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'Reflection' and Other Stories

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“Reflection” and Other Stories

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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

by
Melissa Kathleen Turner
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Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Dr. Alma Bennett
Dr. Jillian Weise

ABSTRACT

A creative thesis made up of four fiction stories. The stories focus on identity within the major characters and how they cope with the circumstances of life. “Reflection and Other Stories” is realistic in plot and style.

DEDICATION

For my father, who has never encouraged me to pursue a career in writing for practical reasons, but enjoys the written word more than anyone else in my life. And for Tyler LaCross, who persistently requests to read my stories, and who continues to love and support me when I refuse.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE USUAL STOCK OF TIMBER	9
3. NESTING	27
4. ANOTHER TOWN ON THE MAP	46
5. REFLECTION	64
WORKS CITED	77

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I haven't always been interested in writing short stories. In fact, only in the last four years has my interest in literature moved from a passive reading stance to an active writing one. While studying literature, I found myself taking apart a novel or story and putting it back together like a puzzle. From that point, I started creating my own puzzles, putting the characters, plot, and conflict together in my own creative ways. As I piece together characters' lives for my stories, I study them and focus on the identity of the character I'm writing about. For me, the most interesting plot twist is one where, ultimately, the main character comes to some conclusion or new state of clarity in his or her life. The situation may not be extremely dramatic or outlandish, but really examines how the character makes decisions and handles various situations.

Although straight realism has been around for a long time, my stories work within the boundaries of a modern world, focusing on individuals in their mid-twenties and early thirties as a generation. I've always been interested in everyday people and understanding how they deal with problems or conflicts in a certain way. Because of my own life experiences, I find the small situations to test people's character and to ultimately reveal their identity, or how they view themselves. Each character within these stories faces some kind of decision or conflict. While the ending may not wrap everything up in a perfect box, each story reflects on an incident of revelation in the individual's life and

how his or her response led towards a certain conclusion. Sometimes I focus simply on the realization, and other times on the character's decision.

Because the stories I write deal with realistic people, my goal for readers is not merely entertainment, but for them to relate to a character or situation. I hope readers can recognize one of their own qualities or struggles within the characters in the stories, and reflect on their own identity afterwards. Some part of my view of myself as an individual has been challenged by each of these characters and, by positioning myself in their shoes, I see where I would have made different and similar decisions. Some of my interest also comes from how cultures play a dominating role in many people's world views and often severs their true identities from the plastic masks they wear in public. Levinas suggests that, "beneath the plasticity of the face [*figure*] that *appears*, the face [*visage*] is already missed" (Levinas 126). I interpret his words here, within his larger context of Levinas's interest in Jewish identity, to mean an individual's true identity hides beneath or is lost underneath the façade, the plastic face others see when they view that person. This plasticity is what I hope to break apart within my stories. While none of my characters are incredibly rebellious or countercultural, they make decisions on an everyday level that lead to the sharpening of their own identities, and hopefully of my readers' as well.

I try to maintain this realism throughout the stories, not just in plot, but also in style. I have always tended to write flowery and long-winded sentences. Professors always told me to make my sentences less complex in papers, and I found my stories to be confusing when I first started writing because I found my sentences to rival those of

Henry James. However, I've tried to refocus my writing style and adapt it to a more realistic and simple form. Writing and editing this thesis have been adopting a new discipline, but the style matches the characters and plot and helps create a more readable story.

Much of my style and character interest comes from my literary interests and influences. When I started graduate school, I found myself interested in late Victorian literature. The language of early Victorians such as Austen or the Bronte sisters influenced my writing patterns for a long time, but I found one of my greatest interests in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*. The plight of everyday women, scraping by for food, in search of jobs, and breaking away from the traditional housewife standard in England at the turn of the century fascinated me when I first read the novel. Although many other people found it slightly dull in comparison to sensation fiction, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* or Wilke Collins's *The Moonstone*, I found the Madden sisters' struggles within the stipulations society placed on them to reveal much more about their identity. While Monica Madden decides to follow society and seek riches in marriage, she ultimately dies because of her decision to dishonor herself by taking on a false identity. The decision to work and not marry for the other sisters held my attention because it was more realistic, and I could relate to it much more than the dramatic, but entertaining murder and arson plot twists in Braddon's work. I enjoy mysteries, but find simple plots challenge me the most.

Another influence on my writing has been Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. While Lily Bart and Edna Pontillier live in a way many people in the public don't experience today, they still resided under the influence of their societies. My interest stemmed from how they worked within their societies, breaking rules, battling with themselves and the men within their worlds in order to decide their identities. While it's argued whether or not Edna Pontillier achieves freedom through her death, Lily Bart definitely does not beat the system by trying to make her own decisions or beat the system. The unfortunately realistic endings to both stories have influenced me to keep a practical viewpoint on the characters in my stories and how they function within their social circles.

Though completely different in writing style and character choice, I also find Richard Ford's realism to encapsulate the types of people I desire to write about. While Ford is separated from Wharton by at least half a century, their writing styles both display how writing realistic fiction has changed and yet, remained the same. Wharton's writing style is more elongated and flowery, whereas Ford has adapted to contemporary society and writes with a straightforward voice. Ford gets straight to the story, but, similar to Wharton, still writes about the struggles and underlying issues for people in society. Also, Ford typically writes from a masculine point of view, whereas the aforementioned Victorian writers wrote from the feminine perspective.

In his book of short stories, *Rock Springs*, Ford focuses on small town characters, the people who seem to live boring, anonymous lives, and brings one small instance of

their lives into focus. In reality, most individuals live what society would consider “boring” lives, but Ford successfully takes them and exalts their mundane attributes, celebrating the challenges the individual faces and the decisions and consequences of one moment or event. He also uses a style that remains specific, but simple and straightforward. He doesn’t hide much in his language. One story I found engaging was “Great Falls.” I love his lines, “It is a true thing that my father did not know limits” and “He smiled at me in an odd way. This was not a thing he usually said, or the way he usually talked” (30-33). These phrases may seem as if they tell too much, but the larger issue in the story always lies beneath the surface of what he says. Ford’s blunt manner makes the reader look for an underlying message. Reading his stories is like listening to someone describe his or her life. The language isn’t ornate or unrealistic, but the intimacy of the topic infiltrates the reader from the first paragraph of the story when he speaks to the reader saying, “This is not a happy story. I warn you” (29).

Another contemporary writer of influence is Bobbie Ann Mason. Her story “Shiloh” is the epitome of minimalistic realism. Once again, she writes about the average American couple, estranged through their loss of a child and the changes going on in their lives. While Leroy loves his wife, but has lost his job and can’t seem to get past proving himself to Norma Jean by promising to build a log cabin. Norma Jean’s refusal to accept Leroy’s gift and her own attempts at proving herself, through night school, create a conflict similar to that of “Nesting” and “The Usual Stock of Timber” in this collection. Both stories deal with couples trying to work through life changes while sorting out their differences. Mason writes in a blunter manner than Ford. Mason describes one of Leroy’s

realizations: “Leroy has the hopeful thought that they are sharing something, but he knows he is a fool to think this. Norma Jean is miles away. He knows he is going to lose her” (1020). While I don’t try to emulate her narrator, omniscient but incredibly distant from the characters, I do enjoy how Mason writes her characters without anything to hide. She realistically portrays them without mystery, leaving the reader to dissect the relationship between Leroy and Norma Jean and grasp how Norma Jean starts to outgrow their relationship and separates herself from Leroy physically and emotionally. I also find myself wanting to leave questions for the reader to answer at the end. At the end of “Shiloh,” Mason leaves Leroy and Norma Jean on opposite sides of the field. They can’t successfully communicate, though Leroy knows Norma Jean wants to leave him, and yet he still holds onto the hope that she motions to him. As a reader you’re left knowing they probably won’t work things out, but there is a margin of a change that allows the reader to interpret what is really going on between the two in the last paragraph.

In my work, I try and imitate that of Gissing, Ford, and even Mason. My narratives tend to be simple and straightforward, not hiding much about the plot from the reader. The stories encapsulate simple decisions everyone faces within day-to-day circumstances. In “Another Town on the Map,” Eli functions within a non-traditional nomad lifestyle. Though readers may not relate to him on that level, he faces the decision to continue in his comfort zone or choose a more settled-down lifestyle that makes him uncomfortable. As well, Skip, in “The Usual Stock of Timber,” thrives in a culture where women stay home from work. He struggles through knowing his wife’s ability to be more successful at work than he is in the lumberyard. Yet, she stays home with their kids. In

“Nesting,” Rebecca finds herself in a marriage where she is happy, but realizes her life goals may be the opposite of what she originally planned with her husband. Her decision to stay with or to leave him hinges on the future lifestyles they individually desire. The one exception to straightforward writing is “Reflection,” where the build-up in the story relies on Hazel’s decision to confront her father. It begins with her seeing her father walk into a store and builds up until she goes to confront him. However, I wrote the story in the similar style of writing and omnisciently gave her thoughts and realizations.

When writing these stories, I focused on one decision or one event that may shape an individual’s personality or concept of self. However, I recognize from my own life experience that there isn’t always one moment of revelation leading to a new concept of reality or a new decision. Some of the stories have the typical epiphany, though the others come to their realization through a slow progression. In “The Usual Stock of Timber,” Skip is jolted out of the angry slump he’s been in through one climactic event. I felt that, as a character, Skip needed more of a jolt to get out of his rut. Also, the major conflict between Skip and his wife, Maggie, wouldn’t have changed because there was no big decision coming up or change in Skip unless the plot changed unexpectedly at work. Similarly, in “Reflection,” Hazel’s anger and frustration with her own life need one similar shocking experience to force her into making commitments in her life she’s never been able to accept. However, in “Nesting,” the character moves through a world where change happens naturally. Rebecca’s pregnancy and experiences in graduate school have an inevitable end in sight. I took the natural changes to the body and the tumult of finishing a graduate degree as a way of implementing change to her character. I didn’t

have to construct a story around one event or moment of deciding about her future because her life continually changes with pregnancy and family. Similarly, in “Another Town on the Map,” Eli moves through the United States, town by town, in a formulated manner. I took his habits of traveling from town-to-town and manipulated the formula with the offer of a full time job in order for his identity to be revealed more directly within the context of his traditional lifestyle.

Because I believe literature should relate to readers while at the same time holding them captive, I’ve focused my thesis on the ordinary lives of men and women. Although all the characters face identity shaping circumstances, each character is different and makes decisions based on his or her specific qualities. While I know these stories won’t specifically relate to everyone, my hope is that the characters appeal to most people and reflect on the self in a straightforward way.

CHAPTER TWO

THE USUAL STOCK OF TIMBER

“Skip, phone call!” Ben hollered from the office. Skip Jackson kept hauling logs in the wood yard: trailer to the forklift, trailer to the forklift. Just one more, he thought as he hoisted his wood pick above his head.

“Easy, man,” his friend Glenn said behind him. “Not too hard.”

“It’s fine. I gotta get the phone. It’s probably Maggie.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s nice she cares enough to call you sometimes.”

“Shit, Glenn.” Skip shook his head. “She only wants control, her way or no way. I just don’t feel like hearing her complain until I say ‘yes.’”

“I don’t know, man.” Glenn kept working.

Skip started walking towards the office, but turned halfway there. “Sometimes I don’t understand you, Glenn.”

“Skip,” Ben stuck his head out of the office. “You coming?”

Skip exhaled loudly and stormed up the steps of the single-wide trailer, the wood yard’s makeshift office, and answered the phone.

“Hello?” He acted as if he didn’t know who was on the other line.

“Skip. You didn’t come home for lunch.”

“Mags, I told you I wouldn’t because we have a train pick up today.”

“But I made your sandwich and everything. The kids and I waited around for an hour.”

“We grabbed something at the gas station. I told you I wouldn’t be home. You shouldn’t have made the boys wait.”

“The gas station? That food is horrible. You probably just had a pack of doughnuts, and you know those things are just empty calories. They’re not going to make you a better worker. They’ll just clog your arteries.”

“I didn’t have doughnuts, Maggie. I’m a 33-year-old man. I can feed myself.”

“Well, you need to start eating like a 33-year-old man then.”

“I’m also on the clock. I can’t let the guys do all the work.”

“You better not go out drinking tonight. I’m cooking a dinner. Don’t make the boys wait on you again.”

“Maggie. I have to go. Bye.” Skip hung up the phone without waiting for a response.

He breathed in and out. Just when he thought he and Maggie had gotten past their daily bickering, she said one thing, couldn’t let it drop, and he had to defend himself. Ben was over by the coffee maker, pretending to clean up. He balled his fist up. Damn it, Ben

could have at least allowed him some privacy. Skip kept staring at the phone. Ben was the new guy, his boss, who took his place as manager because he had a college degree.

Ben walked back to the desk and pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up on his nose. He ran his hands through his black hair and cleared his throat. "I'll go help the guys outside and tell them you're getting a drink of water," he said. "This shouldn't happen again, though." Skip stared at the desk until the door closed behind Ben.

Peering out from one of the many dirt-tinged windows, Skip swore as he watched Ben walk up to the men, talk and laugh, then help them load the train for the afternoon pick up. It was his job, had been his job for years, to take care of all the paperwork. But just like that, Stone had upped their management with the opening of two new wood yards just last year. His job was gone before he knew it. He was demoted, left behind, replaced by a college kid who had never worked a real job. Ben's forestry degree seemed better to the higher-ups than Skip's 17 years of experience in the Elgin yard.

He made a mental inventory of the wood yard. Glenn, Mike, Glove, and Ben worked with chainsaws and picks, hauling a new shipment of timber onto the railroad cars waiting to be hauled to the paper mill a few hundred miles towards the coast. Glenn took the bulk of the pine trees over to the cars on the forklift while the other men pulled, grappled, and positioned the next load. Mike and Glenn were about his age, both with sandy brown hair and tanned skin. Glove wiped his brow with a sleeve. Even in the summer, he sometimes wore long-sleeved shirts. He said it protected his old skin from

the sun. However, Glove never wore a hat, his balding head always sun-burned during the summer.

Skip watched Glenn's skilled hands move the switches and handles of the forklift with ease. Skip never felt confident with the big machines. He'd seen a guy have his foot run over by a loader once, and that was the end of his thrill with how far technology had brought them. He admired his friend's ability to handle machinery, but preferred counting, measuring, and securing the loads before they were shipped or stored. Skip hated micromanagement. It was just like his house. Almost like he lived in an office building.

He knew all their stories. Glenn served as a radio operator in the war, but during the Tet offensive, a mortar exploded near his head, causing hearing loss and a medical discharge. During their many nights on Skip's porch, he had heard enough of Glenn's war stories not to envy his experience.

Mike was door gunner on a helicopter. Not many people lived long in that job. Mike served 6 years, but his leg bore the brunt, one round scar after another up the outside of his calf, some of the machine gun bullets lodged too far under the muscle and bone to be retrieved.

Glove opened the creaky door, which never quite stayed shut, and walked in.

“Skip, that cup of water sure turned into a gallon or so. You been inside at least ten minutes.”

“Sorry, Glove. I should have come outside after Maggie called.” He paused. “I was just looking over some paperwork.” Skip studied the grain in the plastic wood paneling on the wall.

“That’s Ben’s job. Comes with the big bucks.” Glove smiled almost apologetically.

“Yeah, I guess college degrees get you somewhere these days,” Skip said.

“Heck, when I was young, most people didn’t go to college. Lucky I graduated from high school. You boys went to ‘Nam instead.”

“I know, I know,” Skip sighed. “Nixon cut the draft off a month before I would have left. Maggie says with such luck, I should have stuck to finishing college. I don’t know.”

“How is she anyways?”

Skip wasn’t sure what to say. “She’s busy with the boys.”

Glove walked to the window near the door. Both of them studied the wood yard intently.

“Does she have any friends?”

“Nah. The girls around here aren’t what she’s used to. She’s got some college friends she talks to every now and then, but they went off and moved to big cities out of

the state. She's too good for a crossroads place like Elgin." He wasn't sure why he was defending her.

"Maybe one night you two should head to Chuck's."

Chuck's Tavern was the local bar, a hole in the wall just half a mile from the wood yard. Skip liked to stop by with Glenn and Mike some days, especially when the train came and they got off early. He always took advantage of the fact that Maggie didn't expect him for a while. Glove never went, and Skip wondered why he even suggested it.

"Maybe I'd bring her if you'd go with us, too."

Glove laughed and smiled. "You got me there."

Skip patted Glove on the back, "Let's go." The men walked out the door just as Ben gave new directions.

"Alright, guys," he called across the yard. "We've got to finish tying this load down and connecting the cars. Pick up time is 4:30 and a storm's on the horizon. Let's go!"

The men jogged over to the cars, across the off-white, packed dirt ground. He caught up with Glenn as they passed the old wood barn, which looked as if it had been there for centuries, almost out of place beside the covered area. Skip and some other men, who were long gone now, built it for the forklifts when Skip first started at the wood yard in 1968; he was just 15-years-old. The wood yard had its own character, a confused mix

of past and present, full of railway cars, steel frames, yet guided and haunted with the presence of the farmland past. Rusted, decaying farm machinery sat behind the barn between the single-wide and the front gate.

Working quickly, Glenn climbed on top of the car and Skip and Mike worked ropes around the sides of the load, preparing knots and bundling the logs together like firewood. While Ben and Glove got the couplers ready to hook the two rail cars together, Glenn moved extra logs around with his wood pick. They had almost finished when the storm hit. Lightning cracked so loud in the sky, the men shook. In one second they could all feel their arm-hair stand on end, and they saw a bolt strike the line so close they couldn't be sure where it hit. Standing on the top of the car, Glenn suddenly looked pale.

“You scared?” Mike asked.

Glenn just stared ahead and pointed. His wood pick was stuck in the middle of a log.

“Glenn, snap out of it,” Ben called. “Is your pick stuck?”

Glenn nodded. “I didn't do it. Lightning did.”

“So, the lightning threw the pick out of your hand?” Mike laughed.

“I ain't kidding,” he swore.

They all looked at him as if he was joking, but Glenn kept a straight face.

“Damn, that's weird,” said Skip, and Mike nodded in agreement.

“Did you get struck?” Glove asked. “A buddy of mine got struck once and felt like ants were crawling all over him, biting him.”

Glenn shook his head. “No. I don’t think so. I don’t know. Felt like someone yanked her right outta my hands.”

Lightning struck again. This time further off, but they all tensed up.

“Finish up, and get the hell inside,” Ben broke in. Clouds rolled in closer by the second, dark gray and promising.

They piled into the office, trying their best to close the door as the downpour began. “It hasn’t been so hot today. I didn’t think we’d have one,” Ben said, pouring himself a cup of coffee. Glenn sat down at the table by the cooler. He gripped the edge, his knuckles white, his eyes focused on the wall. Glove wrote in the notebook he kept in his pocket and gazed out the window at the rain, now falling in sheets across the wood yard.

Skip took the moment to gaze at the wall and clear his head.

He couldn’t get his conversation with Maggie out of his head. They had been in love for years before they got married, but lately she just seemed to snap at any moment. Just thinking of her dark curls and the curve of her hips made him want to get the boys in bed early. Then he heard all the nagging in his head, and the idea of a beer at Chuck’s sounded better.

He knew he hadn't lived up to all the dreams they had early on in college, but he'd worked hard for their home and kept food on the table. She'd always told him he could be a lot more than he was, but he dropped out the end of his sophomore year. Then they got married, and then the kids came along, and it never seemed the right time to go back to school. Now at 33, he felt like school wasn't an option.

He knew Maggie gave up a big job to stay home with their boys, Daniel and Chris. She patiently worked with them when they couldn't sit still or wanted to dump peas in their milk.

Ben came over and sat down. Skip tensed up. Ben regularly gathered with one or two of the guys for a pep talk about being diligent workers and keeping business profitable. Skip thought they made everyone uncomfortable, hearing a 22-year-old tell them how to work. Ben did help with some of the labor, especially getting the cars ready for pickup by the daily train. But his paperwork took up a lot of his time and his manner about work rankings offended Skip. To his surprise, Ben said, "Do you think you and Maggie would like to come over and eat dinner with Elizabeth and me one night?"

Silence.

"Skip?" Ben asked, leaning closer.

"Oh, sorry. I'll have to ask Maggie." It didn't make sense for Ben to be nice suddenly.

Ben took a sip of his coffee. “It would be nice for her to have a friend. She hasn’t made any yet.”

Skip didn’t know if he was supposed to feel bad for Elizabeth or Ben. Seemed like both of them had the short end of the stick. He looked around to see Glenn had gotten a drink of water, but was staring at the wall while Mike tried to talk to him without success.

Glove interrupted their conversation. “Storm blew over quick,” he called. “Let’s head back out and get it done.”

Glenn gripped the rail as he walked down the steps. Skip wanted to ask if he was ok.

“Skip,” Ben said before he could speak, “Just let me know later or something.”

The two men sauntered over to the door and peered out the window. Skip watched Glenn raise his wood pick to grab a log. He saw the flash of the blade, no more than half an inch thick as Glenn’s muscles flexed. Then Glenn’s body jerked. He seemed to shake, then crumpled to the ground. The pick fell with him. Blood started running down the back of Glenn’s leg and he lay on the ground, as if unconscious.

“What the hell?” Skip said under his breath, shoving Ben aside and striding out the door. He stopped and stared while Ben caught up. Glenn had managed to miss the log, and instead the sharp blade struck his leg and came out the other side.

“He must have passed out and hit his leg when he fell,” Ben said. “Check his pulse, and I’ll call 911.”

Skip didn’t move.

“I said, check his pulse,” Ben yelled over his shoulder, running towards the office. No matter how much he tried, Skip couldn’t move. Mike ran up just about the time Glenn’s eyes started fluttering, his face the color of buttermilk. Glenn let out a guttural moan and immediately threw up. Then he yelled and gagged some more, but his body kept shaking as if he was having a seizure. Mike tried to help Glenn sit up, but the sight of blood stopped him cold, and he moved more slowly to help Glove. Glenn convulsed on the ground, and Ben came running back at about the same time Glove walked over. Ben reached down, trying to see if Glenn was conscious, while Glove calmly placed his hands on the man, trying to stabilize him.

“The ambulance will be here in ten,” Ben said.

It seemed to take forever for Glenn’s body to calm down, and for him to show any sign of comprehension. The whole time Mike watched and Skip stared straight ahead. When Glenn realized he was alive, he tried to reach down to his leg, the wood pick still stuck between his muscle and bone. He moaned and grabbed his chest, murmuring, “It’s stuck” under his breath.

Glove sat down and supported Glenn under his shoulder. Glenn’s veins bulged as he gained color back, his skin changing instantly from white to bright red.

“Skip.”

Although he knew Ben was calling him, Skip’s ears buzzed and his eyes locked on Glenn’s leg. The gaping wound, the pick wedged between layers of skin, the tremors of nerve and muscle pulsing in response to the foreign object. Skip wondered what it would feel like if Glenn tried to flex his foot. He saw a gnat or two starting to hang around, the scent of a fresh wound drawing them closer as each minute passed.

“Mike, I need help to get this man off the ground,” Glove said. “I can’t lift him on my own. We should probably move him to a softer surface.”

Skip stared at the ground even as they moved Glenn into Glove’s truck. It was stained with blood, and more gnats and a few flies were circling now. The blood made him remember the time he and Maggie been walking downtown while they were still in school. They left a bar to get away from a fight. But they’d been just close enough that Skip ended up with some blood spattered on his jacket. After they left, Maggie sidled up to him on the sidewalk, stuck her arm through his, and asked what she would ever do if he was ever badly hurt. Said she wouldn’t make it without him by her side. He thought now she’d be fine without him, and he hated it. Maggie. Just her name alone suddenly made his stomach calm.

“We’ve got to call someone.” Skip startled even himself with how loud he spoke. “Who should we call?”

Ben walked up behind Skip, announcing the arrival of the ambulance.

“Hey, Skip. They’re taking Glenn to the hospital. Seems like he had a heart attack. Maybe from that lightning earlier? I guess he got hit and didn’t realize it.”

“What about his family?”

“Going to phone his sister.”

“Do I need to go with him?”

“What for? You’ve got a wife and kids at home. Get home to them. Mike says he figures unless his leg gets infected, he’ll be ok. It didn’t go through his bone. As for his heart, I don’t know. Glenn isn’t really with it right now.”

Skip looked over at the stretcher being loaded onto the ambulance. He hadn’t even heard the sirens as they’d arrived.

“Oh,” Skip said. “Do we need to finish the load for today?”

“It can wait until tomorrow. We’ll be one man short, but no train pick up, so we can finish it up then.” He paused. “As for Glenn, I guess we can just hope he’s lucky. Call his sister tonight. I’ll write down her phone number and the hospital number.”

“Ok. Where are Glove and Mike?” Skip watched the ambulance close the doors.

“Behind the ambulance. Come get your stuff. It’s time to call it a day. It’s been a hell of one.”

Skip followed Ben for the first time without any question.

Skip walked down the driveway to their small house. It had two bedrooms and a giant back porch. He repainted the shutters navy blue just a few weeks ago. The roof and gutters looked neglected compared to the fresh paint. Glenn had come over that morning and helped. Now Skip felt he didn't appreciate Glenn's help as much as he should have.

As he walked in the kitchen, he heard commotion from every room in the house.

"My soldier is going to crush yours," Chris yelled from his fort in the bedroom.

"Oh yeah? I'm older and my tanks are stronger," Dan yelled back from the den.

Normally the 4-year-old and 5-year-old boys made Skip smile, but not today. He sighed loudly and dropped his keys on the table. Maggie turned from the stove.

"You're just in time. I've got dinner almost on the table. We're having a salad, some chicken in the oven, and some healthy kind of grain I found called Teff. Do you want water or sweet tea for dinner?"

"Maggie."

"Anyways, how was your day? The boys were really disobedient today and had to be sent to time out a lot. I haven't let them go outside since, even though they've begged."

“Maggie.” Skip raised his voice. “Glenn got struck by lightning at work today, stuck a wood pick through his leg, and had a heart attack. They’re not sure about any of it, but they just took him to the hospital.”

“What?” Maggie stared at him as if he’d told a bad joke.

“Boys,” Skip called. “You need to run out and play until dinner. Don’t go too far from the house.” The boys ran barefoot out of the house with whoops of victory.

Turning back to Maggie, Skip said, “He got struck but didn’t know. He said he was fine. Then later, something happened with his heart because of the lightning and the pick went right through his leg.”

“Oh god. What did you do?”

“They got him to the hospital,” Skip said.

“Should I call someone? What can I do? Should we go up to the hospital?”

“Maggie! This isn’t about you. We’ll stay here, have a good, quiet dinner and pray this Teff stuff is endurable.”

“Skip, I know. I wasn’t saying –“

“You always think about what you need to do, instead of just accepting how some things are.”

He tried hard not to raise his voice. He knew he couldn't make a point by yelling too much. Her eyes fired up, as if suddenly offended by his accusations.

But before she could say anything, he walked over, suddenly closer to her than he'd been in weeks.

“Do you remember that time we were downtown, and I had just showed you the letter I wrote your dad about us getting married?”

“Of course.” She squinted her eyes at him and turned her head slightly, looking for his hidden motive.

“Do you remember the bar fight and how I got blood on my jacket. It upset you a lot.”

She nodded, still hesitantly.

“That night you told me you didn't know what you'd do if anything ever happened to me. Do you still feel that way?” He looked up, anxious for her response.

“What does this have to do with anything?” She started to turn back to the stove, but Glenn grabbed her arm.

“All I could think about while Glenn was screaming on the ground was what you and the boys would do if I had been the one bleeding everywhere, if I'd been struck by lightning,” he said trying to look her in the eyes.

“You thought that?” Maggie looked confused.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Truth is, I couldn’t do anything. I froze. I was thinking about how I was so glad it wasn’t me in his place because of you, Daniel, and Chris.”

“Oh,” she said, turning back to the stove, as if embarrassed.

The clock in the den chimed the hour, and Skip stared at the water boiling on the stove.

“I’m going to get changed before dinner.” He sighed.

There was no response.

“Maggie?”

“Yes?”

“I think I’ll have water with dinner tonight.”

“Ok. You don’t have to. You can –“

“Just some water. Thanks.” He turned and walked halfway down the hall before he remembered. Turning back, he suggested, “How would you like to go out one night with Ben and his wife?”

“Why would we do that?”

“Just think about it.” With that, he made his way down the sun-lit hall.

Back in the bedroom, he heard the clatter of plates on the table, ice in glasses, and water from the faucet. But for the first time in a long while, Maggie was silent. She didn't even hum. Quietly, Skip unlaced his boots.

CHAPTER THREE

NESTING

“Cliff swallow nests are gourd-shaped enclosed structures built of mud pellets, consisting primarily of sand with smaller amounts of silt and clay. Both sexes construct the nest, proceeding slowly to allow the mud to dry and harden. Egg laying usually begins before the nest is completely finished. Renesting will occur if the nest is destroyed.” – “Cliff Swallows,” University of California

Sitting in the old-fashioned window seat in the nook of her grandmother’s kitchen, Rebecca could see the entire yard in the mid-afternoon sun. The tin roof of the chicken coop glistened in the hot rays, waves of heat rising from the shining surface. Chickens strutted around the yard, pecking at seeds, grass, and bits of dirt. Her grandmother, Nana, lived in the country outside of town and Rebecca couldn’t remember her life without chickens in the yard. She sipped her coffee, black, just the way she’d been taught to drink it, and Nana walked in from the garden with a bucket of blueberries.

“All those lazy chickens want to do is bask in that afternoon sun,” Nana said. “It warms my bones too. Guess we’re not so different after all.” She laughed, rinsing the berries in the sink and dumping them in a bowl. She poured herself a cup of coffee and brought the berries over to the table where Rebecca sat. Rebecca smiled as her grandmother sat down, noticing she favored her right knee.

“Is something wrong with your knee?” she said.

“I’m just getting old, Becca.” Nana reached across the table and grabbed her arm. “Sometimes they bother me, but it’s doesn’t keep me out of the garden.”

She guessed she'd kept her grandmother young since her parents died when she was ten, and Nana had raised her since then. She was in her late seventies, and Rebecca hoped her health wasn't fading now.

She looked out the window and saw a few chicks walking around alone. "The little chicks look so lost when their mommas walk away. It reminds me of these penguins we studied in one of my zoology classes."

"I'm proud you've done something with your love for animals." Smiling back at her grandmother, she squeezed her hand. She wished she didn't have to leave soon.

Nana gestured towards Rebecca's belly. "Do you think the baby will enjoy birds and animals too?"

Rebecca slowly pulled her hand away. She hadn't wanted to get into this conversation. She knew her grandmother's opposing views on Micah and her decisions about the baby.

"Yeah. I guess so. We'll see, though. You and Micah should talk about the baby. He's already planned his whole life out." She wanted to make sure Nana knew what would happen. "I'm going to finish my degree before the baby is born in order to work at the zoo while Micah stays home with the baby."

"Why?" Nana asked.

Rebecca was aware of her gaze even while Rebecca studied the cherry blossom design on the blueberry bowl. “What’s the point in going to school if I’m not going to get a job?” she said.

“Does Micah think it’s best for your family?”

“Of course!” She laughed. “He’s been asking me to get pregnant since the wedding so he could be the stay-at-home dad he’s always wanted to be.”

“Hmm,” Nana chuckled. “Your granddad never responded that way, but he enjoyed all the kids and grandkids. One of my favorite parts was when I felt you move inside your momma’s belly. You had the strongest legs of any unborn child I’ve ever heard of.” Nana took a sip of her coffee. “Have you felt any of the movement yet?”

Rebecca nodded her head and smiled. The first time she felt the baby move, she’d been on a week-long vacation in New York City with two of her aunts and Micah.

They’d been walking out of their hotel and passed some men doing roadwork. The man with the jackhammer flipped the switch right before they turned the corner. The loud sound made her jump, and she felt the tiniest flutter like a butterfly flapping its wings inside her abdomen. When Micah asked a few weeks later if she had felt anything yet, she hesitated.

“You have! I knew it,” he shouted, looking up from the game he was playing. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted my own secret. Some part of this baby to be mine.” She was unsure of what she said or even if it was true for that matter.

“What are you talking about? This baby is ours. It’s mine. It’s yours. There is no secret to have.” Micah put his controller down and started to get up. Rebecca turned around and walked into the kitchen.

Looking back, she thought about what she actually meant. While the statement had come out abruptly, she felt there must have been some truth to it.

“Nana. I think I’m going to walk up to the attic. I haven’t spent time up there exploring in a while. Do you want to come, too?”

“It’s too hot for me up there anymore. Won’t it be fun when the little one can run around up there?”

She nodded and kissed the top of Nana’s head as she walked out of the room. She knew what her grandmother meant, but her body didn’t feel excited about the new baby arriving. Indigestion from the acidic coffee had already started up, and she knew it would only get worse throughout the day. The “morning sickness” she usually felt in the evening hours would soon be here, and she had a hard time remembering why she was having a baby in the first place. Especially since Micah had already picked out everything he wanted for the baby’s room.

Climbing the attic stairs, Rebecca remembered all the times she had been up there before. She used to hide from her parents when they came to pick her up. After they died,

the attic had become her hide out, her dream world away from the reality of their death and her loss. She would cover up with a dusty blanket and hope not to sneeze, giving her hiding spot away when she played with Nana or Pop-Pop. After Pop-Pop died, she and Nana would have picnics up there and talk until late in the night. She could see the sunlight illuminating the dust in the air by her grandmother's old blanket chest.

Opening the top, she smelled the pungent scent of mothballs, one fondly associated with her exploration of the attic. One time she told her grandmother she'd met an ostrich in the attic, who took her on a flight to Africa and fed her animal crackers and hot chocolate. In the attic, she could always hear the creaking of the boards and the sounds of her imaginary world. Everything else below was muffled and didn't seem to exist. Rebecca suddenly felt overwhelmingly hot and sweaty. She knew she'd have to cut the visit short. Looking through the quilts and wool blankets of the past, she found one she particularly loved and pulled it out. An old necklace fell out with it.

Picking it up with the blanket, she went back downstairs. Nana met her in her old room with a glass of water. The pastel pink walls and flowered quilt hadn't changed in the last fifteen years.

"You look as if you might faint." Nana grabbed Rebecca's arm, trying to sit her down on the bed.

"It's just so hot up there. Thanks for the water." She smiled reassuringly at her grandmother, fearful she would worry too much. "But, look! I found this old necklace and my favorite blanket. Could I take them home?"

“Of course you may. You could even use the quilt for the baby.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” She hadn’t thought about it.

“Of course. We’ve had that necklace in the family as long as I can remember.

You know, your mother used to play with that when she was little.” She smoothed down the quilt and sat down beside Rebecca.

“Really?” Rebecca said. “I never knew that. Funny we liked the same necklace.” She couldn’t remember if her mother had ever shown her the necklace. She always worked and never spent much time at home.

“I can’t believe it was up in the attic. I should keep it down here. Or you know what? You should wear it.”

“Really? Thanks, Nana,” Rebecca said, pushing her black curls away from her neck. She situated the leather straps and tied the wooden mini cat-statue around her neck.

When she got home late that afternoon, Micah sat in the living room playing his latest Xbox game, with the volume turned up on the instrumental music playing on the stereo. Rebecca immediately set her things down and walked to the sink to wash the quilt when Micah walked in.

“What stinks?” he asked.

“This great old quilt I got from my grandmother’s house today. I can’t wait to curl up in it in my office while I’m doing research. Part of me is tempted not to wash it because it smells so much like Nana’s.”

“That’s kind of gross,” Micah said with a grin. “What’s that thing around your neck?”

“A necklace I found. I used to pretend it was a whip for my horses. Isn’t that ridiculous? I was just four or five.”

“At least now you have more interest in preserving animals than beating them.” He laughed.

“Yeah. It reminds me of being a kid.”

“I loved being a kid.” Micah said.

He started rubbing her back and added, “I’d be willing to let the little guy use the quilt instead of the dinosaur one I picked out.”

“Really?” Rebecca looked surprised. She had decided to use it at work. The baby seemed so detached from any other aspect of her life and solely related to Micah. Maybe sharing her blanket would connect the two worlds.

She raised her eyebrows and smiled. “I’m hungry,” she said looking in the fridge for dinner ideas. “Leftovers from last night sound good?”

“Actually, no.” Micah looked apologetic. “I ate all the leftovers for lunch today. Sorry.”

“Micah, that was a whole meal’s worth,” she said turning around. “For both of us. Why don’t you cook our dinner tonight?” she asked.

“We don’t have anything here to cook. And I didn’t go to the grocery store. You know I don’t like having all those choices.” He looked at his feet. “I guess I could run go now if you want me to.”

“We’ll just have cereal.” Rebecca checked the date on the milk as she pulled it out of the fridge and got some bowls out. “So what did you do today? Did you apply for any jobs or clean up or anything?” She tried not to sound too frustrated.

“Obviously I didn’t clean. Look at this place. It’s a wreck.” He sat down on a bar stool while Rebecca cut bananas and put them on top of the cereal. “We’ve got to clean before my parents get back tomorrow. I looked around for jobs, but didn’t apply for any. I just didn’t see anything I was interested in doing.”

Rebecca stopped.

“Micah. At this point I’m hoping you can find a job, any job. I feel so unprepared for him or her.”

“We’ll be prepared. I’ll be home with him. It is going to be a him,” Micah added with emphasis.

“Ok, ok. But we’ve got to stockpile some diapers and formula since I’m not staying home.”

She hoped he understood the ultimate meaning of the statement. He didn’t.

“Yep. We will continue to buy that stuff at the store. Why wouldn’t we? Mom and Dad will be back in just a few days and it’ll be back to the usual.”

“What about next year when I have to find a job at a zoo? I won’t find one around here. We’ll have to move. We can’t live here with your mom and dad forever.”

They were lucky to be living with his parents and she knew she should be thankful, but they never pushed Micah towards any future.

“I know that, Becs. Get off my back about it.” He got up.

“I just want my own kitchen. I don’t want to feel obligated to cook for your little sisters. They act as if they can’t microwave a hot dog.” She set his bowl of cereal down in front of him. The clatter of the bowl surprised him and he sat back down.

She hadn’t even known she wanted her own kitchen. She didn’t know where all these mixed thoughts were coming from.

“I thought we cleared this up before we got married. You wanted this big career at the zoo, and I wanted to be a stay-at-home dad. Now, here we are, and you want me to get a job?” He spoke calmly, reasoning out the situation.

“I know. You’re right. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re pregnant. Your emotions are going haywire. It’s fine.” He walked over and put his arms around her, softly kissing her lips, shoulders, and finally her protruding belly. Standing back up, he looked at her and said, “Want to go see a movie?”

Rebecca laughed, tears in her eyes. She would be fine she convinced herself. There was no reason to get upset about it. She wanted her career. She wanted this.

The next day at work, Rebecca went through the motions. She focused on preparing lessons for her freshmen. She taught her Biology 101 lab and worked on research with the instructing professor. She’d finished her final project on howler monkeys and even sent applications to multiple zoos throughout the country. Now she had to wait.

During lunch she talked with the only other girl in her program. Madeleine was 24, single, and partied three nights a week. But she was the only person Rebecca could relate to at school. At home, she had Micah’s mother’s conservative opinions. She got the liberal version of everything at work.

“So what do you really want?” Madeleine asked, biting into her tuna sandwich.

“What do you mean? I want a career. It’s what I’ve always wanted.” Rebecca coughed and covered her nose, the smell of Madeleine’s tuna making her gag.

“You get your job and you get a kid, but it doesn’t even seem like it will be yours. Don’t you just want to run off to an exotic country and live the life? Your kid could swim every morning and surf by the time she was three.”

Rebecca ignored the final comment. “Why do you say that? Of course she will be mine. Micah thinks it’s a boy, but it’s a girl.”

“Yeah, but what have you really decided about this kid? Nothing! You only got prego because your husband pressured you into it.”

Rebecca focused on the peanut butter and jelly she threw together that morning.

“I mean, do you want to have this baby?” Madeleine asked between bites.

“Yes. I don’t know that I would have said that a few months ago, but now I really think I do,” she said confidently. She knew she hadn’t been excited, especially with all the morning sickness and body changes, but with each conversation she felt her excitement growing.

“So Micah will be at home, cooking, cleaning, and shopping right?”

“I don’t know that he’ll even do that. I’ll have to reform him.”

“Wait. Stop.” She put her sandwich down. “Reform him? Why are you married to him again?”

Rebecca thought of Micah’s independence. He rarely cared what others thought of him. He had gone shopping and danced with her in the streets. He loved to have fun.

“Does he really understand being a father? It seems to me he thinks the kid is going to pop out a six-year-old ready to challenge him to a race on Mario Kart or something.”

“I don’t know.” Rebecca wondered where Madeleine’s credibility came from. What did she know about parenting or even being married? She never kept a boyfriend for longer than three or four months. If that.

“I’d hate for you to convince yourself something would work, when it won’t.”

“It might work out well.” But Rebecca had to admit Madeleine had a point. Even if she wanted to stay home, she couldn’t.

“I’ve worked my ass off trying to get this program done, so I can have a career. This career.” She thought Micah could be a good dad. They could share the responsibility. She spoke more firmly. “And what about Micah? He can get it together and be a good dad, right?”

“Maybe. But this baby is inevitable now; you’re going to have it in four months. You can still have your career. Micah just has to get a job.”

Rebecca finished up her sandwich. “You’re lucky you’ve got another year left in school before you look for a job.”

Madeleine laughed. “You talk as if they’ll be hiring in a year. I hope. If you need me to kick Micah’s ass into a job, let me know.” Standing up, Madeleine threw out her trash and grabbed her stuff.

Rebecca didn't want to talk about the baby anymore. It was obvious Madeleine couldn't understand the problem. Rebecca wanted both the baby and her job. She wasn't sure how it could work out, especially since Micah didn't give her any options. Rebecca followed her back towards the multi-story building behind them.

She got the call at 4:40 p.m. Micah's family waiting at the airport. Of course he forgot about his parents and assumed she'd pick up the slack. His mom had said Micah was out job hunting. She could only hope it was productive, but his mom had thrown a fit about her not being there already.

She was ready to get out of his parents' house and into a place of their own. She was ready to drive to the beach at dawn to surf and build a fire on the beach to warm up afterwards. She was ready to be guided with closed eyes to a surprise dinner on the roof of the house without anyone else there. But with the baby, that might not be possible anymore either.

When they got back to the house, Micah was sitting on the couch beaming with joy.

"I officially got a job," he exclaimed to the whole group before his parents could even put their suitcases down.

Everyone spoke at once. "Micah! That's great. Seriously? I'm so proud son. We knew you could do it!"

Rebecca broke in.

“So where is this job?” she asked stepping towards him.

“It’s great! They’re getting ready to open up this shop downtown. It’s all about comic books and video games and anime. I get to be the first employee.”

“Sounds right up your alley,” his mom said walking towards the kitchen.

“Thanks. I’m really excited about it.” He got up and started to follow his mom to the kitchen.

Rebecca started to take luggage down the hall, anxious to get away from the whole group, but Micah noticed her struggling to get too many bags, stopped her, and took the bags from her.

“Hey. I’ll get this.”

Rebecca didn’t really know what to say. He hadn’t responded that way since she made it clear she didn’t like help. She was pretty independent, especially if she was capable of the work. She walked into their bedroom, half expecting the bed to be made and clothes put away. No such luck. Pushing his pile of clothes on the floor, she lay down on the bed. Her body was so tired. Micah came in and lay beside her.

“How you feeling, poriky?” He rubbed her belly and smiled.

“Really, Micah? I haven’t gained that much weight.” She rolled her eyes, and looked away.

“I’m kidding.” He pulled his hand away, suddenly aware he’d offended her. “You look great, really.” He kissed her cheek. She stared at the movie posters on the wall.

“It’s all I can do to keep my eyes open right now.”

“I know. I see you nodding off and it’s not even six, you old woman.” He kissed her cheek and pulled a blanket up, so she could rest.

“So tell me about this job. I want to hear more about it.” Rebecca turned over on her side to face Micah, snuggling down in the covers he’d provided.

“It’s not that great. I made it sound better because I think my parents care a lot about me getting a job. I’ll be working about ten hours a week at first. They can’t really afford to hire me more than that because they haven’t really started up yet. And I’ll only get minimum wage, if that.”

“How can they pay you less than minimum wage?” Rebecca looked cynical.

He was quiet for a minute. “I volunteered until they could pay me.”

“Seriously?” she said.

“Come on.” He was defensive. “It’s the first job I’ve been interested in. They’ll pay me eventually.”

She sat up. “No. Eventually doesn’t count.” What if they couldn’t pay him for a year? She knew that wasn’t rational, but neither was this job.

“This baby is coming soon.” Her voice rose. “I didn’t mean for you to just take up your time with something to do.” She started getting out of the covers, but Micah lay his hand on her arm.

“Listen, Rebecca. I love you. But we’ve been over this from the start. And I’ve been open and up front about it. I want to be a stay-at-home dad.”

As the tears formed in her eyes, Rebecca moved away from the bed and said, “But I don’t know that I’m ok with this anymore. What if I want to take care of this baby, too?”

“You? The one who has always been career driven? Whose future always focused on animals and zoo work? Now that you’ve basically finished a zoology degree and a management degree, you’re not happy?” His look of shock was evident to Rebecca.

“It’s just different now that it’s happening. I’m starting to think I could actually stay at home, at least for a little while.”

“What do you expect me to do? My degree won’t make any money for you to stay home.” He’d gotten a degree in psychology and planned to go to graduate school, but never finished the application process.

“So I can’t change my mind about this. Now is the time for us to make decisions, not base it on a decision we made three years ago.” He didn’t respond. “I’m going to drive over to Nana’s for a bit.” She picked up her keys.

“For a bit? It’s a thirty-minute drive. What about dinner?”

“Eat with your parents.” She walked out. Fuming in the car, Rebecca drove along the highway twenty miles over the speed limit.

Turning off the interstate onto her grandmother’s road, she relaxed and tried to look for some solution to Micah and her differences. Driving down the gravel driveway to the house, Rebecca looked around for the chickens. There were a few in the trees, one by the small barn-like building beside the house, and a few more walking around in the yard. She knew most of them would be roosting now, sitting on their eggs and preparing for the hatching in just a few weeks.

When she reached the back of the house, she realized Nana’s car was gone. She slammed her fist into the steering wheel, causing the car to send out a frustrated honk and the chickens to scatter and flap about. Tears came hot and fast, coursing down her cheeks. She couldn’t rely on anyone else to take care of her. She had to decide what to do about this baby and her career. She had to decide about it alone.

Driving back home on the interstate, Rebecca calmed her nerves by shouting lyrics to her favorite 90’s songs. “Sorry I’m not home right now, I’m walking into spider webs, so leave a message and I’ll call you back.” She hoped and prayed she’d be strong.

Walking into the house, Micah and his parents were sitting at the table with his two sisters. They looked like a perfect family. She knew she had excluded herself by running off to Nana’s, but the image just confirmed her purpose. She walked to their room and was mostly done packing a small suitcase when Micah walked down the hall.

“Do you still have that weird cat necklace on?” he called.

“Yes. Why?”

“I was telling my parents about it at dinner. I wanted to show them.”

He walked into their room laughing. “Could you take it off?” He stopped. “What are you doing with that bag?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?” He sounded confused.

“I can’t be here anymore.” He kept staring at her. She continued, “I love you. I just don’t think we work together. If you need us, the baby and I will be at Nana’s with the chickens.”

Micah paced back and forth in the small area between the bed and the door. He sat down. He stood up. He looked at her with his head tilted to the side and said, “What? What do the chickens have to do with anything?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why I said that, but they seem to know what they’re doing. I don’t, but I need to figure it out.” Giving her bag a final zip, Rebecca set it on the floor and looked at Micah. “You don’t know what you’re doing either. You’re not a stay-at-home dad. You’re still a child, looking for your parents’ approval.” Rebecca sighed. “Nana raised me after my parents died. She can raise our daughter. And it is a daughter. I know it.”

With that, she picked up her bag and walked down the hall and out of the house. Micah didn't stop her. She knew he wouldn't.

Arriving at Nana's, she found the spare key under the third stepping-stone from the back porch. It started raining just as she got her suitcase out of the car and struggled to unlock the door in the dark. Of course, she thought. Everything happened at the wrong time. Her pregnancy seemed wrong, Micah's job was wrong, and this rain falling on her head didn't make anything better. Her slick hands made getting the key in the door impossible. She couldn't see the key-hole and fumbled with her bag before dropping it as she pushed the door open.

She kicked the bag in the door and walked in, dropping everything immediately. Her pocket book spilled open onto the floor, keys, chapstick and phone fell out. She disregarded the pile and walked through the silent, dark house to climb the stairs to the second floor, and then the attic.

The rain fell in heavy drops, pinging loud on the eaves, pounding and re-pounding the roof. She looked around the room full of shadows of covered couches, boxes of clothes, Christmas ornaments, and house decorations from the seventies. She could hear rain in the gutters, flowing around the house then falling to the ground. Faint light came through the window at the far end of the attic.

She walked towards the window, where she once again found the chest and looked inside, pulling out a few blankets. Making a nest on the floor, she settled down to listen to the rainfall. The consistency of the pattern calmed Rebecca for the first time in a few weeks. She needed something she could count on because she had more options to weigh through. She smiled at the thought and peered out the window.

Headlights fell across the lawn as Nana's old Buick crept up the gravel drive, windshield wipers flying back and forth. She prepared for Nana's shocked face, but felt confident she made the right decision. For now, it would work. She'd wait for her Nana in their favorite place.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANOTHER TOWN ON THE MAP

Eli's gaze followed the road across to the horizon, searching for signs of life. He'd been driving since sunset yesterday, and as the sun once again crested the hill, this time on the rise, he figured he'd almost made it to a possible destination. He'd been on the road two years now, working his way through the heart of America. He stopped in small towns, suburbs, and small cities, always avoiding the larger ones, never getting into a metropolitan area, just the way his father had taught him when he was six. They had always traveled, their streamliner taking the family from ocean to ocean, and back again. His mother taught him math and literature. The road always provided enough history and never ending social studies lessons and built-in field trips.

Sometimes they would stop in town for a few months, just long enough for his dad to earn some money hauling packages or flipping burgers. Then one day, Morgan would wake up, he'd grab Eli's arm and ask, "Do you smell it?" Eli had never known what his dad smelled, but inevitably, within the week, they were always on the road. He couldn't say how many times he'd seen the Alamo or crossed the Mississippi River, but Eli knew for sure he'd been to Niagara Falls eight times in the last twenty-eight years.

Eli followed his dad's road now, but alone. Morgan had died of a heart attack back in '91, and Eli and his mother, Gloria, settled down in a rural town in Kansas, close to where his mother had grown up. She taught second grade at a local elementary school. No matter how much Eli prodded, he couldn't get her to travel again. She seemed lost

without his dad. Eli suffered through tech school, college, and even completed a master's degree in Library Science before he took off. He had been aching for the road, to discover that smell that had propelled his father on, and had been searching for his dad in all their favorite places since he traded in all his gas station pay for a 1995 Dodge Ram van, complete with extended ceiling and dining table, but no air conditioning.

He knew his mother worried. He refused to buy a cell phone. He drove around Kansas instead of passing through, avoiding her house at all costs. He loved his mother, but wasn't ready to settle down, which she would inevitably convince him to do. He worked as a bartender, busing tables, or washing dishes. Women called him shy and mysterious with his curly brown hair and green eyes. They threw themselves at his lanky frame, offering a place to stay the night, buying him drinks while he was on the clock. He always smiled and accepted their generous tips, but went back to his van alone. He bought calling cards and weekly called his mother to check-in. He didn't always tell her where he was. She hated to hear stories of places they'd already been and how they had changed over the years. Only when he indulged himself by describing his boat ride on Lake Palourde or the evening glow from a nearby city, would he find himself speaking to a silent listener. Sometimes she would even find excuses to get off the phone suddenly. Mostly she talked about the weather and her students. When she brought up his travels and maybe settling down someplace, it was Eli's turn to run, without giving any more thought to giving up the road. Usually it would end in an awkward silence for both. Eli would sigh and head back to his van, Gus.

Good ole' Gus offered his only company. Especially this morning as he headed towards Wellton, AZ. He saw the sign from Highway 8: "Wellton 20." Almost there, he thought. Almost to the patches of farmland and a washed out town dancing on the edge of the desert. The best of both worlds, both the civilized and miles of empty solace. It had been fifteen years since he had seen the town and visited with his great aunt and uncle. Both had since died. Not quite sure where he wanted to go first, he pulled over on the side of the road and pulled out his dad's old map.

The worn creases on the state of Arizona almost erased Yuma, Flagstaff, and Casa Grande from the map. Looking over his dad's markings, he wrote the date beside the last mark on the map by Wellton. He decided to drive by the cemetery there and find Aunt Sally and Uncle Ned's stones. He knew his mother would be pleased when he told her he'd visited. Maybe he'd even scrape some change out of the seats and buy flowers to put in front of their graves. He found the small church in the center of town, but decided against flowers. After snapping a picture for his mom, because it would almost be like she'd made it to the funerals, Eli walked around the lawn of the church. He pictured a funeral procession working its way from the church to the small grave yard, people with downcast faces from all the different eras of someone's life: the first love, the best friend from college, the spouse. They'd all walk in a line to the graveside and pretend they knew the deceased better than anyone else in the crowd. It was their own personal loss and no one could console them enough.

By the sign in front of the church, Eli noticed a street sign directing him towards the Wellton branch of the Yuma County Library. He took a picture of it and walked back to Gus. He had a few options of where he could stay: Sun Country, Desert Rose, or M&M. M&Ms made him think of childhood, so he headed back out of town to sign in to the RV Park. His wallet held \$300. He picked up a local monthly flyer and flipped through the quarter-page classifieds for local jobs in the office of the place. He frowned. Putting the monthly paper back, he headed to unpack.

Eli enjoyed walking. Just like driving the scenic route across the country, walking through town appealed more to his slower pace of life. He'd never liked the idea of an airplane. His dad was flown out of Virginia to Washington D.C. when he had his heart attack, but Eli had no other experiences with planes. He liked taking things slower, and walking suited him just fine. He left his van on the outskirts of town and went back towards the church to find the library he'd spotted. It was an older building, obviously in need of restoration. The front sign was faded and barely hung on by a chain. The only entrance didn't even have a scanner to make sure people didn't steal books. They obviously went by the honor system.

Settling down into the non-fiction section with some history books on Wellton as well as other cities in Yuma county, Eli erased everyone else from his mind. Though he'd really only gotten his library science degree to pacify his mother, he was fixated on books, especially history and biography. He didn't always understand why anyone would

want to read a story about people who weren't real, when he could just as easily come up with a story in his head. He wanted facts, to know something actually happened.

He'd only been reading his book a few minutes when a man in his fifties sat down across from him. Eli looked around. They seemed to be the only people in the whole library who weren't behind desks or re-shelving books.

"Are you reading the book by Andrews?" He didn't hear the man until he'd repeated his question twice. Eli looked down.

"Yes, I am," he said. He hadn't noticed the author before.

"You read it before? Pretty interesting to think it actually happened around here," the man replied.

"Yeah. It is." Eli started reading again.

"I'm Frank Jacobs." He held out his hand. "I've never seen you here before. You must be visiting."

"Eli." He held out his hand and barely looked up. He didn't want to seem rude, but he was there to read, not talk. The man didn't notice Eli's evasiveness and continued talking about Wellton, finally drawing Eli into conversation about growing up there, moving to the big city of Phoenix for school, and then moving back because he loved being so close to the desert. He talked about Wellton as if he owned the place, and certainly knew everyone's business.

Eli listened for a while but clammed up when Frank asked about his own life. He left quickly, memorizing the call numbers when he returned the books to their shelves. As he walked back out of town, he stopped at the grocery store and bought enough granola bars and apples to last a few days. He was already tired of Wellton. It was bad enough he couldn't check books out because he didn't live in the county, but he couldn't even read them if Frank was going to constantly talk. He decided to avoid him the next day.

But there he was again. He seemed to be waiting on Eli to sit down so he could come over and talk. But surprisingly, he just greeted him and then read a few magazines and scanned through a new release before turning to Eli.

“Did you see the new sign out front today? They're finishing it up right now.”

Eli nodded politely and glanced out the door. He didn't want to admit he hadn't noticed it as he walked in. He'd been thinking through his finances and hoping to have enough money for a shower or to call his mother.

“The library got a grant from the county. Upgrading the children's section and the history section. It'll be pretty nice when they finish.” He kept staring at Eli, waiting on a response.

Finally Eli looked over. “Sounds pretty nice. I've spent my time in plenty of libraries and for this size town, I'm surprised it didn't have a new sign before now.”

“How many places have you lived?”

“Only two, but I've visited a lot.” Eli shifted in his seat and looked up at Frank.

He looked pretty puzzled, but smiled at Eli nonetheless.

“You don’t look old enough to have been too many places. How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight. I’ve been to every state at least twice, except Alaska and Hawaii.”

Eli looked over at a stack of books. “My dad considered driving to Alaska once, but decided it was crazy and impossible. I was seven, and thought it would be just like Stone Fox, but colder. We went to Montana instead.” He answered the run of the mill questions people always asked. These were the details he found easiest to share.

“How long have you been traveling?”

“This trip has been just two years. Before I went to college and graduate school, my family traveled from the time I was four until I graduated from high school.”

“High school?” Frank seemed confused.

“My mother home-schooled me. She’s a teacher by profession.”

“What kind of master’s do you have?”

“A degree in library science. I really enjoy history a lot.”

Frank looked surprised. He stopped for a moment. “So you have a degree in library science, but you don’t work in a library?”

“Never have. I left Kansas after I graduated.”

They continued talking. Eli could see Frank getting more and more worked up every moment they spoke. He couldn't seem to understand how Eli had been living, and that he had taken the time to get a graduate degree, but didn't seem to have an interest in using it. Eli was shocked at how much Frank reminded him of his father when he smiled, and with that realization, how oddly comfortable he felt around him. However, Eli found he could always relax amongst library shelves because they seemed the same no matter what state he visited, so he wasn't sure what to think.

When he left the library late in the afternoon, he stopped by a pay phone and called his mother collect. Usually, he bought a phone card, but he'd run out of minutes and still hadn't found a job.

"Mom, hey." He quickly jumped in when the operator connected them.

"Eli. How are you?" Her voice sounded urgent.

"Great. I'm in Arizona." He felt bad for making his mother pay for the phone call, though he knew she appreciated any communication with him.

"Really? You were in Washington a week ago. Why did you drive so far?" Her voice sounded empty.

"I came to Wellton. I found the gravestones and took a picture for you. I met a nice guy in the library here who likes to talk too much. How was school today?" The wind gusted around him, and he turned in the phone booth to cover the headset.

“Good. The students are busy getting ready to put on their Easter play. It sure would be great if you could be here to see it. Your friend Ivy, from school, you know the nurse? Her daughter is in my class. Cutest little chick out there.”

“I’m glad, Mom. Tell Ivy you told me. I’m glad she’s doing well.”

His mom cleared her throat. “You doing ok with money?” That was her way of asking if he had a job or if he was starving.

“I’m fine. I haven’t had a chance to get a new phone card, but I’ve got enough money right now.” He didn’t want her to worry, especially when he really was doing ok.

After they got off the phone, Eli ran by the photo counter at a pharmacy and printed out the pictures he’d taken so far in Wellton. He went by the post office, where the postal worker was angry because he walked in at five o’clock sharp. But he quickly addressed an envelope to his mother and paid for the stamp.

He woke up in a cold sweat the next morning, worried about his Mom, worried his Dad would be angry with him for not taking care of her. It took him a while to reorient himself, and when he finally did, he decided it was a day to visit the desert. He didn’t feel like chancing another encounter with Frank at the library. He needed a day of silence.

Eli spent half of the morning preparing, making sure he had enough water, gas, and some fruit to eat. The other half he spent driving to a place where he couldn’t see any form of civilization. He spent the day reading some old books he used to watch his dad

read. His dad loved the adventures in *Swiss Family Robinson*. Eli thought it gave his Dad vindication for raising their family in an unorthodox way. He played in the sand, making sculptures with water he brought, working his fingers around the particles, designing his own shapes and landscapes. He walked around without a shirt on and no sunscreen, knowing he'd be sunburned later. He loved the tight feeling of his skin when the sun shone on it for a while. At dusk, the temperature immediately started to cool off, and Eli collected his belongings while quickly snapping a few pictures of the remnants of the day before heading back to the M&M.

Even though his back was more burned than he had imagined, he peeled himself out of bed the next morning, heading first to the grocery for some coffee, and then to the library, where he glanced around for Frank. Not seeing him anywhere, Eli found his books on the shelves, and sat down to read again. He heard Frank's voice before he saw him. He was leading a group of businessmen around the library, giving them a tour of changes they were going to make to the building. Frank must work here, Eli thought. It was the first time he'd considered the man's presence as more than just a coincidence. Frank winked at him as he went by, and kept walking with the men.

He came over and sat down about thirty minutes later, just as Eli was finishing one book and beginning a biography on Neil Armstrong.

"Those were the financials people. They help decide the budget."

"I didn't know you worked here," Eli said.

Frank apologized. “I assumed you knew from the start. Actually, I was waiting to meet with those guys today before I asked you a question.”

Eli quickly looked at Frank. He fidgeted with his book.

“Ok.”

“How would you like a job?”

“What?” Why would Frank offer him a job?

“Since we got a new grant, we’re thinking of hiring a new librarian to focus on the historical aspects of the library. I can’t promise it would be permanent, because it’s a grant, but it would allow you to continue to study history. And you’d finally use your degree!” Frank seemed overly excited about the opportunity, freezing Eli’s ability to respond.

Eli looked back down at his book. His first response was to laugh. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t, but he guessed it was because he’d never had the option of a professional job before. He asked Frank if he could think on it before giving an answer. For the first time, Frank got up and left Eli in the reading area, alone. After only five minutes, Eli put his books back on the shelf and walked to the front desk.

He asked the quiet woman to speak with Frank. He figured he should ask her name, but didn’t.

“I think I’ll give it a try,” he said casually, when Frank walked out of the library office.

“So, is that a yes?” Frank was cautious.

“Yes.” Eli turned to leave. He knew his decision was impulsive, but maintained it was best.

Frank walked Eli out of the building. “Can you be here at nine in the morning?”

“Yeah. I’ll be here.” Out in the open air, Eli heaved a sigh of relief. It wasn’t nearly as hard as he thought to accept the job. His world didn’t come screeching to a halt.

To prepare for his first day at work, Eli figured a shower would be in order. He drove Gus out of town to the closest truck stop. He was thankful the RV Park had public toilets, but knew for a cleaner shower he’d have to get back out on the main highway. The chaos of the truck stop calmed his nerves. He knew the process. He paid, wandered around the gift shop until they called his number. When he was locked in the shower stall, he stripped down and stepped under the hot water. The torrent felt like needles on his freshly sunburned back and he stared up at the ceiling, watching the steam rise over the top of the shower. It dissipated at the shock of cold air outside the stall.

He thought back to his earlier decision, questioning how quickly he decided to take the job. He could spend his days off in the desert. He could call his mom confidently, knowing she wouldn’t worry. Maybe she’d even visit, though she hadn’t traveled further than twenty miles from her house since the day his dad died. But he’d

have to trade Gus in for a house or an apartment. He'd have to give up not knowing anyone. In a town like Wellton, everyone would know him. Everyone would notice him. In fact, they probably already had noticed him. His dad always made decisions moment by moment, and he'd always been able to get out of the ones that had only seemed like a good idea at the time.

“You can always go back,” his dad had said. “And if you can't go back, move up and out.” Speaking those words aloud now, Eli realized his dad had known how to handle any situation. Up until now, he followed his dad's footsteps without considering why.

His first day went more smoothly than expected. He wore his only polo shirt, the kind that has badges with a name sewn on them. He'd kept it from a previous job and cut off the badge. If someone looked closely, they could see where the thread had been taken out. Surprisingly calm when he walked in, he found Frank waiting by the desk. By the time lunch rolled around, Eli felt he had been at the library for a few weeks at least. He had skimmed over the paperwork, filling in his mother's address and phone number, hoping it would suffice for now. He even began to plan the reorganization of the history section and researched into what books to add to the collection, specifically those about Arizona. He had some trouble with the computer system and could never remember his ID number, but slowly he made progress. He learned the names of the women who worked the desk in the morning: Ida and Laura. They were nice and knew more about how to run a library than he did.

Frank took him out to lunch and gave him a run down of the goals for the library based on county and state money. He also asked about Eli's living arrangements and if he could help find him a place to rent. He shied away, too nervous to tell Frank where he was staying or that he slept on the folded-down seats in the back of the van. He said he'd be fine. He'd find a place in a few weeks.

He walked back to Gus at the end of the day, his brain exhausted, yet prideful about his first day on the job. He wasn't used to so much time in one location, so much time with other people.

Not a day went by that week where he didn't think of calling his mom. But by the end of the day, he had endured enough talk, and all the things he wanted involved silence or being alone. He felt guilty he didn't let her know about his job. She would be the most excited about it, but he hadn't gotten another calling card and refused to call collect again. He'd spent the last of his money on food and a few more shirts to wear at work. She would have to wait to get the news until he got paid.

He started with re-shelving in the morning, if there were any books turned in, followed by working in the history department until lunch. He didn't have an office, but claimed a desk towards the back of the history stacks. He'd sneak out back to eat his lunch with a book, always replacing it on the shelf before starting back on the job. The afternoons were dedicated to the front desk, where he met and greeted people, checking out their books and sending out reminders when a book was overdue.

He began reading about the town's history, starting as a stagecoach town and then continuing to develop as the railroad system worked its way throughout the country in the 1870's. He searched through all the town records, discovering the address of his great-Uncle and Aunt. He was surprised to find his grandparents had sold the house to them when his dad was three-years-old. He walked by the house after work that day, imagining his dad playing on the lawn, toddling around or riding a tricycle. The house looked cozy, a place where someone would want to raise a family. Eli didn't stop long, afraid he would catch the attention of the owner of the white Buick in the drive, but he added the house to his daily rituals. He walked past it on his way home from work, always noticing something new about it, imaging himself there when he was a kid. He barely remembered playing at his own house when he was small, but tried to see their streamliner on the street, his mom sitting on the front porch with his dad, sneaking kisses while he played in the grass. It was almost as if the house was becoming his own.

When he'd been there a week and a half, he got paid for the first time. He hadn't ever earned a check worth so much money. He immediately wanted to run and hide it, afraid he would lose the money or that it'd go to waste. Frank handed it to him before he walked out the door.

“Let me know when you're ready to move somewhere more permanent,” he said.

“Thanks, Frank.” Eli smiled.

“Do you need a ride?”

“No.” Eli was puzzled. “I have a car.”

“Oh.” Frank looked at him with the same bewilderment Eli felt.

“I just like to walk.” Eli left the office and cashed his check. He bought a few groceries, took a celebratory shower and filled Gus’ tank all the way up, for the first time in a while. He felt accomplished.

The next few days, Eli had off. He slept late, allowed himself to eat more than just a granola bar and fruit, and went out into the desert to relax. He made a list of all the places near Wellton he wanted to visit and explore. He couldn’t wait to get up in the Gila mountains one weekend. After reading about the rodeos and parades Wellton hosted, he looked forward to the different seasons and holidays he’d experience this next year.

On the third day, he woke up feeling more energized than usual. Walking out to the edge of the RV Park, some cars roared by, headed back out towards Hwy 8. As a Jeep passed by with a California license tag, he smelled salt from the ocean. Surfboards were strapped to the top and the guy and girl had their windows rolled down. He stared as the Jeep passed by and continued down the road until it dissolved into the waves of heat rising from the asphalt.

Eli inhaled deeply, caught off guard by the sudden smell of ocean. He could imagine the salt water tickling his toes, the Pacific water’s chill contrasting with the heat of the sand. He saw himself on the beach, flying a kite, reading a book. He could hear his dad whispering in his ear.

“Yeah dad, I smell it. It’s time to move up and out.” Running back to Gus, he packed quickly and paid the clerk in the office. Eli stopped by the gas station and looked up the library’s phone number. Writing it on an old receipt, he thanked the clerk and got on the road.

Driving on the highway, he rolled down his window, for once Gus had no air conditioning. He’d call Frank when he got closer to San Diego. He couldn’t go back this time; he wasn’t ready to stop. Pulling out his dad’s map, he looked to see where he might land. Solana Beach sounded nice, and he’d never been there before. Looking towards the horizon he’d come from a few weeks before, Eli noticed this time it looked brighter. He was sure it was just the sun reflecting off the road, but today, he’d pretend it was pulling him forward.

CHAPTER FIVE

REFLECTION

Looking out the window from the bar of her favorite coffeehouse, Hazel stopped typing her news-story to watch him walk up the snow-lined street, never missing a step though ice remained on most of the sidewalk. He paused just before passing through the traffic light, looking both ways as a child would, then continuing through the slush, onto the curb, stomping the snow off his boots before walking up the salted steps and into a Rite-aid across the street. She hadn't seen him in four years and couldn't peel her eyes away from the door he entered. She willed him to exit quickly, imagining a scene where she could see more than just his profile, where the snow would stop so she could see him clearly and he would glance in her direction and then break into a full smile, his swing-like walk guiding him across the street and into the coffee shop.

She knew he was seeing another woman, her mother told her. They'd separated ten years ago, her mother sitting on the couch, quietly crying with a tissue over her face, as her father packed his small suitcase and walked out the door without glancing at his children. They had hovered by the swinging kitchen door, peeking in at their mother every now and then. There wasn't much yelling. He just left, but to Hazel it was a divorce. Later, after much silence and hushed talk into phone receivers, their mother sat Hazel and her brother, Michael, down on the same brocade-covered couch where she sat weeping weeks before and settled it. "Daddy won't be coming home," she said. But

Hazel had already decided he couldn't come home. Anyone who left without saying 'goodbye' didn't deserve to be let in again.

She was twelve at the time, confident she knew everything about the world and confident her father would regret leaving. Then she'd be the one who could look past him as if he didn't exist, shooing him away from the door with her hand. But he hadn't come back, and he only asked her brother and her to come over at Christmas and once during the summer each year. She always tried to ignore him at first, pasting on her straight face. Eventually he won Michael over with candy and jokes, and Hazel would follow later, just when she thought no one was looking. She'd reach down and pick up a peanut M&M, her favorite, and quickly place it on her tongue. She'd leave it there to melt, afraid her father would notice if she was chewing. But he always did, and pulled her real close and whispered, "My little jelly bean is getting too big."

He'd read them books like "The Jungle Book" and "Peter Pan" by the blazing fire until they were sleepy enough to start dozing. Then he'd carry them up to their rooms and wake Hazel just enough for her to notice the present on her bed, wrapped especially for her in wrapping paper with ballet slippers on it. She preferred to open presents alone and he knew it. So he'd always kiss the top of her head and walk out the door. "Father," she'd call. "Leave the door cracked." He would, and he would peek in the door just as she had done a few years before, but this time instead of tears, he would wait until he saw the smile on her face at the sight of her new trinket. Then he'd tiptoe away, afraid of being caught.

Now, at twenty-two, Hazel considered herself a pretty normal girl. She'd been working for the *Charlotte Observer* since she graduated from school six months ago. She'd covered the last local election, sitting through press conference after press conference for news about education and the public school system everyone called a sinking ship. She was usually positive about life. She'd started living with her boyfriend Everett, who she'd been dating for a year though she wasn't sure it would last forever. She knew eventually she'd get tired of the way he stayed out in bars drinking and watching football games, and she'd have to find someone new or, at least, a new place to live. She found herself staring at the door where her father had entered and wondered what he would say if she walked up to her dad in the Rite-aid and said, "I haven't seen you in a long time, I guess." He'd make up an excuse, she knew. But it was her fault. She avoided the ritzy part of town where he lived and hung out in sketchy bars and techno clubs where he'd never allow himself to be seen. He preferred cigar shops and smoking lounges to disco clubs with colored lights splayed in all directions.

Pulling a few Camel Filters out of her bag, Hazel got up from her place at the coffee shop's bar and nodded at Phil, the owner, as she walked out. Snow blew in the door as she stepped out and she watched it start to melt onto the doormat and tile floor through the glass. She'd been using the shop as her office when she was on assignment in the area. She preferred the noisy bustle of people having conversations about pop music and work-days, or meeting with friends reminiscing about last weekend's party. It soothed her the way the espresso machine would grind the coffee beans and the metal would squeal. She didn't like the news floor where everyone was old and talked about

how unhappy they were with their marriages and how their kids never slept through the night. Plus, she was just as connected because she kept her phone on her at all times and the coffee shop provided internet access. It was just as good as being at work. And Phil would watch her computer whenever she walked out to smoke. They'd become friends since she started doing her work in there, discussing the latest episodes of *Big Love* and trash talking pop-stars and politicians.

Lighting her cigarette, Hazel inhaled deeply and held her breath, waiting to exhale until she couldn't hold the smoke in any longer. Since her eighteenth birthday she'd been smoking. Well, before her eighteenth birthday she smoked with Dave, her boyfriend at the time. He was older and taught her to inhale and exhale without coughing. By the time she reached her eighteenth birthday, she could roll her own cigarettes in European fashion. She wanted to put the Atlantic between herself and her parents, but just two days after her eighteenth birthday, she found herself sitting on her father's back porch, smoking a freshly rolled Parisian blend of tobacco while her father smoked his pipe and promised to take her abroad for her twenty-first birthday. It was the last time she had seen him. She had deafly listened to him that day, leafing through a five-year-old *Women's Day* magazine he had on his coffee table. She laughed aloud at him. "Dad, this magazine is old and about women. What are you hiding from me?" She'd only been suggesting maybe he was gay. She'd never seen any other woman with him, but her father tensed up in a way she'd never seen before. He asked her to put down the magazine and talk with him about their trip to Paris, but she refused, drawing on her cigarette in final rebellion. He didn't care she smoked, though, and it didn't stop him from talking with her. Then he

was silent for a long time and didn't say anything. Neither did she. He tapped the ashes from his pipe into the large ashtray, always full, on the coffee table, and walked in the house. She got up to follow, but an envelope fell out of the women's magazine with a postage date of 1995 marked on the front. It was addressed to her mother. She remembered tucking it into her jean pockets, thankful she hadn't worn a dress that day.

Flicking her ashes on the ground, Hazel looked across at the Rite-aid. Her dad hadn't resurfaced from the store yet, and she was getting concerned he wouldn't show. She wasn't sure she would speak to him if he did, but she wanted to see his face. She used to carry the letter in her bag as a reminder, just in case she ever missed seeing her father. She wasn't sure where it was now. Everett had argued with her until she put it away. "It's not healthy for you to hold onto it all," he said. She knew he was right, but didn't want to give it up. She'd hidden it in her sock drawer, but hadn't seen it in a while. Standing on the stoop of the coffee shop, Hazel started shivering as the temperature dropped and the sun sank. She remembered the day she found the letter, how she had locked herself in the bathroom at her mother's house before heading back to her dorm. She slid down the doorway to sit on the floor just as she had when she'd snuck away to read her sister's diary or love letters from her high school boyfriends. She felt foolish, unlike a college freshman just starting class and living on her own. She knew as she opened it, she was going to read something she didn't want to see. Somewhere, though she'd been so young, she knew her parents wouldn't have separated unless there was someone else. She knew it was a letter from her dad's girlfriend, Cheryl. She just didn't realize it would be addressed to her mother.

Hazel stiffened as she read the words, “I’m sorry.” What kind of woman feels remorse for an affair and has the courage to apologize to the betrayed woman? Staring at the letter for a long time, Hazel had tried to imagine this Cheryl in pure form. She must have been younger, whorish with tights and a short mini-skirt. Hazel was surprised when her mother pointed Cheryl out one day in the grocery store two-years-ago. They’d immediately left, groceries stranded in a random aisle in the cart, but she’d had enough time to analyze the smallish woman standing by the checkout counter. She was much more plain than her own mother with short, straight hair around her face. She couldn’t even remember exactly what color her hair was. The day had been windy and they’d rushed to their car, their dresses blowing right and left with the wind. Pulling the door closed in the car, Hazel had ignored her mother’s tears, so fresh after so many years since the divorce, and immediately wondered why her father had given their family up for this seemingly anonymous woman. She didn’t look special or better than their family. She wondered how her mother knew what she looked like and asked her. “How many times have you seen her before?”

“Just once.” She kept her face towards the window, then cleared her throat and took her time starting the ignition on the car. Hazel always wondered what the one time had been. Had her father introduced the two of them or had her mother caught them out together?

The day she’d read Cheryl’s handwriting with its big curls and exaggerated letters, Hazel hadn’t felt she could ever get over her. However, Cheryl as well was a passing phase, and according to her mother, her dad was on to wife number three. She

wondered what kept him moving from one woman to another. She finished her cigarette and walked back in the shop, her fingers numb with cold.

Sitting back down at her computer, she looked out the window at the Rite-aid. Apparently her father had never found contentment with any woman and enjoyed moving from one marriage to another without any hindrances. The espresso grinder wailed and the sound of change clinked in the tip jar. She looked back out the window, checking to see if her father happened to be walking out. Just a family with small children wrapped in coats, hats, and scarves carefully walked out the door and down the street. The kids were so bundled up, their arms dangled almost horizontally, as if they could never lay them completely flat.

She picked up her phone. A missed call from Everett. Dialing him back, she scrolled through her e-mail. Nothing new.

“Hey, sweet thing.”

“Hey, Ev. Stop with the names.” She glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention. She loved eavesdropping on other people’s phone conversations, but never appreciated when people listened to hers. She knew it was hypocritical and didn’t care.

“Do you want to get burgers tonight? We can grill or go out.”

“Not sure. It’s up to you.” She sighed. “I saw my dad.”

“What?” The silence that followed on the end of the line begged for more information.

“I’m at the shop, and I saw him walk into the Rite-aid across the street.” She picked up a pencil and tapped it lightly on her notepad.

“Wow. That never happens. Maybe you should talk to him.”

“No. I can’t.”

“It’s a sign, Hazel.”

“Really. I can’t.” She was ready to get off the phone.

“At least e-mail him. You coming home soon? I cleaned the kitchen and bathroom.”

“Thanks. That’s awesome. I’ll be home in a bit. Bye.” She hung up without waiting for a reply. She hadn’t cared about talking on the phone since she was a teenager.

Looking back at her web browser, she thought about what Everett had said. She could e-mail him. She clicked Compose Mail. “Dear Dad,” she typed, stopped, and backspaced. She started over. “Hey Dad.” That sounded more realistic. “I saw you going into Rite-aid earlier today. I was working on a story at the coffee shop across the street and couldn’t leave my computer and notes to come see you. I guess you’re doing well. Love, Hazel.”

She read over it twice before changing “Love” to “Have a good night.” She knew it was impersonal, but couldn’t see telling him she loved him. She sat for a few minutes, staring at the screen. She usually only e-mailed people from work or for work-related stories. She’d never considered adding family to her list of people to contact that way. It was worse than a phone conversation. You couldn’t tell what someone meant by their language, or even decide what kind of tone they were speaking with. She couldn’t e-mail

her father. He wouldn't know how to take it and might not respond. Then she wouldn't know what to think about their relationship. She would second-guess herself continuously. Clicking discard, she muttered under her breath. What did Everett know about their relationship anyway? He grew up with a family that pretended to be so perfect it made her want to vomit.

She wasn't so sure about Everett sometimes. They'd met at a music festival through mutual friends, and had been together ever since. He played the guitar, and they always sang old songs together and made new ones up when they were drunk. She liked the way he looked when he slept, so peaceful and young. But she didn't want to settle for less than what was best, though she wasn't sure she'd ever really find that. She wasn't afraid of commitment. She could be committed forever, no questions asked. However, it was all a dilemma of who to commit to. She'd been back and forth between boyfriends through high school and college. Everett was her longest relationship. Suddenly, it sounded incredibly ridiculous that they could be living together so quickly. She grabbed another cigarette and headed back outside.

It had been a strange winter, she thought. She and Everett started living together. Her father was, once again, married. She wondered how long it had been since her mother slept with a man beside her in bed. Probably since the night before her father left. It was all over for her, and she'd never moved on to someone new. Hazel found herself admitting that moving on would be the easiest part. The staying would be harder. Staying through the tough times. Just like her dad.

She dropped her cigarette on the ground and ground it out with the toe of her shoe. The brick steps were so cold, the cigarette almost seemed to hiss in the cold. She couldn't get sleep at night, knowing she was like her father. She wanted him to tell her why he left their mom, Michael, and her that Friday evening, walking out as if he had somewhere much more important to go and more important people to entertain. She needed to know why.

The blast of heat warmed her cheeks when she ventured out of the now dark street into the store. No one was at the register, and Hazel looked around. The store seemed empty. She walked along the aisles, pausing to look at the gaudy Christmas decorations on sale. She was surprised they even sold fake trees. She couldn't imagine buying her Christmas tree from a Rite-aid, but she'd keep it in mind. Everett hadn't cooperated when she said she wanted to decorate the apartment. She stood on her tiptoes and looked around for someone in the store. She heard some people back towards the pharmacy section. She walked the aisle closest to the pharmacy, looking at the toys when a woman appeared around the corner and walked towards the front.

She suddenly felt like a spy, as if she was committing a crime by looking for her father. She laughed aloud at her fear of the woman noticing her. Peering around the corner, she didn't find anyone in the pharmacy except a confused-looking technician who was staring at her. She smiled and turned around, walking back down the aisle she'd come from. She saw a grey head on the other side of the aisle and approached cautiously, afraid he might see her before she could look at him and decide how to approach him.

It was definitely the man she saw earlier entering the Rite-aid. He had the same black peacoat on, with expensive loafers and slacks. But his back was turned to her and she couldn't see his face. He seemed to be reading a vitamin box, and Hazel was almost frustrated he wouldn't look up.

“Dad?” She felt as if the voice that spoke was coming from a little kid, and not from her.

The man jumped and turned around, obviously scared by her presence. But it wasn't her dad at all, just another businessman in his mid-fifties.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “He must be on another aisle.”

When the man turned back around, she ran down the aisle and towards the cosmetics section, a safe haven for women. She glanced at an all natural skin care line on display, putting some of the lip gloss on her finger and smoothing it over her lips. Her fingers shook.

Facing the mirror, she stared at herself. She could see a fire in her eyes, and it immediately calmed her emotions. She'd never liked to see herself frustrated. She pulled up all her curly brown hair and let it slide out of her hands. She was instantly reminded of pictures of her dad from the 70's, when he'd sworn to only wear long hair and never finish college. Neither were promises he followed through on. Though she knew she was much more feminine, it was hard to mistake her eyes, hair, and nose for anyone but Randolph McNeal. She was even built with his long and thin features.

She imagined her father beside her in the mirror. She imagined herself posing with Everett. Then she saw the lines on her nose where she used to get sunburned. Her

father used to touch it with his fingertip when she was kid. She saw herself as a five-year-old, playing with Michael outside in the yard, oblivious to the adult world. No matter what she pictured, it always seemed as if her dad snuck back into the image somehow. Realizing she'd been holding her breath, she exhaled and walked away from the mirror.

Back out in the cold, she headed towards the coffee shop. She still couldn't get over her embarrassment and was so ready to go home that she almost forgot her computer and bag. She didn't understand how she could have mistaken the man for her father. While she hadn't seen his entire face before he entered the store, she would have bet her life it was him. But all of it didn't matter now. The encounter remained on her mind as she headed the few blocks to their apartment.

She hated the phantom of her father, that he wasn't there in the store, and that she saw her own image in the mirror. She didn't want to look back at this encounter in ten years and realize she hadn't learned anything from it. She wanted to be a woman more like her mother, who remained committed to herself and others even when everyone else fell apart. She never thought she'd say that, or want to be that kind of person.

She pushed the door open to her apartment. She always had to press her whole body weight against it because it got stuck, especially in cold weather. Everett was in the kitchen. She snuck up behind him.

"I'm home," she whispered and grabbed him around the waist.

"Oh, hey," he said grabbing her back and kissing her hard on the lips. He always kissed hard and sometimes she found it uncomfortable. But she kissed him back.

“Let’s go out and get burgers and beer. Let’s drink together like we used to when we first met.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Where is this coming from?” He pulled away from her, looking her directly in the eye.

“Let’s just do it. I’m grabbing my coat. Let’s go!” She ran to her room and heard him getting ready in the bathroom. She sat on her bed for a just a second, wiping away the tears that quickly formed in her eyes. They’d go out and have a good time. They’d celebrate. Tonight Everett would know what it meant to be loved.

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