The Days Ordained

by

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for Amilyn

and for your daughter, Lucie, too

for finding light in the darkest places
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And finally, endless thanks to my mom who has always squeezed my shoulders and iced my bruises before pushing me back into the ring. How anyone else can go on without you for a mom, I’ll never know.
13 For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.

—Psalm 139: 13-16

Once I came in fast and low
in a little place and when I looked down at the church,
the trees I’ve felt with my hands, the neighbors’ houses
and the family farm, and I saw how tiny what I loved or knew was
it was like my children going on with their plans and griefs
at a distance and nothing I could do about it. But I wanted
to reach down and pat it, while letting it know
I wouldn’t interfere for the world, the world being
everything this isn’t, this unknown buried in the known.

The Days Ordained

On the morning her last son was to be married, Taffeta Burns awoke sometime after four to the sound of the screen door's signature squeak. She had been tossing and turning all night, and only fell asleep a few hours earlier, if she had fallen asleep at all. Outside she could hear the hogs rustling around in the pen and knew someone must have thrown a handful of corn meal their way.

She climbed out the bed she shared with her snoring husband in a country house on the outskirts of Paducah, Kentucky, and slipped on her robe. Ed was never one to lose sleep, even if an Appalachian oak fell down on the house he built, splitting his beloved bed in two, he'd still find away to finish his full night's sleep before lifting the tree in the morning.

Taffy walked down the upstairs hall, peaking in her sons’ rooms one after the other. Two boys, Henry and Hutson, had been married and moved out for almost four years now, both of them with children, but the last room, Ben's room, was quite recently empty. He had only finished moving all of his belongings yesterday into the house he built with his father, and had been staying at Hut's as a bachelor on the last night before his wedding.

As Taffy peered into the room, she could see years of Ben curled up on his bed, sleeping on top of his pillow. It was an image she had memorized. Why her son chose to sleep like a cat baffled her. Even as he grew, he would still only fall asleep in the fetal position with his entire upper half on the pillow. Taffy tried
not think about the fact that tomorrow, another woman would be watching her son sleep. Would he curl up with her like that? Using her chest like a pillow? She was nice enough, sure. And her hips were wide despite her small stature, thankfully. Taffy lived for her grandchildren.

But she had reservations. This girl had never seen Ben turn his bedroom into a woodchippery as he learned how to carve, had never seen him yank his father into his room, beaming as he showed him a collage pasted to his wall of torn out Bible pages. She hadn't seen his father turn ten shades of red, and grab his son by the upper arm, shaking the boy until he squealed like a piglet. Nor did she have to watch him scrape the collage off his wall, using his tiny arms as tissues as he swiped them over his snotty nose, before having to dig into his money jar for enough loose bills to buy a new Bible. And she never had to coach Ben on his spelling—"sorry" with two r's, and "Bible" with l-e not e-l—as he wrote a letter to their pastor professing his sincerest apologies for defacing the Holy Book.

From downstairs, she heard gentle footsteps, so she made her way to the kitchen to greet her visitor. Their house was tucked far enough away in the brush that not only was it invisible from the frontage road, but the only people who lived in a thirty-mile radius were all members of the Holy Spirit Pentecostal Holiness Church off Route 5, a mile or so down the way. The house was not built with locks.

“Good morning, Ma.” Ben was seated at the kitchen table, fumbling with a small carved wooden cross.

“Hi, sweet boy,” Taffy said to her son. “You’re up early.”

“Couldn’t sleep. Hut and I stayed up late talking. But too many, you know, jitters.” Ben’s eyes were bloodshot and his cheeks were starting to gain shadow. His hair was cropped short, as per scripture, but a slight curl was forming above his ear—she should probably give him a trim before that evening. He was still
wearing the same clothes as yesterday, a long-sleeved button-down and khaki slacks, and they were starting to smell dingy. The June heat did not exempt the congregation from dressing modestly. If Ben still had clothes folded in the dresser upstairs she would urge him to change, but he was on his own. He put his face in his hands and slumped forward in his chair.

“Are you ready?”

Ben kept his head buried, and said, “Ready or not, it’s happening, isn’t it?”

Taffy’s stomach clenched. Staring at her son, she could remember sitting in this chair four years ago when Hut’s sweaty palms had left perspiration stains on the wood, and five years ago when Henry had starting shaking so much that Ed felt compelled to thump him hard on the back, enough to bulge out his eyes and choke on his spit.

But as the sun began to christen the sticky air with light, the shadows on Ben’s face began to trick her. He wasn’t her eighteen-year-old son anymore, but her father. She was sixteen again, and she was crying in the back of the church just before her own wedding. Her father was exasperated, and her mother was fed up with Taffy’s emotions, instead resigning herself to fuss with Taffy’s dress as it hung on her. The dress was a long heavy cotton thing. There was no train, no lace, just enough fabric to stretch from her throat, to her wrists, and to the floor. Taffy was marrying Edward, a burly man who never spoke, who had not looked twice at her before proposing. It didn’t help that their fathers were long time friends and had initiated the relationship long before Taffy felt any sentiment for boys. But as Taffy wept in the church, her father grabbed her wrists and squeezed them hard enough to jolt Taffy out of her tears.

“Taffy bean, God has set out this plan for you, and if you complain, you’re complaining about His decisions.”

She nodded. From inside the chapel, where the whole congregation sat in
pews, she could hear the flock sing the first few bars of a hymn.

*Sweet Savior, bless us 'ere we go;*
*Thy word into our minds instill,*
*And make our lukewarm hearts to glow*
*With lowly love and fervent will*

“Lukewarm?” Taffy’s eyes welled again.

Her father threw his hands in the air, and her mother stood to face her.

“Toffeta, what do you think you’re doing? Tell me what you’re about to do.”

Taffy sniffed. “I’m about to get married.”

“No,” her mother said, her grip tight on Taffy’s arms. “You are about to
enter a pact with God. This is not about Edward, young lady. You need to
understand that right now. We are in a church, and you are about to make a
lifelong commitment not to him, but to God, that you will be a good wife.”

Inside the chapel, the congregation rose an octave for the chorus.

*Through life’s long day and death’s dark night,*
*O gentle Jesus, be our Light*

Her mother took her hands in hers. “All you need to do is walk down that
aisle with respect for that boy, and heart and soul full of love for God, and he will
give you the life you want. If you love someone too much, you have no room left
for God in your heart.”

*Grant us, dear Lord, from evil ways*
*True absolutions and release,*
And bless us, more than in the past days,
With purity and inward peace

“I have a full heart for God,” Taffy told herself.
“Yes, you do,” her father said, putting his hands on his hips.
“And so you’ll be a good wife,” her mother said, moving her hands up to her daughter’s face to cradle it.
“I’ll be a good wife,” Taffy said to herself, and said down the aisle, and said that night in her marriage bed, and said every day for the rest of her life.

As Taffy watched her son sweat through his thoughts about the day, she heard Ed stomp down the stairs, already dressed, and tell his son to get ready, allowing him to borrow his clothes. Ed placed his hands on Taffy’s shoulders and squeezed.

“Last one,” he said in a low baritone voice, “then it’s just you and me.”

She leaned her head onto his hand and shut her eyes. The wedding was less than twelve hours away, but for her it could have been twelve seconds. She wanted to savor these last hours. Her husband’s harsh demeanor was something she had gotten used to over the past twenty-five years, but Ben softened the mood in the house. Without him, she would be on edge, waiting for her husband to bark at her, or to get too angry when he dropped a fork. His hand had met the children in rough ways, but he had never laid a hand on her. She knew he loved her, and she loved him, too.

Ben returned to the kitchen, dressed and clean. He and Ed were going to pick up Henry and Hut and their cousins for one last day of moving things into Ben’s house before it was to be officially occupied for the first time that night.

“Wait,” Taffy called as the two men made their way to the driveway.
“Before you go.”

Taffy took her son's clean-shaven face in her hands, stood on her toes to kiss his forehead, and rubbed his upper arms. She loved her youngest son, perhaps more than her older two boys, who had been more than ready to get out of the house and start their own families. The older boys' marriages had been early, and they finished growing up in front of their wives and infants. But the extra time with her youngest boy cemented him in a certain place in her heart. When his brothers had left, Ben began to interest himself more in what she did. She would find him in the kitchen, taking up the wooden spoon and stirring the deer stew, with white beans if they had any. Or he would grab another knife and help her chop the vegetables from the garden. More often than not, the table would have been set before Taffy could even call out to the living room to have it done. As his teen years were coming to a close, Taffy wondered if he might not leave, not that she would mind too terribly.

“I love you.” It was hard to imagine that another woman could love her son as much as she did. If she could have, maybe she would have taken Ben away from the prying eyes of the church and from Ed who had hit him too hard. Away to somewhere where they would never go, like Lexington or Charlotte. But that was a fantasy. Her whole world was in this valley. God was here, too, and He had never led her astray.

“I love you, too, Ma,” Ben said, bending to kiss her on the cheek.

Her grip tightened on her son’s face, and his discomfort made the pit in her stomach all the more heavy. At that moment, Taffy was reminded of a night she hadn’t thought of in over thirty years. It was the night her family dog, Audie, gave birth to a litter of puppies. She was twelve or so, and that night her mother had crept into her room—and only her room, to Taffy's elation, her other sisters still sound asleep—and awoken her with a soft kiss on the forehead and a wag of the
finger to follow. Taffy had watched Audie for the past week waddle uncomfortably around the yard and knew the time was fast approaching. She knew what the wagging finger meant.

Her mother and her crept down to the mudroom where her father was stroking his lab's panting face, her eyes boring into his, focused and determined. Her breathing was nothing like her usual lolling panting; this was measured, staccato, and instinctual. This dog was not the same one that had eaten too many treats and passed out under the Christmas tree last year, this was the dog who Taffy was told not to get near when her father was calling commands, rapid fire, as if to an army regiment. Audie, if let off her leash, kept her nose locked to the forest floor, darting between the trees to find a possum hole, or to snatch a scurrying a squirrel. Even if she caught a bunny, which happened on occasion, it would be skinned and eaten that evening, or packaged into the meat freezer. Both her mother and father had been on the brink of starvation in their youth during the Depression, and were forced to eat grass, leather, and any bugs they managed to trap. They weren’t destitute, just alone in a vast system of sequestered hills and valleys. Her father once joked about eating the money from his wallet because it was useless without any food transports through the mountains. The grocery stores and farms were the first things to go, followed by the animals. It took years of abstinent hunting to get the rodents, birds, and deer back in the valleys. To break that trust and hunt more than was essential would collapse the whole ecosystem.

When Audie whined as the first pup came, her father let out a few ticks out of the corner of his mouth, and Audie continued her heavy breathing. The two had a language that was foreign to Taffy, and she felt for a minute a loathsome envy for the dog. Her father had never pet her face that way.

Taffy looked to her mother, but her mother wasn’t watching the silent
communication between dog and master, instead she was rubbing the wet slimy puppy between rags so that the dog could begin to breathe.

Taffy cradled the first puppy, and memorized each tiny hair on its miniature head. As her mother handed her puppy after puppy, Taffy stretched her nightgown over her knees as she sat cross-legged and lay the puppies down in a row, keeping her eye on each one, cooing at them, feeling a wonderful sense of pride. It was only when Audie's tongue came for them, licking each of their backs three times that Taffy was reminded they were not hers. And when her father called his cousin to tell him his dogs had been born, that the check for all four could be left in our mailbox, was Taffy reminded that the puppies were not even Audie's.

The puppies of course had to stay with Audie for eight weeks, and her mother warned her not to get attached, to let Audie mother them. They were not going to be family dogs, she chastised when Taffy whined, they were to be a hunting pack, perfect for deer herds in the Appalachians.

When the puppies left, Taffy wailed and held onto each of their small faces, kissing the tops of their heads, willing them to stay. The puppies licked her face in confusion, unaware that they were never coming back. But as much as Taffy cried, it was nothing compared to the sickening pain she felt when she lay awake that night listening to Audie's lamenting wails. Her father kept the dog outside for the next two weeks even though she dug up at least three dozen holes looking for her lost puppies.

And of course, Taffy would see Ben after he left, just as she saw Henry and Hut. But there was a part of her that felt like wailing as Ben looked expectantly at her. What would her house be without her children? Her body began to ache, and she swallowed a breath that would have been a scream. It was too soon for him to leave. He wasn't even an adult yet—how could he make it on his own?
She buried her face in the crook of her son's neck, as he laid a hand on her shoulder. After a minute, Ben removed himself and was replaced by a body much more familiar to her.

Her husband placed his large hand on the back of her neck and at the base of her ribs, squeezing her tight. Ed ticked a few times from the corner of his mouth to keep her breathing steady.

It was those ticks that sent Taffy to the hospital bed she had occupied twenty-five years ago. Except then Ed was the one stroking her face, keeping his eyes on hers, nodding at her to keep pushing and keep going. Her breath came out heavy and quick, her eyes weren't looking at anything, and all she could she could keep track of was how many times her teeth scraped together as she clenched every muscle in her body to get her son out. When the baby came, Ed didn't look to his firstborn son, he kept his eyes locked on hers, keeping her breath in check. His hand gripped her shoulder when the baby was placed in her arms, when her son began to nurse, and when she felt herself slipping out of consciousness from exhaustion.

"I did it," she had choked out as her eyes closed.

"Of course, you did," Ed said in his low drawl.

The last thing she remembered before the deepest sleep of her life was a soft kiss on her forehead.

Now as Ben was set to leave the house he was born in, Taffy felt her body closing in on itself. "I can't do it," she cried into her husband's chest.

Ed squeezed her neck, perhaps a hint too hard. He didn't have time for this. "Of course, you can."

* * *
Helena Little was allowed to visit her future house only when her fiancé, Ben, thought it was presentable enough, which happened to be a week before the wedding. The house was a basic steel-frame rectangle, with a gable roof and a chimney disrupting the even silhouette. Inside was a kitchen, a living room, a small table in between that would serve as a dining room, with two bedrooms and a bathroom in the back of the house.

In the car ride over, Ed took it upon himself to recount to her the history of Paducah and the Appalachians. She tried telling him she already knew Appalachian history from school, but he talked over her. He started with the immigration of the Irish, Scotch Irish, and the Germans, and described the settling patterns throughout the mountains. Germans settled mostly in Pennsylvania in the north, but a few who thought the winters would be milder in the south migrated down to Kentucky. He said his great-grandfather spoke German; that the whole valley had. He said they had had a hard time fighting for the Confederacy because they couldn’t understand any orders. He laughed. Most of them came back before the war was over, hid out in the mountain valleys. Before the world was so connected, he had said, it was a lot easier to stay hidden, to keep to yourself. “Now, it’s a real challenge, but we still try.” Taffy nodded with him, and Ben kept quiet.

Ed reminded her several times that the house was more than adaptable for additions or more stories when the time came to expand the family. Lennie had mumbled thanks but felt a slight wave of nausea at the expectation before her. Ben had practiced house building since he could pick up a spanner wrench, but Lennie had never practiced homemaking. Plus, the idea that her future-parents-in-law were encouraging sex made her shift in her seat.

She’d only had her period for two years, and they still came at erratic intervals, or some months, not at all. With weight, and time, her cousin Jane said
they would come more regularly. Jane knew down to the hour that she would bleed, either from having five children or from her great appetite. Unlike Lennie, she’d never ruined a pair of underwear. Can women even have kids with irregular periods? She hoped not. She was more than ready to wait a few years before contracting Ben to expand the house.

The house was covered in creamy yellow siding with three steps leading up to the front door, and a side door next to the driveway. The roof was a dusty gray tile, and the siding and shutters were so white, she couldn’t look straight at them. If she had designed the house, she might have chosen a cream exterior, or even brick, with wider windows and window box planters. But Ben went on about a steel frame, and a porch made from some kind of plastic wood—the house was durable above all else, there would be no room for delicacy beneath her windowpanes. The rooms were still unfurnished except for the dining room table that seemed to be reeling Ben in like a heavy trout in a lazy river. Lennie paced the length of the small house, while Taffy checked the sturdiness of the kitchen cabinets, and Ed used the restroom. Lennie stopped when Ben reached out for her. He made sure not to touch her, but waved at the air around her.


She walked over and stood at the opposite end of it. She ran a finger over the molding carved into the edge. It was obvious that this table had cost a lot of money, but it felt too ostentatious for a small Kentucky gable house. Plus in a house of two, six chairs was overdoing it. “It’s nice.”

Ben beamed, his smile revealing the edges of his cat teeth, his long canines looking sharp. “I built it.”

Lennie blinked. “You made this?” She was happy no one had spent an arm and a leg on this table, but she picked her teeth, hoping Ben didn’t think it was so
stylish. For a country house, the table was gaudy, like it belonged on some English trade ship in the eighteen hundreds.

Ben nodded. His closely cropped hair was starting to grow out by his sideburns, curling just so over the outer rim of the cartilage of his ears. She wanted to hide his clippers, let his hair grow out to a curly Medusian tangle. There was something enticing about the idea, but Ben, the pious, would never betray doctrine like that. Her hair had grown by leaps and bounds since she was no longer allowed to cut it. Although she knew it was supposed to be to enhance her femininity, to be Eve-like, but there was something wild in it, too. She was unbound with her hair so long. If only Ben could do the same.

“Wow,” Lennie whispered, but her jaw clenched. Sure the table was showy, but there was no denying how well it was crafted. What talents did she have? What could she make?

“And, of course,” Taffy called from the kitchen only a few feet away. “There’s plenty of storage space, for when the kids come.” Lennie didn’t hear her.

She looked up at the high vaulted ceiling above the living room. Years ago in a world very unlike this one, her mother had taken her to a palm reader in a rundown tan house, with a blue sign hanging and squeaking out front, who had frowned, looking at the lines in Lennie’s small hands. “There’s nothing here,” she had said, and flipped her hand over just to see if her real hand might have been hiding on the back. “Have you had any work done?”

“Work done?”

“Of course she hasn’t had work done,” her mother had snapped. “She’s nine.”

The palm reader glowered and gripped her hand, pressing her thumbs increasingly into the pads of her forefingers. “No surgeries? No accidents? No skin grafts?”
“No!”

She squeezed until Lennie yelped, and then the woman tossed her hands back to her, discarding them. “Nothing. There’s no information I can tell you.”

“Fraud!” Lennie’s mother had grabbed her and huffed on the bus all the way back to their dingy Charlotte apartment. Lennie stared at her hands, wondering what they said, or why they didn’t say anything at all. Out of the corner of her eye, she had seen her mother staring, too.

As she stood in her new living room, she felt her nothing-hands begin to dampen. She wiped them on her denim skirt and shoved them into her pockets. Ben’s hands must contain an epic—they were calloused from working, often smelled of corn feed, and when he held out his palms in church she could see an array of lines crisscrossing every which way like a highway map. Hers had nothing to reveal. She hadn’t thought about her hands in that way for a very long time, and she had been trying not to think about her Charlotte life at all. Granted it had only been three years since she had arrived at her cousin Jane’s door, pink suitcase in hand, her mother gone, off somewhere with a man she had met online, having never seen a Holy Spirit Pentecostal Holiness Church.

“Can I watch TV?” she had asked in Jane’s house that first day, sitting on the edge of the couch, with a pink suitcase and an old JanSport backpack with a sizeable hole on the front pocket. Her cousin and her had met a lifetime ago at an extended family Christmas party, when Lennie was six. Jane had been one of the dozen cousins of that part of family who stared at her when she asked who their favorite Spice Girl was.

Her cousin had stared at her wide-eyed again the day she arrived in Kentucky, the spiral-corded phone held between her ear and her shoulder, baby on her hip and another one much older clutching onto her mother’s skirt, pulling pieces of her hair out. “We don’t have TV,” she had said, in a rather empty tone.
Lennie heard a voice on the other line, and Jane turned away, twirling the spiral phone cord around her finger while the baby grabbed at it. “Hi, Pastor, it’s me, Jane Castellaw. Yes, hi. Pastor, I’m afraid I have a bit of an emergency.”

She learned fast that her beloved TV was not a topic for discussion. Watching others commit sin, Pastor Tom explained that first night, was just as sinful. How wrong it is to find violence, scantily-clad women, or sacrilege entertaining. Computers, though she’d never owned one for herself, were also not allowed. But the congregation was not so removed from technology that it didn’t have phones or cameras—calling the church or taking photos of your children were, of course, acceptable and encouraged.

Lennie had known her cousins lived strict lives, but it was a harder pill to swallow when she was forced to abide. Had she known her last Law and Order would be her last, she would have memorized every line, so she could repeat it back to herself. Her rabbit-eared TV contained the whole world. She had watched cartoons every Saturday morning since she could remember, had happily graduated from Nickelodeon to Nick at Nite, from Disney to MTV. She had stared into the screen when Ross and Rachel finally got together, when Cribs showed her what a nice house should look like, and for twenty-four hours straight that day the planes hit the towers. Had Jane never seen that? Where had she been that day besides in front a TV?

Two of Jane’s children came out of the woodwork and began sizing her up. She had felt a similar sense of zoo-like self consciousness when her mother would bring home several people from the bar after a long day of waitressing, and they would stumble over to her pullout out couch and TV corner—her makeshift bedroom—and touch her knees, pat her back, or ruffle her hair. They would say just how cool it was that her mom was a single mom.
“Theresa!” one woman had said, when Lennie was seven or so. “Look at this doll you have!”

Most were rather cautious, and taken aback despite their stupor, when they saw her curled up on the pullout couch, surrounded by several stuffed dogs. They would yank her mother’s arm and whisper if it would be ok to do that in there, while she was right here.

Her mother would ignore their hesitation and pull them into her bedroom. “The TV’s on, she’s okay.”

Only one had ever stopped to talk to her. She had been twelve. It was only nine months or so before she would move to Jane’s, and her mother was getting more and more frustrated with the quality of people at the bars. Of course, now she was no longer as young as she used to be, and Lennie stopped being a shock for the guests and became more of an expectation. Her mother’s dark red hair lost its natural sheen and thinned out. Her face fell, succumbing to gravity, leaving her with a crisscross pattern of wrinkles, smeared with increasing amounts of Mary Kay. The people she brought home were much older and slapped her on the behind much more often, regardless of Lennie’s presence. But one night, Lennie heard the keys jangling in the deadbolt and instinctively turned the TV volume down. Her mother stumbled in blushing and giggling, her hand squeezing the bicep of a rather young man. He couldn’t have been over thirty. Or even twenty-five. His brown ringlet hair burst out of his head and bounced down to his shoulders, sticking up in wild directions. Lennie wanted to run her fingers through it and pull a curl to see how long it would be.

He laughed with her mother, but the sound of the TV caught his attention and his smile disappeared as he saw Lennie on the couch eating a bowl of canned spaghetti, watching Forensic Files. “Oh,” he had said. A sheepish hand pointed at her, looking back to her mother for explanation. His cheeks were
dusted with dark scattered stubble, but it didn’t look as though he could grow a full beard if he wanted to.

Her mother ushered him into her bedroom, but he didn’t budge. His face reddened, and he checked his watch as if suddenly realizing where he was, or that he might miss a curfew. He mumbled something about needing to use the bathroom, and her mother shrugged and closed the bedroom door.

Lennie tried to watch her show, and swallow the cooling canned pasta, but the man was staring at her. He walked the two steps across the room to the couch. He was much more attractive than the regular rabble that came through.

“What’s your name?”

“Lennie.”

“Lennie,” he said, then put a hand on his chest. “I’m Bradley.”

She smiled, trying not to seem too awkward. She was sure he could see her sweating through her pajama shirt. Lately she had been sweating far more, and her stacks of clothing were starting to smell. Puberty was doing a number on her. Did he notice how oily her hair was?

“Can I sit here?”

She nodded, moving away her stuffed animals and chucking them to the floor on the other side of the couch. No one had ever sat down next to her, certainly not someone so good looking.

He sat down and stared at the TV. “Do you like this show? It’s a bit gruesome isn’t it? You know, for someone your age.”

She shrugged. “Not really.” It's true; sometimes she did clutch her blanket tighter after a particularly gory episode. The show proved just how easy it was to break through someone’s window and her proximity to one didn’t make it easier. But she turned her attention back to the TV as if the scenes of the bloody murder were nothing more than a local used car commercial.
“Is this the show where they solve murders with DNA and stuff? Like O.J.-style?”

She nodded, but could see him out of the corner of her eye turn to watch her.

“A woman of few words. My sister is a lot like you. She’s about your age, too.”

Lennie blushed. No one had called her woman before. The man put an ankle over his knee and leaned back, an arm extending across the top of the couch. They watched the show for a few minutes, the deep voice of the narrator weaving together images of blood on slides and over-exposed photos of a mangled misshapen body on the side of the road.

“Have you ever read any crime novels?”

“Like, Nancy Drew?” Lennie reddened, sure he would laugh at her.

He shook his head, dead serious. “No, like Agatha Christie or Raymond Chandler? Old school stuff.”

“I haven’t.” Besides a raggedy public school copy of a Shakespeare play she’d had to read for her English class, she couldn’t exactly recall the last book she had finished.

Bradley sat up, excited. “Listen, if I can remember in the morning, I’ll bring over a book I’d think you’d like on my way back to school.”

“School?” Lennie’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. If her mother had brought home a high-school student then she could wave goodbye to any last dignity that may have remained.

He nodded. “UNC. I’m just in Charlotte for the weekend visiting my parents.” College? The only kids in this school district concerned with college were boys who dreamed of playing basketball in the ACC, the rest focused on trade school or hourly-wage jobs. Lennie couldn’t even recall anyone she knew
that had ever gone to college. Lennie couldn’t decide whether she was disgusted or impressed that her lackluster mother had seemed to wrangle the one college boy in all of Mecklenburg County.

He left at the end of the episode, her mother already unconscious. When he walked out, he paused with the door open. Lennie was curled up on her pullout, the TV off, the only light coming in streaks through the wooden blinds from the yellow streetlamps outside the building. The rings of his curls lit up in gold. His head gave a quick nod, before he winked and left the apartment.

In the morning, a book sat on the welcome mat, its edges curled, its corners folded, words underlined, and pages yellowed. Lennie took the book in her hand and studied the two figures on the cover. For a moment she thought the woman and the man looked like her and Bradley, in a certain light. She ran her thumb over the front cementing the book as her property, before sitting down on the couch and reading the first page of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Lennie stood in the master bedroom of her future home, her fingertips lying on a large windowsill. She stared out at the hill that rolled below her, at the grass that was just beginning to rise out of the earth. In the far distance she could see the ground rising at the foot of the Appalachians, where the trees formed a green pocked carpet. On the other side of the mountains was the apartment she had left three years ago. She wondered if her mother had gone back to it, or where she was now. Back then, when her mother was busy or out, she would stare out the window and will herself out of the apartment, to where she couldn’t say, perhaps to a damp street corner of New York where she could stand under the light of a lamppost, smoking a cigarette and letting the smoke pool around her face like a mask. She had never smoked, of course, but a Manhattan private eye certainly would, especially one with things to hide. From her old apartment
window she could see the poor half of Charlotte sprawl below her in the flatland, crowding around her high point in her apartment, where she could be as tall as the mountains. The faraway ample hills rolled to a crescendo at the horizon.

She had had no say in what colors were painted in the master bedroom. Hours had passed pouring over paint swatches at Jane’s house only to find out that someone else had chosen a light taupe, the color one might find in a doctor’s office, for her bedroom. Had someone asked her, perhaps she might have picked a matte royal blue, or a heavy maroon. In the back of her mind she had hoped that becoming the guarantor of her own home would mean her opinion would at least have some weight. But at every corner she was chastised for not knowing best, for not leaving it up to those who know what’s right. Taffy had ignored her entirely when she mentioned a dark color for the master bedroom, had walked off without a moment’s hesitation. She knew that dark colors were not ideal for wall coverings, but she liked how it made the room feel cozier—it was womb-like.

Instead, she helped carry her books and clothes that had been accumulating at Jane’s for three years into the taupe room. She would still be at her cousin’s until Saturday, her wedding night, but most of her things would move before she did.

As she carried a hamper full of robes, nightgowns, and blankets, she recognized the green logo of her middle school sewn into a patch of a large quilt.

On some level she had known her mother was leaving, or at least that they were both leaving the Charlotte apartment. In September of 2003 her mother had started online dating. By June of 2004, the apartment was empty, her mother was in the passenger seat of her fiancé’s truck, and Lennie was on a plane to Paducah, the cost of which her mother’s fiancé had gladly fronted. Had Lennie known her mother was not going to come back at the end of the summer like she had said, perhaps she would have protested more, or maybe after realizing the
futility of her situation she would have assimilated sooner. Instead, she treated her cousins like lepers, and they reciprocated. Her hair was wrangled into a bun, held down by the clutches of hairspray, and her sacrilegious “street” clothes were locked away in the attic, not to be unleashed until she was a few years older and would view them as otherworldly relics, too. And when she found Jane had sewed her old t-shirts into a quilt, a pang in her back said her mother wasn’t coming back to get her.

Most of the twelve T-shirts sewn into the quilt were stained or full of holes. At least nine had come from Goodwill—she had never been to San Francisco, nor had she finished a whole gallon of Mr. Bill’s chili at the Iowa State Fair—but one was hers. It was a white T-shirt from Mecklenburg County Middle School, one every student had worn for field day in the seventh grade. She and some other girls had cut the edges into fringe and occupied themselves during the relay races by sitting on the bleachers and braiding and rebraiding the fringe of the shirts. The end of field day marked the end of the seventh grade, and she had walked home grinning, swishing the fringe on her arms and her hips.

When she had unwrapped the quilt, over a year later, the fringe was gone, leaving only the plain green font on a white patch. Any semblance of her forsaken childhood cut off at the root.

For most of that first summer in Kentucky, she had locked herself in Jane’s girls’ room, reading Dashiell Hammett and Agatha Christie, wishing something more exciting than church would happen to her. She had dozens of questions—why the church didn’t let her keep her butterfly clips in her hair, why she wasn’t allowed rhinestone decorations on her sweater, why her life looked nothing like those in the mystery books. Sure, she wasn’t old enough yet to drink whiskey in a smoker’s lounge. Nor would she want to be a victim in any Christie story, but there was an allure that was impossible for her to obtain. Her desires
were wrapped up in a knot on her head, her frivolity sewn into the hems of skirts and sleeves. But that was the whole point, wasn’t it? Lack of excitement. Lack of nylons and pipes and pistols. Everything she saw was broken down into its most basic form for easy and soft digestion. There was a whole world out there full of indigestibles and sins that were best kept in memories and dreams.

One night when she found herself crying on the air mattress, Jane’s middle daughter, Lucy, climbed down off her bed and rubbed Lennie’s back, still half asleep. She ignored the protests of Molly, the eldest child who began to whine now that the bed was half empty. Lucy ignored her and continued to rub circles.

“Don’t cry, Lennie, it was just a nightmare, you’re ok now. Wake up, look, you’re ok.”

Lennie sniffled, and swallowed a wad of snot that slipped down the back of her throat. She counted the circles Lucy made on her back and lay still as the girl steepled her hands, and said a goodnight prayer over her. She left a small kiss on her shoulder and climbed back in bed, never to mention it again.

Lennie folded the blankets onto her queen bed, deciding she would take the side of the bed closest to the door, in case she ever needed to use the restroom in the middle of the night. From her several boxes of books, she pulled the leather bound King James she had received in December of her first year in Kentucky, and placed it on her bedside table. The copy’s corners had become tattered from over-folding and hardly a verse was not underlined, noted, or starred.

The congregation was tight knit, but thanks to the Pentecostal mission of conversion, she became a shining example of the church’s success. Too many had left the valleys of the mountains for the life out there, but to have someone come in verified the church. It wasn’t hard to be the new kid; in fact people couldn’t stop smiling at her. They shook her hand, introduced themselves, and every older
woman would put her hand on her heart and gaze at her with a look of admiration—how wonderful it is for you to join us.

Her high school education had been replaced by a dutiful ecclesiastic one. Just before her thirteenth birthday in August, she had joined other girls her age in a classroom in the basement of the church. The younger children’s classes were coeducational, but the eldest classes were divided, gradually thinning out as the students got married. In class she found the histories in the Old Testament fascinating, and she would study the conquering by Nebuchadnezzar and martyrdom of Saul, paying far less attention to the moral preaching of Pastor Tom and his wife who would lead the smaller discussion sections.

Bible study was tedious, but she enjoyed it, not necessarily for the verses themselves, but because she found she had an edge over the other girls. Her vocabulary knowledge was so far above and beyond the girls, who had never been subjected to Shakespeare, had never studied English grammar, had never memorized spelling lists for the school-wide spelling bee. The missteps she made trying to immerse herself in the community were much more easily sustained when the Pastor’s wife beamed at her. Well done, Helena! Now, can anyone tell me what ‘jurisdiction’ means? Anyone? Helena? . . . Excellent!

There was a knock on the doorframe.

“How’s it coming?” Ben asked. The slight curl of his sideburn hair caught the light from the window and the blonde hints in his hair glistened gold. His forehead shone with sweat, and his shirt was drenched. She wasn’t supposed to acknowledge it, but she found her soon-to-be husband incredibly attractive. Whether their personalities matched was still to be seen. But his stoicism gave him an allure. An allure that reminded her of men in smoker’s jackets standing in the corner of busy train stations, gaze held below the brim of their hat, working through observations, drawing conclusions. Ben kept plenty to himself, and
Lennie was keen to know what thoughts drifted in and out of his mind. She hoped she was as alluring as a woman in a pencil skirt and kitten heels, catching the man's eye across the station hall. Lennie could feel the heavy sexual tension she had for Ben but she had yet to see any reciprocation. Perhaps she was looking for the wrong signs.

“Good,” she said, trying to force her cheeks to blush so he could maybe throw a wink her way. A sign.

“We’re going to move the dining room chairs in, and then we can break for lunch. Mom is making pike and pawpaw sandwiches. No onions, right?”

“No onions.” She smirked at him and sat down on the edge of the unmade bed. Would he get the hint?

He grinned, rapped twice on the doorframe again, and—to her delight—winked. Her cheeks reddened of their own accord. She tried to put her hair behind her ear, a tick, but found it unavailable for her flirtation, tied up tight in a bun.

She dug around in her milk crate full of books and found the copy of Dashiell Hammett’s *Maltese Falcon*, the cover half-disintegrated from its overuse, but she ran her hand over it nonetheless. The charming image of Sam Spade on the cover that she swooned over was a dead ringer for her fiancé. She imagined Sam as a charmer, as someone who would take their time gauging her interest. He’d hold the door open for her and maybe let his gaze drift down from the nape of her neck to the curve of her back. She imagined Ben would do the same—a tiny piece of allure to which she held tight.

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In the chapel on the day of the wedding, Taffy sat in the front row gripping the hand of her husband, who was exultant in his seat, ready to have an empty peaceful house. His giddiness was almost foreign to Taffy who grit her teeth at the idea that her own husband harbored a deep dislike for his own children.

Next to Pastor Tom, Ben stood eminent at the altar, brown hair freshly cut, looking dapper in a navy suit he filled out well. Jane, her husband, and all of their children sat on the opposite side. The children were giddy about a wedding, and Lucy, now almost ten, rubbed her hands together at the promise of cake. Molly stared at the ceiling and rocked back and forth. The rest of the congregation filled out the pews, attending regardless of relation to the couple, just happy to be celebrating sacraments in their church. As the music began, all heads turned to see a girl coming down the aisle, cheeks flushed, hair pinned up in an intricate knot, and dressed in long heavy white cotton gown.

Helena Little was in a daze as she stood before her fiancé. Pastor Tom rolled through his speech, peppering it with jokes and Bible quotes that conjured a steady choral hum throughout the congregation whenever he made a point.

“I, Benjamin,” Ben echoed, and Lennie snapped to attention, her eyes boring into his. He said his vow with satisfaction and confidence.

His mother put a handkerchief to her nose and sniffed.

Pastor Tom shuffled his feet to face Lennie.

“I, Helena,” she said, repeating after him, although her words came out muffled as if she were speaking underwater. She muttered a few more lines about being faithful but the knots in Lennie’s stomach rose to her throat, and for a moment she wondered if she might be sick all over the white gown Jane had so painstakingly sewn. She looked to Ben. With him she would spend her life, the life that was already well laid out for her. She had no formal education, no skills, and not even a driver’s license. She had no idea how to run a house, how to be a
wife, or, Lord knows, a mother. After the reception they would go home for the first time to the house they now shared, and she would live a blessed life. For a flickering instant, her eyes stung, but before she let them water, she swallowed her nerves, and took a labored breath to finish her vow. “To love, cherish and obey, till death do us part, according to God’s Holy Law, and this be my solemn vow.”

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At the instant of marriage, Lennie became inducted into an unofficial women’s club. They met in each other’s houses, in town for lunch, and in the alcoves of the hallways of their church.

Without warning, every happening in Lennie’s body became open season for discussion, and her green sexual relationship with Ben, which had thus been more alarming than pleasurable, was everyone’s to examine.

It was not unlike the hushed discussions in the girls’ bathroom of her middle school—where the biggest debate was whether to make the switch to tampons. Except now, instead of the sheer ignorance of preteen girls, she was bombarded with facts, as they said, about being a girl from women who had children revolving around their legs like moons. They told the younger girls that their period wouldn’t come if they didn’t eat enough cornbread, that skinny girls never get their period. They told her feeding her baby too much formula would make it get its period early if it’s a girl or develop breasts if it’s a boy. They said, if you want a boy eat three bowls of breakfast cereal in the morning, and if you want a girl, eat only figs and toast or squirrel jerky. It was a far cry from girls who cried when they saw the blood in their underwear for the first time; these women were assured of their womanhood. Lennie felt relieved to be able to discuss her
body with them, and more importantly, she felt proud they considered her a woman. She was seventeen, and her fertility was proof enough that she was no longer a girl.

The women of Holy Spirit Pentecostal Holiness Church went to a church-approved OB/GYN in Paducah, who would tell the girls what holy thing happen on their wedding night during sex if they were lucky, how the baby would form, and how often to try. Of course, it was trying, never sex. Lennie quickly learned that intercourse without intention was as frowned upon as letting one’s hair down. It was tiring having to always toe the line.

The women kept their visits to a minimum, unless repeated attempts had resulted in no baby, then the Pastor himself would accompany the woman to the doctor and hold her hand while the doctor ran test after test. *The Lord will bless you when he believes your family is ready*, he would say. For some women, it never happened, and they would leave the office with their heads buried in their hands, a cloud of heavy rain following their shamed steps. They had lain on their marriage bed for five, ten, twenty years and produced nothing to show for it.

Lennie wished she could be so lucky. Not that she didn’t want a baby, maybe in a few years, sure, but not now. Not when she was still a newlywed, still getting to know the man she was going to spend her life with. She savored the time she spent alone reading, knitting, walking outside over the unfarmed land. A baby meant she had a duty. Alone time would be long gone.

Her period hadn’t come for three weeks now and she was dreading the news. She was lying on the exam table, feet in the stirrups with Ben by her waist. He didn’t know what to do with his hands so he kept putting them in his pockets, then on her knee, then just dangling by his side. The doctor came in with a piece of paper and sat down on his stool.
“Congratulations,” he said. Ben squeezed her knee and Lennie let out a sigh of relief—no baby.

“You’re only about six weeks along, so the baby should be due sometime in May, we’ll have a definite due date in the coming weeks. But you should also come back for testing—”

Lennie sat up on the table, which was difficult because of the high elevation of her feet. “I’m pregnant?”

“You’re pregnant,” he said again, this time to Ben. He held his hand out and Ben shook it with force. “I’ll just have the front desk schedule an appointment later to further discuss your pregnancy.”

The doctor walked out of the room to give them a moment and before she could say anything or wonder why she might need testing, Ben enveloped her in a hug, squeezing her arms to her sides. “I love you,” he breathed into her neck. “I’m so happy.”

Lennie couldn’t help but smile. She liked when he said it, however sparingly. “I love you, too.”

He let her go and walked outside so she could redress. Lennie fell back on the seat, letting her hands creep over the gown onto her stomach.

Of course a baby was the answer to all of her problems, or so said Jane and her mother-in-law. They reviled the large chunks of time she spent alone. They had grown up in busy, large families and had never spent days and night alone in front of a TV. Alone time wasn’t a vacuum for her, it was peaceful. She valued it in way they didn’t understand. But alone time was different than boredom. When she lived in Jane’s house, there was plenty of housework to keep her busy and plenty of planning, sewing, and hot gluing to do for the wedding. It’s true she did value her alone time, but her and Ben’s house was empty, with nothing to do. All she could do was read and reread the same books she had already memorized.
Now that she was married she didn’t have Bible school to attend, instead her weeks were marked by sermons. Church was on Wednesday from six to nine, on Friday from six to nine, and on Sunday from nine to twelve and from two to five.

During the hot summer she let herself become overheated only to stare at the walls of her living room and pretend she was watching TV again. She would use her hairbrush as a remote and click through the channels, eating whatever food was in the pantry—usually cornbread, pear chips, and an endless supply of pickled eggs. The sewing machine Jane had given her as a wedding present sat unused, half assembled in the corner, and the recipe book her mother-in-law had given her had still not been opened. There was cleaning equipment somewhere, Ben had told her when they moved in, but she couldn’t be bothered to find it, let alone use it.

Some nights Ben would come home and she would complain that she had burnt some peas, or couldn’t get the stove to work, and they needed to go out instead. He was usually too tired from the construction sites to bother with the kitchen so they would climb into his truck and drive forty minutes into town, the car quiet enough that Lennie could hear the music from other cars. There was no radio installed in Ben’s truck.

She was bored, but boredom from too much alone time was still preferable to no alone time at all. She had rescinded so many freedoms already. She wasn’t ready to give up another.

As she got up, she felt a hardness, a sort of pressure, coming from her stomach, as if now that she knew there was a baby inside, it suddenly existed, solidifying itself.
She walked out of the room and rejoined her husband who was shaking hands with the doctor, as if they had been complicit in some sort of deal.

“God bless you,” the doctor said, turning to shake Lennie’s hand.

“God bless,” Lennie replied. The two men stood tall over her, looking over the top of her bun, and said something about hunting deer and hogs in the coming weeks. It was high time for hunting season. Ben was getting restless, the rifles in their gun closet were whispering and coaxing him. They had gotten so loud, that while Ben was away at work, Lennie had started to hear them too.

Sure, she had never fired a gun, but she had seen the elation on Ben’s face after returning from the hunting camp. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes were wide, but unfocused, and his breath was heavy, but rhythmic. Sometimes after they had tried for a baby, Ben would look down at her, his bear paw hands gripping her shoulder.

“That’s your hunting face,” she’d say. And he’d roll off her and fall asleep, satisfied.

They didn’t need to have pigs or cows on their land, Ben and his father were well enough off that buying food from the store wasn’t an issue like for some in their church. Every Saturday the church hosted a market in the parking lot, where vegetables, fruits, jams, pickled eggs, pastries, meat pies, breads, and dozens of meats were sold to other churchgoers. It was much easier to wait until Saturday for groceries instead of making the trek over the hills to the nearest Piggly Wiggly.

Lennie had been wondering about keeping sheep. She liked the idea of them; she wouldn’t have to raise them for slaughter and they were much softer and gentler than cattle. But Ben talked her down. They would need at least a half dozen, a dozen to be comfortable, and would need sheep dogs, not retrievers. It wasn’t sound, so she was resigned to the view of an empty landscape. She wasn’t
allowed to have a cat because of Ben’s allergies and no dogs that didn’t work—it was a waste of food. Ben didn’t have hunting dogs of his own, but Henry had six that the three brothers would divvy up before a hunt, and Lennie was glad for it. The one time she had met one when it was in the bed of Ben’s truck on the way to the vet for a broken leg it had bared its teeth at her. Ben told her the dogs had never met a woman before, nor were they supposed to be pet.

She admitted she was curious about what happened at the camp to Ben one night over dinner, and he grinned at her, mouth full of minced meat. The next weekend they got in the truck and drove north on Route 5. The drive was quick, and Lennie was disappointed. She had pictured a fortified cabin deep in the woods, indistinguishable from the surrounding foliage. Instead, plopped down in the middle of a valley basin was a small rotting wooden shack, with one gabled roof and another lean-to set up against it.

“This is the hunting camp?”

He laughed. “No, not quite.”

“I thought you were taking me to the hunting camp.” Lennie tried to mask her disappointment, but it came out as a whine.

“If you can handle this, then you can come to the camp.” Ben put the truck into park and chuckled.

She noticed Ben’s father’s truck here, with a trailer attached to the back. It was empty, but could fit a horse if it needed to, not that anyone had horses around here. Lennie hiked up her skirt so it wouldn’t drag in the mud and traipsed over the sloppy ground, noticing a wretched scent emanating from the shack. Ben trotted inside, knocked twice on the doorframe, and poked his head in. When he came back out, Hutson peeked out from behind the barn door, and laughed.

“Glad you could join us, sis!” he howled and shook his head.
Ben snickered as he tossed Lennie an apron and a bandana that reeked of vinegar.

“What’s this for?” Lennie demanded, her stomach clenching from the worsening odor.

“Put the bandana around your face, it’ll cover up the smell.”

“But it smells!”

He smiled and shrugged. “Up to you, Lennie bee.” He pulled the barn door, and she choked as a wave of the most eye-watering stench overcame her. She yanked the bandana up to her nose and inhaled the vinegar like oxygen.

Inside, a large barrow was hung from the low rafters by its back hooves on a gambrel. The throat was cut and the blood was pouring out of the hog into a large trough as though they had turned on a hose faucet. Henry was holding a long butcher’s knife in one hand and an electric sawzall plugged into a generator in the other.

Lennie thought she might faint, and her eyes threatened to bulge out of her sockets. Meat had to come from somewhere but to see the poor pig hanging by its punctured feet, blood gushing from its throat—it was more than gruesome, it was horrifying and upsetting. No amount of gore she had seen on TV could have ever prepared her for the raw content before her. She stood in shock, trying to make sense of the actions of the men who seemed less than perturbed by the sight.

Ben’s father stood next to the pig and slapped its skin a few times. The blood chugged out each time he hit it. She stood petrified as they worked as a team, exchanging a few bits of information. It was obvious that each man had been assigned a job a decade ago. Hut and Edward pulled the skin off the pig, handing it to Ben who took it over to a workbench and began scrubbing it, before placing it in a basin of some kind of treatment. Henry knifed through the pig’s
abdomen with a swift slice, sending the animal’s guts into the bath of blood. Henry and Ben pulled the inner organs out one by one, severing them from the rest, and placing each in a separate bucket of water to wash them clean.

The tight room was filled with a loud cackling as Henry and his sawzall got to work splitting the breastbone. He used a smaller paring knife to cut out the heart and the lungs, handing them to Ben and Hut. Edward held the pig steady as Henry sawed into the pig’s neck, severing its head. Ben and Hut pulled the rinsed organs out of their water baths and wrapped them in butcher’s paper, before labeling and stacking them in neat piles on a separate table by Lennie. She clutched her chest and watched aghast as her husband sliced organs as though they were squash.

Henry handed the animal’s head to Hut, who put it up to his own face and oinked at Lennie. She covered her eyes and screamed, and Edward barked at Hut. Her father-in-law crossed his arms and nodded at her, but there was no sympathy in his expression. He acknowledged her presence, but his eyes were black with hunger.

Hut smiled, but stopped playing with the head. He lopped off the ears and removed the brain, placing both in a bin that contained the kidneys and spare bones that would be gnawing treats for the dogs. With a serrated spoon, he scooped out the meat from the head and into jars. The sausage would be made later with the skin from the intestines Ben was handling.

Edward pulled a hose from the corner of the barn and Henry stood back as he washed clean the animal’s cavity. The only sound was from the spray of the hose against the meat, and the rustling of paper from the workbench. Lennie shivered and rubbed her arms. Her coat wasn’t thick enough.

Once the pig was washed, Ben and Hut stopped wrapping and helped hoist the pig off the gambrel onto a large wooden table. Henry sliced off the
hooves, and gave them to Ben who washed them then put them into large jars of vinegar. Lennie swallowed the bile at the back of her throat. Pickled pig’s feet had to come from somewhere. Henry switched blades on his sawzall and began sawing the pig in half. Edward wrapped the halves in cellophane before he and Hut lugged each one into a massive meat freezer.

Hut washed off the tables, saws, knives, and gambel until the barn was flooded with water. Ben put the packaged organs into coolers filled with ice and handed one to Lennie, winking. She took it and held it out from her, refusing to return the wink. She grimaced and contorted her face. But it wasn’t the cooler that smelled—it was the rotting blood from previous pigs that stuck to the floor of the barn. The organs were scentless, or maybe her nose had been so soaked with vinegar that she wouldn’t be able to smell a skunk if it sprayed her then and there.

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As her time in Kentucky lengthened, the religion began to build. It never washed over her like the baptismal water, but flowed gentle and unhurried, like a molasses bath. She eased in and took her time with the Books. The physicality of some things were difficult—being swallowed by a whale and surviving, for instance—but after months of months of faith reassurance—the Pastor shrugging and saying, “You must have faith, Helena,”—was she able to give up any mental battle, and let the scripture take the reins.

Perhaps the most difficult hurdle for her was letting Ben control the house. Of course, as Taffy had told her, it was how a house should run and would run well if she abided by his rules and made do with the rest.
She was not allowed to read past when he turned out the light around midnight, cleaning should be done before he got home, and food should be ready when his truck pulled up. She was not allowed to talk to any other men unless they were relatives, husbands standing next to their wives, or Ben was there with her. Her time was to be spent at the church or at home, and any other activities she had to ask him first. She wasn’t used to getting permission, her mother had only nodded when she had told her if she was going down to the convenience store or to a friend’s house. But now Lennie struggled to keep up the energy to constantly remember to ask and obey, ask and obey, ask and obey.

How Ben ran the home was not dictated by a framed set of rules nailed into the structure of the house, but instead was guided by grunts, sighs, and the occasional verbal no. Lennie pretended to clean, was a sheer novice at cooking, and she admitted to letting a few verboten words fly to whomever was around. Her only punishment was a look of disappointment from her husband. His mouth would form a straight line, his eyes would dim, and his shoulders would stiffen. The first time it happened she hadn’t noticed, couldn’t care less really. She could tell he made an extra effort to be understanding of her adjustments, but soon he began to insist on certain levels of respect. But soon her time and her day revolved around his presence in the house, and his small gesticulations of disappointment, having been nonexistent to her for months, she learned to read as screams of rage. His stoicism never procured any yelling, but most days she preferred a stern talking to compared to the shame that came with his silence. At least he was still talking to her if he was angry, he was her only company away from the beehive of the church, and when he shunned her in his silence, she could hardly bear it.
No one was more pleased to hear about the pregnancy than Taffy, who bolted out of her chair and threw her arms around her youngest son. Ed smiled, chuckled a little, but this was the six or seventh time he had had this conversation. Taffy squeezed Ben’s cheeks, and then faced Lennie with open arms. Her eyes flickered from Lennie’s face to her waistband.

Taffy held out her arms. “This is it. This will be your everything.”

Lennie felt the thing inside of her. It didn’t move, not yet, but as she pulled in her stomach, the hardness did not subside.

Ben put his hand on her lower back, pushing her forward, belly-out.

For a brief instance, Lennie turned her head to face the window. It would be so easy to walk out the screen door, down the path, away from her in-laws’ country house down to the road. She could let the tall grass grow around her, up to her shoulders, lifting a few strands of her hair up above her head as it grew to the sky, burying her in the yellowed ground. She could part the Kentucky grass like waves, could let it carry her to the barbed wire fences on the edges of the bush and let herself get tangled in it like a stray, starving dog. She could find reprieve in the abandoned well at the edge of the property, pressing her ruddy cheek to the cool stone before throwing herself into the darkness. She could, also, stand at the road until a car drove past, and get in. She could tell them to take her to an old Charlotte apartment, or perhaps to a dark, lamp-lit street corner where she could let the steam from manhole covers and flour clouds from basement bakeries envelope her completely. She could, if she wished, not be here at all.

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Ben pulled onto the gravel driveway leading up to the house he built. He couldn’t help himself from surveying the property like a work-in-progress. On the left side on the porch was a four-by-four plot of upturned sandy soil. Lennie had received tulip bulbs from his aunt and uncle as a wedding gift and had been waiting until late fall to plant them. He had sat in the truck while she hustled into the library to research tulip planting. She demanded to figure it out for herself. To grow something on her own. Ben wanted to cover the bed with a tarp, to cover the eyesore of a dry, grassless plot. But she insisted. The books said so, she said.

A light was on in the kitchen, and a faint light came from behind the bedroom curtain through the window. His wife—a phrase that still felt good in his mouth, my wife, my pregnant wife—was probably snacking in bed, reading a book, or stitching baby clothes. This, however, meant that every Saturday he had to drive her to the fabric store and purchase yard after yard of ultra-soft flannels in various prints of ducklings, fish, and bears. Taffy had taught her basic hand stitching, which Lennie much preferred to the boisterous sewing machine that threatened to do in the tips of her fingers. He loved watching her handle the needle and thread so delicately. Her caution and particularity sent a tingle through him that he couldn’t quite place. He liked to think he was the only one who noticed her minute movements—how she would reflexively try to put her hair behind her ears, the flush of her cheeks, the lazy circles she drew on his back before she fell asleep.

As the truck pulled up to the side of the house, Ben turned off the ignition and sat in the seat for a minute, gripping the leather of the steering wheel. His brother had warned him about pregnancy. They had been sitting at the hunting camp, after an unsuccessful eight hours up in the deer stand. Ben was lying on the couch and Hut was stoking a fire.
“Sarah changed overnight. She was Mom all over again,” he said, stabbing at a log. “I couldn’t look her in the eye cause I knew I didn’t feel the same.”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t feel anything. No different. There was no change to my life except Sarah stopped eating mayonnaise.” A few more stabs, a squirt from the lighter fluid and the fire burst to life. Hut jumped and chuckled to himself.

Ben stared at the wood paneled ceiling, wondering if he felt anything. He knew he was happy, that was certain, but there was something else too, something that lingered beneath the word happy whenever he said it. He adjusted in his seat. There was a knot somewhere in his back, something that felt like stress, but in all likelihood it was from sitting in the position in the deer stand all morning.

Now in the truck the pain was back. It ached and the pain pushed through from the center of his back to the front, causing his stomach to feel uneasy. He had an urge to look around, as though he had to be doing something, that someone needed him and was waving frantically just out of his periphery.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the pain. As he narrowed in on it, he recalled a conversation he had had with his mother. She had been in charge of the younger grade levels, ages six to nine, Sunday school during Revival, when for nine weeks in the springtime, church was held every night from seven to ten at night, and twice on Sundays. For the children who couldn’t sit in pews twenty-four hours a week, the downstairs classrooms were converted into gathering halls, with chairs in circles and prayer mats in the center. Ben’s mother was leading one such circle and Ben sat across from her, trying to sit up straight but not too straight so the other kids wouldn’t mock him. His mother had just said that God was each and every one of our Fathers.
“But Ma, Daddy isn’t their dad, too, is he?” Half the circle laughed, the other looked to Ben’s mother expectantly.

She smiled. “We each have our own daddies don’t we?”

A few eager nods, some blinks and stares.

“Well your daddy is no less for being so. But everyone on earth has the same Father, a heavenly Father. And we’re all God’s children, aren’t we?”

More nods this time.

Ben sat back in his chair. That evening at dinner his father had smacked Henry on the back of the head for tucking his napkin into his shirt collar. There were moments when he got so furious it seemed as though there were words that wanted to come pouring out of his mouth but got stuck behind his teeth. His cheeks would bulge and redden and all the veins in his face would pulse a wicked purple. Ben could hardly stand his father. His hands were rough and calloused and if his father and he were ever walking side by side, his father would grip the back of his neck and squeeze, pushing Ben forward. The blisters and dried skin on his hands would make Ben’s neck itchy, and Ben would slink down, trying to wiggle away. His father’s grip would only tighten. Ben’s mother had soft, small hands that gladly took Ben’s searching hand. She would never slap his hand away as his father had done on numerous occasions.

Henry and Hutson had grown accustomed to the rough tendencies of their father and learned to push their mother away when she reached for them. Henry just laughed when he was struck in the back of the head. Ben cringed for him.

The pain in his back pulsed, and it occurred to Ben, as he thought about his own growing child, where it came from.

It was the first time he had gone hunting. It was a year or so before the Sunday school Revival question, and he was dressed in a camouflage windbreaker
over two cable knit sweaters and long underwear, and he wore brown rubber waders that came up past his belly button. It was November and the forest ground was thick with mud and rotting leaves. He was having a hard time removing one foot from the mud and taking a step without making a tremendous squelching sound. From behind him came a hiss. Ben whipped his head around to see if he had maybe stepped on the tail of a scurrying possum. Instead he saw the livid face of his father.

“Quiet!” his father hissed.

Ben gulped. “I’m sorry, Daddy, the mud is really sticky!”

At least a hundred yards away, Ben heard rapid rustling of leaves and the sound of hooves beating against the ground.

His father puffed out his cheeks, and turned to Ben with a look that could kill a deer without the firepower. “Walk,” he said through gritted teeth. And with that he shoved the barrel of his rifle into Ben’s back and pushed him forward. A wave of tears clouded his vision but he refused to let any of them fall, lest his father see. He trudged through the mud, careful to avoid the crunchy fallen leaves and walked the next mile to the deer stand with the gun forming a permanent ache.

Ben removed his hands from their tightened grip on the wheel and stretched them out. They were aching and stiff, and his joints cracked when he bent his hands against each other. How long had he been sitting out here?

He rubbed his hands over his face and got out of the truck. Inside, Lennie wasn’t sewing infant clothes, but was at the dining table furiously scribbling. She was in a blue cotton day dress and one foot was tucked under, while the other bounced on the chair’s stretcher.

“It’s about time you got out of that sticky mud and walked, boy,” she said.
Ben blinked “What?”

“I said, it’s about time you got out of that truck and helped, love,” she said, stuffing a note into a yellow envelope. “I have to get all of these baby notices out by tomorrow, I’ve been putting it off for so long.” The notes were canary yellow, with looped calligraphy announcing a due date May ninth.

Ben swallowed whatever bile had crept up the back of his throat and sat down at the table next to her. He wiped the sweat from his palms on his jeans before giving his wife a pat on the knee. She leaned over and kissed him, and he hoped she couldn’t taste the rot in his mouth.

“I was thinking. Do we send one to your parents even though they already know?”

Ben shrugged. “Don’t see why.”

“Well, I just thought it would be nice, is all.” She grabbed a stack of sealed envelopes and hit the edges against the table, straightening them out. “I'll see how many we have left over.”

Ben stared at a piece of the table uncovered by baby notices and envelopes and lists of addresses. The pain in his back threatened to collapse his spine.

Lennie said something else. For a minute he didn’t care. Then she tapped him on the shoulder.

“Ben.”

He moved his eyes to her but couldn’t really see her face. Some water had clouded over his vision and was threatening to fall onto the table he had built with his father’s tools. Most of the furniture in his house growing up was modest and unadorned. As he got better at woodworking, it felt sinful to progress with more decorative designs, but he couldn’t help himself. It became a challenge to see if he could master hand-carving medallions onto table legs, cornices, and the corners of couch frames. Sometimes he would build a wooden frame for a couch,
and employ every decorative style he could fit onto it, take a photo, and then upholster the couch, hiding his handiwork from praying eyes.

His table was different. He had put aside his guilt and planned to use a more decorative design than he had shown before to anyone. His mother had beamed, either ignoring the ornamentation, or appreciating it, Ben couldn’t tell. “Working with your hands is holy, Benjamin,” she had said when she saw the redness on his ears. She had taken his thick hands and kissed each one. “You are blessed.”

He had nodded and avoided his father’s gaze, ignoring whatever his father had said next.

His mother had snapped at him, but his father picked up the edge of the table and let it drop back down, perhaps hoping it would collapse. But the table had fallen down easy, almost floated, really. It landed back on the floor with a satisfactory thud, remaining evermore intact. Ben had grit his teeth to hide a smile, and his father’s face ballooned. Ben put one finger on the table in dominance. He had commanded the wood, raised the table out of the grains. It was his.

It was a six-foot table with six chairs made of warm Bubinga wood. The wood had been a dream to work with. It had listened to each of his fingers, succumbing to every movement of his chisel. Except for the occasional gum pocket, the wood was ideal. He had slaved over the Adam-style table legs, focusing on the medallion on each face, and the long, uniform flutes down the sides. The ornamental molding on the table edge was like any other, but each curve in the Bubinga shone. The face of the table was designed by God, the eyes and rings in the wood resembling ink drops in water, rippling in reds and browns and oranges.

“Are you okay?”
Ben blinked and looked away from his table. He met his wife’s gaze, and realized she was designed, too. Her pale oval face was dotted with a few freckles on her nose, but not enough to say she was freckled. She had one dimple on the left side of her mouth and her front two teeth overlapped one another. From a stranger’s perspective she was pretty, but not beautiful. But for him, she was much more than the slight twist of her nose that his mother said would be passed down to their children. He knew his mother's initial distaste for Lennie. She wasn’t pretty enough. Had no family money. No equitable inheritance or dowry livestock. Plus, to top it off, she wasn’t part of the church family. Ben never argued with his mother, on a certain level she was right. But there was some extra quality she had that no other girl possessed. Perhaps it was the way she swished her ankle-length skirt as if she were off to a ball, or the doe-eyed face she made when anyone described a food dish she’d never heard before. It wasn’t shock or uneasiness, no it was wonder—yes, wonder. To see her fascinated by a world that had been juiced for every last ounce of excitement for him had awakened a new light in him. To marry her would mean a life full of joy and amusement, and, for the most part, it was.

“You look a little lost and forgotten.” She stroked his arm with her small, soft hands. He wanted to reach for her, to take her hand in his and press it to his cheek, but the spot in his back and the tickles on the back of his neck kept his own calloused hands pressed into the denim on his legs.

He stood, pushing back one of the six Hepplewhite shield-backed chairs and walked to the kitchen. Lennie had made it clear she preferred the chairs to the table, their delicacy was what attracted her, but she didn’t see the strength of the table, like he did.

He washed his hands for longer than necessary, letting the warm water run between his fingers. If he scrubbed hard enough, could he wash away the
callouses? He sighed, dried his hands on a dishtowel, and turned to the fridge. He took out a package of meat wrapped in butcher paper—a deer and ground pork mixture that evened out the leaness of the deer while also preventing a burger of half fat—and a tomato from the church market, the sweet butter dish, slices of Munster cheese, a head of lettuce, and a yellow onion from the fridge. In the cabinet above the toaster oven he pulled down a bag of sesame buns. It was a recipe he could make in his sleep. His hands started working of their own accord; buttering the skillet, forming the meat into patties, turning on the spider burners. He laid three patties—two for him, one for Len—into the sizzling butter and began flipping the browning meat. He stood at the stove, his back to his wife, and placed a slice of cheese on two of the three patties. From behind him, the scratching from Lennie’s pen was interrupted here and there by the stacking of envelopes.

Ben removed the patties from the skillet and turned off the burner. He put the buns in the toaster and began to peel the onion. He sliced off a quarter of it and put the rest back in the fridge. He rinsed a handful of lettuce and sliced half the tomato. The toaster dinged. He spread ketchup, mayonnaise, and mustard over two of the buns and barbeque sauce on the third. He layered the lettuce, tomato, and onion on his burgers, and grabbed a jar of pickles from the fridge door. He put three on Lennie’s. As he built up the burgers on plates, his towered over the rather pathetic burger on Lennie’s plate. He carried them over to the dining room table and put them down. The couple took their seats and held hands for prayer.

“Our Dear Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for this food. Please feed our souls on the bread of life and help us to do our part in kind words and loving deeds. We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

“Amen.”
As Lennie brought the burger to her face, her ready grin twisted and contorted into a wretched upturn of disgust. She shook her head and put the sandwich down. “The smell. What is that? Pickles?”

“I made it how you like it.” Ben said, deflated.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll be sick. Any vinegar at all smells like decay.” She blocked the sight of her burger with her hand, as if it would cut off the scent. Ben saw her steal a glance at his plate.

Ben sighed and switched burger for burger. She hardly noticed his theatrical slump as he gave up his food. She dove for the meat faster than a dog.

Not even taking the time to pick off the onions, she chomped into the burger and didn’t pause to take a breath after swallowing before lunging after the burger again. “I think I like onions now,” she said between chews. Her pupils were wide with hunger, and her burger was almost half done by the time Ben brought the barbeque and pickle burger to his mouth and grimaced at the smell. He swallowed the nausea and took a bite, not wanting to waste any food. He was glad his baby got the quality of one of his burgers and was able to save it from the horror of barbeque sauce and pickles. It’s what a good father should do.

After the meal, Lennie returned to stuffing envelopes while Ben read a history on Davy Crockett and had a glass of buttermilk. How much of the book he was really reading and how much was just floating through his head unacknowledged, Ben couldn’t say.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ben watched Lennie’s delicate fingers pick up a card, stuff the envelope, lick the fold, and hunch over each envelope, copying an address from the binder of contacts his mother had lent her. There were bound to be people in the binder Lennie had never met, but she drew her pen over the yellow paper with ease regardless, and stamped each one with a noticeable air of
satisfaction. Was it the baby she was satisfied with? She had only rubbed her stomach this evening after finishing the burger, and hadn’t mentioned any other pregnancy issues. But perhaps that was his own ignorance clouding his judgment, what did he know of having a baby? Could she even feel it? Had it kicked yet, and she hadn’t told him?

Ben folded down the ear of his page and closed the book. “Len.”

“Yes,” she said, not taking her eyes off the envelope.

“Can you feel the baby?”

She stopped writing and cocked her head sideways to look at him. Her long hair, which had now grown well past her waist, fell to the other side of her head. A few pins still clung to her hair, most likely forgotten in Lennie’s hurry to take down the heavy knot that it had been this morning. “What do you mean?”

“Can you, you know, feel it in there?” Ben’s tongue felt heavy as he searched for the right words. “Moving?”

Lennie moved her hand to her belly and smiled. “Well, not yet. It’s only been two months. I think it probably the size of a tadpole right now. But no, I can’t feel it.” Ben nodded. “Here.” She took Ben’s hand that was pressing down on his jeans, and she brought it to her middle. “Feel how it’s kind of hard? I can feel that, the hardness.”

Ben pushed into his wife’s belly and felt an immediate pressure, as though she had ingested an overinflated soccer ball. He kept his hand there for a few extra minutes, hoping something behind that wall might move, might respond to its father.

“The pregnancy books say it should start moving in another two or so months. But because it’s my first baby it may not be until after that, I’m not used to the sensations or something. But I have that doctor’s appointment in three weeks so maybe they can tell us more.”
Ben nodded and retracted his hand.

Lennie left her hand on her belly. “You know, when I was a kid I saw this documentary about a woman that started to have a really bad stomachache so she locked herself in her bathroom and what do you know, a baby popped out!”

Lenny laughed. “I can’t imagine not knowing. But then again, she was a bigger woman.”

Ben blinked at his wife.

She met his eye and shook her head. “Sorry, a documentary is like a real-life TV show, where they show you things that really happened, instead of stories.” She pointed to his book. “Like if that was on TV it would be a documentary.”

He clenched his jaw together. “Do not talk down to me.”

Lennie flushed and her hands retreated to her lap. “I didn’t—”

“Especially, about sinful things, Helena.” He felt something come up in his chest—he his heart pounded, his face flushed, he felt strong.

She opened her mouth to say something but he stood up. Without a second to think, his palm slammed down on his table. It was sturdy. It could take a beating. “I have told you not to talk about those things, and you do it anyway!”

His cheeks puffed, and he felt an urge to say something else, something that would cut deeper, but he couldn’t get it out, couldn’t make himself swear at his own wife.

Lennie swallowed and moved her gaze down to her hands. Ben gripped the edge of the table, imagining how much strength it would take to break it.

“I’m sorry,” Lennie squeaked. Ben thought he heard her sniff.

He closed his eyes and walked into the living room to sit on the couch. He couldn’t get comfortable; the pain in his back wouldn’t let him.
Some days he felt like being with Lennie was like playing with fire. Her wonder for his world was immensely attractive, but he also had nineteen years of doctrine that told him how wrong she could be. The only way to balance the two was to lay down the law. Have a hard hand. “I love you,” he said in a harder tone that reminder her that he needed to be forceful.

She straightened in her chair, picked up her pen again, and sniffed. “I love you, too,” she said, but he wondered how much she meant it.

* * *

A week before Christmas, Lennie sat in Jane’s living room, knitting the final rows of a pillow sham for the rocking chair for the nursery. She had chosen a starch white after numerous conversations about the right colors to choose for a baby. Lennie had decided to wait until birth to find out the gender, and had even asked Pastor Tom if it was against scripture to know in advance. He said it wasn’t, but praised her anyway for choosing a more natural route.

Lennie had prepared plenty of yellows, greens, and reds, but Jane refused. “If you’re going to take my advice on anything, it’s always dress your baby in white. White everything. You have no idea how much bleach you’re going to go through,” Jane had said, arms full of paper white yarn at the fabric store.

As a compromise, Lennie chose a royal yellow rug and curtains, and had Ben paint the walls of the nursery a cream color the paint brand called “Warm Moon.” The summer sunlight that would drift in after the birth would illuminate the room so much, they had skipped installing an overhead light altogether, preferring two soft white lamps in the corners.

The crib and the rocking chair were linen white and gifts from Taffy. The crib had been rickety on its initial arrival, but Ben crafted new legs and replaced
the hinges and nails and it stood sturdy as a rock. The linens still needed to be sewn—“Bleach white, and you'll need at least half a dozen sets, promise me.”—but the upholstery for the chair was nearly complete.

Jane was thrilled with a project and taken it upon herself to sew as many onesies as she could churn out. According to her count, she had gone through at least one onesie per week for each of her children, and had gasped when Lennie asked if she had any hand-me-downs. “Oh my cow, Len!” Her hand was at her throat. “Do you want my old underwear too? Perhaps some of my husband’s boxers?” So Lennie resigned to watch Jane push yard after yard of fabric through her sewing machine, while she knitted or focused on needlework.

As Lennie barreled towards the last few stitches, from the long hallway of her cousin’s mid-century ranch home, came the lanky figure of Jane’s eldest child, Molly. Her eyes kept to the floor and she walked on her toes, never letting her heels touch the ground. Her hair, unkempt and scraggly compared to Jane’s thick, straight mane, hung about her head in a deflated way, as though it too was feeling dreadful and moody.

“Hi, Miss Molly,” Lennie singsonged. Her cousin’s child was notorious for evasion and didn’t bother to throw Lennie a glance before striding the edge of the room to get to her mother. Jane didn’t look up.

“Mom.” Molly stood over her mother, and breathed onto the back of Jane’s neck. Lennie kept knitting but continued to peek at the interaction.

“Yes?” Jane replied, but in a tone that suggested there was a history of denying Molly’s requests. The girl had to be about twelve now, but seemed to have no interests other than sitting in her room reading or doing jigsaw puzzles. In church, the girl would sit always at Jane’s side and never went to Sunday school, where she had been chastised numerous times for interrupting or walking out of the room. Jane preferred to keep Molly at home, and asked her to read a
book a day in lieu of joining her siblings at the church for school, where they were now.

“I finished.”

Jane checked the wall clock. “It’s only eleven. You read the whole book?”

Molly nodded.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jane corrected.

“Yes’m,” Molly repeated, but it was muffled.

“I hope you’re telling the truth. I’m quizzing you on it later.”

Molly shuffled her feet, then looked at the ceiling, not as an eye-roll, but as though she had just heard something. In less than a second she was staring again at the back of her mother’s head. “Can I play now?”

Jane sighed. “I guess, Miss Molly, but you stay inside.”

Molly huffed and said something under her breath as she hurried back down the hall on her tiptoes, but Jane either didn’t hear her or didn’t care. Lennie swallowed and continued her knitting. Molly made her uncomfortable. Perhaps it was the tense and glaring reminder that her own baby could become like Molly. Jane refused to admit any mental issues, but there was no denying her ineptitude and her abrasive nature. How could God test a parent in that way? With no preparation? Like being thrown off a sharp precipice with nothing but your own skirts. She prayed every night for a healthy baby; after all, it would be her fault if it wasn’t, right?

Jane sighed as she pulled the onesie from the machine and snipped the thread. Lennie couldn’t remember what they had been talking about before, or if they had been talking at all. She finished the last three stitches of her sham, removed her needles and pins, and held it up. “Done!”
“It’s lovely.” But Jane was covering her face. She leaned back in her chair and took a ragged, long breath. Every wrinkle on her face had been etched by her firstborn.

Lennie sat immobile.

Jane stood, flicked off her machine and walked into the kitchen. “I’ll fix us lunch.” It didn’t occur to Lennie how much noise the sewing machine had made, and now that the machine was dormant, the silence that followed was deafening.

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Lennie wore a thick cotton dress to her obstetrics appointment. Not only was it frigid outside, but it would also make undressing and dressing much less tedious. The skin over her abdomen was finally starting to stretch and she had been wearing Jane’s maternity skirts much more often. While empire waist dresses were ideal, she couldn’t help but notice how unflattering and overweight they made her look. Her appearance should be the least important thing on her mind as an expecting mother, but she found herself double—taking in every mirror she passed. Her skin was downright glowing, and her hair had a certain glossiness to it that no product could ever replicate. She noticed Ben paying more attention to her, too—the extended glances, the increasing twirls of her long hair in the bed at night. His lips would linger on her cheeks, savoring their suppleness.

They were in the doctor’s office, in two chairs side—by—side, facing an empty desk. Ben looked at the clock on the wall and made a small, disgruntled noise. A plaque on his desk read Dr. Gabriel Young OB/GYN.

The door swung open and her doctor hustled in. “Thank you for waiting.” He shook both of their hands then took his seat. He flipped open a file with
BURNS labeled on the front. His eyes turned to Lennie’s midriff, before giving her a swift grin. “It looks like we’re about four months along.”

_We_. As though this were his baby, too.

Lennie nodded. A hand found its way to her middle.

“Now I see we’re about ready for your amniocentesis test.” The doctor looked at Ben first, then Lennie, waiting for them to react. Neither did. He folded his hands together and cleared his throat. “This test can be very crucial in letting us know about any genetic issues that may be present. Not everyone has to have one, but I heartily suggest it for those of, well, closer-knit communities.”

Lennie looked at Ben, and he blinked at her.

“Closer-knit communities, sir?” Ben asked, leaning forward in his chair.

The doctor licked his lips. “There are many Pentecostal communities in the Paducah area, and as I understand, it’s uncommon to stray from the church you were brought up in, am I correct?”

Ben nodded, but Lennie reddened. She cleared her throat. “Sir, I’m a sort of transplant into the community. I wasn’t born into it.”

“But you’re cousins with the Castellaws, aren’t you? I delivered all of Jane’s babies.”

“Oh,” Lennie said, and it dawned on her. Why so many of the children looked similar in the church. Why so many prefaced names with _my cousin_. “I didn’t know that’s what you meant.” There was a tension in the air that Lennie couldn’t place, as though it may have been their fault if there was something wrong with her baby. Although, if there were a problem, it _would_ be her fault. She was the one that didn’t know her family’s history, didn’t come from the community. She had had sex with Ben, had let him father her baby. If there were a genetic issue, and her baby had a problem, or, heaven forbid, was disabled,
wouldn’t it fall to her shoulders to have done her research? Perhaps she never should have had children. There were ways to prevent it, right? Medicines, procedures. She’d be banished, become a leper even, but at least she wouldn’t be the cause of her own child’s misfortune. Why did it all fall on her shoulders?

The doctor kept talking about genetic complications and the risks her and Ben carried with them. Lennie didn’t know any of her father’s medical history, and struggled to even answer questions about her mother's side. They were taking a bigger risk than most, the doctor warned. As though they had signed a form somewhere. *Yes, I’d like to maximize risk for my baby. It’ll give it some character, don’t you think?*

Ben kept his gaze on the doctor’s face. Nodding when he should nod. Giving *Yes, sirs* when they were needed. Always the rock.

The doctor took messy notes in a manila folder labeled *BURNS*. The amnio test was to be administered, he said, as a medical requirement. When they got the results back in a few weeks, any problems would have to be addressed.

“You’re both so young.” The doctor laced his hands together and tilted his head, pitying them. “You really need to ask yourself if you’re willing to devote your lives to a baby with a disability.”

Lennie snapped, “We’ll have to devote our lives anyway, doctor. Let’s see where we’re at after the test.” This church world, *her* world, had convinced her to be in this doctor’s office. Pregnant. It was the right path, they said, and now someone who pursed his lips at the sight of her long clothes and young age was criticizing her for it.

She stood to leave, ending the meeting. She took Ben’s hand and pulled him to the door, squeezing perhaps a hint too hard. It was the first time she had really seemed to care for the baby, to *want* it. And now, no one was going to keep her from her child.
Lennie let the sun warm the skin that was exposed. Her hair was up in a large
doughnut bun, and she still wore her heavy winter cottons but didn’t mind when
the hem of her skirt lifted above her ankles. She used to shave in Charlotte, and
would savor the feeling of her bed sheets after she had gotten out of the shower.
But now she was resigned to a substantial layer of leg hair. She hadn’t used a razor
in five years; did they even look the same?

Ben’s eyes flicked down to the lower half of his wife’s calves. He looked up
from the statuette he was whittling for the ark set he was going to gift to the
baby. The sheep was still legless.

The ground was defrosting and the whole world seemed wet. Ben told her
it was false summer, that the weather would be cold again in a week or so. But for
now, the late January weather was mild, and the sun was bright and piercing.

Lennie stretched out on the lawn chair. Most of the vegetation was still a
muddy brown and the tulips were still hibernating. Were it not so warm, Ben
would be at the camp, but false summer was as dangerous for the hopes of people
as it was for the ducks. By the dozen, flocks would take off for the Great Lakes,
then they would either get caught in freezing air or find the Lakes uninhabitable,
whichever came first. Those that survived sprinted back for the southern
waterways. It was the week after the false summer that proved to be the most
successful. The ducks were exhausted from their disheartening journey and were
too easy to shoot, it was disheartening and pathetic, as though they had given up
and resigned themselves to the bullet. Ben would come back with his truck bed
full with no stories to brag about. Lennie would have to find room in the meat
freezers already crammed with duck, deer, pork, squirrel, beef, possum, rabbit,
and goat. While one deer or pig could provide them with a freezer full of meat, a single duck was only one serving, not enough even for a stew.

She twisted in her chair to face her husband, and he shot her a quick grin. She smiled back. The results had come back from the doctor’s office. The baby was healthy and happy with all the right chromosomes in all the right places. When she had told Ben, he picked her up around her middle and twirled her, the baby pressing between them. She had laughed and pressed her face into his neck, loving him more now. She declined to think how their relationship may have suffered if the baby was unhealthy. But now her handsome husband had given her a healthy baby, and she loved him.

In the sun, Ben’s army green fleece pullover was zipped up to his chin, and as he carved, he tucked his chin and mouth behind the fleece. It was childlike, but not in a precious way. Unlike at night, when he cuddled up to her before he fell asleep and lay his head on her bosom, clutching her waist and nestling his head up to her neck, using her like a pillow. When that happened she felt a surge of affection. Not even affection, or passion, but something else from the depths of her core. Her right hand would surround his head and push it closer to her, while her left would grab his chest and squeeze, as if her tiny figure could protect his. But she held him close anyway and felt a rush of joy in her blood. If the lights were on and she were facing a mirror, she was sure she would see her pupils dilate, her cheeks flush, and her muscles pulse. She could hold him forever if she needed to, could nurture him as long as he needed. Suddenly she was twice his size, three times, four times. If anyone were to come through the door, or burst in through the window, she was sure she could fight them off, holding Ben all the while. Her skin was effervescent and luminous—there was no need to turn on the lights. Ben could be hidden underneath her twenty-foot cape of hair away from any danger. The intruders would run off, screaming about a giant in the house on
the hill. After she had conquered, she would stroke his hair and place a few kisses on the crown of his head. He had no idea how safe he was, how protected. Had no idea how big she could get. Then to her disappointment, he would roll over, and fall asleep on his side of the bed. Her body would relax and shrink. Her breasts were swollen and would ache so she would give them a slow rub and drift off next to her husband, feeling small once again.

But here, now, he straddled his lawn chair and focused on the toy in his hands. If an intruder tried to get into the house, she would let him handle it. Perhaps he could fend them off with his whittling knife, she grinned to herself.

“What?” Ben asked.
Lennie squinted in the sunlight. “What?”
“You’re smiling.”
“I’m just happy,” she said, placing a hand on her brow so she could see him. “The sun feels good.”

He nodded and refocused on the sheep.

Lennie’s hand appeared on her abdomen. Over the last few months, her middle had gone from pliable and soft to something much more solid. Her skin was stretching now and didn’t feel as tight as she had expected. She squeezed each fingertip into her belly stopping when it felt sore. She wanted to command the baby, tell it to develop right, to have good skin, to make sure it had all ten toes, all ten fingers. How did it know what to do? What if it came out with no arms and sixteen toes and is covered in bulbous birthmarks? What if it becomes like an octopus—tentacles and all—and she couldn’t give birth to it? She knew it was healthy, but she couldn’t see it. What if all tests still didn’t tell her that her baby would be born blue?

For the last few weeks she had been having phantom kicks. It was still a little while before the real kicks would come, but every time her stomach
grumbled, or she felt small motions, she assumed the baby was kicking her. The doctor had said the baby was kicking already, but because of its size, it wasn’t kicking the walls of her uterus. She knew she could still feel it though. Tiny disturbances in her equilibrium, as though the baby were shifting its weight in a bathtub, sending the water sloshing. Of course, it wasn’t that violent. But she noticed times when she would lay down and would feel the faintest motion—perhaps the baby readjusting? Now she felt a stronger movement, a turning sensation. She interned that the baby was squirming, maybe it was reaching for something, or maybe it was uncomfortable.

She felt a turning on either side of her, as if the baby were drawing its arms around itself and petting its walls. But that couldn’t be right, it was so small, so minute, how could it pet her like that?

Lennie sat up in her chair and went into the house to grab a glass of water. Inside of her a six-inch mouse squirmed.

At her last visit to the obstetrician, when they had taken a vial of fluid from her uterus, the doctor had told her at four months the baby was not only fully formed, but well-defined. It has eyelids, eyebrows, and eyelashes. It could wink at her if she said a funny joke. Its teeth and bones were dense and becoming harder to break. Its nerves were now live wires. It could feel how soft her womb was, not that it could tell her. If she wanted to, she could ask it whether it was a girl or boy, whether it had a penis or a vagina. The baby was now doing baby things too, like stretching, yawning, maybe sucking its tiny thumb, and making faces at no one.

The baby is a whopping four ounces.

“Good news,” Dr. Young had said last month, while removing his fingers from her vagina. “Now that you’ve made it past three months, you are far less likely to miscarry.”
Miscarry?

“So just hold on tight to it for a few more weeks, and you'll be home free if it all goes well.”

Hold on?

“What do you mean? I can hardly feel the thing! The baby has nothing to grab onto! How am I supposed to hold onto a one-ounce slippery egg? The thing could fall right out at any moment, and I wouldn’t even notice!” She said none of that, of course. She smiled with him. Ben and he had waited outside as she slipped her underwear back on, smoothed her skirt, and left.

In her kitchen she gulped down a full glass of water before filling up another.

The results from her amnio test had come in a few days ago, and there were no alarm bells, thank God! The baby was safe; she and Ben were genetically far enough apart that there were no outstanding risks. Of course, there was still a slim margin of error, but they had to say that so they weren’t liable. She knew her baby was as good as it got. She was so blessed.

* * *

“You ready?”

Lennie put in one last bobby pin to secure her hair and coated it with a thick layer of hairspray. “Coming.”

The maternity Easter dress Jane had loaned her had looked so unflattering—a candy pink bust with an orange floral skirt—she had to resort to an everyday white dress that she spruced up with a delicate mauve lace sash around the empire waistline. Her belly had ballooned in the past two months so much so that she could rest books, cups, and even bowls of cereal on top of it.
She couldn’t recall if her doctor had told her a woman’s first pregnancy was her biggest, or if by the second one your body really expands. She hadn’t gained significant weight in any place other than her middle but she when she stood in front of the mirror naked she could see thin hashed lines like markings in wood across the tops of her buttocks and under her arms.

Ben was waiting in the truck dressed in a navy suit with a brown tie his mother had made him for his birthday last fall. She walked out of the house, and let the door swing shut behind her. Ben kept his eyes at her belly as she waddled down the porch steps, and he jumped out of the truck and hurried to help her into the passenger seat. Her ease of mobility shrank with every passing day. Her spine was now limited to a ten-degree deviation, and she hadn’t seen her feet or her knees in well over a fortnight. Even washing herself below the waist was much more difficult and every unusual request to Ben sent her squirming under a wave of embarrassment. Of course, he said nothing when she called him over to help her out of the bathtub or off the toilet. And he remained steadfast picking up the one hundred thousand items she dropped day in and day out. He stopped going to sleep before her and stayed up whittling in the living room until she wanted him to turn off her bedside lamp for her. The baby’s feet would step on her bladder, or give it a roundhouse kick, and she could try as hard as she could to get to the bathroom in time, but sometimes she couldn’t help it and she would cover her face as Ben wiped up the dribble on the floor. He would joke and say cleaning up after a baby was going to be much worse, but she couldn’t help but feel degraded.

The church parking lot was full, as usual, but the squealing children darting between the cars wore their nicest dresses and suits. Soon Lennie would be dressing a small figure, fixing the hair on some tiny head, and smoothing out the wrinkles they had acquired while playing.
“Helena.”

Lennie turned as Ben eased her out of the truck. Taffy was walking toward her with a gift-wrapped box in her hands. Lennie threw a dagger stare at Ben, why didn’t he tell her she was supposed to bring a gift? They had never given Easter gifts before.

“For the baby,” Taffy said, giving a quick kiss on her cheek. Edward stood a few steps behind her; hands in the pockets of his slacks, his expression stony. Any interaction with her father-in-law was taxing, but only convinced Lennie further that she had chosen the right Burns man.

“Thank you, that’s so sweet.” Lennie took the gift, not sure what to do with it. Ben sensed her anxiety and began to open it, turning the attention to him. In the box wrapped in thin cloth, was a glistening silver spoon. The crown of the handle was wreathed with intricate metallic roses and ivy curls, but the plate was blank.

“You can engrave it when you decide on a name, but I just thought the baby should know it’s being born into a good family,” she said, placing her hand on Lennie’s elbow. She winked.

“I’m speechless.” Lennie had no use for a silver spoon, nor did a baby, and wondered if it wasn’t too materialistic. Still, the silver was polished and sparkled as it caught the sunlight. Her kitchen drawers were loaded with soft-edged plastic and rubber spoons that she had bought in bulk. Was she supposed to frame it?

Ben filled in the silence. “This is too much.”

Did every one of Taffy’s grandchildren get a silver spoon? Lennie was uncomfortable, as if she had been gifted a heavy string of pearls. Gorgeous, but useless. Sinful, even. Was this Taffy’s way of showing her final approval of Lennie?
Ben rewrapped the spoon and placed it back in the box, tucking it under his arm. He hugged his mother before she held her arms out for Lennie and squeezed her. Ed made no moves to shake his son’s hand, but he nodded at Lennie, then ushered them towards the church doors.

The group made their way into the sanctuary. They took their seats in the center left and greeted those that filled in the empty spaces around them. Pastor Tom’s wife stood up and started to lead the congregation in a preludial hymn.

When I die don’t cry for me
In my Father’s arms I’ll be
The wounds this world left on my soul
Will all be healed and I’ll be whole

It don’t matter where you bury me
I’ll be home and I’ll be free
It don’t matter where I lay
All my tears be washed away

Gold and silver blind the eye
Temporary riches light
Come and eat from Heaven’s store
Come and drink, and thirst no more

So weep not for me my friend
When my time below does end
For my life belongs to Him
Who will raise the dead again
Lennie held her breath as what felt like a hand moved from the bottom of her insides to her stomach, the fingers tickled her skin and sent a spasm through her spine.

Ben glanced at her from the corner of his eye and gave her knee a quick squeeze.

But the baby was not done. Lennie bowed her head in prayer, while the baby kicked her bladder, then her rib, and sent one kick straight out causing her dress to flutter. She ran her hands over her belly, but the baby kept writhing. She gripped the edge of the pew and Ben’s hand, bracing herself for the wave of nausea that inevitably followed the churning inside of her.

Only once had she ever been on a roller coaster, on a class trip in the sixth grade to Busch Gardens, and the plummeting motion of the near free fall had not made her scream like the other kids, but swirled every ounce of liquid in her system and sent it all onto the back of the person in front of her. For the rest of the day she remained with the school nurse and kept her eyes trained on the ground, not daring to look at the screaming and twisting riders on the metal tracks above her. But now, the baby conjured the same sickening feeling. The pummeling of her insides she could bear, but the seasickness from the sea monster drove her mad.

Never mind that she could never be a femme fatale, could never amount to the swagger and lust of Brigid O'Shaughnessy and wield her body like a weapon. Of course she wasn’t in the business of denying many advances, but a trick like that could protect her from the whims of pregnancy. It was weakness, nothing else, that sent her over the edge from any minute movements of the fetus. It was a helpless feeling really, to be so deft at controlling her bladder. When the baby sloshed, she would lose her balance and careen off to the side as
she walked like a schooner with unsecured cargo that threatened to capsize with each punching whitecap. But now she felt as if she were tied to her seat while the ship rocked, unable to balance herself.

The Pastor was giving his sermon now, but Lennie couldn’t hear him. One minute there was a ringing in her ears and the next a sharp petrifying pain in her abdomen. She clutched her middle and must have made a loud noise because the whole hall turned to look. Ben stood up in shock and Taffy lifted her head from prayer and was pulling Lennie to her feet before Lennie had taken a breath. Taffy hustled her to the bathroom in the back of the church while Ben followed at their heels.

In the back of her mind, or at the front of the church, the Pastor said, “Ah, the joys of new life,” before the bathroom door clicked shut.

The church bathroom doubled as a women’s lounge complete with two old donated couches and one salon-style chair for trying new up-do’s. Taffy led her to one of the couches where she eased her down.

“I’m going to look,” Taffy said, rolling the hem of Lennie’s skirt up her legs, “if that’s okay with you. I need to see if your water has broken.”

Lennie managed to nod and leaned her head back. She was trying to recall breathing practices that her pregnancy book had preached about, but she couldn’t remember how long she was supposed to inhale. She coughed and her abdomen clenched. She wailed.

“I know, sweetie, it’s okay.”

There was a swift rapping on the door and Lennie heard Ben’s voice. “Are we okay in there?”

“Well?

“Should I bring the truck around?”
Taffy’s hands felt Lennie’s underwear, but Lennie couldn’t feel their touch. The overwhelming blinding pain radiating from her middle was numbing every other part of her. She was sure if one of her fingers were lopped off, she wouldn’t even have the focus to blink.

“I don’t feel anything,” Taffy mumbled. “These could be false contractions.”

“False?” Lennie croaked.

“Your body is trying to get your baby into position, but it’s not ready to deliver yet. Don’t worry, these pains are much better than trying to deliver breech. But they really shouldn’t be this painful . . .”

Lennie stopped listening. Her vision was dusted with white speckles that remained after she squeezed her eyes shut. The muscles in her abdomen felt so tight that she figured she was bound to pop. Something was bound to release.

“Don’t push, it’ll make it worse.”

“Hush!” Lennie barked and felt her heart pounding. Taffy joined her on the couch, letting her skirt fall back to the floor. Her hand supported the back of Lennie’s neck and rubbed soft circles at the base of her skull. The muscles around her middle released one by one, making her feel gelatinous. In less than a minute the pain subsided, and she found herself humming, some sweet tune, or an earworm hymn.

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An hour before it happened for real, Lennie could only think of her own mother. There had been no response from the pregnancy announcement, nor had there been one for the wedding invitation. She hoped it was the address that was the problem.
She was sitting in the rocking chair in the nursery, using her swollen feet to rock herself. Movement didn’t bother her anymore. The baby had stopped squirming as violently since her Braxton Hicks contractions, and but every hour or so the baby would adjust or sink lower down her pelvis, giving her lungs some much needed elbow room.

What had her mother done eighteen years ago when it was her turn to deliver? Was her father holding her mother’s hand, or had he already packed his bags? Did her mother scream, or was she stoic and tempered? She had listened to Taffy and Jane’s detailed recreations of each of their births but none of them felt real, they were just as unhelpful as the pregnancy book attempting to walk her through delivery as if she was going to have time to read.

Ben had assured her, “You’ll know what to do,” but she couldn’t help think that was more for his ears than for hers.

Taffy called every six hours to ask for updates but after a week with nothing to report, Lennie retreated into the nursery to tidy it up, while Ben fielded the phone calls. She had vacuumed the room dozens of times and hadn’t yet found the perfect arrangement of pillows in the crib. Of course, no pillows were allowed to be in the crib when the baby arrived, but she still found an urge to make it presentable anyway.

But now everything had been cleaned a million times over and Lennie was exhausted. From the nursery window she could see her tulip stems peeking at her, ready to bloom any day now. Far behind them, past the valleys and the hills, rose the mountains. It had been almost four years since she had arrived and four years since she had been on the other side. What was it like over there now? Was the apartment still there, or had it been torn down, sending any connection to that other world into the wind.
On the side table next to the chair was an old, dingy copy of a noir book she had received in that past life. The binding was taped and the pages curled and waved every which way. The baby was bound to be unappreciative of it, if not terribly confused, but she would read it to her child nonetheless. If only because it was familiar, and in a certain way, it was a history of its mother—an exposé on the world it could have been born into, were they one hundred miles to the east. Ben had read the book too and said he found it entertaining, but in the same tone of voice one says, *The church choir was good this morning.* He had laid his anxieties about her old life to rest, somewhere in the backyard months ago. Taffy had stopped watching her out of the corner of her eye, and Lennie had stopped looking for exits, and no longer saw the barbed wire fence at the edge of the property as something that would deter her escape, but she hoped it would keep others away. Ben had built the house, but Lennie had built the home. Without her body, Ben couldn’t further his centuries-old Appalachian family. She was closer to Ben now, closer to God, too.

Now there was nothing between her and the Almighty. She was the toeing the line between earthliness and heavenliness, as she was about to bring a new soul into the world. How odd it was to remember the hesitation and devastation at the news of her pregnancy. But now the baby was binding her to her life here, stitching her soul into the carpet and the pages of her Bible.

There was a rap on the doorframe. “How are things going? Do you want me to fix you lunch?”

Lennie blinked. “Maybe lunch.” She put her hand on her stomach and felt a light rumble. “My stomach’s grumbling, I think I, wait . . . ob.” The grumble had triggered an avalanche of muscle spasms down the mountain of her baby bump. Sure enough, her whole middle crunched.
Ben rushed over and pulled her off the chair. He rambled about calling Dr. Young, and his mother, and Jane, and speeding to the hospital, but Lennie stared in horror at the rocking chair. There, on the pristine white upholstery, was a dark red stain. How had she not felt it? The doctor said that her water would break, her contractions would start, or her show would leak—a bloody mucus that signaled labor. Ben ignored the red stain on the back of her skirt or on the seat of the chair, but Lennie began to sweat and her eyes watered as her first contraction subsided. How long had she been in labor? How long had the stain been there? Why couldn’t she feel any liquid between her legs?

Ben drove faster than he ever had. He hung a small white flag with a red cross from the driver’s side door, draping over the window so no cop would pull him over as he barreled down the narrow highway. He dialed number after number on speed dial and shouted “Baby!” on speakerphone before hanging up and dialing the next one.

Lennie gripped the car door and the center console. She tried to control her breathing as another contraction swept over her. Two minutes hadn’t passed since her last one. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for a fast delivery.

In the hospital, Lennie was swept into the delivery room the moment Ben wheeled her into the door, and Dr. Young was telling her to push while a room full of nurses could see her entire lower half. Ben’s face was inches from hers and he was repeating something, but she could never quite make out what it was. Lennie had prepared herself for an hours-long delivery, frightened of the prospect of spending days in brutal discomfort, but there was no need. The baby was more than ready.

The noise in the delivery was loud but got louder and louder and the breathing was faster and faster like a heavy Kennedy half dollar spinning on
marble top table spinning and spinning louder and tighter and louder and tighter until in one second it stops and falls flat. One moment she screamed through the tightest, most sickening pressure on her pelvic bone, and the next it all came whooshing out. Just like that. She closed her eyes for a split second in pure bliss, before the agitated voice of Dr. Young pulled her back.

“What’s happening?” she thought she said, but Ben didn’t pretend to hear her. His eyes were trained on something happening beyond her stirrupped legs. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

Ben gave her hand a quick squeeze but said nothing.

Lennie couldn’t breathe, the hospital bed was so constricting. “Tell me!” she shouted, and a masked nurse came over to her and repeated something a few times before Lennie understood.

The doctor had ordered the baby to the NICU, she explained, they were having a hard time getting the baby to breathe.

Ben grabbed squeezed Lennie’s hand again, this time a bit too hard, but she pushed him towards the door. Go get my baby, she said, but she wasn’t sure if it came out or not.

In any case, Ben understood and ran out after the nurse.

Lennie watched a light flickering in the corner, on and off, on and off. After a few moments, or a few hours, the light turned off for good.

The door swung open and Ben stood in the doorway, unmoving. She knew before he said a word.

“God makes decisions for us, Lennie bee,” he said, his voice trembling, “decisions we have no part of, that we don’t understand.”

No. Again, she was unsure if she made any noise. But from inside her a tiny ghost of a thing started from somewhere deep and came up between her lungs under her weary rib cage and beneath her ample breasts full of ready milk. It
came through her sore neck and out her open mouth wrought with horror. A scream followed.

The doctor came in, hands wringing, and whispered that the time of death had been at 10:17, two minutes after birth.

She was allowed to hold her dead baby, all wrapped in a hospital white fleece. They had returned the blanket she had made for it. The nurse set it on her bedside neatly folded, unused and useless. The nurse that brought the baby into the room kept her eyes on Lennie instead of the bundle. Her eyes were glistening and Lennie saw that her hands were shaking. She told Lennie that she was sorry, that they had tried their hardest.

Lennie took her blue child and laid it over her hospital gown stretched between her legs. She cradled it, memorizing each wispy brown hair on its miniature head. She cooed at it, while Ben heaved and cried on the edge of her bed, his head in his hands.

It was only when the nurse came back for the body that she realized the baby was not here. It was to be taken to the mortuary. She wailed when they took the body from her, and Ben pulled her tight, squeezing too hard that it hurt. Only the fortunate get to meet their child, get to tell it how much they love it.

The house was cleaned and the lawn proper when the truck pulled up and sat idling in the driveway, the empty car seat forgotten in the back. The past twenty-four hours had been a whirlpool of grief counselors, needles sewing up parts of her that had split during delivery, and a revolving door of those closest to her, come to pay respects, to tell her to try again next year, as though she hadn’t made the cut.

The tulips had bloomed a shocking yellow, somehow overnight. In another life, she would have cradled them, too. But for Lennie, the house was a hundred
years old, already overtaken by the forest and grasses and vines. The tulips collapsed where they stood, shriveling, shrinking, and decaying as she willed it. The house’s steel frame rusted beneath the chipping plastic siding, and the roof tiles slid off one by one like children on a playground slide. The whole house swayed back and forth as the foundation broke apart just like any other mountain rock. From the view behind the windshield, the house was another piece of litter that sat abandoned in the Appalachians, waiting for its time to die, too.

Lennie struggled out of the truck and walked into the grass away from the house. Ben stayed in the truck, his hands immobile on the wheel, twisting his back as if trying to reach some sore spot. He had muttered to himself the whole ride home—*I would have been so good. I would have done it right*. . .

She ran her fingers over the wheat grass and pulled grains as she went, dusting them over the ground aimlessly. It was as though her entire life had happened a moment ago, that without warning she was a toddler again, waddling between the grass gripping and grabbing at whatever could keep her steady, whatever was in reach.

She made her way to the edge of the field near a small grouping of wildflowers. Her baby would be buried here. A child of the forgotten mountains, gone in an instant, but to remain forever in the ground that once rose higher than the earth had ever gone.

They say babies that die before baptism end up in a different part of heaven. It’s all white, but it’s warm and close—womb-like. Lennie wondered if her baby was there, swaddled in clouds, and if it could hear her voice, even from this far away.

*END*