

The Quarry

by

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The Quarry

Mary Weir

To Paula Sharp, who taught me how to write,

And

To Burt Munroe, who taught me what to write. My friend, one of your snakes escaped. He slithered out the door of your freshly painted house, cleared the old Battle property line and wriggled right out of the *Pastures of Heaven*. I found him sunning himself in the quarry behind my house. I thought you would want to know.

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Quarry

At dawn, all is quiet: mist dampens the silent thrill of sunbeams. Mountains do not protect the quarry nor do waves soothe it. The trees enclosing it are tall; deep ridges riddle bark. The leaves are wind-withered. At dusk, gentle hills tuck shadows around the gray stone. This place has a story so well known it is forgotten.

The universe was condensed into a moment and gave birth to past, present and future. Heavy metals sank in upon themselves, attracting lighter particles. The magma cooled, and water rained on the earth. The land wrinkled and buckled. Molten rock fought to the surface, fragmenting the earth. Water cooled the rifts. Life frustrated with murkiness skulked inland in search of firmer footing. A plume of magma cooled to form a stock of granite. Red clay settled. Leaves fell, decomposed and lay undisturbed for years.

The weight of boots and iron railroad spikes surprised the foothills of the ancient Appalachian Mountains. Two stump-strewn corridors, stretching in the four cardinal directions, scarred the soft ground. Steam engines dripping confederate

blood rattled the forest. Pine trees grew out of the rotting oak stumps; trembling needles, stilled by sap, hung from the trees.

* * *

In the year 1898, unlucky Silas Montgomery, a homeowner's insurance agent, had a stroke of luck. One of Silas' childless clients had drowned in the floodwaters of Hurricane Bert and left Silas forms to sign, money to count and one hundred and twenty forested acres next to a railroad crossing twenty-five miles west of Durham, North Carolina. Silas surveyed his new land and found a large outcropping of gray rock, flecked with black and white minerals. Silas' wife, Betty – a fair-haired, even-minded girl from the coast – convinced her husband to quit his job and build a house on their new land. Silas baked red clay into thick bricks, but his mortar, a mixture of sand, water and limestone would not congeal. Betty remembered her mother's stories about 'great-grandma and great-grandpa,' the first English settlers who had mixed the ashes of seashells into their mortar. Betty's father, rumored to steer the eyes of hurricanes with his brilliant growl and chief of the Algonquin tribe, had left her fifty-pound bags of oyster shells, the currency of the outer banks. Silas crushed and burned the shells, added the ash to the mortar and built his house row by row. Betty sold biscuits and iced tea to passengers while their trains refueled. By night, the oyster shell ash reflected moonbeams, and the Montgomery house glowed.

One summer evening, the Montgomerys were sitting in rocking chairs on their front porch. Chirping crickets dulled the sound of squeaking floorboards, and lightning bugs flitted above the railroad tracks. Silas was thrilled by his turn of fortune and chuckled. "I bet those oyster shells protected me," he said, grinning at his

wife and brushing the wall beside him. “Bad Luck, why she never made it in the front door! She saw her nasty reflection in the oyster shells and stopped dead in her tracks.”

Betty, who was eight months pregnant, rocked slowly: her large stomach stayed still while her torso and legs tipped up and down. “Bad Luck,” Betty laughed, “she probably thought she was as beautiful as a moonbeam, and the truth destroyed her. The truth can do that, you know.” Betty shivered as a gust of wind tinkled the clamshell chimes that hung from the porch.

Silas nodded and smacked his glass on the table. “I bet she was so sad, she forgot her pride and asked everyone she knew for comfort. But nobody likes Bad Luck, so when they saw her coming they turned off their lights and pretended to be asleep.”

“She must’ve slept on a bed of rock,” Betty imagined, “and covered herself with a cold wind.” Betty caressed her stomach as a train passed, and the windowpanes vibrated. “I don’t envy the person who wakes her. Bad Luck’s bound to be cranky after all that.”

Silas laughed and breathed in the sweet scent of honeysuckle.

The next morning five men – the master carver, the investor, the journalist, the carving apprentice and the senior partner of the architecture firm renovating the New York Municipal Building – disembarked from the southbound train and asked Silas if they could survey the land for granite. The men needed to extract, cut and sculpt twenty-four Corinthian capitals to crown the Municipal Building’s columns. Silas pointed the men toward the rock outcropping, hoping that he could sell what could not support seed or heifer. Later that afternoon, the men wrote a letter to New York explaining they had purchased ‘enough granite to rebuild the entire city.’

Betty and Silas watched as men from the surrounding counties bounded off the train to clear the land and start drilling. In less than a week, Betty had sold a month's supply of ham, which was shipped from a slaughterhouse in Durham. Silas was angry that he had sold the largest stock of granite on the east coast for a song and furious when he found Betty behind the general store, drinking moonshine and cheering on the men playing horseshoes.

The workers were hungry, so a diner was built to feed empty stomachs. Lodging quarters were erected to shelter tired bodies. A general store opened its thick, oak doors to sweaty, pressing palms. The streets were paved with granite gravel too fine to be packaged.

When the final capital of the New York Municipal Building was almost finished, the five men congratulated themselves. The proud master carver, who wore an English style cap and vest, sent the other men to bed, promising he would finish the last embellishment on the capital by dawn. The next morning, the four men arrived at the quarry, but the capital was cracked, and the master carver – ashamed of his mistake – had fled. The investor, whose features had grown round underneath his bowler hat, assured the three other men that the laborers would work even though their contracts had expired. The investor knocked on the lodging house, but the men would not come out. Their boots, caked with red clay and chipped granite, hanging from steel hooks outside the lodging house, knocked together in the wind. A thin journalist, winking behind black-rimmed glasses, took pleasure in the owner's humiliation and documented it in a large black notebook, which a small boy tipped into the water barrel at the general store. The ink ran, and the journalist's work bled into sodden paper. The carving apprentice, who molded granite as easily as icing on a

cake, tried to fix his predecessor's mistakes. His caring chisel did more harm than good, and the crack deepened. The senior partner ran away to distill moonshine in the mountains. Discouraged, the three remaining men sent a letter to New York explaining that the last capital would have to be ordered from a granite mine in Kentucky. Silas, Betty and their newborn son watched the men board a northbound train. After the train had disappeared, and the tracks had stopped vibrating, Silas took his son's delicate, pink hand and ran it over the rough bricks. "Oyster shells," he whispered in his son's ear, "I should've trusted 'em. They protected me but I was too foolish to realize it."

The town, christened Pittsborough in 1915, flourished as golden rod, clover and grass overgrew the road to the quarry. A roof, vending machines and bathrooms were attached to the railroad platform. The God-fearing built a church, a few academically-minded parents erected a school and a rich man founded a university. The dead were buried in red clay, their graves marked with bricks of granite. Water pooled at the bottom of the cold, gray quarry. Wind and rain dulled the stone's meticulously cut edges until the townspeople forgot the quarry that had inspired them to pack their horseshoes, work boots, books, cake pans and letters from loved ones in worn suitcases and move to a new place, a place they now referred to as home. But on rare chilly summer nights, when the smell of honeysuckle was crisp, and the fireflies beckoned children deeper into the dark forest, the townspeople heard the wind wailing, whistling over the gray stone, and they shivered as if they had just remembered something they had been longing to forget.



Granite

1958

Hugh Jay never told me his real name. We met at the quarry when I still had an embarrassingly smooth face for an eighteen-year-old boy. I had just graduated from Pittsburgh High and had taken a job on the night shift at the quarry because I hated the noise of my mother's lips sipping wine; the way my father folded his napkin before dabbing my grandfather's mouth; and the red, unstained tablecloth that hung over the dinner table. I sat in our dining room – a fair-skinned, brown-haired martyr – and twitched every time my mother chided my father. I couldn't wait to leave home and go to Bridgewater University at the end of the summer.

Hugh Jay was a legend: the whole town knew he was a self-made man. He slept with women, owned a dog and scrambled his own eggs every morning. My father, the town vet, claimed that his dog had no name. According to Sally, a girl I had dated in high school, Hugh Jay bought the same bacon bits my mother sprinkled on her salad when we had company. Hugh Jay rented a trailer from Lucille Clearwater, who – in addition to owning a trailer park – was also the night manager at the quarry. Lucille's rough face reddened as she told people about the women's

lingerie that she saw dangling from Hugh Jay's bedpost every month when she inspected his trailer for damages. The only heart that I suspect didn't beat faster when Hugh Jay's name was mentioned was my mother's.

When I told my parents I was taking a second job, my father's hands hit the underside of the table with excitement. The tassels at the end of the red tablecloth tickled the tops of my thighs.

"That's my boy!" He clapped me on the shoulder. "Working two jobs. Bringing home twice the money." His long fingers folded his napkin into a neat triangle, which he placed on his lap. My father claimed to remember 'Black Tuesday's black clouds' but fell silent when my grandfather asked him if the 'black clouds' had darkened the sky over St. Marks, the boarding school my father had attended. My grandfather, who had worked hard, so that his son, my father, could get a good education, had grown bitter in his old age.

"Where will you be working?" my mother asked. Her perfectly aligned teeth gleamed white behind her painted lips. Her eyebrows were razor-thin; she waxed them every Sunday before we went to church. She wore a white blouse and a beige skirt. When the azaleas bloomed, my mother hemmed all of her skirts. After the first frost in the fall, she let the hems down. She wore a dress on Sundays.

"The quarry that's re-opened just north of town," I answered.

"How did you hear about the job?" my mother asked.

"Lucille Clearwater told me about it while I was working at the pharmacy."

My father clasped his hands together and lowered them into his lap.

"You know your father and I don't approve of Lucille. She may seem nice, but she's indecent."

My father blushed and took a large bite of sweet-potato casserole. Years before, Lucille had seen my father delivering church dinners to a middle-aged man suspected of being homosexual. Lucille had told her Bible study group that my father was having an affair with this man. My mother had ignored the rumor and insisted that my father and I do the same. A few weeks later, another rumor had circulated that Lucille was having an affair with a woman.

“You know,” my mother continued, “you’re not like the people who work at places like that.”

“I worked at a quarry,” my grandfather said. The wrinkles on his face buckled into deep crevices. His eyes were watery and shielded by lenses so thick that I could see my own wide blue eyes in them. “Doesn’t matter where you work so long as you work hard. That’s all that counts in America: that’s the American Dream.” My grandfather had emigrated from Germany and kept his job during the Great Depression, so that he could feed his wife, children and in-laws. His patriotism had roots nourished by hard-earned success.

The clock rang seven. My father wheeled my grandfather into the kitchen.

“Son,” my mother said when we were alone in the room. “Your father and I are going to have to think very carefully about this new job of yours.”

“Where are dad’s pills?” my father yelled from the kitchen.

My mother pushed back her chair sharply; her quick step rattled the china.

* * *

As a child, I had played games in Bridgewater Forest, and in early high school, before I had a car, I had visited the forest to escape from streetlights and my mother’s prying eyes, but I hadn’t been there recently. I was nervous as I drove up the road.

Gravel slipped off the edge of the road and buried itself in pine needles. Through the trees I could barely see the Montgomery house, glinting in the evening sun. When I was a kid, I thought the house was magical, but I learned later that it shone because there were shiny seashells in the mortar.

I parked my father's rusted car next to three other vehicles in a small clearing by a trailer and took a deep breath before opening the car door.

The top lip of the giant pit was ragged; bare roots starved in the air. A road hugged the steep quarry edge, which fell twenty feet before evening out into a gray sheet of rock. Geometric craters branded the earth. Two large drills loomed taller than the huge mounds of chipped granite that towered over the landscape. Around the drills, the granite stood in large cubes.

The trailer was off-white, and its hitch was rusted. I climbed the cinderblock stairs and knocked. Lucille Clearwater's daughter, Gladys, opened the door. I knew her from high school; she was a year younger than I. In middle school, Gladys had been fat and shy, but her limbs had elongated in high school. Her face betrayed no emotion; her flesh was as lifeless as the granite: cut, cubed and ready to be packed at the bottom of the quarry. Dark hair curled to her shoulders. Her movements were awkward and halting, but when she was still, she was so imposingly beautiful that men and women leaned toward her as though they stood behind a red velvet rope.

"Nick." Lucille's husky voice called from inside the trailer. "Come in." Lucille stood with her feet wider than her hips. She was balding slightly and looked nothing like her daughter. The sweat on Lucille's upper lip shone in the light of a fluorescent bulb, which hung from the ceiling by a wire. She wore a purple floral dress that clung to her stomach and thighs. According to my mother, Lucille Clearwater always

looked – even when she was wearing her Church clothes – as if she were going to a NASCAR race. Sweat darkened the dress underneath her armpits. Lucille stood behind a table, laden with several open maps, shaded red and blue.

Two men just older than myself sat at the table drinking coffee out of paper cups. Lucille held out a sweaty hand and grasped mine firmly. “Nick, this is Allen and Paul.”

The two men lifted their heads. They were both pale and wore thick-rimmed glasses.

“Lucille told us you’re gonna be at Bridgewater this fall,” Allen said. “We’ll both be seniors.” Allen’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he spoke. He had a thin neck, and his Adam’s apple looked as large as one of my fathers’ golf balls. His blond hair was thin and wispy, like a young girl’s.

Paul nodded. “The school will appreciate the work you do here this summer.” Paul spoke with a thick Boston accent. He was short, and his dark hair was cropped closely. Everything about him was thin: his nose, cheeks, arms, legs and torso were gaunt.

“The north tower of the library desperately needs repair,” Allen said. “The school tried to order granite from a mine in Kentucky, but granite’s on back order these days. Thankfully, the university has its own resources and was able to reopen this quarry after fifty-three years of inactivity.”

“Are there more people on the crew?” I asked.

“Hugh Jay,” Allen, Paul and Lucille answered in unison.

“He should be getting here any moment,” Lucille said.

“He owns a 1956 Ford F-100,” Paul said dreamily. “Did you know that, Nick?”

I shook my head.

“The Ford factory in Atlanta gave it to him because he won the monthly productivity award six times in a row,” Paul explained. “All the other workers gave up. Morale was so low that eventually the bosses gave him the truck and told him he wasn’t eligible to win another award.” Paul dipped a napkin in his water, cleaned his glasses and gave the napkin to Allen, who did the same.

Hugh Jay’s legend had infiltrated Bridgewater University.

“What brought Hugh Jay here from Atlanta?” I asked. I had only been to Atlanta once as a prospective student at Emory. My clearest memory was of my mother whispering about how sloppy the tour guide looked: his shirt was not tucked into his pants.

“No one knows for sure,” Allen said. “I think he got into some kind of trouble.”

“Nonsense,” Lucille interjected. “He left because he was bored of his job. He was working in a Ford Factory. Who wouldn’t get bored there?”

“My *girlfriend* swears he did time in jail,” Paul said. He stretched his short frame to its full height. “My girlfriend would know; she just got a job working for the University newspaper.”

While we were talking, Gladys had moved to the window. A tremor of fear quivered in her eyelashes, nose and lips. The sound of tires crunching the gravel announced the arrival of another vehicle.

“That’ll be Hugh Jay,” said Lucille Clearwater, glancing at her watch. “He’s never late.”

A car door slammed, and the quarry echoed in response.

Gladys’ head turned as a man and a dog approached.

The trailer door swung open, and Hugh Jay was framed in the red evening light. His dog sat on the steps behind him. He wore work boots, tight blue jeans, a white tee shirt and a black leather jacket that was zipped halfway. His dog whimpered as he shut the door. He leaned against the trailer wall and crossed his arms slowly. His hair was gelled back from his face, and dark brows gathered over his squinting eyes. His cheeks and chin were clean-shaven. Slowly, he surveyed each of us. His eyes lingered on me before they came to rest on Gladys, who was still standing by the window. When he turned his head, I could see a scar, which ran from behind his ear down his neck and disappeared underneath his white tee shirt. I shivered, imagining what could have given him such an injury.

“Hugh Jay,” Lucille said, “This is Nick. Now that there are four of you, you can split into two groups. One team, Hugh Jay and Nick, will work on the first drill. Allen and Paul will use the second. At the end of every night, each team will report how many cubes of granite they’ve extracted to Gladys. At the end of the summer, whichever team has extracted more will get a bonus.”

Hugh Jay took his eyes off Gladys to nod at me. He tilted his head down, opened his eyes a hair and wrinkled his forehead. His lips smiled a fraction of a second, and my heart beat faster.

“Come on, boys,” Lucille said. “Get to work. Gladys and I’ll have your donuts and coffee ready at break time.”

I waited for Hugh Jay to tie his dog to the trailer before we walked down the steep road into the quarry. The red light of the setting sun glowed off the gray rock. I started to sweat. The granite seemed to have absorbed the day's heat and was radiating it back in the last remaining moments of day. I felt as if I were in a convection oven. Hugh Jay taught me how to position the drill quickly. The work was physically easier, but much more tedious than I had expected. First, we cracked the rock into cubes while it was still in the ground using long, slim drill bits. After the granite was cracked, we widened the fissures until we could pry the cube out and place it on the ground, where the day crew could load it into a truck. I was not allowed to use the drill because I was under twenty-one. My job was to spot the drill, to ensure it bit in the correct place. I measured, re-measured, positioned the drill and stood back, while Hugh Jay did the work. Sweat collected under his armpits and trickled down his face.

My eyes strained in the growing darkness, and I wondered why the large floodlights had not been turned on. When I saw Paul and Allen walk up the road to the trailer, I assumed it was break team and stopped working.

"Why are you quitting?" Hugh Jay asked, squinting at me. I explained my reasoning to which he replied, "It's not break. Those college boys are just looking for excuses to quit." Hugh Jay laughed. "They've gone to tell Gladys and Lucille to turn on the floodlights." Hugh Jay wiped sweat off his brow. "Students, they've never worked a day in their life. We'll beat 'em in this competition; you'll get a bonus at the end of the summer."

I realized that Hugh Jay didn't know that I was going to be a freshman at Bridgewater University and worked with increased vigor. The floodlights turned on,

and Paul and Allen ambled back to work. The floodlights drowned out the stars, and our world was reduced to the quarry.

At nine o'clock, we took a break. Gladys served us donuts and coffee. I sat down on the cinderblocks by the trailer door to watch Paul and Allen play horseshoes. Hugh Jay sat beside me. His dog – a medium-sized, brown mutt with half an ear missing – lay on his other side. Hugh Jay tapped a cigarette out of his carton and lit it. He took a long drag, looked at the stars and blew the smoke into the night. “Hugh Jay,” he said, still looking up. “My name’s Hugh Jay.”

“Nick Holloway.” I wondered if he had forgotten that Lucille had introduced us already.

“You’re a good worker, Nick. We’ll have a good summer together.”

I felt my face redden, and my hands grow hot.

Paul’s horseshoe landed a foot away from Hugh Jay’s dog. The dog yelped loudly then growled at Paul when he came to retrieve the bent iron.

“Nick’s a nice name,” Hugh Jay continued. “My name used to be Nick.”

“You changed your name? Legally?”

“I tell people my name’s Hugh Jay, and that’s what they call me.” He finished his coffee, crushed the paper cup in his fist and threw it underneath the trailer. “Let ‘em believe what they want.”

That was the only thing Hugh Jay ever told me about himself.

* * *

After I had worked side-by-side with Hugh Jay for a week, everyone considered me an expert on his life. Even Lucille, Allen and Paul – everyone but Gladys – interrogated me about him.

People came to the pharmacy expressly to ask me questions about him. Candy sales soared, and Mr. Pill claimed that I was the reason. One time, my ex-girlfriend Sally and her two best friends came into the pharmacy. Each of them selected a candy bar and brought it to the register. Sally was the first in line. She had curly blond hair that bounced continually, plump, rosy cheeks and large lips. She laid the money on the counter and asked, “Is it true that Hugh Jay ran away from an orphanage when he was fifteen years old?”

She was short five cents. When I told her so, the two girls behind her erupted in laughter.

“Is it true,” she continued, slapping five cents on the counter, “that he slept in bus stations and hasn’t even received his high school diploma?”

“Yeah, he’s slept in a few bus stations.” My hands were cool and clammy. I tried to squint at the girls, like Hugh Jay, and saw the train tracks just across Main Street. “He slept in train stations too.”

“I heard he works night shifts only,” Sally’s friend stated. “Why’s that?”

“He was homeless. The nights are colder than the days, so he worked during the night and slept during the day.” I gained confidence behind my furrowed brow.

“That’s not what I heard,” Sally said. She blew a large bubble and scraped the bubble gum off her lips with her teeth. “I heard he was hiding from the police.”

I waved off her suggestion, all the while knowing I couldn’t disprove it. As soon as the girls had filed out of the store, I searched the pharmacy for hair gel. I had become the mouthpiece of a legend.

* * *

“Horseshoes,” Paul said, standing in front of the cinderblock steps on which Hugh Jay and I sat. “Either of you know how to play?” Paul’s muscles had not become more toned, even though he had been working at the quarry for a month and a half. It was mid-July and the heat was unbearable. “Wanna play Allen and me?” Paul’s pale face shone with dried sweat.

I knew I was better than both of them because I had watched them play every night. The last time I had lost a horseshoe game was to my father when I was eight. After that, I had spent hours perfecting my throwing technique. If Hugh Jay was decent, I knew we could beat them.

“What?” Allen goaded. “Are you scared of losing?” His Adam’s apple trembled. “Scared of losing a game of horseshoes just like you’re going to lose the extraction competition?”

Hugh Jay squinted into the sun and then at the trailer window where Gladys stood, motionless. Hugh Jay flexed his arms. “We’re not scared,” he said. “We’ll play as long as we’ve got an audience.” He winked at Gladys.

Lucille, standing behind us, heard Hugh Jay. “Gladys, honey,” Lucille called to her daughter. “Would you bring two chairs, so we can watch the game?”

Hugh Jay jumped up from the cinderblock steps and grabbed two folding chairs from the trailer. He set them next to the horseshoe court. His dog must have felt the excitement in the air because he circled around the dusty lawn, barking.

“What do you want to play to?” Allen asked me.

“Twenty-one,” I replied. A breeze lifted the hair on the back of my neck.

Lucille sat down on one of the two chairs and called Gladys to join her. Gladys wore a blue skirt. As she walked to her chair, a gust of wind blew her skirt up

around her slender thighs, and Hugh Jay let out a low whistle. The floodlights reflected off her black hair.

Allen missed the first shot but made the second. I let Hugh Jay go first. It was obvious he had never played horseshoes before. He didn't pitch a decent shot the entire game. We lost badly, but Hugh Jay remained in good spirits and made sly comments to Gladys when he wasn't pitching. Afterwards, he slapped me on the back. "You're quite a player, Nick, but watch out. I'm gonna practice, and next time we'll play each other. It'll be a *real* game."

Hugh Jay helped Gladys with her chair. His dog followed him, nipping at his heels. Hugh Jay brushed his hand against Gladys' cheek as her thin skirt blew around her knees. "You'll see," Hugh Jay said, the wind carrying his voice to me. "I'll win." Hugh Jay's lips spread into a half-grin. The raised, discolored skin of his scar looked like a gopher hole running down his neck.

* * *

My mother insisted that the family go to church every Sunday, a tradition I had tried to escape unsuccessfully. Church had become more bearable however, since I had become the expert on Hugh Jay. Before and after the service, girls and boys surrounded me, wanting to know everything about my new co-worker. I tilted my face down, grinned up at them and tried to remain as mysterious as possible. I unbuttoned my coat halfway, wishing I were wearing a leather jacket and that my white button-up were a tee shirt.

One Sunday, Sally approached me before the service while I was wheeling my grandfather down the aisle. She had on glasses, which I had never seen her wear before.

“I’m coming to the quarry,” she said, without greeting me.

I nodded.

“I suppose you already know that I’m the new photographer for the Bridgewater University school newspaper.” She tossed her hair.

I shook my head. “I hadn’t heard.”

She looked surprised. “No matter.”

My grandfather snorted. He had never liked Sally and had made his opinions well known at the dinner table.

“My next assignment,” Sally continued, “is to take a picture of the night crew.” Sally clucked her tongue and moved her head, so that her curls twitched. “Maybe you can introduce me to Hugh Jay.” She pushed her glasses farther up onto her nose.

Suddenly, I saw Sally through Hugh Jay’s eyes. She was false, pretentious and hadn’t worked a day in her life. “Sure,” I said coolly. “No problem.” I wondered why I had ever dated her. My friends had said she was pretty.

“Great. See you soon.”

I wheeled my grandfather to our pew and sat beside him. More people crowded around me to ask questions about Hugh Jay.

When the church bells rang, my grandfather’s head drooped, and by the sermon, he was snoring. At the end of the service, my father leaned over me to wipe a fine dribble of spit from my grandfather’s chin.

“Today’s the day,” Hugh Jay told me when I arrived one day in early August. He mimed throwing a horseshoe. “I’ve been practicing.”

I couldn't concentrate while Lucille gave me the day's instructions. Once in the quarry, I set the drill, checked the alignment and gave Hugh Jay the go-ahead before putting in my earplugs. Hugh Jay had just scratched the surface of the granite when Gladys reached us. She had run down from the trailer, and her breasts rose and fell, as she struggled to regain her breath. She held a map that had been crushed in her sweaty hand. I wondered what could have drawn Gladys away from the trailer.

"You're drilling in the wrong spot," she said to me, handing me the map. I unfolded it, and she pointed to where we had been about to drill. The area was shaded red, indicating that there was a spring directly underneath.

Hugh Jay laughed at me. "What were you trying to do? Did you think I looked too hot and needed to cool off?"

"Sorry," I fumbled. "I didn't mean to."

She accepted my apology silently, folded the map and sidestepped around Hugh Jay to walk back to the trailer.

"Gladys," Hugh Jay called after her. "Wanna go on a date?"

Gladys stopped but did not turn around. Her hands played nervously with the hem of her skirt.

"Come on, Gladys, just one date."

Gladys continued back up the steep path to the trailer.

I was shocked; Hugh Jay had failed. I put on my goggles and pretended as if I hadn't heard their conversation.

Hugh Jay punched me in the rib cage. "She'll come around," he said. "Just you wait; they always do."

During break, I watched Hugh Jay wolf down six donuts.

“Why aren’t you eating?” he asked with scorn.

I could see Gladys watching us out of the corner of her eye.

“Hey,” Hugh Jay said as if the idea was just dawning on him. “Why don’t we play a game of horseshoes?” Hugh Jay winked at Gladys. “I think we’ve got one viewer who would rather watch us than those students.”

Allen and Paul willingly conceded the court: they were eager to watch us play. Both of them refilled their coffee cups, grabbed two donuts and sat on the cement blocks that Hugh Jay and I had abandoned.

It was clear after the first pitch that Hugh Jay had practiced. Pitch after pitch rang conclusively around the iron stake. We stayed even for ten innings. At the top of the eleventh, he had nineteen points, and I had twenty. We were playing to twenty-one, win by two. Lucille and Gladys Clearwater sat in folding chairs beside the court.

Before pitching the eleventh inning, Hugh Jay held the horseshoe out to Gladys. “Gladys,” he said, “I need some good luck on this next pitch. Will you kiss my horseshoe?” Hugh Jay pushed the horseshoe so close to Gladys that the ends of her dark curls brushed the dirty metal.

“Go on,” her mother said. “It’s not going to bite.”

Allen and Paul elbowed each other and whispered. Allen puckered and made a loud smacking sound with his lips.

Gladys fingered the fraying hem of her skirt.

“Come on Gladys,” Lucille said. “All he’s asking you to do is kiss the goddamned horseshoe.” Lucille cursed. “Sorry,” she apologized to Hugh Jay, “I can’t make her do it.”

Hugh Jay continued to glare at Gladys. “No problem,” Hugh Jay’s voice echoed in the quarry. “I don’t need good luck.” The stars were bright. His loud voice had silenced the chirping crickets; all was quiet.

I pitched first and heard the familiar sound of iron rattling around iron. My horseshoe fell to the ground embracing the peg. It was Hugh Jay’s turn. For once, the students did not fidget or whisper to each other. My sweaty shirt was cold underneath my armpits and against the small of my back. Hugh Jay had to make this shot in order to stay in the game. He took a long time winding up for the pitch. He let the horseshoe fly, and I watched it land feet away from the stake. He had overshot, and his horseshoe lay in a cloud of dust.

A loud clang echoed through the night. I spun around to see Hugh Jay huffing, his hands empty. He had thrown his horseshoe into the quarry, and it had hit the granite escarpment. His dog, mistaking his anger for excitement, pranced at his feet. Hugh Jay tried to kick the brown mutt but missed, hitting only his tail. The dog whimpered and ran underneath the trailer. Without looking at any of us, Hugh Jay stalked into the quarry. The floodlights projected Hugh Jay’s enormous shadow onto the steep granite wall that ran beside the road.

Paul patted me on the shoulder before we descended into the quarry. “If Hugh Jay acts out,” Paul whispered, “just yell, and Allen and I’ll come running.” I shrugged off his hand.

Hugh Jay was standing in front of the drill when I reached him, smiling as if nothing had happened.

* * *

A few days later at breakfast, my parents confronted me about Hugh Jay. Allen and Paul must have told people about the horseshoe game.

“Your father and I respect your motivation to work two jobs,” my mother said, “but if you’re in danger, you should quit.”

My grandfather coughed: his head lurched forward and back on his thin neck.

My mother put a hand on my grandfather’s shoulder. “The doctor called,” she said.

The wrinkles on my grandfather’s forehead creased more deeply.

“The new drug will be just as ineffective.” My mother held a roll to his mouth, but he refused to take a bite.

“I’ve scheduled you another--”

My grandfather silenced my mother with a shake of his head and nodded to me to wheel him back to his room. His arms sagged helplessly by the side of his wheelchair. My mother still held the roll in the air.

“My medicine’s in that drawer over there,” he told me when we got to his bedroom.

“How many?” I asked, wondering if he had understood what my mother had said.

“Two.” He smiled.

I held the pills and cup of water to his lips and watched him fumble to swallow.

* * *

I arrived at the quarry that evening to find Sally – a camera dangling from her neck – talking to Lucille Clearwater. I had forgotten Sally was coming. She wore the

same glasses I had seen her wearing in church. Her curly blond hair was pulled back into a bun. Paul and Allen loitered behind her. Hugh Jay's truck was not in the parking lot.

When I approached, Sally laughed loudly.

"Good evening," Paul greeted me. "I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Sally."

"We already know each other," Sally told him, grinning at my astonishment.

"We used to date."

Paul looked at me in surprise, and I felt my cheeks grow red. I wiped the sweat off my upper lip and caught sight of Gladys, watching us from the trailer stoop.

I listened to Paul and Sally banter until Hugh Jay arrived. His dog jumped out of the truck bed and ran to sniff Sally. The dog growled until Hugh Jay yelled at him to stop.

"Alright boys, line up." Lucille said. "Gladys come out here and get in this picture."

We lined up in front of the quarry. Hugh Jay was on my right, Gladys on my left. Lucille stood on the other side of her daughter.

Sally studied us from behind the lens of her camera. She asked us to move to the right, and then to the left. Slowly, she walked backwards over the loose gravel.

"Be careful," Paul shouted.

"Paul." Sally's voice was sharp. "I can take care of myself." Her eyes flitted to Hugh Jay, and she tried to hide a smile.

"But the horseshoes are--"

"Be quiet. I need to concentrate. Allen, Paul, will you two kneel in front?"

The pile of horseshoes lay in a messy pile just behind her. I smiled as her uncalloused finger clicked the shutter button. She took another step back, lost her footing and fell to the ground with a yelp. Hugh Jay's dog ran to lick her face, Paul shooed away the dog and Hugh Jay snickered.

"I'll get the first aid kit," Lucille said.

Paul and Allen carried Sally back to the car and set her in the passenger's seat. Allen – a pre-med student – diagnosed her with a broken ankle and deemed the first aid kit of no use. Allen insisted that he and Paul rush Sally to the hospital right away. Lucille insisted on accompanying them. Before leaving, Lucille put Gladys in charge.

Paul knelt by the passenger's seat. "Even with an extra night," Paul said to Sally, "I doubt they'll catch up to us. You see Sally, we're having a little competition. Needless to say, Allen and I have mined much more granite than they have. You don't need to take my word for it--check the records."

I knew Hugh Jay and I had mined at least twice as much as Allen and Paul had. I reasoned that Paul had lied to Sally because he wanted to impress her.

As soon as the car pulled out of the driveway, Hugh Jay went to the trailer and demanded to see the records.

Gladys brought him the thick binder that catalogued every night's work. I looked over Hugh Jay's shoulder and saw that the back page was a simple tally sheet. At the top of one side was printed: Allen and Paul. The other side read: Hugh Jay and Nick. According to the page, Allen and Paul had mined three more cubes of granite than we had. Hugh Jay's finger counted the marks one by one. "They're lying," he said. "And Lucille's buying it." Hugh Jay slammed the book shut and stormed out of the trailer.

* * *

Now, ten years later, I'm ashamed. I should have intervened in what was about to happen. But I was young, and Hugh Jay was a legend. I believed that the harder Hugh Jay worked the more successful he became. Hugh Jay believed that too. Everyone did. By the time he was twenty-nine, Hugh Jay was convinced – as firmly as my grandfather was – in the simple beauty of the American dream. But not all things can be won with hard work.

I still have the photograph Sally took of the night crew. Allen and Paul are kneeling in front. Allen's Adam's apple is as prominent as it was when I first met him. Paul is grinning broadly, trying to impress Sally. His arms are still not toned. Behind them, stand the rest of us. My brown hair is cropped short, and I am wearing a white tee shirt and jeans, like Hugh Jay, who is standing by my other side. I'm trying to squint at the camera, but with my large eyes, I look ridiculous. On my other side, stand Lucille and Gladys. Lucille's stance is wide, and her hand rests on the head of Hugh Jay's dog. Gladys is the centerpiece of the photograph. Her hair falls behind her shoulders and frames her face, and her features seem sculpted of fragile porcelain. Hugh Jay looks relaxed. He squints at the camera, neither smiling nor bothering to dispose of the cigarette that is dangling from his fingers.

After Gladys showed us the records, Hugh Jay and I got to work. He worked furiously, harder than I had ever seen him work before. At nine, we took off our sweat-drenched shirts for our thirty-minute break. As we walked back up to the trailer, Hugh Jay pointed to the largest untouched section of granite, the place where I had accidentally set the drill. "If we could only drill there," he whispered, "maybe

we could catch up to Allen and Paul. All of that untouched granite – just think, it'd be so easy.” He shook his head, and we walked the remaining way to the trailer.

Gladys was studying maps at her desk when we walked in. She had set our donuts and lukewarm coffee on the stoop, where we normally sat, but Hugh Jay stepped over the food and sat down in the trailer. Storm clouds were approaching, and I could feel the electricity in the air. I picked up the plate of donuts and thermos of coffee and sat next to Hugh Jay inside the trailer.

“So Gladys,” Hugh Jay said casually. “Now that your mom’s gone, tell me something about yourself. You go to school, right?”

Gladys nodded.

“What? I couldn’t hear you.”

“Yes, I go to school.”

“What grade will you be in next year?”

“Twelfth.”

“And you still won’t go on a date with me?”

Gladys shook her head. She set a map firmly on the table, bending over slightly.

“What’s the matter with me?” Hugh Jay asked roughly.

When she didn’t answer, Hugh Jay got up and approached the table. “What’s the matter with me?” he repeated, setting his hands on the map.

Gladys stood as still as a statue.

“Don’t I work hard enough for you?” Hugh Jay continued. Gladys’ eyes flitted toward me, reminding Hugh Jay of my presence. He whirled around, and I caught

sight of a dark anger, brimming in his irises. “Nick,” he whispered. “Would you mind starting the second shift without me? I’ll be down in just a minute.”

Without saying a word, I walked to the quarry ledge. I had never seen Hugh Jay like this, and I was scared. My toes bumped the tips of my shoes as I walked down the steep road. I lay down on the granite, which had not yet cooled from the sun’s heat. It was five minutes until break time was over. I told myself I shouldn’t go back to the trailer because Hugh Jay would come down any minute. When my watch read nine-thirty, the end of break, and Hugh Jay still hadn’t arrived, I told myself it would be irresponsible to walk back up to the trailer because I was paid to work from nine thirty till midnight. I started cleaning drill bits because I didn’t want to be caught idle, if Lucille returned. The first large raindrops fell heavily on the dry ground.

Thirty minutes after we were supposed to start working, Hugh Jay joined me. Sweat trickled down his face. When he got to the drill, he moved it to the untouched deposit and pointed the slender drill bit directly into the ground. Hugh Jay’s hands shook, and the drill danced on the granite’s surface. The rock cracked, and the drill sank deep into the rock. A dark spot formed around the crevice. A trickle of water bubbled up from the earth: he had hit the spring. The sweat on his forehead dripped and mixed with water that bled from the ground. He drilled until the bit was fully submerged in the earth, and water seeped into the bed of the dry quarry. I saw Lucille waving at us from the lip of the quarry and Allen and Paul running down the road towards us, but Hugh Jay did not notice them. I doubted Lucille could see the puddle around Hugh Jay because the ground was slick with rain.

“Nick,” Allen said when he reached me. He was breathing heavily. “It’s your grandfather. We saw your whole family at the hospital. You’d better go, quick.” Allen

gasped when he saw the puddle surrounding the drill. “What happened?” he asked. “Is he illiterate? Did he misread the map? Idiot.”

Paul whistled when Allen motioned to the puddle creeping slowly over the bottom of the rain-splattered quarry. “Go on,” Paul urged me. “Your grandfather is dying, for Christ’s sake. We’ll take care of this.”

I took Paul’s advice and walked quickly to the parking lot. Through the trailer window, I saw Gladys – her shirt torn and her hair mussed – standing like a statue. Lucille was bent over her. Certainty that, I realize now, had been bubbling just below the surface, flooded my earlier unease.

I took one last glance at Hugh Jay from the top of the quarry. He sat at the controls, the puddle growing around him. He must have moved eventually, because by the time the police came, he was nowhere to be found. Allen and Paul said that he had walked into the forest, leaving behind his dog, tied to the trailer, and his truck. Bridgewater University charged Hugh Jay for destruction of capital. The police searched for Hugh Jay in all of the neighboring counties, but with no luck.

* * *

My grandfather died that night. By the time I got to the hospital, they had already given him a dose of morphine. He didn’t recognize me. The doctor assured us he wasn’t in any pain. My mother told me to zip my jacket, and for once I listened to her. My grandfather’s last breath was as quiet as the sound of a drop of Hugh Jay’s sweat hitting the bottom of the quarry.

Clay

1975

The blood had seeped into the white threads before Agatha realized she was bleeding. The cotton drank greedily. She hadn't felt the initial pinprick, so she was startled when she saw a stain, two inches in diameter, around the safety pin on her waist.

Agatha looked in the mirror. Her small breasts and narrow hips no longer filled out the dress. The heavy fabric fell in folds from her waist. Her dark hair, dissatisfied and unaccustomed to curling, was thick. Agatha brushed rouge onto her cheeks, but the blush only accentuated the paleness of her skin. She wiped it off immediately. Early in their marriage, her husband, Cooper, had requested frequently that she wear the dress, but she had ignored his suggestions. The stains, she had told him, which flecked the hem and stretched across the backs of Agatha's calves, upper thighs, the small of her back and spread across her shoulders, were shameful. Agatha did not like to indulge in nostalgia, but guilt, delivered in a small, white envelope, had prompted her to put on the dress.

A rap on the front door startled her. He must have forgotten his keys, she thought. As she turned toward the noise, Agatha knocked the mirror onto the corner of her bureau. Frustrated, she righted it: she resented her husband for making her feel giddy. Agatha had gotten a full scholarship to Bridgewater University and had continued studying moths in the biology labs after graduation. Now, ten years later, she was the youngest chair at Bridgewater and the only woman in the biology department.

Agatha was proud of her accomplishments, and she always felt in control, but with Cooper it was different. He made her feel the way Agatha imagined a moth must feel after emerging from her cocoon: excited, on top of the world and absolutely terrified. Cooper wasn't the man whom she would have chosen to fall in love. She was sure her co-workers talked about her choice of husband behind her back. Agatha checked the safety pin in the mirror to make sure it wouldn't prick her again and steadied herself. A web of cracks radiated from the center of the mirror, obscuring Agatha's lower abdomen and fragmenting the rest of her body. Another rap came from the front door. Agatha's footsteps were muffled in the shag carpet.

Judy Jordan – her hand poised to knock a third time – stood on the stoop. Snow fell behind her, hushing the darkened landscape. The girl, Agatha thought, had always been too clean, too innocent and too perfect: it was as if she had been embalmed. There was never any dirt underneath her fingernails. Her thin blond hair was parted and plaited every morning by her mother, Mrs. Bertha Jordan, a plump woman with broad hips. Not a strand was out of place. Her blue eyes were too deep, Agatha reflected, for a six-year-old's unblemished skin. Judy did not look like her brothers.

“Good evening Mrs. Cooper.” Snowflakes melted in Judy’s hair. She wore a light blue coat, a purple jumper, black stockings and large black rain boots.

“What happened?” Judy pointed to the stain on Agatha’s back. “Are you ok?”

Agatha’s face grew red, and she waved off the question. She had always felt awkward and unsure of herself around children.

Judy pointed to the Styrofoam containers. “Where’s the food from?”

“Allen and Sons.”

“Allen and Sons? Really? I’ve never been there, but I’ve always wanted to.”

Agatha stepped to the side and invited Judy out of the cold.

Judy walked in and peered at the dinning room table. Clumps of snow melted into the carpet behind her. The wallpaper was peeling in the corner. The crystal wine glasses stood on the table, empty but for a thin coat of dust. Between the glasses, lay the open envelope from the lab.

“My mom doesn’t let us go to Allen and Sons,” Judy said, her eyes resting on the Styrofoam containers of food. The hamburger buns looked stale, the cheese was not melted and the tomatoes were watery. Orange grease collected in the corners. “Once, when my mom was pregnant with me, she got food poisoning after eating there.”

“Allen and Sons is a very special restaurant for my husband and me,” blurted Agatha. “We ate there on the night he proposed.”

Agatha remembered the sticky countertops and the plastic orange chairs at the bar. The cook tossed fried okra and other kitchen scraps to a dog chained to the back porch. Beers had chilled next to the cashier in a cooler priced with a faded tag. It had been shabby – Agatha would have never have gone there with her college friends –

but it was conveniently located between the University's labs, where she had worked, and the quarry, where Cooper had worked. After dinner, Cooper had driven Agatha to the quarry. It had started to rain as they passed the Montgomery house. Cooper had taken Agatha's hand and led her away from the supervisor's trailer. The rain had pounded the red clay, splattering the hem of Agatha's dress. They had entered the forest and walked around the quarry before approaching the lip of the steep embankment. In the middle of the white plateau, twenty feet below, stood a man in front of a drill, his head raised to the sky. Around him, a puddle seeped out of a deep crack in the earth. Agatha had been scared, but Cooper's strong hands had steadied her. Her thin lips had trembled before he had kissed her. He had made her feel safe. She had said yes without hesitating but had not worn the dress since. Later, Cooper had told her that he was unemployed because a spring had flooded the quarry.

"Where'd you get that?" Judy's question startled Agatha from her reverie. Agatha looked where Judy pointed and was surprised to see a horseshoe hanging upside down above the front door. Agatha didn't know how long it had been there.

"Cooper must've picked it up from the hardware store."

"My mom hung one just like that above my door and promised it would bring me good luck."

"Did it?"

"I don't know. My dad threw it into the woods as soon as he saw it." Judy toyed with the ends of her braids and stared at the horseshoe. "Do you know where my mom is?" she asked suddenly.

Agatha looked blankly at Judy. "She's not home yet?"

“No, and we’re getting hungry. My mom didn’t prepare us food, like she normally does when she’s gone for dinner.”

Agatha was surprised. Normally, the Jordans sat down to their dinner when the six-thirty train rumbled through town. Bertha’s six children flanked the table, yelling as she brought them steaming platters of food. It was now after eight o’clock. “Here.” Agatha thrust some microwavable dinners into the girl’s hands. “Take these back to your father and brothers.”

Judy looked skeptically at the dinners, but accepted them. “Thank you, Mrs. Cooper.” Agatha let Judy out the door and watched as the young girl traipsed through the snow. The air was still, and the world was silent.

Agatha retreated to her bedroom and squirted perfume on her wrists. She hoped Cooper wouldn’t take the news of the test results too badly. Cooper had wanted to conceive on their honeymoon, but Agatha had refused, explaining that she wanted to finish school before raising a family. On the night of her graduation, he had kissed her neck with abnormal passion, but Agatha had told him that she wanted to be financially secure before they had a baby. Finally, when they had both turned thirty-three, two years ago, she had agreed it was time, but she still didn’t really want child. The fertility test had come back negative. Agatha’s suspicions were confirmed: she had never thought her body capable of nourishing another life. She fluffed their pillows before returning to the kitchen.

Agatha lit the candles and poured herself a glass of wine. The wax dripped slowly down the long red wax cylinder. Outside, a streetlight illuminated a world of light that snowflakes fell into and out of soundlessly. Agatha sat by the flickering light of the candles and watched for headlights. The sky was eerily luminescent, even

though it was nine o'clock. The house felt large and empty. Agatha recalled again the way her husband's strong hands had led her through the forest, how he had kissed her unmoving lips. That night by the quarry had been so long ago. Agatha couldn't remember the last time she had felt the tender tickle of his hair against her cheek.

The noise of a key in the door startled her. She sat up and straightened the silverware on the table.

Cooper turned on the light, hung up his hat and brushed snow off his coat. When he saw her, he jumped, but his expression softened as his blue eyes took in the hamburgers, crystal glasses, candles and white dress. His gaze halted on the envelope, and he ran his hand through his perfectly straight blond hair.

A knock interrupted the silence.

Cooper opened the door to find Judy standing on the stoop with the microwavable dinners tucked underneath her arm.

"Mom just came home," Judy explained. "We won't be needing these." Cooper took the microwavable dinners from her and put them back in the freezer. "Also, Mom asked me to get back her stain removal kit." Judy addressed Agatha.

"Stain removal kit?" Agatha was confused. She hadn't spoken to Bertha in over a week.

"I borrowed it," said Cooper. "It's in the laundry room, on top of the washer."

Agatha passed her husband and Judy to climb the carpeted stairs. On top of the washer was a large Tupperware container filled with stain removal products. Through the laundry room window, Agatha could see Bertha setting the table with the help of two of her red-haired sons. Mr. Jordan slammed the front door. Standing on the stoop, he lit a cigarette. His eldest son, Matthew, joined him outside, and

father and son smoked together. Agatha repinned her dress and went back downstairs.

“Guess what?” Judy asked Cooper.

“What?” Cooper sounded tired.

“School’s canceled tomorrow. Will you build a snowman with me, like you promised?”

Cooper looked above Judy’s head at the two Jordans. “I don’t know, Judy. Tomorrow might not be a good day.”

“Judy? Is that you?” Mr. Jordan yelled across the street. The snow did not dampen the harshness of his voice.

“Yeah.”

“Get back over here.” Mr. Jordan threw his cigarette butt on the ground. Matthew put a hand on his father’s shoulder.

“Dinner time,” Judy chirped to Cooper. “I’ve got to go home, but I’ll come by tomorrow.” Judy grabbed the stain removal kit from Agatha and skipped toward her house. In the middle of the road, she opened her mouth to the heavens. As soon as she stepped inside, Mr. Jordan slammed the door behind her.

Cooper laid a trembling hand on Agatha’s shoulder. “That dress still looks great on you,” he said. His hand was warm on her shoulder. “I already ate dinner,” Cooper faltered. “Otherwise I’d love to eat with you.”

Agatha blushed: the candles, crystal wine glasses and dress suddenly seemed trite and childish.

“The doctor’s office called me today,” Cooper continued. “Don’t worry Agatha. It’s not your fault.”

He climbed the stairs heavily, and Agatha listened to his steps. The lights were still on across the street, but all was quiet. The sky was glowing, orange as it always did when it snowed, and the snow continued to fall as if nothing had happened. Agatha summoned the courage to call her husband back, but when she turned to yell for him, she saw the stains of clay retreating up the stairs. She held the moment before it melted, like a snowflake on Judy's tongue. Agatha was flooded with humiliation: she felt empty and dead. She thought of Judy's straight blond braids, swinging as the young girl traipsed through the snow. The memory of Cooper's straight blond hair against Agatha's cheek was stained: Judy was his. Agatha loved him, but it didn't matter: his love for her was buried under the smiling corpses of their unborn children.

Picnic

1980

The groans of rusty bike chains awoke the quarry; the children had arrived. Skipped stones and salty bodies sent ripples bellying across the water. Blankets peppered the single grassy bank. Card tables weighed down with pulled pork, chips, soda and a large cake iced like an American flag were erected around a tired horseshoe court overgrown with crabgrass. The horseshoe irons stood close to the water. The sun curdled the mayonnaise in the potato salad. Cold water stalked the shoreline. The Fourth of July picnic was the climax of the summer.

Sofia clasped her notebook and newspaper as she scanned the crowd for Gladys Clearwater. Sofia's blond hair was as fine as a baby's. Her face was cloudless; clear skin stretched thinly over her small nose and shallow cheeks. Large lips interrupted the smooth finish of her face. She frowned when she did not see Gladys among the throng of all-too-familiar half-naked bodies. Ten years ago, when Sofia had been in junior high, she had despised the townspeople for their immodesty. Now that she had a college degree, Mae Hall's breasts and the Jordans' naked backs struck Sofia as tragic.

Paul Rung, the man who had taken over the grocery store after Sofia's grandmother had died, shuffled across the horseshoe court. Sofia knew she had to interview Paul: he had worked at the quarry when it had been active in the late fifties. Professor Wevelt, Sofia's advisor, had suggested she use the quarry as one of her case studies for her dissertation on gender relations in male-dominated occupations. According to Sofia's research, Paul had grown up in Boston with his wealthy parents and received good marks in school. When the south tower of Bridgewater University - - which housed books on anti-Semitic interpretations of the first chapter of Genesis, cuttlefish, the history of the Roman aqueducts, Italian recipe books from the seventeenth century and the men's bathroom -- had crumbled, Paul had worked hard at the university quarry. He had even written an article for the school newspaper titled, 'Preserving Southern Intellectualism: My Summer at the Pittsborough Quarry.' It seemed like Paul had had the start of a budding intellectual career, but in his last year at Bridgewater he had flunked his classes and dropped out. Now he ran the town's grocery store. Sofia was not looking forward to interviewing him.

Sofia flipped through her papers to find the photograph that her mother had taken while working for the school newspaper and resettled her non-prescription glasses on her nose. In the photograph, Paul Rung kneeled in front of the small group of workers, his left arm slung around another man, identified by the caption as Allen. Paul had had thick hair and glasses, but everything else about him - nose, arms and face - was lean. Only two women, Lucille and Gladys Clearwater, had worked at the quarry. Lucille, Gladys' mother, had been killed in an accident involving a faulty trailer hitch, five years after the quarry had closed. Gladys was the only remaining female who had worked at the quarry: an interview with her was imperative.

The young Paul Rung in the picture looked nothing like the man hobbling in front of Sofia. Alcohol had clouded Paul's gaze, and he had lost his thick hair and glasses. His clothes were too large for his thin frame. He bent forward at the waist and walked slowly, even though – according to Sofia's math – he was only forty-two. After he had dropped out, Paul had stayed in Pittsborough. Sofia's grandparents had always been good friends with him, but Sofia had never shared her grandparents' taste in people. Paul was dishonoring academia by using his education to sell groceries in a small, isolated town, Sofia thought. He was a disappointment.

“Paul?” Sofia placed herself between the bent man and the beer table.

With the help of a lawn chair, Paul straightened to look at Sofia.

“Do you have a minute? I'd like to interview you about your work at the quarry.”

Paul eyed the cans of beer.

Sofia fingered the Chap Stick in her pocket. She knew she would have to be assertive. “If you don't mind,” said Sofia, stepping in front of Paul, “I'd like to interview you now.”

Paul sank into the lawn chair, but Sofia persisted. “So Paul, what do you remember about the Clearwaters?”

“Why do you wanna know about the Clearwaters?”

“I'm conducting research for my dissertation.”

“Really?” Mae Hall stood beside the beverage table. Mae's thin, gray braid lay limply across her back. Thick hairs stuck out haphazardly of moles on her chin. Her lips twitched when she wasn't talking as if they couldn't stand being still. Mae

prided herself on knowing all of the town's gossip. "Shouldn't you be done with school by now? You've been at it for four years."

"I graduated in May, but I was accepted into Bridgewater's anthropology graduate program, so I'll be there for five more years. My advisor, Professor Wevelt, wants me to start research for my dissertation early, which is what I'm trying to do right now."

"Professor Wevelt..." Mae trailed off. "Is he the professor who failed West Point's Candidate Fitness Assessment and decided to teach at Bridgewater instead?"

Sofia ignored Mae: nothing she said could be trusted. Mae was uncultured, unlearned and ignorant of the ways of the world.

"I bet he gave you a grant or a fellowship," Mae continued, "so that you could work with him over the summer, didn't he?"

Sofia was startled: she hadn't realized that Mae knew about the Wevelt fellowship. "He did," Sofia answered. It was time to get to work. "Did you enjoy working at the quarry?" she asked Paul.

"A girl like you shouldn't spend her summer working for men like Professor Wevelt," Paul said.

Professor Wevelt's strong voice rang in Sofia's head: *Men will try to distract you, but you must stay committed to your research. For the sake of your project, for the sake of anthropology, remain focused.* She ignored Paul's comment.

"Does the fellowship give you enough money?" Mae asked.

"Professor Wevelt arranged for me to live on campus and gave me a faculty ID, so I can eat in the University's cafeteria. It's very difficult for a student to get a faculty ID; apparently Professor Wevelt had to pull some strings." Sofia didn't like

confiding in Mae, but she hadn't yet had the satisfaction of telling anyone about her most recent academic achievements.

"Last year the fellow was a red-head, this year she's a blond." Mae rolled her eyes. "What'll it be next year?"

"That's enough, Mae." Sofia's voice was sharper than she had intended.

"Oh come now," Mae soothed, "don't get your panties in a wad. I didn't mean to--"

"Paul," Sofia interrupted. "Did you enjoy working at the quarry?"

"The quarry was active twenty-two years ago," Paul mumbled. "You're a fool to disturb it."

Sofia pushed her glasses back onto her nose. "What did you do on a daily— nightly," Sofia corrected herself, "basis?"

Paul tapped his cane against the weedy ground. "Sophie--"

"Sofia. My full name is Sofia Andreevna Johnson." It angered Sofia when people mispronounced her name. She had gone by Sophie as a child but decided to switch to 'Sofia' when she got to Bridgewater. She wanted her father, the Dean, to know that she respected his original name choice. It was difficult, however, to convince the Pittsborough citizens to switch to the more sophisticated pronunciation. She had been named after Sofia Andreevna Behrs, the wife of Tolstoy. Sofia Behrs birthed thirteen children and copied *War and Peace* for Tolstoy – who was sixteen years her senior – seven times. The only person from Sofia's childhood who pronounced her name correctly was Agatha, the head of the biology department at Bridgewater and one of the few professors who interacted with the townspeople. Agatha was at the picnic: she sat by the water reading while her husband slept beside her. When Sofia

had been required to write about her hero in middle school she had written about Agatha, who Sofia thought of as a successful, southern, woman academic. Sofia hadn't realized then the one flaw in Agatha's life: her husband, who had never gone to college and worked at the general store.

"You're like your mother," Paul murmured. "Proud. Stubborn. You don't know what's best for you."

Sofia was surprised. "You knew my mom?"

Mae laughed. "Sure, he knew your mom. They were dating when that picture was taken!"

Sofia was confused because she thought her grandparents had told her everything about her mother, but they had never mentioned Hugh Jay. It was her father who had remained a mystery. Sofia had seen him only on holidays, and her grandparents had not spoken of him frequently.

Paul leaned heavily on his cane and twisted it into the ground. "We dated that whole summer, and before that she dated Nick." Paul pointed to a tall man in the photograph, standing between Gladys and the infamous Hugh Jay, who had drilled into the spring. "Nick was a nice kid. I think he moved out west."

"He moved to California," Mae corrected, "so that he could live with another man."

Paul ignored Mae and continued, "Here's the truth: freshman year, Sally broke up with me after taking one class with your father. Two years later – and two Johnson Fellowships later – you were born."

Sofia wrote everything Paul said in her black notebook to hide her anger: she knew her mother would never have fallen in love with her father unless he had been a

perfect gentleman. Wevelt had warned her not to interrupt or correct her interviewees. *Let them think whatever they want. You know better.* Sofia noticed that Mae was still listening to their conversation.

“What can you remember about Gladys Clearwater?” Sofia’s voice cut through the humid air.

Paul looked up sharply. “Why do you want to know about Gladys?” he asked, looking suspiciously at Sofia’s notebook.

“I’ve already told you. I want to interview her about gender relations at the quarry. I’ve been calling her for weeks, but she hasn’t returned any of my calls. I hope she comes today.”

A breeze tickled the water. The reflection of tall pine trees was distorted by the disturbed surface. Paul eyed the beer cans, glinting in the sun.

“Listen.” Paul’s voice sunk to a whisper. “Please let Gladys be. Things have settled the way they were meant to settle.” Paul said nothing more, but Sofia noted that his knuckles were growing white around the lawn chair.

Paul was contemptuous, thought Sofia. It wasn’t worth trying to interview him if he wasn’t going to answer any of her questions.

Charlie Clearwater, Gladys’s only son, caught Sofia’s eye. He seemed as if he were always hiding something; his hefty brow bone shadowed the rest of his face. Sofia was only two and a half years younger, but they had never gotten along. If she couldn’t interview Gladys, Charlie was her second-best option. Sofia painted her lips with Chap Stick. Paul grabbed a beer and stumbled into the shade of an umbrella.

“What’re you reading?” A voice spoke near Sofia’s elbow. Sofia was so startled that she dropped the notebook onto the horseshoe court. Quickly, she dusted off each

of the pages. Thankfully, the ink had not been smeared. She could not risk losing this book; she had no other copy of her research aside from the brief notes that she had given to Professor Wevelt at each of their weekly meetings.

“I’m sorry.” A boy no more than ten years old with ruthlessly sun-kissed cheeks stood before her. His shock of red hair and freckled arms and legs could mean only one thing: he was a member of the Jordan family, a family that writhed, twisted and hissed like a wounded snake at non-members and members alike. Sofia had kept her distance from the Jordans for ten years ever since Matthew, the eldest of the Jordan clan, had fed her a cupcake filled with mashed worms on April Fools’ Day. The boy fidgeted. “I just wanted to ask you what your book was about.”

“I’m collecting research for my dissertation,” Sofia replied.

“Oh.” The boy looked disappointed. “Do you need any help?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’ve got--”

“It’s about time you two met.” Mae said, setting a hand on each of their shoulders. “Lucas meet Sophie. Sophie, Lucas.” Sunlight glinted off the hairs on Mae’s chin, and Sofia shuttered in disgust.

“It’s Sofia, and we’ve already met.”

Lucas took Sofia’s hand, and his earnest face grinned up at her.

“Honey,” Mae replied. “You’ll always be Sophie to me. I can picture the day you arrived at your grandma’s house, like it was yesterday. You cried for two weeks, but you calmed down eventually. I can remember your first day of kindergarten when

you wore that cute, little navy dress. We old-timers couldn't believe how much you looked like your mother."

Sofia had hated the blue dress with white polka dots, but her grandmother had insisted she wear it.

"I can remember," Mae continued, "the day you got your acceptance letter from Bridgewater. I was so happy for you; it was like I was getting the letter myself."

Lucas squatted on the backs of his heels and dug into the earth next to the horseshoe iron with his bare hands. Sofia noticed, with horror, an earthworm's waxen body lying limply in the loamy soil.

"You were so happy," Mae continued. "The whole town celebrated. We didn't expect anything else to happen – because of your father's influence and all – but that didn't stop us from being happy when you got your official notification."

Is that what the citizen's of Pittsborough thought? That she – Sofia Andreevna Johnson – had been accepted to the university simply because her father was the Dean? Professor Wevelt had warned her that people would doubt her on account of her beauty, but she hadn't realized that the whole town had devalued her intelligence. Sofia fumed.

"Hey Yankee!"

Lucas wheeled around.

"Come here," yelled Matthew, who sat by the water with Charlie Clearwater.

Lucas ignored his cousin, picked up the earthworm and cupped it in his hands. The pale, enervated body lay across his fingers. Calmly, he opened his pants pocket wide and dropped the worm inside. He sauntered toward the Jordan's picnic

blanket, his hand clamped over his pocket. Sofia shivered; the young boy had courage to disobey Matthew Jordan.

“I’m sorry Mae,” Sofia said briskly, “I don’t have time to chat right now.”

“Sophie!” the mayor chirped. “It’s so good to see you.” The mayor was a chubby man; no one had run against him in fifteen years because everyone was scared he would have a heart attack, if he lost. “How has your summer been? Do you think you’ll be able to attend our next town meeting?”

“Sorry Mayor, I’m very busy right now. In fact, you caught me at a bad time.” Nothing and nobody – especially not the mayor of a tiny, backwards town – was going to stand in her way of interviewing Charlie. Sofia turned toward the water and walked directly into a man wearing a dark t-shirt. She was so startled that she fell backwards narrowly missing the horseshoe iron. Her black notebook landed several feet away from her. Professor Wevelt’s large, athletic figure clad in flip-flops, khaki shorts and a damp, sweaty tee shirt, stood above her. His thick eyebrows slunk down to his wiry beard. His thin, pink lips poked out tentatively from his aggressive stubble.

“Sophe,” Professor Wevelt’s voice echoed around the quarry. “Fancy seeing you here.” He gulped from a can of beer.

“Professor Wevelt.” She took her professor’s outstretched hand and pulled herself up to standing; in her high heels, she stood nearly as tall as he did. “I wasn’t expecting you.” She could feel the eyes of the mayor and Mae watching her. She dusted the grass clippings off her skirt. Sofia’s heart pounded; she always got jittery when she spoke with Professor Wevelt.

“I was so intrigued by your research; I wanted to experience the quarry for myself. I’ve taught at Bridgewater for so many years; it’s really a shame I haven’t

visited it until now. When you told me about this picnic at our last meeting, it sounded like the perfect time to see the pit of Pittsborough.”

“I was just about to interview Charlie Clearwater, the son of Gladys, one of the only women who worked at the quarry.” Sophia bent down to pick up her black notebook.

“Allow me,” Professor Wevelt said, kneeling down to retrieve her notebook. “That’s a nice skirt.”

“Professor Wevelt,” the mayor said, “it’s good to finally meet you. I’m the mayor. Sophie speaks so fondly of you.”

“Please, call me Claude.” Wevelt strutted toward the mayor, still clasping Sofia’s black notebook. “What’s she been saying about me? Only good things, I hope.” Professor Wevelt winked at Sofia, who felt her cheeks grow warm as more people noticed the newcomer. Even though Professor Wevelt had worked at Bridgewater for twenty years, like Sofia’s father, he didn’t associate with the people of Pittsborough. Wevelt threw back his head, poked the mayor in the ribs and laughed. Beer sloshed onto Wevelt’s exposed feet.

“I’ve heard only good things,” the mayor said stiffly.

Sofia glanced nervously at Charlie. She was worried he would leave before she got a chance to interview him. “Professor,” Sofia began.

“Yes, Sophe.”

“Can I have my notebook? I’ve got an interview to conduct.” Sofia hoped that Professor Wevelt was impressed by her professional tone.

Professor Wevelt tucked a strand of hair behind Sofia’s ear. Sofia froze; Professor Wevelt had never touched her in public before. He had smoothed her hair

once, but there had been lint in her hair, and it had felt natural because Professor Wevelt hadn't stopped praising her Anthropology 101 paper while he was touching her. He had been strictly business.

Professor Wevelt flipped the pages of the black notebook. Barbeque sauce thumbprints marred the pages of perfectly scrawled notes. "You've been keeping your pretty little self busy," he said, smiling. He let the book fall open and read aloud, "Allen Fina. Phone interview. June first, 1980. Worked at the quarry the summer before his senior year at Bridgewater University. Now lives in Florida. Ignored all questions about Gladys and spoke instead about horseshoes. Dead source." Professor Wevelt shut the notebook with a thud. "Thinking makes me hungry. You wouldn't mind if I had some more of those delicious ribs, would you?"

"Help yourself," the mayor said.

Professor Wevelt struggled to hold both Sofia's notebook and the paper plate loaded with ribs. The barbeque sauce weakened the thin paper plate.

The water of the quarry was agitated; dark ripples creased the surface. A gust of wind raised the hair on the back of Sofia's neck and rustled the notebook's dry pages. Focused on his plate, Professor Wevelt did not notice the horseshoe irons, protruding from the earth, in front of him. His foot caught on the metal, and he lost his balance. Sofia heart dropped as the notebook sailed through the air and landed with a dull splash in the water. The citizens of Pittsborough fell silent and watched Sofia lunge toward the quarry, but the ink was already bleeding, darkening the surrounding water.

“Don’t worry!” yelled Lucas. He jumped into the water, retrieved the notebook and held the dripping paper over his head as he swam back to shore. Before Sofia could take her ruined notebook, Professor Wevelt grabbed it.

“Don’t worry Sophe,” Professor Wevelt said. He waved the book in the air, spraying the mayor and Lucas. “It’ll dry right off.”

Sofia took the book in her hands and felt the limp paper.

Agatha, who had witnessed the whole scene from the shore, grabbed the book from Wevelt and tried to dry the pages with paper napkins.

“What’s the matter, Agatha?” Professor Wevelt asked. “Not enjoying your summer vacation? I know I am. The students start to wear on you, you know? It’s nice to have a break.”

“You seem to enjoy students most of the time,” Agatha said, continuing to pat the pages dry. But it was no use: the writing was illegible. “I’m sorry, Sofia. I think it’s ruined.”

Professor Wevelt tossed the useless notebook onto the table. Water pooled on the table and ran in small rivulets down the plastic surface. “Don’t worry,” Professor Wevelt whispered to her. “You don’t actually need to complete research for your dissertation this summer. I just wanted the opportunity to work with you.”

The smell of cologne overpowered Sofia.

“But--I’ll still give you the money,” Professor Wevelt continued. “Perhaps this is for the best. I need a secretary to type all of my field notes. Would you be willing to do that for the rest of the summer?”

“Professor--”

“No Sophe,” Wevelt whispered. “It would be an honor to have you in the office. It would be an honor to be able to spend time with you.” Wevelt wrapped an arm around her waist. “Well, will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Marry me? You can’t tell me you’re surprised by my proposal. The compliments, the fellowship, I’ve been courting you since I saw you on the first day of school.”

Sofia wanted to shrug off his arm in disgust, but the sight of Paul, shaking his head, made her pause. Paul, who sat at a cash register all day, read inventories rather than novels, sublet a room at the age of forty-two, spoke badly of her mother, wanted her to shrug off Professor Wevelt’s arm. Next to Paul, Mae was leaning against the card table, her hand raised to her mouth. Mae, who listened to the radio rather than to records, drank whiskey instead of wine, pried into everything and had no respect for people’s privacy, did not want Sofia to accept Professor Wevelt’s proposal. Agatha’s sharp face was furious. Agatha, who had been Sofia’s hero when she was younger, had always pronounced her name correctly, loathed Professor Wevelt, would certainly think terribly of her if she married Professor Wevelt. But Agatha, Sofia realized, was not an expert on husbands. She didn’t want to – she couldn’t – end up like Mae, Paul or Agatha. She would become what her mother had not: a southern female academic with a successful husband. Besides, it would be a relief to relax and not have to think for the rest of the summer.

“What’s the matter?” Professor Wevelt put his arm around Sofia. “Can’t make up your mind?”

Sofia's hand trembled as she slipped it into Wevelt's. His fingers pressed hers uncomfortably tight.

Paul struggled to stand up. "Wait," he yelled from the lawn chair. "Are you sure you're feeling well? You look ill. You should rest before making your decision."

"Don't worry," Professor Wevelt said. "I can take care of my own fiancée."

"Is that what you are?" Agatha asked Sofia. "His fiancé?"

"Yes," Sofia replied. She didn't expect any of them to understand.

Agatha stalked back to her husband without a word. Mae opened her mouth but made no sound. Paul sighed and slumped back down into his lawn chair.

"Wait!" Lucas yelled. "Don't you want your notes?" He held out the notebook to Sofia, who looked at it blankly.

"Young man," Professor Wevelt said, "consider it a present from the Wevelt couple. I'm sure you can find a good use for it. Why don't you draw some pictures in it or something?"

Professor Wevelt opened the car door, helped Sofia into the passenger's seat and buckled her in. He waved out the window as the car rolled away from the quarry and past the Montgomery house. Water dripped from Lucas' hair onto the black notebook. Droplets formed at the corner of the soft cover and fell to the earth; eventually they would return to the quarry.

Cake

1990

The knife came out clean. Perfect, Gretchen thought – it was done. She set the cake on a stainless-steel cooling rack. Steam whispered out the window into the muggy night air. The ring of wind chimes was drained out by a train’s sharp whistle. Across the street, her brother’s house was dark. It was unusual, she thought, that Victor wasn’t home yet. Over the past three weeks, he had worked long hours, but he always came home before eight. Gretchen had seen very little of him. Whenever he returned, he claimed to be too tired to have dinner and would go straight to bed. It was nine already.

The plastic-covered chair crinkled as it accommodated Gretchen’s sticky thighs. Gretchen looked at the whipped peaks of vanilla frosting that stood in a bowl on the black-and-white checkered counter. The bowl distorted Gretchen’s reflection. Her eyes were reduced to dark slits above her swollen cheeks. Her face tapered into a tiny, pointy chin. Behind her, the kitchen gleamed: the counters were wiped, the floor swept, the dishes washed and the shelves dusted. The cookbooks stood at attention

next to a file of wedding cake order forms. Underneath the cabinets, a mousetrap, laden with peanut butter, waited.

Gretchen smiled when she remembered the first time she had baked Victor a cake; his lips had quivered before taking the first bite. The occasion had been his tenth birthday, a month after their mother's death in the summer of 1974. At the end of the birthday party, while the remaining guests were outside enjoying the last, golden yawn of summer, Victor had come into the kitchen to eat another slice of cake. No one else was in the house.

"If Mama were here she'd want me to eat it, right?" he had asked.

Gretchen had cut him a large piece. Since her mother's death, Gretchen had felt responsible for her brother, so helpless and in need of care. "If she were here, she'd want you to eat the whole cake."

His cheeks had dimpled in an easy smile, and the fork had smeared icing on his mouth. His breath had been sweet.

She had not missed an opportunity to bake him a cake in the sixteen years since. Everyone had been impressed that at only fifteen years old, she took such good care of her younger brother. Gretchen had packed Victor's lunches, waited for him at the bus stop and helped him with his math homework.

The cake she was preparing now was no longer steaming, which meant it was ready to be frosted. The base coat of icing was stiffened with egg whites. As she molded the top edge, a fly flew into the icing. Its legs struggled as its wings twitched helplessly. Carefully, Gretchen extracted the fly, examined it and squashed it between her thumb and index finger. Humming softly, she washed her hands.

As soon as the second layer of icing had been applied, Gretchen felt restless.

She decided to leave the cake on Victor's doorstep, so that he would find it when he arrived home. Light from his side porch cut across the hot pavement and dew-laden lawn. Strange, she thought – he had been scrupulous about switching off the lights ever since Mae Hall, the town gossip, had told Victor that he shouldn't leave his lights on because she could 'see things through the white curtains.' Mae's bedroom window faced Victor's bedroom.

Gretchen climbed the steps and was surprised to see his car pulled all the way into the driveway. Normally, he came directly to her house after work. She heard voices inside. Victor was a private person and did not like to entertain guests. Gretchen climbed the stairs loudly.

"Do you hear that?" asked a woman's voice from inside. "There's someone on your porch."

"It's probably a solicitor," Victor responded. "Keep quiet: they won't know we're here."

Gretchen saw the speaker cross the room. The door opened and a slim, young woman appeared. Her skin was the color of cinnamon, and her hair, which was piled in a loose, messy bun on the top of her head, was the color of Mexican chocolate.

"Happy Birthday, Victor," Gretchen piped. She slipped off her shoes, slid around the woman and set the cake on the table. "Have you had a good twenty-sixth?"

Victor stood on the other side of the room. His green eyes were dark. He was wearing a red sweater-vest that Gretchen had given him for Christmas. The vest hugged his chest, drawing attention to his broad shoulders and narrow waist. His angular chin was hairless. His lips were chapped from the sun.

“I’m Meredith,” the slim woman said, extending her hand. Meredith moved slowly and sensually, like rich caramel dripping off a hot knife. Gretchen could smell wine on Meredith’s breath. “I’ve been helping Victor conduct the radon research at the quarry for the past three weeks.”

“Gretchen.” Meredith’s hand was cold and bony. “Victor’s older sister.”

“Your cake looks divine -- much better than ours.” Meredith pointed to a cake pan that Gretchen had not noticed before. Two forks stood straight out of the charred, chocolate mass. “Somehow,” Meredith smiled at Victor, “we messed up a mix. It was Victor’s fault. He distracted me when I should have been paying attention to the time.” Meredith tried to pull a fork out of the cake and lifted the entire pan. She laughed lightly. “I never baked as a kid. My mother was too busy. ‘Why waste time when you can buy it,’ she used to say.”

“Victor doesn’t like store-bought cakes, do you Victor? Remember your tenth birthday when--”

“Gretchen,” Victor said pleadingly. He rubbed his hands together, a nervous habit he had picked up after their mother’s death. “Did you know, Meredith, that Gretchen runs the local bakery?” His voice wavered. “You might have seen it on Main Street. She specializes in wedding cakes.”

“But I can make lots of other types of cakes. Right now I’m working on a cake shaped like a horseshoe for the fiftieth anniversary of the NHPA, the National Horseshoe Pitchers Association.”

Sweat glistened on Victor’s palms. Gretchen wished she could calm Victor; he seemed so tense. She didn’t mind that he had interrupted her: it was normal for boys to become impatient with those they loved best, especially when trying to impress

women. Gretchen had expected this to happen a long time ago. Silence settled into the well-swept corners of the room.

“Tell me Gretchen,” Meredith fumbled. “Do you live around here?”

“Right across the street.” Gretchen gestured to the window. “In the house with the green shutters.”

“You’ve managed to stay so close.” Meredith tucked a loose strand of hair back into her bun. “How nice.”

“Gretchen,” Victor cut in. “Won’t you get us some plates and forks from the kitchen? I’d love a slice of your cake.” He pulled a chair out from the table.

“Meredith, won’t you sit down?”

Meredith’s walk seemed to originate from her hips; her stride was smooth.

“While I’m in the kitchen”--Gretchen picked up the burned cake--“I’ll dispose of this.”

“You were telling me about testing radon levels in Spain,” Victor said to Meredith. “Please continue.”

The kitchen door swung shut. Gretchen inspected her nails. All were clean except her thumb and index finger, which were dirtied by the entrails of the fly. She scrubbed her hands with soap before gathering the plates and forks and bustling back into the dining room. “Victor, I noticed you didn’t eat all of last week’s cake. Was anything wrong with it?”

“No, it was just as good as the others.”

Meredith pushed her chair back from the table. “How frequently does your sister bake you a cake?” she asked Victor.

“Once a week,” Gretchen responded, sliding a plate in front of Victor.

“Once a week!” Meredith repeated.

“I wouldn’t want my boy to go hungry.” Gretchen responded, tweaking Victor’s hairless cheek. “Who wants a slice?”

“Actually I should be going,” Meredith said, glancing at her watch. “We’ve got a big day tomorrow, and I need to rest tonight.”

“Meredith.” Victor looked desperately across the table. “Don’t leave me.”

“Would you like a slice for the road?” Gretchen touched Meredith on the shoulder. “I’d be happy to wrap one up.”

“No thank you, Gretchen.” Meredith spun on her heels to face Victor. “Where’s my purse? You put it in the bedroom, right.”

“Wait, Meredith. I can get your purse. Don’t--” Victor scrambled to put his hand on Meredith’s shoulder, but it was too late: she had already opened the door, and switched on the light.

Meredith stalked into the bedroom, and Victor followed. Gretchen listened to Victor’s strained whisper. “Meredith, I’m sorry. I can ask her to leave. Everything’s normal between us, right?”

Gretchen, still holding a piece of cake, leaned on the doorframe. Victor nestled beside Meredith, who was sitting on the bed. Meredith’s rich dark eyes read the stacked spines of Victor’s geology books. Her eyes traveled up and down the twisting wrought iron floor lamp that Gretchen had bought Victor in Paris before they had settled in Pittsborough. Meredith’s eyes came to rest on the framed photographs of Victor and Gretchen at their father’s home in Florida and on a cruise in the Caribbean resting on the mahogany bureau. On the adjacent wall was a series of photographs standing at attention. Gretchen always cleaned, dusted and

straightened Victor's photographs with as much attention as she did her own cookbooks. The leftmost photograph had been taken at Victor's tenth birthday. In the picture, Gretchen, her back to the camera, fed Victor a forkful of cake. Victor's eyes were closed, and his mouth open. His tongue lay limp. The next picture had been taken at Victor's eleventh birthday party. Again, Gretchen fed Victor a forkful of cake. After Victor's next birthday, the pictures were dark; they had been taken at night, Gretchen remembered, after their father had gone to bed. The pictures were out of focus, hazy and often tilted because they had been taken by a self-timed camera. In a few of the recent photographs Gretchen hadn't bothered to use a fork.

Meredith shuddered and grabbed her purse. "No, Victor. Mae was right: everything isn't normal." She gestured to the wall. "You're both sick." Meredith swept past Gretchen and out the door.

Victor's body slumped as he looked at the photos. Gretchen knew that nothing could cheer him up like a taste of his favorite cake. She joined him on the bed, but he didn't notice.

It hurt Gretchen to see her brother in pain. Everyone is desperate to be loved, she thought. All I can do is love him the best way I know how. Gretchen pushed the plate in front of her brother. When he didn't take the fork from her outstretched hand, Gretchen speared the cake and held it to his lips. She placed a finger gently on his bottom lip and opened his mouth. He raised his eyes to look at her, and for one brief moment their eyes met. His green eyes were deep, and although they had aged, they still longed for love. His eyelashes lowered as she slid the cake between his lips and deposited it on his tongue. Frosting cowered in the crevices of his chapped lips. She closed her brother's mouth and extracted the fork. His breath was as sweet as it

had been when he was ten. His lips were just as soft, even though they had been chapped by the sun.

Campground

2005

The attendant for Sleepy Bear's Tent and RV Campground was arrested for growing marijuana in the abandoned synagogue. In and out of court, to his friends and family, the attendant swore he had been framed. He claimed rowdy teenagers were responsible. The jury almost believed his story. But a story, as the prosecution pointed out, is just a long strand of words, cobbled together by the teller. The prosecution asked the jury to examine the evidence: the gardening gloves, the attendant's long absences from his family, the proximity of the old synagogue to the campsite and – most importantly – the curing marijuana found in the attendant's private trailer. The attendant pleaded with the jury: he had a son. The jury found him guilty, and Sleepy Bear's was abandoned.

* * *

It was the first time Albert had been back to Sleepy Bear's since his father had been found guilty. Albert surveyed the familiar surroundings: he had spent many summer days at the campsite, tossing rusty horseshoes around the bowed irons, while his father had performed routine maintenance. Beer caps littered the ground,

collecting water and filth, like the Petri dishes in Mr. Mendell's third grade science class. The signposts were covered in ivy. Albert stood in the shadow of a large plywood sign he had helped his father paint six months before. The bear sat upright; his eyes were closed. He was wearing blue and white striped pajamas and a red nightcap. The paint was peeling on the bear's pajamas, and the plywood was beginning to rot. Birds sat on the red nightcap that Albert had painted so carefully while his father had attended to 'grown-up campground business.' Albert fidgeted with the badges on his uniform; he couldn't wait to see his father, who had been out of jail for three months.

"Give it a chance," his mother said, mistaking his anticipation for fear.

Albert had not told his mother about the note he had found in his desk drawer on the night of his father's arrest. Whenever his father was mentioned, his mother bit her fingernails. The note was written on a page torn out of Albert's mother's gardening magazine; Albert felt the folded, slick page in his pocket. He turned away from his mother and read the smudged ink scrawled across an add for granite gravel:

Dear Albert,

I'm going away for the next few months, but I'll be back. Don't worry. I won't miss the camping season.

*Love,
Dad*

"Maybe you'll like this troop better than your old one. The leaders will certainly be more responsible." The trunk slammed, and Albert shoved the note deep in his pocket.

“Are you alright being back here?” his mother asked, kneeling to comb his thin blond hair. Tiny wrinkles crisscrossed her face. “I asked the scoutmasters if the troop could camp elsewhere, but they said it was too late to change their plans.” Her gray, tangled hair fell to her shoulders. She looked, thought Albert, like one of the women in his grandmother’s photo albums.

“Here come the scoutmasters,” she said, standing up.

Two men approached: one was short and hairy, the other tall and wearing a beige suit.

“Welcome to Cub Scout Troop #153’s first camping trip,” the short man said. Thick dark hair covered every inch of his body. He stood so close that Albert could see white spots on the man’s nose. Albert was not surprised to hear that the troop had never been camping: they looked very disorganized.

“I know what you’re thinking,” the tall man said. He looked, thought Albert, like the catfish Mr. Mendell had dissected in front of the entire class. His thin-lipped mouth was wide. Oily hair covered his small head, and his pale eyes were glassy. “How can the troop be so organized, if they’ve never been camping? Why, they’ve erected their tents--” The tall man gestured to the three boys fencing with tent poles. The tent canvasses lay unfolded at their feet. “And unpacked the food.” He pointed to a van, packed with shopping bags. By the van, a fat boy with large shoulders poked a small blond boy in the stomach.

Albert gulped: he doubted whether either of these men had received a single scouting badge. It was a good thing that his father, a former Eagle Scout, would be there soon.

“Son!” yelled the hairy man. “Son! Stop poking Tobin. Thata’ boy.” The hairy man looked at Albert’s mother. “Don’t worry. They’re just having fun; they’ve known each other for years. I’m Hunter Gask, call me Hunter, and that’s my son, Junior.”

“I’m Maryanne, and this is Albert.”

“Albert, of course,” replied the tall man who had a shock of red hair and was covered in freckles. “You’re Frank’s replacement, fresh from the dissolved troop. I’m Lucas.”

Albert dared not correct Lucas while his mother was present. The troop had not dissolved; they were taking a break until his father, the primary scoutmaster, came back.

Hunter placed a hand on Albert’s mother’s shoulder and whispered loudly, “Lucas was dating Frank’s mom and is still mad that Frank quit the Cub Scouts.”

“Is that the new kid?” Junior yelled. Junior’s voice was deep, for an eight-year-old’s.

“Could I talk to both of you over there?” Albert’s mother nodded towards the car. Hunter and Lucas followed her.

Junior’s chest was too large for his skinny legs: he leaned forward as he walked. His nose looked as if it had been flattened many times, and his fists were big. Black hair slunk down his head. Two red-haired twins, a chubby boy and the blond boy whom Junior had been poking, gathered in a semicircle in front of Albert.

Even though he knew his father would show up, Albert didn’t want his mother to leave. She was still talking in a low voice to Lucas and Hunter.

“Hey Albert?” Junior asked. “Are you albino?”

Albert shook his head. Both Albert and his father had pale skin, strong cheekbones and blond hair. His father told people that he and Albert had magical powers due to their near transparent skins. After the trial, the press had written about the striking physical similarities between father and son.

“I’m going to call you Albino Al,” Junior said, “cause you’re, like, really pale.”

Albert felt his mother squeeze his shoulder. His ears burned as she pulled away from him. He held her hand and did not let go until they had reached the car, a few feet from the other boys.

“Albert dear,” his mother whispered. “Let go.”

Albert shook his head. He could feel the rest of the boys staring at his back.

“What’s the matter? You were never scared of camping before. This is the same campsite -- nothing’s changed.”

Albert felt for his father’s note.

His mother bit her fingernails. “Scouting means a lot to your father. He would want you to continue. Even after all that happened, his wishes – well his reasonable ones at least – deserve to be respected.” His mother straightened his hair and kissed the top of his head. “Give it a chance; I’ll pick you up at ten.” She opened the car door. “Have fun!” she called out the window. The bumper of the vehicle disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“Time for the tent assignments,” Lucas announced. “When I call your name, raise your hand, so Albert can learn who everyone is.” Lucas put on glasses and read from a white note card: “Sleeping in Tent One will be Hunter and Junior.” Lucas turned to Albert, knelt and whispered, “You already know them.” Lucas straightened; he was almost as tall as Albert’s father. “Guthrie.”

A fat boy wearing a King Tut shirt raised his hand.

“Sammy and Davy.”

Red-headed twins raised their hands in unison.

“In Tent Two will be you, me and Tobin.”

The thin boy whom Junior had been poking nodded at Albert.

“Now that that’s taken care of, let’s unload the gear.” Lucas fumbled with the pockets of his baggy khaki pants. The white note card fell to the ground. Albert picked it up. Everyone else followed Lucas as he walked toward the car. Albert read:

Tent 1 (5 person)

Hunter – as far away as possible – 6 hotdogs

Junior – will complain if not close to Hunter, loud – 4 hotdogs

Guthrie – light-up King Tut sleeping bag – 3 hotdogs

Sammy & Davy – probably snore in sync – 2 apiece = 4 hotdogs

Total (Tent 1): 17 hotdogs

Tent 2 (4 person)

Me – 0 hotdogs

(Could be fat)

Frank – ~~give extra attention!~~ – 2 hotdogs new kid – keep away from Junior – 4 hotdogs

Tobin – annoying, but must be kept away from Junior – 1 hotdog

Total (Tent 2): ~~3 hotdogs~~ 5 hotdogs

22

Total: 20: 3 packages of ten, just in case.

“Albert! Albert!” Tobin was pointing at Albert’s chest.

“You dropped this,” Albert said, handing the note back to Lucas.

“Is that a courage badge?” asked Tobin, his voice cracking. Tobin’s blond curls grew so tightly against his head that he looked as if he wore a helmet. Metal braces wound between his pearly white teeth. “Those are really rare. The scouting board awards only one per year. According to chapter 9.2 in the handbook--”

“Shut up Tobin,” said Junior. “No one cares about the handbook.” He poked Albert’s badge with a stubby finger. Junior was so tall that Albert could see up Junior’s nose. “How’d you get that?”

“My dad and I, we saved a drowning bird.”

Junior scoffed.

“Every Sunday, my--my dad and I used to go fishing. One day, we saw a bird that was drowning. I jumped out of the boat and swam to save it. I had to swim back to the boat, holding the bird over my head. It was almost dead, but my dad and I nursed it back to health and--”

“You got a courage badge for saving a dying bird?” Junior squinted. “A courage badge for a bird?”

Albert’s fingers shrank into fists; he hadn’t told the boys that he was scared of swimming. He got the courage badge because he had faced up to his fear and dove into the water. If Dad were here, thought Albert, he’d put Junior in his place.

“Seems like you boys have the start of a beautiful friendship,” Hunter said. “Junior, why don’t you show your new best friend our campsite?”

“Sure,” said Junior, clapping his hand on Albert’s shoulder. “Follow me.” Junior led Albert and the troop to a small clearing, where the boys had been fencing. Albert recognized the clearing: it was where his father had kept his private trailer. Albert had never been allowed inside the trailer, but he had seen pictures of the green plants drying on screens during the trial. He knew the green plants were bad. A small footbridge led over a shallow creek. Water trickled past soda cans, half buried in mud. Branches entangled in wrappers were caught in a dam. Sammy and Davy ran around the edge of the clearing, fencing with sticks and pretending to be pirates. In the

middle of the campsite, two rusty horseshoe irons, stuck out of the ground. Hunter and Junior followed the boys over the footbridge.

“I still think we should switch to campsite number fourteen,” Tobin whispered to Albert. “All of the reviews online identified fourteen as the best site.”

“What is it Tobin,” Junior asked, leaning in between Albert and Tobin. “Are you scared? I’ll bet Albert isn’t scared. He’s so courageous; he’s got a courage badge.”

“Son, you’ve picked the best spot on the lot, I’d say.” Hunter cut off a hangnail with a large knife, licked his finger and spat out the blood.

“Alright boys, pitch the tents before it gets too dark.” Lucas directed.

Albert wished his father would come quickly. The sleeping bear’s shadow had grown; it now stretched across the entire campsite. Albert pulled the horseshoe irons out of the ground, kicked them to the edge of the clearing and peered into the dark trees. He had never seen the forest floor so littered with trash. Albert’s father had taught him about the different types of trees, so he knew that it was the dogwoods that had held onto their leaves all winter long. Albert felt a cold wind on the back of his neck, and the white, papery leaves rustled.

The boys collected sticks and set up their tents while Lucas kindled a small fire. The damp wood sputtered, hissed and a single flame flickered in the cool night air. The coals looked like the ends of the cigarette butts his father liked to smoke: red, glowing, festering with light and gone the next minute.

“Were you planning on eating cold hotdogs?” Hunter’s voice startled Albert. From his backpack, Hunter pulled a canister of gasoline. He doused a few logs with the liquid and threw them onto the fire. The flame jumped onto the gas-soaked logs and leapt into the air. Tobin cowered behind Lucas, who screwed and unscrewed his

water bottle. The twins – their hair even redder in the light of the fire – squealed in delight.

“Now that’s a fire!” Junior exclaimed, standing next to his father.

“According to legend,” Guthrie said, “the Lighthouse of Alexandria set ships on fire by reflecting light off large sheets of glass before the ships even reached land.” Guthrie hugged his chubby knees and rocked back and forth.

“Hand over the grub. I’m starving.” Hunter ripped open a package of hotdogs and held two – with his bare hands – over the fire.

Junior threw his whittled stick into the fire and joined his father. Junior’s hands trembled as he held two hotdogs over the flames.

The twins roasted their dinners on a short, forked stick. They whispered to each other and pointed to Hunter.

Tobin bit into a hotdog without warming it.

“What’re you doing?” Junior asked Tobin.

“I like my hotdogs cold.”

“King Tut loved meat,” Guthrie said with his mouth full. “He ate it at every meal, even though it was expensive in ancient Egypt.”

Albert speared a hotdog with a stick. He knew his father loved hotdogs. A twig cracked in the woods, but when Albert looked there was no one there. He could barely see the dogwood trees, white in the darkening forest. He turned back to the fire: he had to make sure they saved a hotdog for his father.

“Where are the buns?” Hunter asked.

“Buns!” Tobin exclaimed. “But the scout handbook says not to eat bread products in the spring. Bread products leave crumbs, and crumbs attract wild animals!”

Lucas threw Hunter a bag of buns.

“That handbook was written by a bunch of suits who don’t know anything about camping,” Hunter said.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell him all day!” Junior interjected.

Hunter ruffled his son’s hair. Hunter’s fingers were red from being so close to the fire.

Albert watched as father and son ate hotdogs bathed in mustard and ketchup. Hotdog skins caught between their teeth. Albert squirted ketchup on his hotdog and set it on the log next to him. He had overcooked it, just as his father liked.

Dusk fell: flashlight beams chased each other across the underside of the canopy of leaves. Fireflies – scared of the fire – darted among the silhouettes of the dark pine trees.

“Why aren’t you eating, Lucas?” Albert asked.

“I’ve never liked hotdogs,” replied Lucas. “No one knows what’s inside of ‘em. All of you could be eating mashed up worms and not even know it!”

Albert’s uneaten hotdog sat beside him. His stomach grumbled. He roasted another hotdog in the waning flames.

“Who’s ready for s’mores?” Hunter asked when everyone had finished eating. He pulled boxes of Graham crackers, bars of chocolate and bags of marshmallows from his backpack.

“But Graham crackers will produce more crumbs--”

“Tobin,” Junior interrupted, grabbing the box of graham crackers and breaking one over his knee. Crumbs fell to the forest floor and settled among the dry leaves. “If a bear comes, we’ll fight it.”

“We sure will, son. Can you pass the marshmallows?”

The boys roasted marshmallows as darkness descended on the campsite.

“This is the life,” Hunter said, reclining with a bag of marshmallows nestled into the crook of his arm. He threw a marshmallow into the air and caught it in his mouth. “Who wants to tell a story? Lucas? As a new scoutmaster it’s your duty.”

“Why don’t you tell one first?” Lucas replied quickly, winking at Albert. “So I can learn from you.”

Hunter paused, his hand in the marshmallow bag.

“Please dad. Your story is bound to be better than his.”

“Do you boys have any requests?” Hunter popped another unroasted marshmallow into his mouth and swallowed without chewing.

“Tell us a story about King Tut,” cried Guthrie.

“I get bad dreams,” said Tobin. “So nothing too scary.”

“Mamma’s boy.” Junior punched Tobin on the shoulder.

“Let’s hear about sailors,” yelled Sammy.

“And pirates,” added Davy.

“I know,” shouted Junior. His voice quieted the other boys. “Tell us about a time you did something really courageous.” Junior squinted at Albert through the smoke.

Sticks laden with marshmallows quivered in the fire.

Hunter groped in his pocket for his knife, flicked it open, and drove it into the fat log beside him. "I've got a courageous story," he whispered. "But to hear it, you boys are going to have to gather closer."

Sammy and Davy inched together, and Tobin scooted toward Lucas.

The Sleeping Bear's sign had been reduced to a silhouette, black plywood outlined against the starless sky.

"Thirty years ago, when I was in high school," Hunter began, "my friends and I camped right here, at this same campground. Back then there were no bathrooms, or trashcans. There wasn't even running water."

"What did you drink?" interrupted Sammy.

"We drank water right from the stream."

"Those were the days," Lucas whispered to Albert. "When we could drink from the fresh, New Jersey streams."

"Did you want to say something Lucas?" asked Hunter.

"No, please continue."

Hunter grasped his knife and continued, "As I was saying, we roasted a hog on a spit; that was the best barbeque I've ever eaten. The meat fell right off the bone. We told stories all night long. By the time we had finished eating, it was getting light. We were tired, so we hunkered down into our sleeping bags and tried to fall asleep."

"Did you sleep in tents?" Davy asked.

"Shhh," hushed Junior. "Don't interrupt!"

"We had tents, but I couldn't fall asleep. As I lay there, I heard a low snuffling noise. I unzipped the tent and saw a large female bear, accompanied by her cub, meandering around our site. They came out of the woods right over there." Hunter

pointed across the parking lot into the forest. The parking lot was empty; his dad had not arrived.

“Luckily, I knew a lot about bears,” Hunter continued. “One learns a lot, growing up in rural New Jersey.”

“Actually,” Tobin interrupted, “there’s no such thing as rural New Jersey. We’re the only fully urbanized state.”

Junior sighed in frustration.

“What Tobin meant to say,” Lucas asserted, “was that he wants you to continue your story. Please, go on.”

“For those of you who don’t know,” Hunter said, “bears won’t attack unless provoked to protect their territory or – as this case will illustrate – their young.”

Lucas stirred the embers.

“The cub was curious about our tents. He left his mother, who had found the remains of our barbeque, to explore the rest of our campsite. The cub sniffed the bottom corner of my tent. A dark wet spot appeared on the canvas just above my feet. My friends awoke as the cub circled our tent. I realized I hadn’t closed the tent flap. When the cub came back around to my side, he sniffed at the opening. His head inched into our tent until his snout was less than a foot away from my face.”

The twins gasped.

“Were you scared?” Tobin asked.

“Scared? Of course not. I knew the cub couldn’t hurt me.”

“What was the mamma bear doing?” Junior asked.

“Good question; I always knew you were a bright one.” Hunter grasped the knife at his left side. His face was almost invisible in the waning light. “The sight of

the tents scared the mamma bear. She must've thought her cub was in danger." His hands tightened around the knife. "I'll never forget what happened next."

Albert jumped when Lucas pinched his thigh. His leg tingled.

"The mamma bear reared up on her hind legs and attacked the tent."

"Did she use her claws or her teeth?" asked Davy.

"Please." Hunter took a deep breath. "As soon as I saw her claws pierce the canvas, I jumped out of my sleeping bag. I threw sticks to distract her. My only thought was to protect my friends.

"Because of my extensive knowledge of bears, I knew that a black bear her size could run up to thirty miles per hour. There was no way I could outrun her. I prepared to fight." Hunter pulled the knife out of the log. "I always carry a Swiss army knife; all men should." Hunter passed the knife to his son.

Junior examined the knife, the handle of which was made of green plastic. The curved metal blade glinted in the firelight. The twins and Guthrie leaned in to see it better.

"What happened next?" Junior asked, passing the knife to Guthrie. "Did you kill the bear?"

Hunter lowered his voice. "Son, I hope you never find yourself in a position similar to mine." He looked at the boys one by one. "I hope none of you ever find yourself in a situation where the only thing that stands between you and death is your animal instincts for survival. And if you do – God forbid – find yourself in such a situation, I hope your instincts serve you as well as mine did."

Albert felt Lucas' elbow dig into his hip. He looked at Lucas, who rolled his eyes.

“When I saw the bear above me, I opened my knife, the one that you, Guthrie, are holding right now. I opened it with the smallest of movements because I knew that anything sudden would result in certain death. Without thinking, I threw my hat away from the tent to distract the bear. It worked. As soon as she had turned her head, I leapt toward her.”

“Let me guess,” Lucas interrupted. “You were in a state of pure exhilaration. People told you later that you leapt toward the bear’s jugular and killed the bear with grace and ease, but you remember nothing. You regained consciousness only after the bear had been slain.”

Hunter was still leaning forward, his hands poised, caught in the middle of a sentence.

Tobin giggled at Hunter, and Junior glared at him across the fire.

“No,” Hunter said. “I didn’t wake up beside the bear.” Hunter’s voice was tense; he spoke slowly. “I woke up in the hospital with my bloody knife beside me.”

“Excuse me for getting the details wrong,” Lucas said, cocking his head to the side. Albert could feel the tension simmering in the campfire’s smoke. It reminded him of the silence at the dinner table before his father had been arrested. His father had buttered his bread as he asked Albert about his day at school. His mother hadn’t said anything or touched her food. Albert has assumed that his parents had had another bad fight, but when a harsh knock interrupted Albert’s story about his fieldtrip and his mother told him to go upstairs, he had known something serious was wrong. His father had put on his coat. He had watched from his bedroom window as his father was escorted to the vehicle. It was then that Albert found the note.

Albert shivered as he looked at the rusty horseshoe irons heaped on the ground, like a bunch of bones.

“What happened to the cub?” asked Davy.

“What happened to the mamma bear?” asked Sammy.

“The cub was taken by the zoo. I went to see him after I was released from the hospital. He didn’t appear to suffer any trauma from the incident. The mamma bear on the other hand, was severely injured. Animal services had to put her down.”

“Is this dried bear blood on the handle?” Tobin shrieked.

“I wouldn’t be too concerned,” Lucas said before Hunter could answer. He took the knife from Tobin and sniffed it. “Smells like dried strawberry jam.”

“All right, Lucas,” Hunter said. “Even you *must* have a story worth telling.”

Lucas’s stomach growled. “I’m afraid I haven’t killed any bears. Sorry boys, story time’s over. It’s time for bed.”

Albert moved his father’s hotdog behind the log, so that Lucas wouldn’t be able to see it, realize he was hungry, and eat it when Albert wasn’t watching.

The twins sighed in disappointment. Both of them peeled bark and flicked it into the fire. The bark hissed, retaining its shape, before bursting into flame and shriveling into ash. Junior was clutching his father’s knife and making slight hand gestures, Albert noticed, as if fighting a bear.

“Can’t you make up a story about King Tut?” Guthrie asked.

“Or buried treasure?” Sammy suggested.

“Or sharks?” Davy said.

“King Tut was buried with lots of treasure. In his tomb were shrines and golden statues of boats and chariots and Anubis and--”

“What if our newest member tells us a story?” Junior interrupted, folding the blade of his father’s knife carefully back into the plastic handle. “Or is your best story about a dying bird, Albino Al?”

Albert’s heart beat quickly, and he dug his heels into the soft earth. His father had told the best stories to Albert’s old troop, but he was missing his chance.

“I suppose we have time for one more story,” Lucas said. “That is, if you boys want to hear *me* tell one. It’s not about King Tut or pirates.”

The twins, Guthrie and Tobin nodded. Junior flicked a twig into the fire. His hair was so flat it looked as if it had been painted on. Albert looked at Lucas in the dim firelight. Faint wrinkles surrounded Lucas’s mouth. His small eyes darted from one camper to the next until fixing on Albert. Lucas winked.

“I grew up here, in New Jersey, like all of you. I was eight, your age exactly, when my father left my mother, and my mom decided I should spend the summer with her sister’s family in Pittsborough, North Carolina.”

Davy found a dead beetle in the grass. Using two sticks, Sammy picked it up and threw it into the flames.

“Perhaps it has changed since then, but twenty-five years ago Pittsborough was a wretched place. The library was in a trailer. There were no arcades and no malls. There was only one movie theater that played two movies all summer long. The biggest event of the summer was the Fourth of July picnic. It might have been nice way back in the day, but when I was there fast-food restaurants surrounded the quaint historic district, and there was nothing for me to do except tag along with my cousins.”

The twins watched the beetle's body writhe in the embers. Smoke emerged from its eyes. Davy poked the beetle, and its head separated from its body easily.

"My mother's sister had married a man by the name of Jordan. He smoked cigarettes, against the wishes of my aunt. The front lawn was littered with half-smoked butts."

Albert remembered how his own mother had gotten angry with his father for throwing cigarette butts on the lawn.

The head of the beetle was burning much more rapidly than the body. Sammy poked the carcass deeper into the fire.

"Their only girl, Judy, was eleven, but Mrs. Jordan still doted on her. Matthew, the eldest, was the leader of the Jordan children. He looked exactly like his father. Father and son went fishing, camping and hunting together." Lucas winked at Albert, and Albert realized his mother must have told Lucas and Hunter that his father and he used to go camping together. The story was about him: he was Matthew!

"Matthew hated me from the beginning. He collected cat pee and poured it into my sweet iced tea. Mr. Jordan started calling me 'the Yankee,' and his son picked up the term quickly. You know how *some* fathers and sons are."

"The Yankee, like the baseball team?" Sammy asked.

Why did Lucas assume that Albert and his father were bad people? Was it just because his father had been arrested? Albert moved back from the fire.

"Exactly like the baseball team," Lucas replied. "Matthew tried to humiliate me every way he could. He told me that if I swam in the quarry--"

"What's a quarry?" interrupted Davy.

“A quarry is a deep pit used for mining. Anyone have any more questions about the quarry? No? Ok, good. This particular quarry was filled with water, and near it was a shiny house everyone--”

“Why was the house shiny?” Tobin interrupted.

“The tears of little children were trapped in the bricks, at least that’s what Matthew told me.”

Albert shivered and wished he had worn a thicker sweater.

“As I was saying before,” Lucas continued, “Matthew told me that anyone who ran around the house three times and then swam among the lily pads would be granted one wish. I was convinced that Matthew was trying to trick me, but when I heard other kids talking about the magical powers of the house, I wasn’t so sure. I decided to sneak to the quarry by myself. If I was alone, I reasoned, Matthew wouldn’t have the opportunity to plot any mischief.”

“You believed that running around a house and then swimming in a pit would grant you a wish?” Junior asked. “You actually believed that?”

“You’d be surprised. People have believed farther fetched things about their parents. I believed my father was going to come back. That summer he drove to Texas in the arms of a young blond. A few years ago I found him online. Now, he’s a lawyer in Dallas.”

The slick magazine page crinkled in Albert’s fingers. Albert knew his father would never leave him: the note was proof.

“The last Friday I was in Pittsburgh, a local band played on the steps of the courthouse. The moon was full, like it is tonight. The grownups sat on the lawn and

listened to the music, while the kids played hide-and-seek. Matthew was 'it.' While he was counting, I crossed the railroad tracks and snuck to the quarry.

“Darkness had fallen by the time I reached the house. The moon was bright, and the house glimmered. Quickly, I ran around it three times and made my way to the water. The surface of the water was peaceful; it looked untouched. I took off my shirt, next to the outcropping of lily pads. The bank was steep, and there was little traction. I balanced at the edge of the water and took a deep breath before stepping down. My toes entered the water and sent ripples across the surface of the lake. I was surprised at how cold the water was. North Carolina summers are hot, yet the quarry seemed to have remained immune to the heat. Carefully, I lowered my foot into the water. Shivers ran down my spine. The bottom was slimy with algae. I slipped but caught myself on an exposed root before falling all the way into the water. Using the root, I hoisted myself back up.”

An owl hooted, and Guthrie pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head. Albert flicked an ant off his father's hotdog.

“At that moment, Matthew found me. I learned later that my aunt, Bertha Jordan, had organized a search party. Matthew must have realized I had believed his story and ran to the quarry ahead of everyone else. Matthew stood at the top of the bank, several feet from where I clung to the root. ‘Hey Yankee,’ he whispered. He took a step towards me, his feet faltering on the slippery rock. ‘What’s the matter, Yankee,’ he taunted. ‘Don’t you want your parents back together?’ Matthew was close enough to put his hand on my chest. ‘Don’t you want to go for a swim?’ He pushed me into the quarry, but in doing so he lost his own balance on the slick rock and slipped in after me. Lily pads slapped my naked back as I fell into the cold water.

I heard the faint echo of adults shouting. Beside me, Matthew flailed his arms and legs, and his head bobbed in the water. ‘Help me,’ he gasped. ‘I don’t know how to swim.’ The more he flailed his legs and arms, the more entangled he became in the lily pad roots.”

Albert fingered his courage badge. How could Lucas have known that Albert didn’t like to swim?

“Calmly treading water,” Lucas continued, “I supported him with my arms and told him to calm down. Finally, after he felt my arm firmly around his chest, he stopped kicking. Continuing to support him, I disentangled the roots from his limbs. He inhaled heavily and sputtered for breath. I could feel his heart beating rapidly. Supporting his chest, I swam to shore and helped him climb up the steep bank.

“Just as we climbed to the top, the adults arrived, among them Mr. Jordan. When he saw us, he held up Matthew’s hand and proclaimed him a hero for saving my life. He knew that Matthew couldn’t swim, but he couldn’t bear to have it known that ‘the Yankee’ had saved his son.”

Albert was livid. Did Lucas think that Albert’s father would lie? Was he hinting that Albert and his father had made up a story, so that Albert could get the badge? Albert’s heart pounded in his chest.

“Let me guess what happened next,” Hunter interrupted. “I bet you embarrassed Matthew and his father in front of the entire town. I bet you told everyone else how you saved his life.”

“No,” Lucas said quietly. “I didn’t. I didn’t see the point of setting the record straight. Matthew and his father stood on a pedestal of false confidence. It wasn’t my

place to shake that pedestal. They weren't worth it. My time was too precious to spend it trying to teach them a lesson."

Albert was irate. He couldn't believe that he had ever liked Lucas.

The fire had died down completely. Ashes blew across the campsite in the cold wind. Lucas kicked dirt into the cold pit and looked at his watch. Tobin yawned. "Does everyone know which tent he's in?" Lucas asked. "Good. Let's get to bed."

"No one ever wants to hear about King Tut," grumbled Guthrie. "It's not fair!"

Albert knew his father would be furious when he heard what Lucas had said.

The boys filed into their respective tents and zipped their sleeping bags. Albert lay between Lucas and Tobin.

Albert listened to the sounds of grumbling from the other tent. Junior told the twins to move over. Hunter was snoring but awoke when Guthrie rolled over onto the button embedded in the side of his sleeping bag hood, causing the sleeping bag to light up. Hunter grumbled loudly. Finally, the troop fell asleep, and the Gask's snoring echoed in the quiet night.

The ground was hard underneath Albert. Tobin whimpered softly, and Lucas breathed deeply. Tobin's battery-operated nightlight glowed off the tent canvas. The dim light cast Tobin's shadow on the opposite tent wall. The shadow grew and shrank in time with Tobin's breath. Albert tossed in his sleeping bag; he was still angry with Lucas.

"Albert," Lucas whispered. "Are you awake?"

Albert's muscles tensed as he turned in his sleeping bag. Lucas' thin lips, long eyelashes and large watery eyes were inches from Albert's own.

“How’d you like that story I told tonight?” Lucas whispered. “I don’t think Hunter or Junior even realized. Do you?”

Confused, Albert remained silent.

“No, they’re much too thick. People like us can make fun of the Gasks of the world all we want, and they’ll be none the worse. Some people have such thick skulls. They’re lucky, I guess.” Lucas shook his head and toyed with the tent zipper above his head. “Good night Albert. Welcome to Troop #153.” Lucas turned to face the tent door.

Albert’s toes grew cold. ‘People like us,’ Lucas had said. Albert shuddered, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. His teeth chattered as he shivered in his sleeping bag. He remembered how Lucas had winked at him. Did Lucas really think that Albert’s father had left him like Lucas’ had? Albert’s anger sank into the hard ground, and his soul slipped into murky shame. The magazine gloss had worn off the corners of his father’s note. Dad didn’t come, and he’s not going to, Albert realized. Albert felt as if he had been plunged into cold water; he choked back a sob. A shiver ran up and down his spine, and Albert longed to forget the memories of his father, etched into his soul.

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