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Eulogy

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EULOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Arts

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Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg, Kansas

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EULOGY

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EULOGY

An Abstract of the Thesis by
Kim T. Allison

Particular to the three short stories in *Eulogy* is the importance of place, as they are set in the fictional location of Potter's Island, which is based on my childhood sense of Florida. Contradictions, complications, and disappointments can be uniquely tied to a sense of place. My own parents and grandparents moved to Florida when I was three years old, but where they lived, how they lived and worked, and what dreams they pursued was only partially an immigrant's story of wanting a better life.

The past has weight—a weight that must be dealt with, for real people, and for the characters in my stories. Charlie Dunham, a new retiree who has recently moved to Island Circle, finds out that the idea of starting over sometimes ends up in the reality of being rootless and unable to flourish, despite all the right conditions for regrowth. Clementine Asher, a fourth grader who buries the road kill she finds on her way home from school in a burned out Florida pine forest, has to meet her past head on when her missing father shows up after leaving his family desperate and struggling to survive. And Dodie, whose family is always on the run from trouble, has to find a way to balance family loyalty and the need for self-survival.

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LEMON

If there was anything that stank worse than a dead bullfrog in the heat of summer, Lemon didn't want to know about it. The frog was big and it was dead. Lemon peered down at it with her hands on her hips, marveling at the way its unblinking amphibian eyes looked back at hers, as if they could see right through to her own gizzard and understand everything she was thinking. Now it was just last week that Lemon got out of kiddie jail, otherwise known as Brentwood Elementary's After School Program, and she was determined not to go back, but she had the worst trouble with dead croakers—and everybody knew it.

Lemon was the red-headed, knock-kneed, fourth grade girl who buried dead animals in the elementary school playground. If it had been baby birds instead of frogs, maybe people would have been more sympathetic. Even Lemon could admit, seeing those barely feathered babies dead on the ground, fallen out of a nest too soon, was enough to make anyone sad. Anyone with a heart might wish they could do something for them, even though the suffering was long over. And she had buried birds. Plenty of them. In the spring mostly, but summer time had its own share.

Lemon poked at the frog's legs with the edge of her dingy Keds. This one wasn't changing into a prince anytime soon. She felt bad about it, but she was going to have to leave this fellow on the side of the road and that was surely a sign that all that work the school counselors put on her was starting to do its thing. Maybe that was why they let her out of kiddie jail. She was good and cured. No frog funerals today.

Lemon smiled, and her happiness bloomed, like the orange tree blossoms in March and just as sweet. Parents' Night was going to be great this year. No more secret, sad whispering in the hallway and half hidden worry on her momma's face. And Gram would be there too. Double good, since she didn't know anything about that part of the story—and her not knowing was the best thing ever. Glory be, it might even feel like she had two parents at home, instead of just one. Miracles abounded.

A crunch in the gravel from behind made Lemon turn back. It was Cassie Hendricks. Cassie Hendricks and her sister Chloe had snuck up on her, and on a day they weren't even supposed to be

walking home. The girls were a matched set, both skinny-legged and white skinned as a mango tree, dressed in matching blue plaid skirts and crisp white shirts, half soaked with sweat. Cassie's nose wrinkled, the freckles bunching all up.

"You're a disgusting freak, Clementine Asher," she said.

Dismay jolted Lemon at the sound of that voice, a dismay tinged with a little sadness that the words still hurt. It wasn't anything that Lemon hadn't heard before.

"Just walking home," Lemon said, brushing phantom dirt from her pants. "Walking home, same as you."

But it wasn't really the same. Lemon felt her throat tighten up as she fought the urge to look down at her dirty shoes and run her fingers through her messy hair. Playground funerals were not the only thing she got teased for.

Cassie was bigger than her sister— and a fair sight meaner too. Chloe, the little one, peered around Lemon for a better look at the frog.

"Road kill must be pretty good this time of year," Cassie said, planting her other hand on her hip, elbow sticking out. "Especially frogs."

Lemon sighed. As far as insults went, Cassie wasn't very talented or creative. Over at Brentwood, Lemon had heard it all. According to the fourth grade, she had hideous, wart covered hands, froggy lips, webbed toes, and a three foot tongue made for snapping flies right out of the air. Even those opinions of her might have been mean-spirited but bearable, if they hadn't come along with an invisible force field, an impassable barrier around her that no other child would dare cross. She felt it at the playground, and the lunch table, and even the line for the bus. Whatever Cassie knew, or thought she knew, it was nothing but old news.

Lemon turned away from Cassie, taking a few hesitant steps. "I'm going. You can stay here all day, if that what's you want,"

"Oh, really," Cassie said, with what sounded like genuine wonder. "I guess you won't mind it at all if I—"

Another scrape in the gravel. Lemon turned back around, just in time to see Cassie pull back her foot, aiming to take a swing at the frog lying helpless on the ground. Lemon dashed back, closing the gap in

two steps, pushing Cassie away with her hands, knocking her off balance. “Don’t you dare,” Lemon said, panting. “That’s just plain mean.”

Chloe clutched at her sister, eyes wide. She tugged on Cassie’s backpack, trying to draw her away. Her eyes flickered from Lemon to the frog.

“You’re sick,” Cassie said, smoothing down her skirt.

“Pardon me? I’d rather be sick than heartless.”

“Whatever. It’s dead anyways.”

Cassie led Chloe away by the hand, dragging her roughly through the gravel. They swung a wide circle around Lemon and the frog, almost moving to the other side of the street. Lemon, watched them go, swinging their matching lunch boxes like they were on their way to a picnic instead of the quarter-mile walk in the boiling heat. Lemon felt better with every step that took them farther and farther down the road. She wiped the sweat from her brow with a hand that still shook a little. Hopefully they wouldn’t go telling their mom what happened when they got home. The terror of Mrs. Hendricks calling up her momma on today of all days was enough for Lemon to consider chasing after them and begging for an apology. She didn’t mean to touch Cassie like that. She really didn’t.

A car came up and whizzed past her, the sound of the tires in the gravel sizzling like bacon in a pan. The wind storm behind it buffeted Lemon, whipping her hair into her face. The driver tossed away a soda can, its empty rattle suddenly muffled by a hard landing in the weeds. She turned back to the frog and almost bumped into Jimmy, her brother. His face was pink. He’d been running to catch up after taking the late bus from middle school. His cheeks were stained redder than with just the heat. His eyes were dark when looked down at her. It was then she knew. He’d seen everything that happened from a ways back.

“It’s not what you think. Not a fight,” Lemon said, even though it had felt like one for a second. “That was Cassie just being herself and me not putting up with it for once.”

“So why’d you lay a hand to her? That can get you in worse trouble, even at Brentwood.”

Lemon didn’t say anything to that. She just looked at her shoes. “Come on,” she said. “Gram’s waiting.”

But Jimmy didn’t move to follow her. He stayed where he was. “You promised, Lemon. You swore on it,” Jimmy said. “No more frogs.”

“Take a look around, Jimmy,” Lemon said, flinging her hand out. “Just where do you think I could bury something out here?” She kicked at the loose gravel at the side of the road and watched as it splashed in the murky waters of the stagnant ditch. “You’d need a pick axe.”

“What’s the matter with you,” Jimmy said. “Why can’t you grow up and act right. Like Cassie.”

“I ain’t nothing like her. Never will be. Just stop,” Lemon said, holding up her hand. “You just don’t get it. I want to go home.”

“I don’t even see why we need to walk home anyway,” Jimmy said, the two of them moving together down the side of the road. “Gram could come up here and pick us up in her car.”

“And what then Jimmy?” Lemon said. “You’d get used to it, being all cool in the car and getting home in ten minutes instead of forty-five. But when Gram goes back to Kentucky, it’ll be fifty times worse. Worse than getting used to walking home in this heat all over again, cause then you’ll know how nice it could’ve been-- if things were different. Besides,” Lemon said, crossing her arms and standing a little straighter, “Gram’s coming to Parents’ Night and I don’t want her too tired and saying that she can’t make it.”

“Geez, it’s not like we’ve never been picked up before,” Jimmy said, under his breath.

“It’s not like *you* ’ve never been picked up before. I never have. Dad was gone by then and momma was on the night shift.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Fine. Dad picked *me* up. You were too little anyhow.”

“Not too little to leave home alone. Not too little for him to go off and leave us both, neither one picked up since.”

“Sometime Lemon, you ought to let someone actually do something nice for you.”

“Sometime Jimmy, you ought to get with the program. It is what it is.”

Jimmy threw up his hands. “Let’s just take the short cut, then.”

They started jogging, jogging along the gravel road that would cut a path through three more miles of pine forest, jogging past the swollen ditches full of not just water, but cattails rising up out of old tires and sodden boxes, broken lawn chairs and black plastic bags half submerged. When Lemon was smaller, she and Jimmy had taken their time getting home, stopping to play with sticks and rocks, making

games out of hopping from one side of the ditch to the other on half sunken things in the water, sailing boats out of leaves, watching excitedly for frogs and turtles. But it was all trash now. Something to get away from as fast as you can.

Lemon slowed to a stop. “No way,” she said, in between breaths. “I’m not going through the blackberry brambles and the barbed wire just to sit in the air conditioning for twenty extra minutes.”

Jimmy turned, panting. His eyes were hard, closed to slits against the afternoon swelter. “You are the stubbornest person I ever met. Dumbest too.” He smacked a mosquito against the side of his neck. “Suit yourself, then Lemon. I’m done fighting. But don’t you dare catch a ride with some car. And you better not be late neither, cause I’ll be the one getting in trouble for letting you walk home by yourself.” They looked at each other for a long minute, then Jimmy shrugged and took off running, sure to cut his time by at least thirty minutes.

Lemon meandered, watching Jimmy go, kicking the dirt as she pretended to walk in tiny little steps. Either way, she was going to come home a sweaty, dirty mess, but the brambles and barbed wire were not what changed her mind about the shortcut. As soon as Jimmy turned down the dirt path that snaked off deeper into the forest, Lemon went back to the frog. It hadn’t moved from where she left it. Lemon crouched down, resting her chin in her hand and propping her elbow up on her freckled knee.

“I have a real problem, Mr. Frog,” she said. “I walk home this way every day and it’s not like you’ll be gone tomorrow. You might look pretty much the same, if you don’t get squished by a car, but the day after that, your eyes will go, and pretty soon, the rest.” There was already a cloud of black flies congregating on its green bumpy back, its front legs beginning to shrivel.

Lemon stood up. The ditches were full of water that had fallen weeks ago, stagnant and brown as coffee, the scent sickly sweet from the rotting grass that vainly reached up towards the surface, pale, withering. She walked down to its edge where the slowly receding water abandoned its dead in the weedy slopes, the sparkling shards of beer bottles, the melting Styrofoam cups, the swelling 24 packs of Orange Crush. A stick was all she needed. She could just nudge the frog a little and that would be it. He’d tumble into the water, disappearing from view. She found one and came back, gently sliding it under his legs. And then she stopped. It just wasn’t right. Mr. Frog wasn’t trash.

Lemon rolled the frog over, belly up and it fit into the frog's mouth with some gentle pushing, the yellowish skin thin enough to see the outline of the stick as she moved it around inside, trying to dodge the green and blue lumps that had to be the gizzards, afraid to split the thing in half. The flies buzzed in her face, annoyed at her for toying with their dinner. She carefully lifted the poor dead croaker from the pavement and picked her way back down into the weeds.

There was an old plaid couch somebody had dumped alongside the road three months back, before Florida's rainy seasons came, before whatever trouble came to its former owner. The blackened plaid fabric seeped when Lemon cautiously stepped back up on the upholstered frame. Her thin-soled tennis shoes slipped on the slick and moldering fabric and the whole thing wobbled with her weight. She threw out her arms to balance herself, the hand carrying the stick going hard to the right. The frog's arms and legs went to flailing. Black goop dropped from its mouth to splatter the swollen cushions. Lemon caught her breath, torn between watching the frog in her hand and keeping her own balance.

She quick-hopped to the other side of the ditch in two long strides, one of her shoes filling with water as the corner of the couch disappeared under her feet. Landing on the other bank, sweating and out of breath, Lemon scrambled up the slope, dodging a rotten heap of newsprint, her shoe making wet farting sounds with every squishy step.

Lemon climbed the slope with the frog on a stick way out in front of her. Her shoe was wet. She was going to have a hard time explaining that away when the long way home was a bone dry one. Lemon bit her lip and went further into the woods.

Her steps were loud and crunchy, the brown pine cones and dead pine needles popping underneath her feet until she reached the palmetto scrub, each clump with spiky fronds, all needle tipped. It was fresh and clean and cool, not like the hateful long walk home or the dangerous short cut that went through other people's land. No one owned this forest and inside of it there was a place. A place she knew, that only she knew. A place that she'd never told anybody about, not Jimmy, not Gram, not the counsellors. A place that was just hers that she'd been to from time to time.

"It's okay, Mr. Frog," Lemon whispered. "I know somewhere that's good and quiet. Nothing bad can happen anymore."

Cicadas whined in the afternoon heat, a new one taking up where the last one left off making for a constant high pitched wail, a singing sound that was sometimes loud enough to hurt the ears. Lemon liked how it felt, how drowned other sounds, and filled her mind with a buzzing whiteness.

Lemon dodged the traps set by the forest for the unwary and the unwise, side stepping sand spurs grabbing at the cuff of her white socks, giving a wide berth to the huge mounds of red fire ants just waiting to be angry at someone daring to foolishly trespass. She kept on with the frog on the stick, holding it straight-armed and as far away as possible, hoping the stink wouldn't stick to her if she kept it downwind. Skinny squirrels, thin gray rabbits and coveys of mourning doves scattered at her passing. Suddenly all the trees died away to broken stumps and the scrub turned black. Lemon paused. She'd come to the edge of the dead place, where the forest had burned to ash.

There was an old cow trail worn bare, a gray ribbon in all that blackness. Lemon turned down it, looking up at the sun, trying to figure how much time she had left—coming home late would mean just as many questions as coming home wet. She followed the path, as she had many times, until she came to a blackened stump, a stump split in two. Tucked inside the chasm was a Maxwell House coffee can, beat up and rusted out, but still showing some of its blue paint and white letters.

All around her and the stump were waves of gray ash, little mounds of sand and char turned over and over, getting lighter and lighter as it moved outward like a ripple in a pond.

Lemon picked a new spot, a valley in between two ancient hills of her own making, hills that sheltered another frog and a baby squirrel just a few days old, and started digging with the clam. The shell was cool in her hands and she dipped into the ashy soot, the sand underneath hot and dry, fine like baking sugar, but speckled with dark flecks of ancient shark's teeth. At the soil line the digging became hard, the clam unable to crack the crust of crushed shell, white and bleached out fragments of what she'd seen at the sea shore, broken curves and points from conchs and clams, periwinkles and cat's paws— but with no color left in them at all. Gone were soft pinks and purples and the iridescent sheen of green and blue and gold. Lemon put the frog down in the shallow grave.

“I fought for you,” she said. “I defended you. I even lied to Jimmy about you, Mr. Frog.” She wiped the sweat from underneath her bangs with her other hand, leaving a trail of sand across her forehead. “You mean something to me now and because of that I’ve got to do right by you.”

She knelt down and scooped the dry soil over the frog with her hands, trying not to worry. The hot, dry, sand burned her hands as she pushed it into a mound, piling it higher and higher. It was the end, and the end always made her feel better. After all the gore was gone, all the flesh that rotted and stank and made things ugly, there’d be nothing but the bones. Clean and white and pure.

Lemon got up off her knees and brushed the sand from her legs. It trickled down into her shoes and coated her hands, her forearms, like sugar, sparkling in the light. Her hair, limp and lank with sweat, was muddled with golden pine cone flowers and broken bits of needles. She picked at it, worry starting to creep in and making her unsure now if she had really done the right thing for herself or not. She dropped the coffee can and the shell where she stood and ran towards Hessler’s field as fast as she could go.

The hot, oily smell of creosote tar burned her eyes and the inside of her nose as Lemon climbed the split rail fence at that lined the borders of the neighborhood. She shaded her face with her hands, trying to guess by the sun how much later she was than Jimmy. A guilty feeling started creeping up, worse than ever and Lemon didn’t like it. She just wanted to get home so she could get herself cleaned up.

Reaching the far corner of her own yard, the fencing stretching on for a couple of acres before it opened up to her driveway, Lemon stepped on the bottom rail of the fence, ready to climb over it and cut through the yard. The house, with its peeling white painted clapboard and green shingled roof was set back a piece from the road, but the sun still glistened off Momma’s Chevy, which meant that she was home too, off of work early for once. But something wasn’t right. Underneath the feeble shade of the pine trees and right in the middle of the bleached shell driveway she saw Jimmy and a strange man, a biker dressed in black leathers, not at the gate but further up, closer to the house. There was a motorcycle too. No one they knew had a motorcycle, especially not one like that. It looked like something from a magazine, all shiny.

Lemon cautiously slid her foot off the fence rail, deciding instead to walk up to the drive, hoping that maybe the man would go by the time she got there. She could hear the mocking birds singing in the trees despite the heat, feel the grittiness of the sand down in the sock of her shoe, the other one caked in mud.

Jimmy was standing too close to the man and the bike and it scared Lemon. They were never to answer the door or the phone when Momma was away at work or asleep in the afternoons when she came home. Why would a man come up to their house anyway?

But just then, Gram came up off the couch on the front porch, smoking a cigarette, making her way towards Jimmy. Relief swept through Lemon. Nothing bad was going to happen now, not with Gram around. Lemon slowed her steps, torn between wanting to run to Gram and slap Jimmy for being such a fool.

As Lemon approached, the man stayed where he was. He was not noticing her at all, just standing off to the side of his bike, his faded Levis frayed along the leg seams, black leather jacket hanging loose in one hand, half helmet in the other.

Jimmy was grinning and laughing. His eyes were bright and taking in the bike, every inch of it, like it was a Christmas present. The purple metallic paint glittered with bright flames and silver pin stripes. The shiny tailpipes gleamed in the afternoon light, the blue of the sky and the white of the clouds.

Jimmy cautiously touched the leather seat, looking up to the man for permission, and the man nodded. Jimmy ran his hands over it, touching the silver metal studs that ran along its contours while Gram stood back a piece, quiet, her eyes smoldering like the cigarette in her hand. Lemon could feel it now, something wrong was happening, but whatever it was nobody was going to say.

Lemon drew closer, her own steps making noise enough for them to hear her now. Gram saw her. She looked Lemon over from head to toe, a crease in her forehead deepening at the sight, but she seemed as intently focused on the man as Jimmy was on the man's cycle. She said nothing to anyone but sort of nodded her head towards Lemon and then crossed her arms.

The biker man turned to face Lemon, boot chains rattling, a silver cable running from his left back pocket to his belt swinging. Lemon was shocked at how his face was covered in hair, his bushy beard disappearing into wild sideburns that tangled up in long hair that should have been pulled back in a ponytail— chestnut brown pony tail, just like Jimmy's. His eyes crinkled up and his thin lips, half hidden by mustache, widened into a smile.

“Clementine,” he said in a soft voice. “Well. You’ve grown up.”

Lemon met his gaze full on and felt a heat creep over her cheeks. He couldn't have missed the way she looked, all a mess and sweaty as a pig, but search as she might, she didn't see a hint of disgust in him. But she couldn't place this man even if it seemed as though everyone else did and was acting like she ought to as well. Lemon glanced over at Jimmy who now beamed at her almost giddy, still lovestruck from that bike. Gram pulled a long drag off her cigarette, her face unreadable, but the awkwardness of it went on too long. The man looked down at the ground and fiddled with his sunglasses.

"Bax." He glanced up at her and a look passed between them, but neither one said anything more.

"Bax?" Lemon repeated. "Baxter Asher?" The words came out with a quiver, a trembling, that she instantly hated, but couldn't help. *Baxter Asher. Her daddy?*

Lemon bolted toward the house, as quick as if she'd been stung by a bee. She glared at Gram as she passed. How could Gram have let this happen? She was supposed to keep them safe when Momma was asleep.

Her feet pounded on the back porch steps, a hollow thumping that shook the whole house as she came closer and closer to the screen door that led into the kitchen, a thumping that matched the heavy beating of her heart. She wrenched open the door, letting it slam behind her, and then stood stock still, stunned by the smell of roasting chicken and hot biscuits with butter, fresh out of the oven. Lemon's mouth went to watering and a second later her eyes too. It was grief and gratitude all mixed up so bad she couldn't sort it out.

Gram came up behind her, panting and out of breath. "Didn't you hear me, girl? Stop yourself when I call your name."

"I'm not some dumb dog."

"Then stop acting like one."

She faced Gram though it was like looking up at a pine tree. "What should I be acting like then—like Jimmy? Like it don't matter he's been gone so long. Like it don't matter—" Lemon looked at the stairs that went up to the bedrooms. *Did Momma know?*

"Come on outside."

"I will not."

"Don't sass me." Gram held open the door.

Lemon followed her out, arms crossed. “You can make me go out there, but I don’t have to be nice about it. You’ll see.”

Gram sat down in the porch swing, scooting over for Lemon to join her, the swing tipping over to one side, uneven without her weight to balance it out. Lemon sighed and sat down, looking straight ahead at a big bunch of nothing. She could wait this out if she had to.

Gram took a cigarette out of her front pocket and lit it from a match. She waved the match stick off and tossed it on to the porch. “You, listen,” she said. “I got something to say.”

“Like you’re sorry?” Lemon crossed her arms tighter and kicked at the ground to make the porch swing rock as hard as she could. The chains rattled and clanked.

“Like I ought to whip your ass, fooling around like you do after school. What are you doing out in them woods all by yourself? You’re fixing to get killed or snatched up.”

“Walking home like I do every day. I can take care of myself, you know.” Lemon’s words were meant to be strong and confident, born of righteous indignation at Baxter Asher’s sudden appearance, but they came out weak and unsure. Lemon frowned. There was no way anyone could have known, no way that someone could have followed her to the burned out place and watched and then told, but somehow, what she had done marked her for all the world to see. The counselors, everybody, would know the second she walked back into Brentwood Elementary. She scratched at the sand clinging to and itching on her skin.

Gram turned her head and blew the smoke away from Lemon’s face. “I know that you’ve had to take care of yourself a long time, honey. There’s a difference.”

“Didn’t hurt you none.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe not. But know I sure wished better for you.” Gram dug in her heels and set the swing to rocking. “You’ve always been a sensitive child. Things always affected you more.” She turned to Lemon, but Lemon looked away, not wanting Gram to see the hurt plainly open on her face. Someone had told about the frogs. She knew, the one person Lemon needed not to know, suddenly knew.

“My dad,” Gram said “is buried out between the chicken coop and the barn, on that miserable farm we called home,” pointing with her finger as if they were sitting somewhere else, looking on another backyard from some other time. “Edgar and Cecil, nailed him up. Thirteen nails at a penny a piece.”

“Lordy, I hated that man. Not a saint alive that wouldn’t disagree with it, knowing how he act, hearing what he say, watching what he do. And I wake up every morning and say to myself, I’m glad you’re dead, daddy. Every day is a better day on account of that.”

Lemon frowned. She didn’t want to hear some sad tale meant to make her feel sorry for that man out in the front yard. Besides, Gram usually didn’t talk like this until she’d been drinking and they hadn’t even had supper yet.

“Every once in a while, every great once in a while, I wish it would have been different and I’m sad about it,” she went on, “not for the man he was, but for the man he could’ve been.” Lemon heard her sigh. “Your daddy—”

“He don’t live here no more and he ain’t coming back,” Lemon said. “That’s why you’re your here isn’t it? To help us, to help momma, because he left us? How can he mean anything to me, when I mean nothing at all? Whatever is going on out there right now, Gram—I need him to go. Tonight was supposed to special. Don’t you remember what tonight is?”

Gram leaned back into the corner of the swing, her arm laying across the top rail of the swing, easy like, as if the two of them were just sitting, enjoying the breeze. “Of course, I remember. And I promise we won’t miss it. Not for the world. Hear what I got to say, girl. You need that man out there. It don’t matter if he’s earned it or not, you owe the man something and you’ll end up paying it. Either now or when he’s gone.”

“When he’s gone then,” Lemon said, surprised at how the words hurt to say out loud. “I’ll go jump in that lake and never come back if you make me. He’s nothing. He’s nothing that any of us want or need.” Lemon tugged on her Gram’s arm and leaned in close to her. “Please make him go.”

“You think you mean it— ”

“Yes, I do Gram. I swear it.”

The grumble and roar of a motorcycle’s engine startled the birds out of the trees. Lemon flinched. Her heart was pounding as loud as the bike’s pulsing engine. Baxter Asher was leaving. Relief washed over her and she took her hands away from Gram’s sleeve, thankful for the man on the motorcycle’s decency and common sense, two things he might have more of now than he once did. He could go back to his life

and keep on knowing nothing about hers, and that would be good. That would be a blessing. That would make things all right again.

The engine roared louder. Maybe he was just revving it up to show off, or maybe it didn't run as well as it looked. Gram stopped the swing. And stood. Lemon scrambled up after her, the swing threatening to dump her onto the porch if she stayed.

Jimmy flung open the screen door and raced down the back porch. Lemon expected him to keep on going into the house, but he stopped at her, catching her arm with his hand and tugging at it.

"Invite him to dinner," he said to her, breathless from running. "Gram already did. She said it was okay with Momma." Lemon frowned and tried to pull her arm away. "Please, Clementine." Jimmy tightened his grip. The hope and fear in his eyes threatened to give way to tears. "He won't stay unless it's all right with you. When will we get another chance like this?"

"Is that what he said to you?" she asked Jimmy over the noise. "That I have to say yes?"

Both Lemon and Jimmy looked at Gram, but she said nothing.

Lemon frowned and moved past Jimmy. She slowly moved towards the door and the terrible noise of the bike with heavy steps, passing gallon jugs of water stacked against the wall and spindly potted plants cowering in the deep shade.

It wasn't going to last, this new thing with Baxter Asher. Lemon turned back. Jimmy and Gram sat on the porch swing, her arm around his thin shoulders, his head bowed. The chicken. The biscuits. It was a real supper for once. They'd all sit down together to eat it, she and Jimmy and Gram and Momma—no matter what else. Wasn't any cause to cry.

Lemon went out. Baxter Asher still sat on his motorcycle. His helmet was on and his sunglasses too.

The chicken. The biscuits. It was a real supper for once. They'd all sit down together to eat it, she and Jimmy and Gram and Momma—no matter what else. Lemon took one last look back don't the porch. Wasn't any cause to cry.

Lemon went out. She couldn't tell if Baxter Asher was looking at her or not with his eyes hidden behind those sunglasses, but she walked with purpose in his direction. When she was half the distance to the bike, he shut off the engine.

It died with a sputtering sound. She could hear the mufflers, still hot, ticking and pinging and hissing away. The air was full of its exhaust that smelled of oil and gasoline. The stink of it mixed in the salty air with hints of wax and leather too. Lemon suddenly hated that bike, hated it like it were some kind of living thing that could know and feel her hatred. It was something her dad loved and cherished, maybe more than anything else. How many chicken dinners, and new sneakers, and winter coats had it cost? Lemon wished she could bury it alive and let it rot to nothing— let him go dig it up after months in the heat and the sands and see what lies beneath. Just dust and nothing more.

Baxter Asher took off this helmet. He fumbled with the chin strap, as if the gloves he had on made it more difficult than it should have been. Lemon stopped short when she felt the heat of the bike radiating like a lightless sun. It was only then he took his sunglasses off, his eyes as blue as any sky in winter.

Where have you been? She burned the thought into the man still sitting on his bike, willing herself to say it out loud.

“Where are you going?” she asked in a bare whisper. The sound of her own voice, came out weak and very small. So different than the angry and strong sound inside of her head.

Baxter Asher flinched as if she’d roared. Maybe he wasn’t expecting her to ask him that.

“Milk. Janalee said you all were out and needed some.” He wasn’t looking at her. Anywhere but.

“Maybe you just ought to keep going.”

Baxter Asher nodded to himself. He brushed a dead fly off the gas tank with his hand. “I’ve been thinking about it.”

He stood up a little, rocking the bike side to side as shifted his weight, finally pulling something out of the back pocket of his jeans. A crumpled envelope. He turned it over in this hands, his fingers running along the seams. Then he held it out to her.

Lemon stood still. She didn’t move to take it. What was this? Was he going to just give her a note and drive off again?

She looked at the envelope. It was tattered around the edges and covered with dirty finger prints of motor grease and road dirt. She opened the flap just enough to see it held a photograph or two.

“This used to be your granddad Asher’s. His name was Edward Davis. Went by Ed.”

“I don’t want it,” Lemon said. “I didn’t know him.” *I don’t even know you.*

Baxter Asher grimaced.

“You ought to have given that to Jimmy anyway,” she said. “He’s the only one around here with any interest in family history.”

Baxter Asher closed his eyes and something like a sigh escaped his lips. When he opened his eyes again, he was looking off into the clouds, the sunset coming fast now, everything burning in oranges and reds.

“When I went to the house, his new wife Gloris said all his things was gone. Thrown out not even given away. Aunt Pearl’d seen his obit in the papers and she tried to call me.” He gazed at the envelope in his hands. “I rode twelve hours straight, hoping to get there in time, for what I don’t know, but Gloris had him cremated and didn’t feel the need to have a service. I had to ask the funeral home to find his unmarked grave.”

Baxter Asher looked Lemon in the eye again and held the envelope out, his hand barely trembling. “This was the only thing left.”

It wasn’t a big envelope. Maybe something that you might get a birthday card in, though this one was plain in every way, no mark or scribble, no trace of where it might have lain or who might have owned it. It felt like something hastily chosen, something grabbed off a kitchen counter in a rush. Lemon could almost see this Gloris person, rushing to the junk drawer, looking for where she’d put those last few things of Edward Asher’s that she hadn’t disposed of yet and cramming them in this envelope, anything to get the unexpected and unwanted visitor off her doorstep. It didn’t matter if it was a dead man’s son. She didn’t know him. She didn’t want to know him.

It came on so quick. All at once, Lemon felt sorry for Baxter Asher like she had never felt sorry for anyone in her whole life. Her throat tightened up as she drew closer and took the envelope from his hands even though she didn’t want to.

It was very light. Less than she was expecting given a whole life inside, not a note or a letter, but little things of different sizes and shapes. Pictures she guessed, probably old ones, a young man dressed as soldier in some war she couldn’t name, or maybe some of her dad when he was small, but then again,

Lemon wasn't even sure how long Baxter Asher had been with his own dad, or what they had done, or what they meant to each other. If anything.

She turned the envelope over and opened the flap, pulling out the first thing her fingers touched. It was a snap shot, one of the old kind, square with white borders.

Two little kids smiled up at her, enjoying a sunny day in a kiddie park, riding on one of those seesaws where each of the ends is an animal. The little girl was on a dolphin and a slightly older boy on a seal. The little boy looked just like Baxter Asher. But she knew it wasn't him because she knew the little girl, she knew that face. It was her own and that little boy was Jimmy.

Where could the picture have been taken? And when? She thumbed through the next one and the one after that. They were all pictures of her and Jimmy. How could these be the pictures Gloris gave Baxter Asher?

"These are yours," Lemon said, finally. She held the envelope out to him, but it shook a little from the trembling in her hand that went all the way down her legs. Baxter Asher didn't move. He didn't even look at her. She couldn't see his face, all covered up in his long hair and his long beard.

"Told him about you and Jimmy, as often as I could. I don't even know why I did it," he said, but his words didn't seem meant for her. Then he looked up. "I'm sorry it didn't do no good." He glanced at the envelope in her hands and then right in her eyes.

"Take them back," she said. "You keep them." Lemon put the envelope in his hand.

He gripped it and then her hand too. "I swore I would never do the things he did. I didn't ever want to be like him." Lemon tried not to flinch as he brushed her hair out of her own blue eyes. The night was starting to fall. The frogs were singing and in that long quiet between the two of them, he picked up his sunglasses and put them and the envelope back inside his jacket.

Lemon watched his hands, biting her lip. He put his helmet back on, gloved hands pulling his long hair back, gloved hands tightening the straps underneath his beard. She turned away, walking up toward the house, not waiting for an answer, not wanting to see if maybe he would stay, or go, or maybe even come back sometime.

The tall pines swayed in the coming evening breeze, the clouds turning deep purple now that the sun was sinking under the horizon. When she reached the steps of the back porch, the rumble of a motorcycle, loud and crackling, echoed against the wooden siding of the house.

Lemon spun back around with a start, running after the motorcycle as it pulled out of the drive, a white billowing cloud of dust enveloping her and cloaking the rider in white, while frogs, all kinds of frogs, leapt up and out of the ditches at the sound.

THE ORCHID HOUSE

Nola was already walking down the driveway, her hibiscus print kimono blending in with the blue and orange birds of paradise, their slender flowers and the folds of her robe swaying in the light sea breeze. Charlie squinted through his thick glasses as he watched her tiny black and white form disappeared behind the silver saw palmetto in the camera monitor. In just a moment she'd be standing at the mailbox, their mailbox, Charlie reminded himself. Too bad the camera's view didn't extend to the road.

It was supposed to come today. The package from Paraguay. The package of tiny bulbs that would grow, with careful and meticulous care, into orchids. Rare ones, he hoped, but either way it was okay, because they were coming from Mrs. Mieras. It was possible that her name and her name alone on the package might have been the real problem between himself and his wife concerning their mail, but Charlie didn't want to think about that.

Her letters that came with the orchid boxes, written in broken English, were completely charming, maybe a little too charming. It was for that reason he purposely imagined her as woman of five hundred pounds with a face like a bulldog, happily growing her beautiful orquídeas and watching her telenovelas in a little yellow house smaller than his living room. She knew nothing of his world, nor he anything of hers. That was very good, for the best he thought. But no matter what he thought about her, what Nola thought mattered more—especially now that that everything between them was so new and not exactly happy.

Charlie sighed. Florida. The Sunshine State. The white sand beaches with their stately palm trees looked so nice in the postcards and the advertisements in the AARP magazine. It seemed as though the move from boring old Cuyahoga Falls to year round golf courses and endless ocean views was the perfect end to a well-planned life.

And it could have been. He and Nola had the magical million dollars in the bank when they left, which wasn't as hard as it might have been if they had put several kids through college and then started all

over ten years later with the grandkid thing. Even so, purchasing the bargain priced beach house Nola had to have cost them exactly half of the funds they'd saved. It was a lot of money for the privilege of sweeping a pound of sandy grit from the foyer twice a day, installing cameras to watch every inch of the property, and waiting forty minutes on the drawbridge to get off the island, but then again, Charlie wasn't the type to complain. Maybe he should have. After all, it didn't stop Nola when it came to Mrs. Mieras.

Charlie left the security monitor and went into the kitchen. Nola came inside soon after, scraping her sandals on the coconut mat just beyond the screen door. She walked passed him, tossing a small package, still warm from the mailbox, onto the kitchen table. Charlie could feel the anger coming off her like heat from an invisible sun, threatening to burn his exposed skin by proximity.

"Another one?" she said. Nola plopped down on the kitchen chair with an audible thud. She picked up the pack of cigarettes next to her coffee cup and tapped them hard against her hand. "How many of these orchid things does this Mieras woman need to send you?"

Charlie picked up the box and brought it close enough to his face to read the return address. "Why don't you open it, if you're so concerned. I've told you before, it's nothing. Just orchids."

"Bridge today at the Hershes," she said, sighing. Outside the window, little purple martins pecked at the walkway. "I wonder if Marge will make that coffee cake again."

"We trade bulbs, not buy. I've told you that a million times already." The package was small and light. Charlie hoped it was a Cattleya or maybe a Cymbidium. Mrs. Mieras always sent something interesting in return for his Gongoras.

"The Baumfields have hosted the last three times," Nola said. She looked past Charlie, her gaze lingering over the foyer, the towering shadows of shipping boxes stacked to the ceiling in some places. "It would be nice to be able to have someone over once in a while."

"The Hersches. That ridiculous boat? They can't even drive it. And the Baumfields—"

"What's the matter with wanting a boat, Charlie?" The sound of Nola's shell pink fingernails flicking against the table top, barely drowning out the soft ticks of the kitchen clock hanging on the wall behind her. "Plenty of people want to have boats. It's Florida."

"Yeah, I know. It's Florida." Charlie straightened the straps on his overalls and tucked the package under his arm. "If I don't get to work now it's going to be too hot."

“Maybe you should have stayed in Ohio.” She flicked the ash from her cigarette into a coral ash tray and then locked her lips in a new pucker around the pink-stained filter. “You know, that place where old people still act old.”

Charlie felt his muscles stiffen and his heart beat faster. “I went to those stupid golf games with those stupid people. They didn’t really want me there. Even you can admit that.”

“Gray hair and crochet blanket covered sofas.” The smoke slowly rose from Nola’s ash tray in the morning light, curling into ethereal shapes Charlie couldn’t quite make out clear enough to name. “You just want to mess around in that crappy shed. You don’t care about what’s happening out in the world or outside of this house.”

“I moved with you, didn’t I?”

Nola’s eyes narrowed. She brought her ringless hand to her mouth and took a long drag off her Virginia Slim, the ash glowing crimson. “Whatever, Charlie. You listen to the same music from thirty-five years ago. Eat the same meals your mother made—down to the damned creamed corn.” She crushed the cigarette. “I don’t know what you thought moving to Florida was going to be like, but I didn’t expect to come down here with my ninety year old dad.”

“I am *not* Frank,” Charlie said. She sat there across from him, her made-up hair and nails, her frail seventy-two year old body all done up in that silk robe, while he tried to find something in himself that recognized her, something that knew her and loved her, but it was almost like looking at stranger. “I did it for you—because you weren’t happy and I wanted you to be happy.”

“Did you ever stop and think that just maybe I wanted to be happy *with* you.” She stood up, smoothing down the stray hairs that had come undone from her updo. “You aren’t even the same man.”

“Like you’re the same woman.” Charlie turned his back on her. He had more important things waiting on him than the same old argument.

“I like myself this way, even if you don’t. As do my friends.” He heard her snatched up her keys. “Be back at seven. Don’t wait up.” Her footsteps echoed off the tile floor, getting softer as they went, footsteps that carried her back to her walk-in closet that was the size of their old master bedroom in their house on Forrest Ave. “And by the way,” she called out, her voice bouncing off the walls and floors, “martyrdom isn’t very damn attractive.”

Charlie pretended not to hear.

The cherry red Honda slowly backed out of the driveway. Nola's huge sunglasses made her look like a large bug-eyed fly behind the wheel. The top of her hair, quaffed and sprayed for the country club, barely peeked over the driver's seat and for a second, Charlie hoped she wouldn't come back. Life would be so much easier. He could stay home without any complaining and finish the work he'd started in the orchid house. She could find somewhere else to live, like St. Paulo's Circle with its high class tourist shopping and exclusive gated communities.

Charlie left the kitchen window and wondered into the darkened foyer. Piles of shipping boxes, both his and hers, lined the walls of the small room. Shipping boxes that neither one of them had taken care of—yet. Charlie took a box knife out of his overalls and clicked it open. Sometimes anger was a good motivator, a much better motivator than Nola's constant nagging to get rid of his junk. Picking up a box that his new grow lights came in, he turned it over and sliced the tape sealing the bottom. He folded it flat so he could leave it out by the curb for trash pick-up. It was something he'd meant to do three weeks ago, but never found the time. It seemed neither one of them had much time for taking care of the things they used to.

Nola knew he wasn't happy. He had never been good at hiding his feelings, but he had gotten a lot better about confronting her over his unhappiness. In fact, it had become a new way of being between them, an unspoken compromise—just say nothing to each other and keep pretending nothing was wrong. Where did she get off harping on him for the state of her feelings? As if he were at fault.

The boxes, at one time bringing joy and excitement, suddenly depressed Charlie. All that money spent. All those things, thought of and cared for, instead of the relationship between himself and his wife. How did it even get to this point? Maybe the move wasn't the problem. Maybe it was the people Nola thought they should be friends with. None of the people he'd met were actually from Florida, they were refugee's just like Nola and himself. The Hersches at 4522 were from Synecdoche, and the Baumfields, Caratunk, Maine. The young kid at the Shop-n-Go—Wisconsin. The bag boy at Publix—Nebraska. Even the landscapers were from somewhere else. It was no wonder there was so much crime. Even in the upscale community Nola insisted on there were break-ins and day time carjackings. People tended to be out for

themselves when they were rootless.

“At least you’re not,” Charlie said, picking up the tiny orchid box he had placed on the nearest pile of empty boxes. He smiled at his own joke. “Rootless in a good way, anyhow.” Charlie squinted at the display panel for the security camera system. The driveway was empty. The bedroom was empty. Garage. Back patio. Not a thing out of place. No strangers lurking around. No Nola. He sighed and turned away from the monitor. At least there was always the orchid house.

Nola hated his orchids, of course. She hated the fact they weren’t normal plants like the hibiscus or the oleanders or the soldier palms everybody else seemed to have. He didn’t think she knew that oleanders were extremely poisonous, every bit of it capable of killing the careless, like small children and pets for example. Rather than argue with her he just moved everything he cared about to the backyard. He liked to imagine the plants were happier about it too. No dogs or mouthy wives to harass them.

Charlie went directly to lunch, as he always did precisely at noon, orchid box by his side. He opened the kitchen pantry. There were three types of Campbell’s Chunky soup, though truthfully, he only liked two of them. The third was just for the sake of variety. Charlie looked at them longer than usual, then he shut the pantry door and went to the refrigerator.

“I think today I’ll have a sandwich,” he called out to the empty house. “Wouldn’t want to do the same thing every day, now would I?” He grabbed a package of bologna, and paused. Besides some condiments, bologna was the only choice other than cheese and some mystery take out containers. Nola hated bologna. What had she been eating for lunch? Charlie couldn’t say that he really knew, except that she’d been out—quite a bit. He made a dry bologna sandwich on white bread and chewed it at the kitchen’s island bar, still standing. His mind drifted thoughtlessly, consumed with the effort. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and headed out towards the patio.

In the hallway, he passed by a bunch of framed photographs, a grouping that had remained the same since their move from Cuyahoga Falls. These were the only things Nola didn’t insist on changing. Starfish shaped soap in the bathrooms, instead of a bar of Irish Spring. Everything in white and sand—designer colors, she’d said. Charlie slipped off his glasses and came in close, the only way he could see things clearly, having never bothered to see a new optometrist after his last prescription wore out.

He smiled as he looked carefully at the snap shots of his mom and dad, of Nola and himself at Lorena's, her mother, that summer before they got married. How he'd loved the girl Nola had been, the one who had run off with him to drive across Ohio eating Polish Boys at every festival and roadside stand. She loved him and loved her footlong kielbasa links smothered in slaw and tangy mustard, topped with sizzling French fries. How did all that turn into dry bologna sandwiches and wine parties with fake friends?

He turned the orchid box over in his hands, the wrinkles and folds of his skin deep and blackened with dirt, or whatever it was, that made the potting soil so rich and dark. Maybe Nola was right. Maybe this was all that was left, the rest of him, the best of him, having rotted away like an old tree stump, hollowed from the inside out.

The orchid house was what Nola called his refuge. Charlie knew it was out of spite, but he didn't care anymore. He kind of liked the name, a better name than it really deserved, considering the addition he'd put on himself wasn't a building made for the tropics or at least not one made to last. With a flat, tarpapered roof nailed onto unfinished plywood walls, it was more like a hastily built Midwestern shed. Something ill-suited for the salty humid air of the ocean side of the key. It definitely wasn't in the plans when they'd bought the house from Palm Reality.

Charlie looked up into the banyan trees, past their roots that dropped from their limbs like stringy red hair. There were his orchids, nestled in the crooks of the branches. He stood in silence watching as everything swayed in the mild wind while lizards sunned themselves, darting back into the shadows at the slightest noise. The scent of sweet orange blossoms drifted on the breeze from lanai; the dwarf tree he'd potted was in bloom. He followed the stone pavers through the clumps of banyan trees, careful not to crush the African lilies underfoot. He tripped over something at the door to the shed. At first the thought it was a rock, or a broken tree limb, but as he got closer his vision cleared and he saw that it was a piece of wood, a broken handle to what must have been a hand spade, the blade nowhere to be found. Charlie frowned and tossed it over into the Hersches perfectly manicured lawn. He was sure that Island Breeze Lawn and Landscape was the culprit. Especially after he's complained they'd cut back his Sea Grapes, which were protected plants even if they encroached a little over the property line.

Charlie opened the door to the orchid house. He hadn't bothered to put a lock on it. Theft was always a concern in a place where houses could be empty for months at a time, but Charlie didn't keep many tools in his makeshift shed. The low buzz and bright glow of UV grow lights welcomed him, along with the earthy smell of potting mix and peat moss. He set the package down on the plywood work bench, pushing the pile of bamboo stakes and twine out of the way. A rusted coffee can held all his shears. A shipping box full of mason jar rings and lids jingled with his steps. A scuttling, shuffling sound reached his ears as he toyed with a spray bottle, twisting and untwisting the nozzle. Probably rats or every large cockroaches; it wasn't worth chasing down. He didn't really want to know what might be lurking in the dark corners of the shed, especially since the orchids themselves were safe behind glass.

Plants were to be misted. Roots to be supported. Bulbs to be unglassed. But he stopped mid spray at something small and golden resting on the edge. He set the spray bottle aside and picked it up. A ring. Nola's wedding ring. Charlie blinked. What was doing in here?

Plain and gold and worn so thin it looked it might break with the slightest pressure from his fingers, Charlie moved over to the other side of the table and held it up into the light of the grow lamp. It definitely was her ring. He'd stopped wearing his, afraid of ruining it while doing so much dirty work with the orchids. He couldn't remember exactly when she'd stopped wearing hers, just that he'd noticed it was missing some time ago but he never said anything about it. Nor had she.

Charlie felt as if he'd started to stumble after missing a step he'd never seen coming. Had Nola meant this as some kind of sign, some kind of understated message to him that she was done? Was this why the refrigerator was empty and the pantry was full of only his favorite meals?

"Nola," Charlie said in a voice that was low and thick with regret. Her ring was so poor, so ill-used. It was something he'd meant to replace, as soon as he could have afforded something better, but somehow the moment had never arrived, despite his financial successes. He held her ring in his own ringless hand, once slender and fine, the hands of a pianist or a surgeon his mother always said, fingers straight and thin as aspens. But oh how those same bones had twisted over time, the first joint of his index finger turning inward as if he had spent a life time working on cars or hauling packages, when all he'd ever done was sit at a desk and take notes and make phone calls. Nola was right. He was an old man. A foolish, selfish old man.

Charlie set the ring carefully down on the work bench, unsure what to do next. Maybe he'd never been sure what to do next his whole life. He stepped away from the ring and table, his shoes grinding on the wood chips and the dirt, when something else golden caught his eye from the floor. Charlie picked it up. A thin golden chain. Then a bracelet. Had Nola been so angry with him that she wanted to destroy everything of value she owned? A growling sound rumbled from the back corner of the shed. Charlie turned in time to see a large blurry man lurch towards him out of the shadows.

A terrible force shoved Charlie in the side and he flew forward, towards the table. He tried to catch himself, his arms flung out, his hands spread wide, but they failed to stop his own body weight from taking him down to the ground, the side of his head meeting the table's edge on the way. He let out a high pitched squawk that sounded half way between a goat's bleat and a seagull's cry as he hit the floor. Jelly jars full of tiny orchids tumbled and crashed to the table top. Tools flew to the ground, landing like lead raindrops, heavy thumps echoing off the plywood foundation. Charlie whimpered. His head hurt and his glasses were gone. Someone grabbed him by the straps of the overalls and pulled him up, shoving him aside again. Charlie's fingers frantically grabbed at the nearest pile of potting soil, hoping to find something he could use.

He rolled over, seeing two fuzzy, dark shapes of men bending over the floor, their hands picking in the dirt like a birds scratching for worms— the jewelry. But would it be enough?

"Take my keys," Charlie said. "The truck is in the garage. Just go." He put his hand to the side of his head. It was wet. Blood trickled through his trembling fingers. He thought of Nola pulling up in her new red convertible. He thought of her walking up the drive in her too high heels and too bleached hair.

"Hurry up, goddamnit" he growled, pawing at the ground for a hammer or wrench, but his hands found nothing, nothing except the smashed orchid box, crushed by his fall.

A kick to the ribs knocked all the breath of out Charlie. Panting, he made a low sound, like a dog that had been kicked and had no breath to whimper. As he lay there, Charlie heard the scramble of sand against the floor and saw the bright flash of light as the door swung wide. His heart beat was thin and fast, like bird's fluttering wings. He sat up, dizzy.

They were gone at last, but the orchid house was now destroyed from the inside out. Tools scattered. Hydroponic gel oozing from the broken jelly jars. Potting soil bags ripped open and the dirt flung around.

Charlie didn't have a phone on him, He'd never put one in the orchid house, never put a lock on the door, or a camera facing that side of the house. He shivered. How foolish he'd been, risking so much out of carelessness and neglect.

Charlie grabbed on to some bags of mulch and pulled himself up to standing. He needed to call the police. He needed to let someone know what just happened before those men came for them too.

Bright light splashed into the room as the door swung wide open. Charlie flinched, pulling his hands back and up to protect his face. Why hadn't he grabbed a weapon first thing?

"Charlie!" Nola took off her sunglasses and looked around wide eyed. Her eyes stopped on him and she rushed to support his arm. He was tipping over and hadn't even felt it.

"What happened?" Her hands grabbed at his, her eyes pained at the sight of his face. "You're bleeding."

"I'm so sorry," Charlie said. "I thought everything was okay because the security cameras were clear. I didn't even think to set the perimeter alarms. Probably thought they were safe in the shed until I walked in on them."

"They weren't. They tripped the window one and the security company called me, saying they'd alerted the police. They will be here any minute. But I don't care," Nola said, walking him over to the garden sink. "As long as you're okay."

She heated some water and grabbed the soap, using a shop towel as a wash rag. "Can you lean down a little? I want to see." She washed Charlie's face and scalp. "No stitches," she said, "but you should see a doctor."

"Nola, I found all your jewelry in here, Your wedding ring. Everything."

She took his hands, old and dry, caked with dirt and began washing them. She scrubbed them with the bar of Lava, using her own hands and the grit in the soap to wash away the stains, leaving both of their hands ringless and new. They were clean, cleaner than they had been in a long time. Even his fingernails were pink and white, no longer blackened and stained with dirt.

“You don’t want to know what I thought. You—” Charlie sighed. “These hands, Nola. These hands never do anything right.”

Nola shook her head. “These are good hands,” she told him. “Strong hands. Hands that will do the right thing, the best thing, always. Everything will be okay, Charlie. Really, it will. Wait here and let me find your glasses.”

Nola was wrong. His hands never did anything right, not without her there to guide them. She came back to the sink and washed his glasses off. Then she slipped them over his face. Slowly, everything came into focus. The light streaming in from the opened door made Nola’s face look rounded and young, even though her nose was now pink. She smiled up at him with a genuine, good smile and handed him the smashed orchid box. It had fallen apart, but Charlie could see whatever Mrs. Mieras had sent him, it wasn’t orchids. He’d caught a glimpse of a silver beaded chain, the cheap kind he’d always associated with dog tags and lucky rabbit’s feet.

“I think I got something different in the mail today. Would you like to see it?” Charlie said. He pulled the chain up and out of the box. At the end hung a silver capped vial made of glass. It was half full of a dense clear gel and set into that was tiny sprig of green.

“What is it?” Nola asked. She stood next to him. Her hair smelled like honeysuckle and she was wearing some kind of scented powder that he liked the smell of very much. He lowered the vial into her hand. She took it from him and turned it around in her palm with her finger. “Is it alive?”

“It’s an in vitro propagation of an orchid. So long as you don’t leave it in the dark for a long time this little orchid will grow in here perfectly well until its big enough to transplant.”

“That’s not very big,” she said with an edge of sarcasm to her words. Nola lifted up the vial closer to her face and held it up to the light. She moved to give it back to him. Charlie grabbed the chain and gently pulled on it before she could let go. The micro LED in the lid clicked on. The light refracted through the gel casting a tiny blue glow over her hands.

Nola laughed. “That’s very clever. Where ever did you find such thing?”

“It was a gift. From Mrs. Mieras.”

He felt her stiffen. She held the vial out to him by the chain.

“Is there something going on I should know about?”

Charlie's heart beat faster. "Like what?"

"Honestly, Charlie—"

"Of course she knows about you—about us," Charlie said. "How could she not know about the most important person in my life?"

The sirens wailed. Flashing blue and red lights burst through the cracks of the orchid house. It sounded like City Island had sent the entire police force and Charlie could imagine all his neighbors pouring out into the street to see what terrible thing had happened at the house on house at 4524 Island Circle Drive.

"She knows how reluctant of a gardener this old man really is, all alone with his plants when I don't have to be. It's her way of telling me she thinks I spend too much time in here without the company of my wife."

Charlie lowered the tiny Bio-Orb on its chain into Nola's hands and clasped them with his own. He could feel the pull of an invisible current and it was taking him someplace he wished he could always be, somewhere Nola was and would never leave— each of them standing alone but together on the same side of an ever-widening gulf with a hope to reach the other shore.

EMBER

A spot of soft green light. The hands of the Moonbeam clock, dipped in glowing paint pointed somewhere past midnight. 2:24 am. Dodie blinked in the darkness of her room and pulled the covers on her bed higher. She dreamt that someone had taken all the knobs off the doors of her house, leaving no way to get out. It was a weird dream and the feeling of it, a slow creeping horror, still clung to her waking mind.

A loud bang. The sound echoed through the hallway from somewhere deeper in the house. Dodie sunk down into her bed. It was it a fight? Another one? She pulled the covers over her head and tried to go back to sleep. No wonder, if her daddy was just now coming home from his shift at the Tropicana plant. Maybe too much liquor or not enough money or just a plain bad mood. It could be anything, God knew, but her mama would fix him good. She always managed to in the end.

Dodie listened for voices as she tried to drift back into the oblivion of sleep, but it was strangely quiet above the rustling and banging. No screaming. No cursing. No whining or crying. Part of her was glad, relieved at the peace, if not quiet, in the house. But quiet sometimes turned out to be just a pause you shouldn't trust, like the silence after a flash of lightning. All depended on how far away you were from the place where the strike landed on the ground. Dodie sat up and tossed the covers aside. Better to know than to be caught off guard, especially where her daddy was concerned. It was always work that did it, maybe didn't even matter what kind, but this job especially Daddy hated because of the foolish hairnet and the Cubans and the smell of burnt orange peels that clung to his clothes. Didn't matter how much it paid, it was never enough and Mama and Harlan always took the brunt. They spared her the worst of it, a bitter price for them all.

Dodie got up from the bed and quietly pressed her ear to the door. Hearing nothing, she carefully turned the door knob and pushed it open a crack. The lights were on in the kitchen and she could see that the cabinet doors were hanging open, boxes of food and piles of dishes everywhere, which was normal.

They weren't the neatest of people, unlike Aunt Josie. Maybe there were some benefits to giving your kids chores after all.

Dodie pushed her door open further, widening the crack to a gaping crevasse. In the dim light flooding in from the kitchen, she could tell her brother Harlan's door, down the hall, was still closed. At least he wasn't involved tonight. Lord knows, he wasn't always so lucky.

Dodie crept down the hallway, dodging the boards that creaked and squawked in the sloping floor, slowing her steps as she reached the end. Even in the relative darkness, she could see that the living room had been upended. Couch cushions were thrown on to the floor and a side table had been turned over, spilling an ash tray on to the threadbare rug. No sign of Daddy though. His work boots and coat were gone from the place he always left them by the door. She was relieved he had gone off—run off maybe. It was for the best.

The rounded back of her mama bobbed over the kitchen counter, rising up and sinking down as she dug through the cabinets underneath, dressed in that pink gingham with the white ties of her apron fixed into a bow. Still wearing her work uniform even though her shift had ended hours ago. Dodie grimaced. She wasn't going to be in a good mood either. Lately it seemed like the whole world was titling that way.

"Hey, Mama," Dodie said.

Her mama rose up, slow and grim. Dodie drew in a sharp breath, putting her hand over her mouth. Mama's eyes were blacked, a stark blue shining out of purpled sockets, half-hidden behind a straggle of ebony hair, and at first Dodie thought her daddy had really gone to town this time, bad enough for the cops, bad enough for child protective services with their foster homes and psyche counsellors, those interlopers who didn't understand what family was—a full multitude of government agencies their parents were always telling her and Harlan to be afraid of for one reason or another. But another look, a closer look, said it was just eye makeup that had run unrepentant down her face. Dodie watched as her mama brought up a quivering hand holding a cigarette to her lips, a sprinkling of ash absently falling on her plastic name tag that spelled out *Ida* in chunky embossed letters, white and raised on a crooked black tape.

"What is it?" Dodie asked. Mama's lace apron, stained with fry sauce, and burger grease and the smeared eye makeup, said something more than just a bad debt come due last night. But it was going to be

all right this time. No matter what, they were staying put. Even though it was old and rundown, this was the cheapest house they'd ever found to rent and everyone had a decent job. Even the school was good, for both her and for Harlan. The constant flow of families moving in and out, of kids not being where they should be because they hadn't been in school long enough to learn much, made it of no account that they just showed up one day. Without records. Without a past. Never before had so many things turned out right. Even her mama and daddy, who seemed to chase trouble when none was to be had close at hand, would surely see that their luck had finally turned round.

"The car is running," Mama said. "Can't you hear it?"

The Chrysler Royale was always parked in grass out front. Dodie could hear the rumbling chug of the engine left running outside in the yard sounding like an idling boat in water too deep. She felt herself sinking under the weight of it, the heaviness of the churning carburetor painfully crushing her chest.

"No," Dodie said, her whisper raw and thin. "Not again." She looked around the room but all Dodie's eyes could see were faded memories. The concrete block house on Mystic Drive with its tiny carport, the roach infested duplex right behind Edgerton Elementary, the illegal second floor apartment at the intersection of highways 41 and 301—Brandon, Manatee, Zolfo Springs, Winter Park—place after place, town after town. It was always the same story with same ending. Daddy got in a fight at work and lost his job. Some bill didn't get paid. The whole family on the run from the repo man, or the pissed off landlord, or the distant relative who finally had enough of the trouble that came with them and spread to everyone like fleas on a mangy dog.

Dodie crossed her arms, warming herself in her thin night gown. It wasn't fair and it wasn't right. "I'm not going," she said, weighing the power of unfamiliar words as she spoke them. "And neither is Harlan."

Mama's eyes narrowed and her mouth stretched taut into a grim line. The blackness of her eye sockets deepened, sinking her eyes. The feeble light from the bare bulb hanging overhead in the kitchen hollowed out her cheeks, making her look fevered, wasted. Her hands clenched into tight little fists as they did when she was nervous, or about to fight. It was suddenly a dangerous moment, Dodie could feel it now that she was more awake, a moment that would go better if she did what she was told, and apologized for what she hadn't done yet.

“So that’s it, then,” Mama said, crushing the cigarette into the countertop. “Think you’re big enough to take on the world yourself?”

“Big enough to know this ain’t right,” Dodie said, “Big enough to see the fact that life don’t have to go like this.”

“Harlan—”

“Harlan’s not Daddy. He would never be like Daddy. You know it. You seen it firsthand.”

The fire faded from Mama’s eyes, snuffed out, like a wind had come from nowhere and blown them out. Her shoulders slumped. “I know,” she said. “That’s why we got to stick together as family now. More than ever.”

“What—”

“Don’t sass, me. Get your stuff. Get some of your brother’s things if you want,” Mama said. “But I expect he can get along without them.”

“What do you mean get Harlan’s stuff? Isn’t he here?”

Mama said nothing else, she just headed towards the back, the busted out screen door already standing open, moths and mosquitos flitting around in the light from the porch. Rattling metal pots clinked and clanged as the bedsheet bundle she’d made tumbled down the rickety porch steps after her.

Dodie ran back down the hall to Harlan’s door, a door pocked marked with dents and long scratches. She pushed it open. The light of the moonrise creeping in through the slats of the window shade revealed a bed still made, no books scattered on the floor, no clothes piled up by the closet. Not a thing out of place since this morning. He had never come home from school.

Dodie pulled the door close with a bang, rubbing her hand from the touch of the door knob as if it were hot and burning. She leaned her back against the cracked plastered wall and closed her eyes even though she wanted to run through the house, calling his name. Mama was too calm, in general. She knew where he was — and Daddy too. Maybe not at the same place, but not someplace she didn’t know about.

Most of the time Harlan was on the opposing side of her daddy’s moods which often turned into fights. Beatings. Something about him, something she could never see herself brought out the devil in Daddy.

But the night before last had been quiet. Algebra homework. TV while they ate frozen dinners in shiny tin trays. A little time to chat over popcorn as she talked about some girls at school, pretty, popular girls who dreamt of cheerleading and boys. Harlan was a little quiet maybe, a little subdued, but Dodie figured it was because he didn't have anything much going on, except what he always had going on—a big bunch of waiting until he turned 18 and could sign up for the military. They were never around long enough in any one place for him to be able to join an ROTC program, but he'd talked to recruiters. More than once. At every school they'd been to. He had his way out, his way up. It was just a matter of time now.

Mama knew where he was and wasn't saying. They were leaving again, in the middle of night. This time she didn't even have to leave with Mama if she didn't want to. She was making her own plan. Disappearing into the woods would be enough. Mama would have to leave and Dodie could come back later to the empty house and try to work something out with the school and the authorities. Harlan would know right away something was amiss if she didn't come with Mama and he would leave too and probably come back here looking for her. Maybe they couldn't stay in this place, but they would at least be together. That was all Dodie really ever cared about—that they'd be free and okay on their own somehow.

Leaving Mama and Daddy was something they had to do. It felt as if their real lives depended on it. Sometimes she imagined in the strange quiet of night, the ghost of Harlan still in his bed, pale faced, limbs askew, eyes wide open, pupils big and black. Purple hand prints blooming like violets around his neck. And yet even for all that, something unseen and powerful held her back from abandoning them all. She wasn't sure she really understood what love was, or loyalty, or family. It always felt like it contradicted commonsense. Dodie looked around, desperately, as if there really were someone else in the room, someone else who could tell her the truth about those things, but this house and every house had always been empty of people who could do that. With every blow, every smack, every belittling tirade, she wondered if the damage on the inside matched what you could see on the outside. That violence, she thought, bore its harvest in colors of purple and green, the seeds dropping to ground and taking root—the roots intractable, the fruit unbearable. She bit her lip until it bled.

The light was still on in her room. Dodie grabbed a suitcase out of her closet and opened it up flat on the top of her faded quilt. The two matching halves were like a broken clam, the pink satin lining,

shimmering with an iridescence from the light of the bare bulb hanging from her ceiling. There was never much to take. Never enough time to take it. Never enough room to store it or care for it.

Yesterday's clothes were still on the floor. Dodie slipped on her jeans, a t-shirt, and a pair of shoes without socks. The Moonbeam clock sat on top of her tattered Algebra book. She put the clock there on purpose so that she would also see the book and remember where it was, as a way to get her to take it to school in the morning. A crumpled piece of notebook paper, her homework for tomorrow, stuck out between its pages. The clock struck the floor with a shattering ring of its bells as she snatched up the book, clutching it to her breast, wrapping her arms around it in a tight embrace. She put it in the suitcase. The silver snaps made a cracking sound as she closed them up.

Dodie trudged out the back door, lugging her suitcase as if it weighed a thousand pounds towards the running car, her body lit up in shades of crimson and scarlet from the too-bright brake lights. She wasn't going to run away this time. She was running towards Harlan. He was in trouble and needed her and she would help him. Like a real family.

The night was almost black. There were no paved roads, streetlamps, or traffic lights where they lived in the old cracker house on the edge of Myakka State Forest. Dodie expected them to head towards what passed for the city's downtown, a strip of dilapidated storefronts along Main Street, but instead they seemed to be heading deeper into the back country. The headlamps lit up the road and some few trees beyond, stealing their true form, flattening what should be full and round into cardboard cutouts, a cheap set from a theater club play with nothing but black velvet behind for a fake starless sky.

Dodie laid her head on the side of the window of the car, half sleeping, half dreaming, half plotting her own escape even as she felt Mama's presence, tense and on edge. The springs of the bench seat in the back of the Chrysler Royale bounced and she gently swayed as the car drove a twisting path through the untamed landscape and dead end turn offs, the pop and crunch of gravel sounding like hot grease in a cast iron pan.

Myakka High was already getting smaller in her mind, fading away as if she could really see it in the rearview mirror as the car sped away and she imagined Mr. Crawley's gentle smile as he waved good bye from behind his desk, her Algebra papers fluttering at his feet like butterflies. She saw the girls, the

ones who asked her to join the cheer squad with them waving their pompoms, everything like it's a big parade just for her and at the end is this one last boy, a new friend of her brother's, a quiet sort of guy with nice eyes she might have liked if she had the chance to get to know him better. He's waving too.

Suddenly—they stopped.

Dodie sat up. Mama's eyes glared at her in the rear-view mirror, then scanned the darkness ahead. She pulled the car slowly into a dark gap in the trees, wagging the steering wheel left and right, trying to keep the sedan to the middle of what must have been a trail. An old bootleggers trail, or cattle rustlers, or drug runners. Dodie's hands got cold and clammy.

"Mama," she said. Dodie twisted her hands in her lap. How Harlan and her daddy could have gotten so far out without a car only led to terrifying possibilities. Maybe Harlan had given up and ran away himself, unable to stand another second. Maybe Daddy ran him off and then regretted it, chasing after him. Maybe this, maybe that, maybe their leaving had nothing to do with nothing.

The brush gave way. The car slowed to a crawl as it broke through to a clearing. Mama slipped the clutch into neutral and let the car idle. "Hush it," she said. In the gloom of the headlamps, picnic tables and brown beer bottles appeared from the dark edges of the woods. Ripped open sacks of leftover fast food littered the hard-packed shell that defined the clearing. They were in a campground. It had to be Myakka State Park, but somewhere behind their house, maybe out by the river. Green and red glowing eyes watched, unblinking, from the forest beyond.

The shape of a man, Daddy, in a glowing white t-shirt, darted out from the darkness. Dodie flinched. A scream burned deep in her throat, struggling to burst out, but she clamped it down to a whimper as Mama's hand whipped around the seat back, clutching at her but finding only empty air. Daddy's work shirt was gone, and in its place, his undershirt, as if he'd been home all along and just come outside to kick off a stray dog or get the evening paper. His hair, whipped by the wind, stood out from his head, peppered with twigs and pine needles. He carried a long oak branch, scorched to ebony in his left hand. He tossed it to the side, whipping it back into the woods, as he approached the car. After ducking down so he could see inside, Daddy pounded the hood with his hand and whistled a sharp single note to the night.

Harlan came out next, following Daddy's same path and Dodie could see something terrible and strange had happened to him. Gone was the Myakka High jersey he normally wore to school and in its

place was Daddy's work shirt, buttoned all wrong, like he put it on in the dark without a mirror. Daddy's name, *Zoar*, was embroidered in a patch above the left breast pocket and a large embroidered orange tree was on the right. Harlan walked toward the car with a lurch, like his ankle was twisted funny, but his face, rather than showing pain or distress was flat. Blank. Almost lifeless. His eyes seemed dead and black in the glare of the head lights. When he saw who else was in the car he froze and just stood there, looking back from her to Mama in disbelief.

Daddy shoved Harlan from behind and Harlan stumbled towards the car, but Harlan didn't look angry or annoyed or hurt, he just blinked. A slow blink of the eyes, like he was just waking up out of a deep sleep and didn't know where he was anymore. Dodie slid over the back seat of the car to the other side and opened the door for Harlan. She opened her mouth to say something, anything to him when, someone else, another boy, dashed out of the woods and shoved his way in front of Harlan and got into the car instead.

Dodie backed away as this new boy scooted his body towards her at alarming speed. She tried to lean over him or get around him to get a better look at Harlan, but this new kid kept pushing his way into her with his elbows and his knees, forcing her back to her side of the car.

"Hey, quit it," Dodie said.

"Hey, quit yourself," the new boy said. "Get the door, Harl." Harlan complied. Daddy got into the front seat. Mama put the car into gear.

"It's done?" Mama asked.

"As best as we could, considering," Daddy said. He picked a twig out of his hair and tossed it on the floor boards of the car. "We got about a day, I figure."

"Are you okay?" Dodie asked Harlan. Harlan didn't say anything. He wouldn't even look at her.

"I'm just fine, Darlin'" the boy next to her replied. Dodie recoiled from him, recognizing the distinctive sound of his slow drawl. Fred Hanks. The worst kid, with the worst reputation at Myakka High. She didn't even know he was a friend of Harlan's. She didn't even know they knew each other.

"I'm not talking to you," Dodie said. "Didn't you just get suspended or something?"

"Or something." Fred looked at her and grinned. He took a pack of cigarettes and a match from his front pocket. He lit the match with his thumb and held it up his mouth, taking in a deep draw to burn the

tobacco. “That’s all right.” Smoke poured out of his nose as he waved off the match. “We’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other.”

“Shut it,” Harlan said.

“Shut it, all of you,” Mama said. She hit the gas.

“Take the 17,” Daddy said.

“It’s longer,” Mama said.

“Less traffic.”

They drove.

Dodie did not like Fred Hanks, this boy that came with them. He was not a good kid. He was not the kind of kid she hoped her brother would be hanging out with at their new school. He was old trouble in a new package and she was surprised that Harlan couldn’t see it and that Mama, at least, didn’t say something about him sooner. Fred wasn’t supposed to be in the car too. They weren’t the type of family to have people over—ever.

He kept pretending to fall asleep, his head bobbing up and down until he slumped on to her, his head landing on her shoulder, or slipping off her shoulder and sliding towards her lap. She knew he was faking it because when she’d shove him back he’d smile a little and look at her through the slits of his eyes like a snake might. Before it bites.

Dodie tried three times to get her brother to talk, but he wouldn’t do it, wouldn’t say nothing. Finally, Daddy told her to quit it, but that only enraged her, emboldened her to make a final plea.

“You don’t have to do this, Harlan,” Dodie said. She slowly moved the suitcase until it was in between her legs, ready for a quick grab. Her other hand was so close to the door handle she could feel its coldness like a glowing light, tingling the back of her hand. “We can be done, done with all of it. I don’t know what happened, but I know it’s bad. We can get through it though. Just me and you.”

“You hear that, Harl?” Fred said, yawning and stretching out his arms. “That sister of yours, boy howdy. Now only if she would have been there at Old Red’s instead of me, things would have turned out different. A whole lot different.”

Harlan finally looked at Dodie. His face was pale, almost green tinged and his eyes were rimmed in red. He was in pain, distress, like he'd eaten a fist full of glass and it was cutting up his insides with every passing minute.

"Harlan?" Dodie said. She reached across Fred to try and touch him.

"For fuck's sake, Ida," Daddy said. "I told you take 17. When did you get on 20? We're heading into Stark. Jesus fucking Christ." Daddy reached down to the floor boards and lifted up a blanket. He threw it up and over the back seat. It landed in the laps of Fred and Harland, burying Dodie's outstretched arm.

"What's in Stark?" Dodie asked, pulling her arm back. She could see it was a town. And a town had traffic lights. The car would stop, and she could get out. She and Harlan could get away. "Harlan!" Dodie whispered.

"Why Stark is just the thing," Fred said to Dodie. "State Pen's here." He turned to Harlan. "Guess the ghost of old Red's on your trail now, Harl."

Harlan looked sick. "I didn't mean it," he said, his voice cracking, breaking down. "It was an accident, I swear it was an accident."

"What happened? What did you do?" Dodie said.

"He didn't do nothing," Mama said. "He's innocent. He's always been innocent."

"Slow down, Ida," Daddy warned her. "Drive normal. It's the biggest speed trap in the whole state."

"I can't," Mama said, breathless. She gulped air like a fish out of water.

"Don't be stupid," Daddy said. "Slow it down or pull over."

"I can't. I won't. It's too soon."

"Get down," Daddy said. "Stay under that blanket. Can't nobody see you."

"Why Daddy?" Dodie said.

"They're not taking my babies. Ain't nobody taking my babies from me," Mama said.

Fred and Harlan slowly moved down off the seat and lowered themselves to the floor boards of the Chrysler Royale, taking the blanket with them, arranging it over their heads, leaving just enough to space to breathe. Harlan looked down at his hands the whole time, hands folded and resting on the bench seat as if

he were kneeling, praying in a church pew. They stayed there, both boys, silent in their penance, with no one to absolve them.

Dodie closed her eyes. She wanted to be under the blanket too. Just for a minute. It seemed to be somewhere safe, somewhere warm, somewhere quiet where no one could see her. Forgotten. Free. When she opened them again, she saw Harlan looking at her, eyes shimmering in the little bit of light that found its way underneath the shadow of the blanket. None of reasons for last night had been about Daddy. None of the reasons for last night had been about bills or jobs or running away from the past. This was about Harlan having run towards something, something he had never seen coming, and now he was the one who had to get away from it fast and forever. If he got caught, it would separate them. For good. Dodie opened her mouth—

“Ida—” Daddy yelled.

The car pulled hard to the right, sliding into the gravel on the side of the road. Daddy grabbed at the wheel and yanked it. Then, when she wouldn’t stop, he grabbed her hair and pulled.

Mama’s hand reached out quick as a viper and struck Daddy in the face. She whimpered and growled as she tried to beat off his fists.

“Daddy, no!” Dodie said.

“What the hell now?” Frank said, flinging the blanket away. Harlan scrambled up out of the floor boards. The car sped up as Mama smashed her foot on the gas. The Chrysler Royale ran a red light at the edge of the city limits.

Dodie put her hand on the door handle even as she frantically kicked at the back of the front seat with both feet. Never before had she been so close to their fighting, always scurrying away to hide in closet or behind a couch because she couldn’t help but run. Mama and Daddy had always beat their love into each other with gasping and wailing and streaming eyes, terrible, horrible love that burned without consuming. She tore her eyes away to look out the window at the big vacant swaths of land rolling by. Farms. Cows. Barbed wire fences. Everything blurred by the motion of the car.

Daddy let go of Mama and the car swerved again. Harlan was half over the front seat groping for Daddy’s fist, making sure it came to him instead, making sure as he always did. Daddy whipped around grabbing Harlan by his hair, pulling hard, his face purple with the effort.

“You,” Daddy said. “I ought to fucking break your neck.”

Harlan winced, tears in his eyes, trying to pull Daddy’s hand away by prying up his fingers. “I’m sorry,” Harlan wailed. His eyes met Dodie’s. “I’m so so sorry. I never wanted to be like him. It was an accident, I swear.”

“Harlan, no!” Dodie said, reaching out towards the both of them.

A black and white, sitting underneath a billboard, pulled out into the highway, lights blazing, siren wailing. Mama’s eyes grew wide with terror, and she pulled the wheel hard to the left with the gas pedal mashed to the floor, the car speeding up, and swerving, and spinning across one, and then two yellow lines towards the cows and the fields and then—gravity loosed its hold on the earth and everything on the earth and everything in the car. The suitcase floated to the top, to the velvet liner of the Chrysler Royale, and thumped, gently it seemed, the silver snaps popping. The Algebra book tumbled, fluttering open like the feathers of a bird’s wing preparing to fly. Dodie watched as her homework slipped out of the pages. It lingered, flapping its full length several times before it dove like a hawk, flittering around the inside of the car, dodging ashes and cigarette butts, and sparkling shards of glass. It looped around Harlan’s peaceful, sleeping face, and brushed the bowed heads of Mama and Daddy before it leapt out the crack of an opened car door, swooping and diving, first over the pine trees and then down into palmetto scrub, moved by the invisible wake of the car, growing smaller and smaller like the glowing white ash of an ember engulfed by the flashing of a blue and red flame.