when there weren’t no tornadoes or nothing, we’d have to get up and go to the pit. One time, our neighbors had a pit with an old, iron bed in the back. He’d pile up his old lady and the kids in that bed all night.”

I don’t really know why I didn’t like storms. Maybe it was because I lived in a trailer. Maybe it was because I got something from my great-grandma. Maybe I was scared of dying. A storm, for me, was like the time I got baptized, not sure what was coming next or where I was going. Either way there was water.

JOHNNY’S STORY

Two weeks before my seventh grade school year, our old next-door neighbor, Johnny, killed his girlfriend and her ex-boyfriend. It didn’t all happen at once. It wasn’t self-defense.

I had a crush on Johnny since I knew what a crush was. He was handsome and was always hanging out and hunting with Daddy. I gave him envelopes with rings and necklaces in them, hiding behind the screen door to see what he said. He never said anything but slid the envelope in his pocket. I guess he was about ten years older than me, but I didn’t care. I was always jealous when he started having girlfriends; then he had a kid, so I played with him. He didn’t stay with the boy’s mama, though. He started dating again.

He really liked this new girl, and she had a daughter with the same name as mine. Weird. He was nice to her when her mama was around, but when she wasn’t he was mean. We went fishing one time, and he just up and smacked her on the head. She

didn't tell on him. Neither did I. My Daddy saw it, too, but he said it wasn't none of our business. Johnny started getting jealous of his new girlfriend, and I knew whatever happened with them wasn't going to be good.

The night before the first day of school, Johnny's mama came running on our front porch. I couldn't hear all of what she said. "Johnny...shot...said self-defense...we don't know," was all I heard from her. Listening to Mama and Daddy I figured out that Johnny had shot the little girl's real daddy in a church parking lot. The little girl's daddy was dead. Those two weeks passed quickly, and everything kind of died down. Johnny was released on bond since he claimed it was self-defense, and the police couldn't find a weapon.

The night before school started, Johnny's mama came running up on our porch again. This time she had Johnny's little boy. "Johnny done shot her in the back. He ran...can't find him...police are at the house...watch him until tomorrow," she said. Johnny's little boy came in the house rubbing his eyes. He didn't even know. I didn't really understand. Mama put him in the cot with Scott, and he fell asleep pretty quickly. A few hours later we heard footsteps on the porch. We thought it was Johnny's Mama, but it was Johnny.

"Don't call nobody," he said to Daddy. "Just let me in for a minute."

"Now you know I can't do that," Daddy said.

"Let him in, Daddy," I said, pressing my slightly larger right ear up to the door.

"Just sit there, Johnny," Daddy said, "and we'll straighten this out."

I didn't understand. Johnny was my Daddy's best friend. Why wouldn't he let him in?

Daddy went to the phone in the bedroom and started dialing Johnny's house number. He must have heard the dial because he ran off the porch and into the woods. He ended up going home and turning himself in that night.

The next day at school was busy. Everyone had heard about the murder, and everyone knew he had been on my porch.

"What happened, what happened?" the eighth grade girls asked. "Was he bloody...did you see him...did he say anything to you?"

"Let me tell you," I said softly, "all about it."

PART FOUR

KUDZU

OVERGROWN

Scott graduated high school two years after I graduated college. He said he wanted to take a year off for hunting season. It was 2004, and he still didn't have a job. But he did have a girl pregnant. They had been dating about three months when my mom and I noticed that she would randomly get sick before eating, so we figured she was pregnant. They denied it, of course, until she started showing. I had just switched my teaching position from Clinton High to Woodruff High when they finally told us. I figured they would probably be pretty decent parents, and the baby shower was about two months away.

I lived in my own apartment, but my mom would stop by every day on her way home from work. I always expected her at 4:45 pm. I had just received a letter from a publishing company in Boston, my dream job, and was so excited to finally be putting a resume together for an editing position. Mom stopped by and wondered why I was even bothering.

"You always wanted to teach, Gen," she said.

"Yes, and I've always wanted to write, mom," I said.

"Gen, even when you was little, you was writing on the walls upstairs with chalk and pretending to be the teacher for Scott and Faye," she said.

“Yes, mom, pretending, “ I said. “I love teaching, but I love to write. I’ll never be a writer, so this is as close as I can get to it. Why don’t you understand that?”

“I know you can write, and you’re good at it, but that’s just too far away, and you know it,” she said.

“Maybe I need to get ‘too far away’ for once in my life,” I said.

“ I know I ain’t about to stop you, but I want you to consider it is all,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Now what are you really here for,” I asked, placing the letter and application back in the top drawer of the cabinet. I was already forgetting about it.

“Well, I don’t got anything for the shower, so we need to go shopping,” she said.

“Oh yeh,” I said. “That’s right. I guess we’ll go to Toys R Us.”

“I might run up to Hobby Lobby, too,” she said.

“Whatever,” I said. “It’s not like I have anything important to do.”

I have to admit, I was pretty excited about this baby. Marie’s third child was her last, and that was five years ago, so I missed having a baby around. Mom went with me to the store, and we bought the baby some gifts.

Most of the women in my family were at the shower, and the girlfriend got a lot of nice gifts, but I felt something was wrong. Every gift she opened, she said she already had one or didn’t need a new one. I saw everybody getting more and more anxious and aggravated, as her attitude grew snobbier. I was so mad at her because all of my family had spent so much on her and the baby, not to mention the constant support when her family gave her none. She just didn’t care.

The baby was born the following week at Allan Bennett Hospital in Greer. Mom and dad picked me up, and we went to see the baby. We were already fighting over who was going to get to hold it first. Mom seemed too excited, and it hurt me a little, but I was too focused on the baby.

We walked in the eighth floor hospital room and saw that the baby wasn't being held by anyone. The girlfriend was watching TV, and Scott wasn't even in the room. The baby, in bright pink, was asleep between the girl's legs. Of course, my mom ran and picked her up. When she did, the girlfriend looked like she was mad. I don't know why...she wasn't holding her. I took some pictures and made mom pass the baby girl to me. I picked her up and held her close to my face. She smiled, and I giggled. She had the prettiest blue eyes, just like mine, but she wasn't mine. I could still hold her, though.

MOUNTAIN DOLPHINS

I walked outside the hospital room and saw my Papa sitting in one of the waiting rooms. He hated hospitals, so it was a surprise to see him there. He had major heart surgery about ten years earlier, and he hadn't been truly healthy since then. I remember the day of his surgery. Scott was trying to steal a drink from the coke machine by sticking his hand up in the slot, all the while managing to kick me as I stood behind him. Mom came and got me and told me that I could talk to Papa before his surgery. I really didn't know what to say. She let me go in by myself. I was so scared when I saw the white and blue wires hooked up to his white, hairy chest. He said, "I love you, baby (he says where it sounds like be-be)." I told him I loved him too. I went back outside. Mom wanted to know what he said, and I told her. She turned and walked away from me, and I

saw her crying at the window, her reflection as sad as she was. He came through the surgery okay, but his health was never one hundred percent again. That's why I didn't think he would be there. Maybe I was more scared of it than he was.

"Papa, do you remember who your grandparents were," I asked. I had been researching our family's history for a few months now, so I thought I better start asking for some names.

"Well, bebe," he said, "My uncle's name was Fred. I don't remember my grandpa's name."

"He lived in Madison County, NC, right?" I asked.

"Yeh, all my people did," he said. "I used to go to my uncle Fred's all the time. He lived in Madison County. He lived in a house built into a cave."

"A cave," I asked. "C'mon now, Papa."

"He did," he said. "The back of his house went into a cave, and the front stuck out on the outside of it. A creek ran down the middle of the house, right through the house. You could see the water from the kitchen, running down the middle."

"Now, Papa," I said. "You know you're making that up."

"No ma'am," he said. "I used to spend the night up there all the time. I would go play in the big creek all day. You had to be careful though because people who lived upriver would dump their poop, and it would flow downstream. I never drunk that water in my life."

"Why would you even play in it?" I asked.

“Well, we didn’t have nuthin’ else to do. And you could see it comin’ cause it was usually green. All mountain people ate was greens. We would just get out ‘til it cleared up. Uncle Fred wouldn’t let us go in the cave, so the creek was all we had.”

“So, you spent your days playing in feces,” I asked.

“Yep,” he said, leaning back in his chair with his black coffee in his wrinkled left hand. “We used to watch Uncle Fred climb the mountain to the top. Aunt Mary lived up there. He never would let us climb. We had to walk the path the long way. I stayed up there one day by myself, and he took me another way up the mountain. When we got to the top, all you could see was a clear blue salt lake and dolphins jumping all in it.”

“Papa, you’ve got to be kidding,” I said, starting to giggle. “You know mountain lakes are fresh water.”

“Well, this one ain’t,” he said, looking me straight in the eyes. “This one had dolphins in it.” My granny began giggling in the corner.

“Mountain dolphins,” I whispered to myself. “Beats all I ever heard.”

“Beats all I ever seen,” he said.

GIGGLES

If you can make my grandma laugh, she won’t stop for hours. I graduated from college in 2002, so she wanted to take me to my favorite Chinese buffet in Spartanburg. After we ate and paid, she started walking slightly ahead of me. She reached for what she thought was the door but was actually a floor-to-ceiling window. The Chinese hostess laughed at her, and she started laughing too. When my grandma laughs, she looks more like she’s crying, so at first, I wasn’t sure if she was hurt or not. When we

went in Wal-Mart after to get Grandpa some Werthers, she would randomly start giggling throughout the store.

My laugh is very quiet, and Scott used to pick at me all the time to “Let it out, dummy!” If you weren’t looking directly at me, you wouldn’t know I was laughing because there is no noise, just giggling. Then, I look like I’m crying. People ask me all the time about whether or not I’m crying. I don’t know why my laugh doesn’t have a voice, but once I start with giggles, I can’t stop.

Mom said I used to hold my breath every time she put me in my car seat to go somewhere. She would strap me in, get in the front seat, and start driving. Not a minute down the road, she would look in the rearview mirror and see my face turning blue. I wasn’t even a year old.

“I would have to stop the car,” she said, “ and jerk you out of the seat to get you to stop.”

“How did you get me to stop doing it?” I asked.

“I took you to the doctor, and he said to whip your butt the next time you did it.”

“Did it work?”

“Well, me, mom, and you was going to Tabs. I put you in the seat and you had already started holding your breath. I jerked you and whipped you good. You never did it again after that.”

I started giggling when she told me that, but she didn’t think it was funny. At least my laugh was silent.

REVELATION 5.2

Papa told us that his sister, Dorothy, had suddenly died the day after he told me about the dolphins. She lived in an old trailer down in a valley. We never visited her, but Papa said her house was full of scorpions. I guess that's what killed her because she was only her late fifties. When she would come to Granny's to see Papa, she would always whisper to me when Papa wasn't looking. "My momma and daddy wuz witches, you know," she always said. She had some kind of speech problem, so her whispering was hard to understand more than her normal speech.

"What do you mean *witches*," I asked.

"Well, momma could wook at a wart on your finger and tate it wight off," she said. "People would always tome ovej for séances and stuff wike dat."

"Really," I said. "That's interesting." Papa always denied that when I asked. "My momma and daddy wasn't no witches," he'd say every time I asked. His story never changed, and neither did hers. So, when we were at the funeral, I asked him about the witch story again, and he said the same thing, except this time he laughed.

The funeral was boring for the most part. I didn't know any of Papa's side of the family, and most of the people on Granny's side separated themselves to the far right corner of the church parlor. There was a Big Woman sitting in the back row with a large black, feather hat and long, black gown. Her arms, as wide as the trunks of the oldest oak tree, were crossed and laid across her legs. Her hands looked like they should be a man's, holding a Bible in between them. Her head was facing down, so I couldn't see her face. She had two kids with her, a boy and a girl. They looked like they should be six or

seven years old, but their faces had wrinkles, and their colorless eyes drooped, their gaze dropping to the floor. Their short legs swung back and forth underneath the church pew, and they were humming something I couldn't understand. The woman let go of her Bible and took one child's hand in each of hers. Their posture straightened, and the humming stopped. I decided that these people must belong somewhere on Papa's side and also decided that I didn't need to know them. So, I got up and went to sit beside Papa again.

"I need you to find a picture of me and Dorothy," Papa said. "There should be one under the bed at home. I'd like to have one put out on the dresser."

"Okay Pop," I said. "I'll look for one when we get back."

"Hey," he said. "Did I ever tell you the story of the bull snake?"

"Bull snake," I said, scrunching my eyes to look up at him. "No, I don't think so."

"Well," he said, "a bull snake, when it gets hungry, will go up to a cow in a field and suck on its teats and drink milk."

"Now how do you know that?" I asked.

"I seen it while I was out in the field one day," he said. "That bull snake snuck up to that cow and got hold of its teat to drink milk. The cow just stood there and let it, too. Then, the bull snake let go, and the cow walked on off."

"Okay, Papa," I said, shaking my head at him. "I'll just let you have that one without arguing." With that, I got up and told mom I was ready to go, and we left to go to Granny's house to find a picture for Papa.

When we got there, I drug out all of Papa's containers of old pictures from under his bed. I had never looked at Papa's photos. Granny kept hers under her bed in the next

room, and for some reason, I always wanted to look at hers instead. As I started glancing through Papa's pictures, I noticed that I didn't recognize half the people I saw. I knew what Great-Grandpa looked like because he had lived until after my fifth birthday, but these other people I had no clue who they were. I found one that had the big woman from the funeral. The only reason I knew it was her was because of her size. Her head was still facing down, and she wore a large, black feather hat. I shrugged at the picture and kept digging through the boxes. I finally found one of Papa and Dorothy at the bottom of the last container. I took it out and stared at it for a minute. Papa was so young. I went to put the rest of the pictures back into the container and noticed that there was something underneath the last few I hadn't bothered to look at. I took it out, and it was old, leather journal with Papa's initials on the bottom. I didn't understand why Papa would have a journal because he always told me he never learned to read and write. I opened the journal and a picture of Great-Grandpa and a black man fell out to the floor. I turned it over--"Me and Percy" was written on the back. "Percy," I said to myself, recognizing that Percy was the man who was almost hung in Papa's story. I turned to the first entry, dated June 26, 1887. The date didn't make sense because Papa wasn't even born until 1936. I turned back to the front and ran my finger across the initials. They were the same as Papa's. I yelled at my mom in the next room. "Mom" I said. "Whose initials are JEE?" She yelled back, "Dad's are, but Great-Great-Grandpa's were too." I realized that this must be Great-Grandpa's journal, but Papa told me he couldn't read or write either. So I was still confused but decided I would read the entry to see what was happening.

I tole ole man Jones he needs leave Percy lone. Percy a good man, a good worker. He ain't done nuttin wrong to nobody. I been buildin dese coffins for ten year wit Percy's help. I needs him to hep me round de field. Ole man Jones says he gonna get the Klan if Percy don stay outta his field at night. He don give no mind to whut I say though. He just spat his 'bacco and went down de road.

I skipped to a later entry, August 21, 1887.

Ole Man Jones come by de farm. He says he wuz to get Percy tomorrow, him and the Klan. He says dere wuz nuttin I could do bout it, so I might just let it go. Dere's nuttin I could do to hep Percy without gettin my neck hung,too.

August 22, 1887.

Dey tooks ole Percy last nite. Amelia come screamin cross the field, and I already knows what wuz wrong. Her head wuz bleedin, and she says someone hit her. When she woke up, Percy wuz gone. She ain't seen him since. I think I knows where he's at, but I don't rightly want to go. I don't want to tell her that I knows. It's betta if she don know.

*I found Percy in a tree right outside town. His eyes still open, lookin at me, accusin me.
Where wuz you to help me.*

I dropped the journal to the floor. This wasn't the story Papa had told me. This wasn't how it happened. Percy didn't die...the wind scared the Klan off. He said Great-Grandpa couldn't even read or write, so how could he have written that at all? I looked away from the pictures and the journal and got up from the floor. I wasn't going to put everything back up like a secret. I was going to let him know that I knew. I left Papa's room and went to Granny's, sitting on her iron bed trying to figure everything out. It just didn't make sense. I spotted a picture of the new baby girl. The pink frame was sitting on the drawer next to the bed, and the baby girl was laughing. She was so innocent, I thought. She didn't need to know anything.

SARAH

Scott's girlfriend had disappeared a month after the baby was born. She did well for a while with her, but then she started going to bars and leaving the baby alone with my grandmother. Granny didn't mind, really, because she had pretty much raised everyone in my family anyway, but Granny wasn't as young and healthy as she used to be. My mom and I both agreed that it wasn't right for Scott to leave the baby with Granny every day, but we couldn't say anything about it because Granny had a weird temper sometimes. If you said something the wrong way, she would get mad at you for a week. My dad's mother stays at his brother's house every weekend, and I know that they get a little aggravated with her. I was telling Granny one day that I wouldn't want my single, aging mother to stay with me every weekend. Granny took offense and said I was rude. I didn't mean that I never wanted my mother to stay with me, just not every single weekend. I planned on getting married and having kids (or maybe just a kid), and I

wanted a life on my own. But I would always help my mother if she needed me. My dad's mother is a strong woman. Her husband, my dad's father, died when my dad was only thirteen. It had been over thirty years, and my dad's mother had never even looked at another man. She raised her four boys on her own, and I have always admired her for that. So, needless to say, I watch what I say around Granny sometimes.

“All I really need,” Granny said, “is some help buying food and diapers.”

“I know, Granny,” I said, “and it's stupid that Scott or that stupid girlfriend won't help you buy anything.”

“Well,” she said, “you might as well forget about them and starting thinking of new ways to buy things. I can spend a little at the Dollar Store and Wal-Mart, but I can't buy everything.”

“I know.” I said, “Well, you know I've been buying her clothes and food every now and then, but I guess it's just not enough.”

“Don't think I don't 'preciate what you do neither,” she said. “It just comes up short sometimes. It ain't like when we used to make our own diapers and wash 'em out. That was a lot easier than today when diapers cost ya thirty dollars every month.” Mom had been bringing her home toys and clothes from the Goodwill, and I had been stopping at Target every now and then when diapers were on sale, but this was a brand new baby girl, and the bare minimum wasn't working. While we knew she needed everything, nobody but Granny really felt a sense of full responsibility for her. We all knew who should be taking care of her, but we all knew, too, that it wasn't going to happen.

I didn't really care where the girlfriend had gone because I never really liked her anyway, and she never seemed like a fit parent to begin with, but Scott was different. He was still around; he just didn't want to see her. He always played it off like he was too busy trying to find a job, but the baby girl needed him now, not when he had spare time. So I took advantage of the situation and saw the baby girl as much as I could. My mom went to see her every day after work, sometimes forgetting to drop by and see me. The baby girl couldn't do much at a month-old but lay there and laugh at God knows what, probably at the baby voice my mom used to talk to her. She had talked to all of us in that voice.

Mom decided that she would keep her at night, and since my dad was unemployed from five back surgeries, he was always there to help. He loved babies, too, and always asked when I would have a baby boy to go hunting and fishing with him. I liked knowing that the baby girl was safe during the day with Granny and at night with Mom, but I still felt like something was missing for her. I went down on a Friday to take her some of the books I had as a kid. I wanted to read them to her every time I saw her so she would know what it was to go to another world when everything here was so messed up—even if we caused the mess. Even if she couldn't understand it at a month old, I wanted it to be locked somewhere in her mind. I read to her the story of Guinevere and Lancelot and how brave Guinevere was—she was a fighter, I told her, a strong woman. The baby girl seemed to like the story, but she always seemed to laugh when I read *Frog and Toad Together*. Maybe that story was much simpler.

Everybody seemed to be complaining about Granny keeping the baby girl every day, but no one stepped up to do anything about it. My mom was doing the best she could, and no one had a right to say otherwise. Most of the snickering seemed to come from my aunts who I guess were jealous because they thought they could do a better job. Even Marie acted like she could do better than my mom, and she was already so busy raising three kids of her own—three wonderful kids who deserved their mother’s full attention. There was no easy way around the situation, and there didn’t seem to be a solution either. The little girl in the pink jumpsuit looking wide-eyed around the room didn’t really have anybody that wanted her, and I felt ashamed to be standing there just looking at her.

I picked her up and took her to every picture frame in Granny’s house—Granny had so many pictures of family members on her walls, on her tables, under her bed. There weren’t many recent photographs. I showed her my college graduation and the picture my mom took of me when I was a baby, sitting on the top of her Falcon when the car broke down on the way to the mountains. Every single member of my family had a picture somewhere in Granny’s house. She even kept out pictures of my aunt’s ex-husband. I told the baby girl about everyone in our family as I took her to each frame, and then I showed her a picture of her that I took when she was first born.

“That’s you, baby girl,” I whispered to her, pinching her little finger in mine. “Aren’t you a beautiful little girl?” She stared at the picture of herself, not knowing who the other people around her were. They weren’t holding her or even looking at her. They were just in the picture. “Yes you are,” I said, “a beautiful little Sarah.”

TUG OF WAR

It had been ten years since Johnny killed those people. His name had only crossed my mind when I heard about his failed appeals on the local news. Each time, they showed a new picture, and each time he failed to look the same as I remembered him. I was at my mom and dad's one day in the afternoon and decided to check the mail. My dad and I usually competed to see who could get there first, but his back surgeries slowed him down. I flipped through the junk mail and saw an envelope with Scott's and my name on it. It was from the McCormick Prison down below Columbia. I opened the envelope slowly because I had no idea what it could be. Inside were two drawings, one addressed to each of us. Scott's was a pencil sketch of a puppy dog, and mine was of a unicorn, both signed at the bottom "I love you and miss you, Johnny." I didn't know what I felt. This was a from a man who had killed two people, a man who had almost completely been erased from my memory. I showed my dad, and he got really angry because Johnny had once been his best friend. He showed them to my mom when she got home from work, and she immediately wanted to throw them away, but I grabbed them before she could get to the trash.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't want you to throw them away."

"Why the hell not?" she said, her voice getting louder.

"I don't know," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "I don't want to look at them. I just want to keep 'em somewhere." She didn't ask me any more about it, handing me the envelope as she walked out the back door.

I really didn't know what I wanted with the drawings, but I knew I didn't just want to throw them away. I took the envelope home and tossed it in the drawer on top of my application for an editor's position in New York. I went back to it later that night and realized that they had both gotten stuck in between the top and second drawer, and I really didn't have the will to fight with the desk.

MR. READER

Mr. Reader was an old, black man that was friends with my dad. I absolutely adored him. He would walk up to the front porch with his faded blue overalls and his tub of chewing tobacco almost falling out of his side pocket. His eyes looked tired as if he had seen too much in his lifetime, but his will was strong. He had to live for his daughter, he always said, because she needed him. My dad met him one day at Verdin's Feed Store; dad was buying dog food for his beagles, and Mr. Reader was buying horse feed. Mr. Reader had noticed that one of dad's beagles was limping, so he applied a salve he took from his pocket to the dog's back leg and said that the dog would be better the next day. Sure enough, Cadie was running hard and fast the next morning, chasing the little, brown bunny in my dad's running pen. My dad was so impressed that he went back to Verdin's, hoping that Mr. Reader would be there, but he wasn't. The man behind the counter told him where he lived, and dad drove to his farm just to say thanks for fixing his dog. After that day, they developed a really close bond with each other and with each other's animals. Mr. Reader would come once a month just to check on all of the dogs.

He drove a blue and gray Ford pickup with all of his supplies banging around in the back of the truck—that's how I knew when he was coming down the driveway. He was a slow walker, so I usually met him at his door when he came to visit. Every time, he would tell me the same thing:

“Miss Gen,” he'd say, “you'se ain't married yet are you?”

“No, Mr. Reader,” I'd say, “not married yet.”

“Wells,” he said, “you'se doin' the right thing, too, cuz lemme tell you, honey, there ain't a good man out dere no more, and I'm just too ole for ya.” Mr. Reader always made me laugh, but he also made me appreciate the single life I led so far. I wasn't in a hurry to get married because I wanted my teaching to come first. I had always felt that way.

Mr. Reader's last visit before he passed was about a week after Sarah was born.

“Now, I knows dis ain't your baby,” he said, rubbing one arthritic finger over the baby's head. “Naw suh, I knows dis ain't yourn.”

“No, sir, Mr. Reader,” I said. “She's just my baby cousin.”

“Well, I know dats true cuz yous too smart for a chile right now,” he said.

“That's right, Mr. Reader,” I said, giggling at Mr. Reader's comment but looking down at Sarah. “Too smart.”

Dad found out through Mr. Reader's daughter that he had passed when Sarah was almost a month old. We went to the funeral and talked about how he never seemed like he was lonely, that he always had his animals and his daughter. His daughter told my dad that her mother had passed when she was just a baby, and Mr. Reader raised her alone

with the occasional help of her grandmother. Her father didn't care about another woman after his wife's death. I imagined that would probably happen to me, too. Either I would be left alone or I would leave somebody alone, if I could even love that much or someone could even love me that much. I told myself when I saw Mr. Reader's daughter crying on her knees at her father's grave that I didn't want someone left after me who would have to be that sad if something happened. I knew what it was like to fear each day because something tragic could happen to someone so close to me. I thought about it constantly, worrying every single day when my mom would go to work or when my dad would go hunting. Would there be a wreck on Woodruff Road? Would dad forget to switch to safety on his gun? Why should I have someone worry like that about me? It didn't seem worth the anxiety. But the same eyes that held his daughter's tears held the love I saw for her father, and maybe that was more important than grief.

COURT DATE

The girlfriend had come back from where she was and up and decided that she wanted Sarah back. Scott decided that he was actually going to try and get full custody of Sarah, but I knew he wouldn't because he didn't have a job (of course, neither did she). Scott asked us to go to court with him; my dad said he would, but mom and I decided that we would stay as far away from that scene as possible because we both knew it would be nothing but a day of lies. Instead, we kept Sarah because the court would not allow her to be there. They were in court for about three hours, and dad called us to say that the court didn't feel that either parent was suitable to take care of Sarah, and if they didn't agree on a suitable family placement within twenty-four hours, Sarah would be put

in temporary foster care. Mom and I couldn't believe it. We had no idea what to do, and we only had one day to figure out something. Mom had already said that she couldn't take Sarah because dad had some pretty bad days with his back. Granny and Papa couldn't take her because they were simply not healthy enough. Sure, they said, they could keep her sometimes during the day, but not every day. The girlfriend didn't want anyone in her family to get Sarah, so she told Scott to decide and that she just didn't care anymore. She walked out the courtroom door, dad said, and just drove off. So, it was up to Scott to make the decision, or up to one of us to make it for him.

We didn't talk much about it when Scott came to the house. He patted Sarah on her head and sat down to watch the Panthers play. We sat, me holding a sleeping Sarah, mom cooking supper, and dad doing a crossword. We didn't know what to say or do. I was so mad at Scott for not being a responsible father. My mom and dad had showed him what a good parent was, and he acted like he had never even lived with us. He had learned nothing about responsibility and compassion, not even compassion really but love. He had learned nothing about love, not how to take or give it. How could he have sat there and watched a stupid football game and not even notice that his daughter was crying, not for milk, but for someone to pick her up and just look at her. She only wanted to be looked at, for someone to realize that she was there in the room. Why couldn't he see how much she wanted his attention?

I stood up with Sarah and went to the front door. "I'll take her," I said and looked at them. Mom nodded as if she had known all along that I would. "I'll put her in a nursery three days a week and let Granny keep her the others," I said. "I'll take her

tonight.” The light from the front door window caught her eyes, and I noticed that one was blue, and one was a mix of blue, brown, and green.

PART FIVE

EPILOGUE

I got married the December after Sarah's fifth birthday. I met my husband, Matthew, at a bookstore in Greenville. I had actually gone to school with him but hadn't really seen him since graduation. When I saw him standing there, the first memory that popped into my mind was him sitting at the back of the school bus that day. His green eyes still held that same intensity. He was skimming through a biography of James Joyce. I was sitting in one of those burgundy couches next to the literature section when I noticed him frantically searching for another book. Sarah was pulling at my arm from beside the couch. I turned back around to see Matthew staring at me. We ended up talking a lot about the past. Five months after Sarah's fifth birthday, we were married. Three years later, we had a son, Lucas.

Eight total years have passed since the day I decided to take little Sarah. Sarah is eight, and Luke is five. Scott sees her every weekend, and she knows he's her daddy. Even at eight years old, she understands why she's with me. She doesn't ask where her mother is, and even if she did, I couldn't tell her. Nobody had heard from her since Sarah was one. She tried to come see her on her birthday, but Sarah cried so hard when I left the room. It upset her to see Sarah want me and not her. Honestly, I'm not sure how I felt that day. In a way, I was happy to see her walk to me, but I also felt like I was taking her away from her mother. I still haven't figured out which emotion is right, but I do know that Sarah looks happy and healthy. Maybe that's the best I could do for her.

Luke just turned five a few days before Papa told me that The Big Woman had died. He actually did say her name, but I couldn't pronounce it, and I still didn't know how she fit into our family. Nevertheless, I told him I would go to the funeral with him and Granny. Matthew didn't want to go; he said he wasn't a big fan of funerals since his half brother had died, so I took the kids with me. The funeral was held at a little Ebenezer church, one I had never really noticed before. By noticed, I mean that it wasn't even on the main road. It was stuck between two gorges in some town I had never heard of. It wasn't easy to get to; in fact, we had to walk the whole way, me pulling Luke by my left arm and Sarah by my right because they kept wandering off somewhere behind me. After about a mile walk, we finally saw the little church. It looked more like a cathedral than a church. Its tall, white columns were peeling from the summer heat, and the stained glass windows were broken. Ivy reached in through the cracks in the walls. I didn't think anyone still attended church there. We went in, and I took the kids with me to the back row since I wasn't really familiar with Papa's side of the family. The rows leaned forward as if forcing its attendants to pray. The top of a faded metal cross peaked out from the green and brown fingers of the ivy. Papa and Granny went around to the ten or so people who showed up and shook hands, nodding their heads from side to side. No one was crying for this Big Woman, a single, blue light shone on her black hat from one of the broken windows. Her son and daughter sat in the front row, still humming the same song I heard at the last funeral. I stared at them for a few minutes.

The girl was probably sixteen or seventeen by now, but she still wore a purple and white striped dress, frilly at the bottom but cute. Her hair was much longer and was

curled tightly. A white satin bow flowed down her back. I couldn't see her face, but I imagined that it still carried the wrinkles that grew there before. Her brother, a few years younger than her, was wearing a blue and green striped shirt and black pants that stopped just below his knees. I thought he was wearing white tights, but I couldn't be sure. Both brother and sister looked awfully pale, but they didn't seem to be bothered by their mother's death. They hummed and stared out straight in front them to the wooden casket that barely held the Big Woman's body. Slowly, the few guests who had come walked up and past the casket, looking down when they arrived at her face. Curious to see what this woman looked like, I left the kids and went to the Big Woman's side. I wasn't really shocked to see that she was still wearing her black dress, and her feathered, black hat was draped neatly over her face. I lifted my hand to her face in determination to raise the hat and see who this woman was. I touched the thick brim lightly and started to slowly lift the front away from her face. I had exposed her chin, sunken as if someone had punched her harshly in the mouth and indented her jawbone. I stopped for a second. I again put my hand to the brim of the hat. I had almost exposed her nose when I heard a scream from the back pew. Luke and Sarah were fighting, Luke's hand entwined in Sarah's long golden hair. She yelped and punched him in the arm. The black, feathered hat dropped harshly when I let it go. Finally free of each other's grasp, Luke reared his right leg back and kicked Sarah in her left shin. She screamed again.

“Orphan!” he yelled at her, and she cried.

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