



ADULT FICTION
WRITING CONTEST
2017 ANTHOLOGY

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I DON'T BLAME HIM FOR DYING

The woman who saw my brother die waits in the sunlight outside Santa Lucia station. I glance once more at the creased, black-and-white photograph that Ed mailed from Venice last winter. The woman must have been standing on something when the picture was taken; she's shorter than I expected. I stop, lift my hat.

"Buongiorno, Signora. I'm William."

"I am Francesca."

I know that, of course, from Ed's letters, and from the strangely uninformative telegram she wired to Cedar Rapids after he died. I've anticipated this meeting for weeks, and yet now that I'm here I don't know what to say. I feel guilty about Ed's death--for we weren't exactly

pals—and lately I've become obsessed about lost opportunities. And let's be honest: I'm angry, too. I don't know what happened here, but it wouldn't have if only he'd stayed in Iowa.

She asks me, "Do you speak Italian?"

"I can manage *please* and *thank you*."

She smiles, her teeth just visible. "What more does a man need to say?" Francesca's English is seductively accented, and she dresses a bit like Greta Garbo: a pale blue suit, noticeably tight, hair piled beneath a rakish straw hat. Her hair is a deep shining brown, like sable, and if she were to remove the hat I just know it would all come loose.

She says, "I am very sorry about Edward. But I regret you felt it necessary to come such a long way."

"You left me no choice."

"Still, I believe you did not wish to come. Not really."

"Maybe I didn't. But my brother died here. And your telegram told us absolutely nothing." I sound peeved, but I don't care. My journey has taken three endless weeks: train to New York, Hamburg-America Line to Genoa, and another train, to Venice, crawling and crowded in the hot Italian spring.

She says, "It was your parents who insisted, then."

"Insisted?"

"That you come to Italy."

"How do you know?"

"You forget that your brother and I were close." She adjusts her hat slightly, as though she's preening before a mirror I cannot see. "Very close," she adds.

What she means is: they were lovers. I'm not sure I want to think about that. Travelers swirl past us, noisily scuffing their leather suitcases over the granite steps below the station. I glance over the crowd: old women in stout shoes, a few nuns in Carmelite brown, policemen in Fascist black.

Francesca says, "Edward told me about your parents. Their demands, their sense of propriety. And so I suppose they have sent you to pay their respects, to keep up appearances."

I shrug. A long voyage, a few flowers left on a grave, and Cedar Rapids society nodding its approval of our family's efforts, even amidst the Depression. Still, the woman makes me feel like a cad. Francesca pries open her purse and carefully dons a pair of sunglasses. She looks mysterious now, like Garbo in that movie *Mata Hari*. She leans into me as though we're suddenly fellow conspirators. "My telegram," she whispers. "It was necessary to be vague. The *fascisti* look at everything. One never knows which rules might be broken."

"You could have said something. Told us how he died, where he's buried."

Francesca shrugs, like whatever she wrote, she wrote. Her manner is cavalier, and I suspect a certain cruelty behind the dark glasses. I glance at my wristwatch. "I haven't much time. Are Italian trains always late?"

Her hand slips through my arm. "It depends what you mean by *late*." She tugs the sleeve of my suit and we descend the steps toward the Grand Canal. It's awkward like this; she seems always one step below me and I'm forced to lean over as we walk. I look down to avoid her feet, and find myself staring at the seams of her stockings where they disappear beneath the hem of her skirt. We're virtually alone when we reach the canal. The water is a pale green—like jade you can see into—and it flickers restlessly. Three construction cranes stand

higher than oil derricks outside the station. Workmen shout as they pass bricks up from a barge. The tang of coal smoke stings my eyes.

I ask, "They're rebuilding the terminal?"

"Mussolini is giving us a new station." Her voice is flat, without enthusiasm. "Very modern, very efficient. But in a city that is neither modern nor efficient, the station will look like an orphan, a bastard."

I flinch; I'm not accustomed to hearing women swear. I say, "Mussolini's not well liked in America, but the papers say he's done a lot of good for Italy."

"I am most happy to hear it."

"But he must get your trains running properly. In Iowa, our trains are always on time."

"And you have much corn there."

She says this as though she's extolling Iowa's advantages, but I sense she's mocking me. Our family sells farm machinery and we take agriculture very seriously. Ed and I have been learning the business, preparing for the day our father abdicates. But now, Ed's gone and I feel a sudden emptiness, a vacuum rapidly filling with intolerable expectations.

Our water bus, the *vaporetto*, chugs down the Grand Canal, the motor coughing in its own exhaust. Water splashes the ancient, apricot-colored palaces on either side. Francesca stands next to me, silent as a sphinx. There's something wary and watchful in her expression, but no sign of grief. I wonder about that, whether she's heartless, or reticent, or...something else entirely. I ask, "Have you been in Venice long?"

She lifts her face to the sunlight. The sky is the palest blue and a tissue of thin clouds wraps the sun. "I have lived here forever," she says. "All my childhood. I attended university

here.”

“What did you study?”

“Art, what else? I work at *la Fenice*, the opera house. I design scenes.”

She pronounces it, *senns*, and I pause to decode her meaning. Another *vaporetto* veers close by, plowing its way up the canal. We cross its wake and our boat climbs and plunges, climbs and plunges again. Nearby, gondolas ride the undulating water like glossy black ducks.

“Is that why Ed came here?” I ask. “For the art?”

“We met in the north, while I was on holiday in Bolzano. I suppose he may have been interested in art.”

I detect a small, self-satisfied smile, like she’s proud of luring a man to the place where he would die. I don’t like her for that. I say, “He was supposed to go on to Rome. He was booked for the American passage from Civitavecchia.”

“Things changed,” she says. “He missed his sailing.”

I pull my arm free of her hand and tear open a fresh pack of Lucky Strikes. The *vaporetto*’s progress creates a small breeze and I have to cup one hand around the match until my cigarette catches.

She asks, “May I?”

“Do you smoke?”

“If you don’t mind.”

Her fingernails are polished and subtly painted. I can’t avoid staring at them as she plucks a cigarette from the pack. She pinches it between her red lips and leans close, on tiptoe, lighting it from the end of mine. Francesca exudes an intense physicality; she’s unsettling up

close.

I ask, "So, where is the cemetery?"

Her face suddenly goes blank. "Most are on the mainland. There's a small one on *Isola di San Michele*, the island."

"I need to see Ed's grave. I promised our parents."

"There is no grave."

My cigarette slips from my fingers. It bounces once on the boat's rail before disappearing into the water.

"What do you mean? How can he not have..."

The *vaporetto* captain suddenly reverses the motor and swings sharply toward a landing on the right side. Francesca lurches and presses warmly against me. I brace for a collision, but the boat glides smoothly against the quay. A deckhand ties off to a bollard with a rope as thick as my wrist.

Someone shouts, "*Accademia!*"

Francesca says, "This is your stop."

She takes my arm again and we swim against the tide of boarding passengers. The pavement feels unusually solid beneath my feet. I smell garlic and tomatoes and a faint scent of the sea. Buildings rise from the canal as though we've strayed into a maze of brick and marble. She says, with maddening casualness, "Your hotel is down here, behind Gesuati."

I wait until we've turned once or twice and the voices from the embankment fade to nothing. I stop. "Tell me. Why is there no grave?"

Francesca seems a subtle woman, and yet I detect a quick, reflexive glance away. She

says, "Edward drowned. In the lagoon. His body was never recovered."

"Ed? He was a terrific swimmer. And I saw the lagoon from the train. It looked so...so peaceful."

"Things are not always peaceful here."

"There was a storm?"

"Perhaps there was."

In the evening—the sole evening I will spend here—Francesca and I go out. We walk, in a soft, end-of-day light that refuses to fade. Water laps soothingly, almost hypnotically on stone. My Michelin guidebook recommends the *Caffe Florian* for dinner. Francesca rolls her eyes. She knows a place, she says.

The *ristorante* has no electricity and there are candles everywhere: at the tables, in wall sconces, filling racks on shelves like you see in Catholic churches if you want to remember someone with a prayer. The long, low room smells of pasta and sauces and melting wax.

"How long did you...did you know Ed?" I ask.

"Time enough," she says. "What are your impressions of Italy?"

"It's fine, very nice. But you can't have known each other long. No more than a few months."

She stares at me across our table. Her eyes are full and dark, and they don't leave my face for an instant. She pulls off her gloves, extracting one finger at a time. She unpins her hat

and drops it onto a vacant chair. "You are interrogating me, William."

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I must have the truth."

She clasps her hands on the table as though she's giving evidence in court. "I have told you the truth. Well, most of it, anyway. Edward and I were together for five months. We fell in love. Passionately."

"Fast work."

"Love arrives on its own schedule. Do you have someone at home? In I-o-wa?" She draws the word out, toying mischievously with the vowels.

"No, I don't. And you don't seem much affected by the death of your lover."

"And you seem unaffected by the death of your brother."

"That's hardly your business."

"I'm beginning to think," she says, "that you suspect I murdered him."

I lean toward her. We're surrounded by conversation and the rattle of cutlery, but it feels as though we're alone. "Maybe you did. What happened?"

"We were in a small boat. Edward fell overboard. By the time I took control of the motor and circled back, he was gone."

"There wasn't a storm, then?"

"It is over, William. May I call you Bill? Ah, our dinner."

Our meal arrives. It's been cooked over a wood fire and there are flakes of ash here and there in the food. It's delicious. The candles flicker in Francesca's eyes and her hair sweeps over her shoulders like a cresting wave whenever she turns her head. We talk, of Venice and art and all the safe, inconsequential things that can be explored between two wary people.

She's charming; there's no other way to describe her. Quick laughter, lightly flitting touches of her hand, a *sotto voce* manner that excludes everyone but me. There's a rehearsed artfulness to her as well, though I can't help but find it engaging.

"What is wrong, Bill?" she asks. "Something is troubling you."

It's odd, the effect a person can have. I feel vulnerable, and I have the nagging sense I'm betraying something, that I'm slipping over to the other side. "I'm sorry, Francesca. If it were up to me, I'd buy it."

"Buy it?"

"Accept your story. But my parents will want more."

"About Edward's drowning?"

"That's right. They'll want to know where. I should go to the spot."

"Water is water, the same everywhere."

"They'll want a search."

"I searched."

"Then we should go to the police."

She shakes her head. "No! No police."

"Why?"

"This isn't Iowa," she says. Her voice is hard, determined. "Your police solve problems. Ours make them."

"Well, the lagoon is shallow. I'll ask the authorities to drag it."

"Impossible. Too expensive. All the city's money is pouring into Santa Lucia, Mussolini's new train terminal."

I've run out of ideas, when a woman at the next table startles me with a loud, exuberant laugh. In Cedar Rapids, other diners would turn to stare. Pointedly. But everyone here seems too busy getting on with their lives to care. I find it strangely liberating. We eat silently for some time. The wine is good, though I'm no expert and really wouldn't know. Finally, I ask, "What did Ed tell you about our family?"

"As I said. That your parents were...oh...a bit *controlling*. That they had *plans*."

"He probably said more than that."

"Perhaps. You see, he discovered his freedom here."

"Ah, freedom. When Ed and I were boys we used to say there was just one way to be free of our parents, one way to avoid selling tractors and plows for the rest of our lives."

"And how was that?"

"To die."

Francesca flinches. A small gasp.

"I apologize," I say. "That was clumsy of me."

She smiles, but it looks forced. "No, I understand. You will miss him?"

I shrug. "Sure, we would have made a good team. I have a head for numbers. He is—that is, he was—very inventive. A problem-solver." It would sound churlish to say it, and so I don't: my brother's solutions always seemed to benefit him most of all. I say, "I think the business would have been bearable if only Ed...well, if he were still alive."

"And now?"

"Miles and miles of corn in every direction. Farmers incessantly discussing the weather. That's it for me, forever."

"Edward was worried about you."

"Worried?"

"If something should happen to him. He was afraid you would never escape."

I like to think I'm a truthful man, but right now I honestly can't say whether I'm mourning my brother, or my future. I came here to find his grave; I feel I'm gazing into my own.

She says, "They didn't approve of me, did they? Your parents, I mean."

Ed's letters changed soon after he arrived in Italy. A bit less dutiful, a certain eagerness to express his own ideas. I say, "My mother predicted something, that there would be a woman behind it all. And then your photograph arrived. They stared at it for the longest time. And then picked you apart."

"Ah." Francesca frowns, and I'm sorry I mentioned it. She asks, "But what did you think?"

"I thought you were beautiful. Taller, though."

She laughs, head tilted back, white throat, hair spilling down her back. There are mirrors on the walls here, the usual trick to make a place appear larger, brighter. I'm caught by the spell of her hair and I glance beyond her, into the mirror to view her from that perspective. I notice a man behind me, with a close-cropped beard and a gray suit, pushing through the door, just leaving. I swivel around. My chair legs grate on the tile floor.

Francesca touches my hand.

"Bill, what is it?"

"I thought I recognized someone. A familiar face."

"You have friends in Venice? I didn't know."

I turn back, shift my chair closer to the table. "No. Just you."

The next morning, I linger in my room, unexpectedly savoring my strange surroundings. Sunlight, pure and strong, streams through the open shutters. A violinist rehearses somewhere close, gliding up and down the scales. Voices rise from the narrow street—the *calle*, Francesca called it—below my window. I lean over the deep sill and peer downward carefully, for I'm on the third floor and wearing only my trousers. Young women walk their children to school. A short priest stands before an open door, clapping his hands and smiling. There's a pull to this city, like a dangerous undertow, and I suddenly feel something inside me shift, break free. I've been angry at Ed for dying, for abandoning me. But now I'm thankful he was in such an enchanting place at the end.

I'm booked on the evening train to Genoa, and so in the late afternoon we have orange sorbet at a white metal table beneath the towering Campanile. Francesca wears a bright yellow dress with a black hat, and her hair is bound by a ribbon at the nape of her neck. I gaze over the broad, sunlit Piazza, already filling with couples, with groups of tourists determined on an early dinner. I hear her spoon rattling around her bowl, hunting up the last drops of orange liquid.

She says, "What do you think of Venice?"

"Have you read Hilton's book, *Lost Horizon*?"

She shakes her head.

I say, "A man finds himself in a remote part of Tibet, a place called Shangri-La where people seem to live forever."

"And so you think my home is like that?"

"It's outside of time. A person might never grow old here, might never die."

She looks at me sharply, and I'm embarrassed, suddenly remembering why I've come. I glance stupidly at the sorbet, as though she's doctored it, added some drug. No corpse, no storm, no police, no answers. There's something behind her façade—I'm certain of it—and yet I find myself unable to press. This city, this woman, I begin to understand why my brother never came home.

She asks, "What time is your train?"

"Six-fifteen."

A spot of sorbet lingers on her upper lip. Her tongue searches, finds it, savors it slowly. In my head I can hear an Iowan's criticism: coarse manners, not ladylike. But the evening descends softly with a peal of bells from San Marco, and I don't believe I've seen a more beautiful woman in all my life.

"Look, Francesca. I don't suppose...."

She touches my hand gently. "We should go, Bill. Your train might actually depart on schedule."

I find a seat in a musty, second-class compartment. The window is already down and I lean through the opening. Francesca spots me and comes along the platform, her right hand

pressing the top of her hat as she tilts her face upward.

“Safe travels.”

“Thank you.”

The locomotive steams beneath the station’s glass-and-iron roof. Conductors slam carriage doors in a relentless progression of hollow thumps, like the sound of dirt shoveled onto a coffin. A sharp whistle, and then one more, replying from the far end of the platform.

She asks, “You will explain everything to your family?”

“Of course.”

It’s hard to breathe, thinking of Iowa, its fields spreading over me like a winding-sheet. Francesca bites her lip, as though she’s struggling with some difficult decision. About honesty perhaps, or loyalty, or maybe guilt. She says, abruptly, “I cannot let you go this way. I’ve deceived you.” There’s more, but the train jolts loudly, metal on metal, as the slack comes out of the couplings.

I shout, “What?”

The train begins to roll; already we are several feet apart. She cups her hands into a small megaphone. “Edward is still alive!”

I glance beyond her, where the bearded man I saw last evening in the *ristorante* leans against a pillar. His hand lifts slightly in a self-conscious farewell. Francesca grows smaller as the train picks up speed along the causeway to the mainland. A gentle sunset slants across the lagoon. There is not a ripple upon its surface.

###

Puddle

The boy woke up slowly, the train rocking him like he'd always imagined his mother would have had she lived. A woollen overcoat covered his tiny body, the plush seat as nice as any pillow, the click-clack of the steel wheels a soothing lullaby. He rubbed at the grit in his eyes, trying to remember. Already it was foggy. There was only the coat, surrounding him with warmth like a womb.

The man was watching him, smoking a cigarette. The silver in his eyes flickered in the dim gaslight. "Nearly there," he said, raising his boot and carefully snubbing out the smoke.

The boy raised his arms and his mouth, stretching both as far as he could. He scratched his forehead, pools of brown curls pouring into his eyes. He was thirsty and confused from his sleep, but he didn't want to say so. He touched the thick collar of the coat to his cheek and then his nose. It smelled of tobacco, pine trees and ginger sweets. A perfect smell. And having it surround him made him feel more impregnable than the train.

"Raining again."

He turned from the man and raised himself to his knees, pressing the tip of his nose to the cold glass. He was right, the window was crying. He imagined all that water drenching down on him, stabbing his eyes, making his clothing heavy and itchy, his skin red. He hated that. Cold, wet...it was like a dog he once saw, abandoned and stiff, its head buried in a mud puddle. He had

stared at it until his throat had closed and his father had found him, angrily tugging him away. Later, alone in his bedroom, he had drowned himself in blankets and cried until snot coated his face.

The man flicked his ear gently and he turned. “Don’t worry. We’ve the broly with us.

He nodded. He would have stayed on the train forever if allowed, a small bone buried in the massive steel exoskeleton. But having his Godfather with him was the best alternative. He let his hands squeal down the glass to the armrest.

The man said, “Dirty place, the country. Never cared for it myself.” But he was not looking outside. He was reaching down and retrieving his stick, a heavy ebony cane with a silver crouching fox atop it. He gently stroked two gloved fingers over the head of the animal. “Can’t hide in the country like you can in the city.”

The boy had long admired that stick. Being a man who travelled quite a lot, his Godfather collected many bits and baubles; his flat was just like the Olde Curiosity Shop. Better than a museum, as he was permitted to play with most of the exhibits. He had hidden in a sarcophagus, and napped in the shell of a giant tortoise. The man owned the horn of an ibex, a pipe tomahawk, and had the tooth of a shark hanging from his watch-chain. But the boy was never permitted to touch the glistening fox on the black stick, though he had tried several times. He was always seen. His Godfather saw everything. Almost.

“Will.”

His heart squeezed at the sound of his own name. He looked away from the man's hands, the tips of his ears flooding. "Yes, sir."

"You must try to be a better man than I am. It is my one wish for you. Will you try?"

"Yes, sir." The train was slowing, he could feel the drag in his spine.

But he didn't know how he could. His Godfather was the best man he knew. He remembered how confused he had been when he had found his father sleeping at his desk with the red puddle around him. How he had shaken him and told him to wake up, Papa and how he hadn't and how his Godfather had rushed in and scooped him up and smashed his face into his overcoat, the same smell as today, and telling him, Jesus, don't look, Will, don't look, Oh, Jesus, what have you done, Jack...oh Jack

Will had closed his eyes. If he had been a year or two older, he would have been afraid. He might have stood there shaking, hands squeezed into fists, his breath coming out in hot bursts. He might have understood why his father's name –Jack—was being muttered over and over. He might have been able to read the note, even though it was not his name written upon it, or notice when later it was chucked into the fire. Perhaps he would have cried.

Instead, he had stuck two fingers in his mouth and curled up in his Godfather's battered leather armchair, pulling the heavy woollen shroud over his head and peeping around the collar. He had followed the strong silver fox with one eye all around the room—it gesticulated wildly at the two blue-coated bobbies, it switched from one hand to another when the doctor arrived, it stayed close to his hip as the men with the board balanced the body down the stairs. All that day,

it had remained in his hand. He seemed unable to stand alone without it. But Will was already snoring and sucking at a thumb and a coat button when the man that would raise him sank to his knees in front of the chair, gently pulled the sleeve free of his Godson's mouth and sobbed without making a sound.

*

He held the man's hand as he jumped down the platform. The rain had nearly disappeared and he was permitted to drag the large black umbrella after him. The air smelled of wet brick and mouldy leaves but there were no puddles. "I never thought I would be back here," the man said. Will looked up at him. There seemed to be more words on the tip of his tongue, but he let them die there. Just the metal tip of the fox clicked against the ground. Will tried to match the noise, though he and the broly were much of a size and he could barely manage it. But he thought he should try, as he had promised to be a better man than his Godfather. Better men always had easy strides and beautiful walking sticks.

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Isaac scratched another tick into the back of his notebook. Forty-two days of school. He hadn't had so much school since he had learned his alphabet, lowers and uppers. After that, there hadn't been much of a point. No one had seemed to think so. But now was different.

The teacher spread out the photos, clippings, and magazines like the color swatches she'd shown them during an art lesson last week.

“Take any one you like,” she said, leaving her hands on top of them all. “I want you to look at it, really take a good look. Then I want you to write about it. Anything that strikes your fancy. Is it the colors that stand out to you? Remember when we talked about composition? Contrast? Try to use some of those words in your response. Have fun.”

The other kids couldn't wait to scramble to the front and grab at their first choices. Some had a harder time deciding and pushed through carefully and thoughtfully. Isaac's shoulders tensed as he watched the kids who'd already gotten their pictures. How would he choose? How long would he have to decide? Almost everyone else had gone ahead of him, but some other kids were waiting behind him and there was no getting out of it now.

He approached the table, having already ruled out the ones he could see from behind the other students. He didn't know what he was looking for, exactly. Just a good picture. Something that spoke to him without him having to interpret or make things up. He wasn't very good at making things up.

Then he saw it— a flash of fuzzy yellow against emerald. He slipped it out from under a red boat and a magazine about winter gardens. A little chick, no bigger than his fist, was running away from the photographer across a stretch of asphalt, a few blades of grass looking inviting to the patch of grass ahead. He didn't know what it was saying yet, but it was trying awfully hard.

Gratefully, he slipped back to his desk and put the photograph at the top, his notebook underneath.

The words came easily. He was surprised at them, tumbling out without so much as him needing to look at the clock for encouragement. Time was growing short, though. Then the teacher said they had one more activity before the end of class, and they’d have to take their writing home with them to finish for homework.

Isaac was grateful. Looking over his paper, his words were a tangled mess.

Outside, summer tapped on the schoolroom windows. From his desk across the room, pushed up against a wall where the posters threatened to come off the wall any second, Isaac heard it. He heard the teacher’s question, too, but he didn’t know the answer.

The teacher leaned back into her hip, blinking at her students. “I know it’s getting warm, everyone, but stick with me here.”

And Isaac was thinking about the posters again. He let his gaze fall to his desk, an expert mess of papers, pencils, and a textbook. His fingers shifted the worksheets he was supposed to be working on and unearthed the glossy photo already smudged with fingerprints. In the indirect light, they framed the photo’s subject with dull spots.

When the teacher put on a video clip, he stared at the photo instead of the screen. It was all right—he heard everything.

Mariah was waiting for him, as always, to take him home.

It still took him by surprise to see her there. Someone waiting for him.

“It’s a project,” he told her when she asked him about the picture he was holding. “I have to write about it.”

“What are you going to say?”

He didn’t know yet. Everything was a tangled mess. So he said, “I don’t know.”

“That’s all right,” she said, and then quiet settled onto the seats around them, the warm silence of thinking.

He pushed through the front door, Mariah saying, “Upstairs with you,” so he wouldn’t leave all his things in the living room. She said it was a bad habit.

In his room, he went to his desk, carefully put the photo and his notebook down, and scratched another tick into the back of it—the other chart this time. Sixty-six days since he’d come to live with Mariah. He supposed it’d been long enough now that she’d decided to keep him.

Downstairs, he heard her thumping around in the kitchen cabinets to start dinner. The front door opened and a man’s voice joined the noises. Ray was the other person in his life. He went with Mariah, but Isaac thought to himself that maybe she wasn’t so sure she wanted to keep him, since he didn’t get to live here like Isaac did. They seemed close enough, and there might have been books written about the way he’d hold her hand while they watched something on TV or how he’d bow out of her way in the cramped kitchen.

From the top of the stairs, Isaac watched what he could of the scene: Ray’s elbow sticking out as he opened a cabinet to grab something, a shadow changing the shape of the light coming from the doorway to the kitchen. He tried to imagine the rest, but he didn’t know about cooking or why it took so long to put noodles in hot water. He was bad at making things up.

Isaac strained to hear what they were saying, but the clatter of spoons in metal bowls was too loud and they were speaking too quietly. He liked the sound of their voices together, though, especially when Mariah laughed.

As he tiptoed back to his room, he hoped someday Ray would end up getting to stay all the time, too.

At his desk, he faced the picture again. The words had gotten stuck somewhere between school and home, so he examined the photograph. It was a 4x6, printed on semi-gloss paper. A smudged time code from the camera was stamped in blocky red ink on the back. He didn't know whose fingerprints were all over the front. They showed up as dull patches, and when he tilted the picture a little bit away from the light, they framed the fuzzy little yellow chick running away from the photographer.

As he focused, everything else fell away.

Where are you going, little guy? he wanted to ask. *Why are you running away?*

Maybe the tiny bird was afraid. The photographer and his big black camera must have looked big and scary. But the day was so bright and the ground so close, so reassuring. That was one of Isaac's favorite parts about the picture. Looking at it, he could imagine himself lying on the ground, tiny blades of grass, granules of sand, and bits of gravel pricking and digging into his palms and arms as he watched the chick patter away, probably a little unsteadily but determinedly on those webby orange feet.

He thought that must be what it would be like. He didn't know a lot about the real ground, being a city kid where asphalt and concrete were far more common. It wasn't real ground, not really. The ground in the picture was earth, actually growing and changing. Maybe the photographer was on the edge of a curb, lying out on a parking lot to get the picture. *I'd run away from that, too*, thought Isaac. The grassy world in front of the chick looked much more inviting than whatever could be behind it. The little duck was escaping, he thought, leaving its

small shadow behind as it ran towards the light that made its fluffy feathers glow. But the little duck was all alone. Where would he go? How far could he get?

Three taps echoed off his door, the only signal that could bring him back to his own room from wherever his mind might roam. “Hey, bean,” said Mariah, leaning in. “Fifteen minute warning.”

“Okay,” Isaac said.

She wandered over to his desk. “Ray’s here. Wanna come down?”

“Maybe.”

Her fingers trailed over the photo. “Still working?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s cute.” After a moment, she added, “Reminds me of you.”

He twisted up his face, half pleased and half mortified to be in the same train of thought as *cute*. “Why?”

“‘Cuz you’re my little chick,” she said before she leaned over and dropped a kiss on top of his head. “All right, back to work. Fifteen minutes, though, okay?”

“Okay.” He looked at the picture again, carefully turning over her words. She was gone when he started wondering how he could be her chick. He lived with Mariah—she made his lunches, offered to tuck him in at night, sometimes read to him, sometimes cried with him, but she wasn’t his mom. And he lived with Ray, too, when he was with Mariah, but he wasn’t his dad, either. Isaac was somebody’s chick, but they weren’t here, and he couldn’t remember them.

Maybe that’s why the little chick was running, he thought. He’s lost.

Isaac shuffled out of his room with the picture and went downstairs to sit cross-legged on the window seat, holding the picture and studying it. In the periphery of his vision the living

room sat in foggy clouds of color composing the general atmosphere of everything outside of his mind, punctuated by sounds of dishes clattering in the sink, the puff of a lid coming off a pot of steaming vegetables, the closing and opening of cabinet doors as Mariah searched for an ingredient. His attention sharpened only the picture in front of him. Everything else, even the nervous tingle he felt sitting still, dropped away into oblivion.

After what Mariah said about the photograph, he didn't think he'd show it to Ray. Isaac knew he wouldn't think it was cute, which was a plus, but beyond that, Isaac didn't know what he would think. Ray knew things about him before he said them, even to the point that Isaac didn't have to say anything sometimes, and Ray would know something was wrong. He was like Mariah. He knew that Ray cared about him—he built Isaac a bunk bed just because he mentioned he liked them, he let him sit in his study while he tinkered on projects, sometimes they'd sit on the roof, and they always did the dishes together while Mariah sat at the kitchen table and read funny things out of the newspaper. Isaac had always wondered how she found so much interesting news in the paper. Whenever he looked, there always seemed to be just sad things. *Or scary things*, he thought, thinking about the photographer again.

He felt a warm feeling wash over him, and he wondered if Mariah was thinking about him. He resisted the urge to look over and see if she was watching him because everything was still hazy beyond the picture. Isaac had kind of hoped that changing positions would have helped him make more sense of the picture, but it was still just a picture of a fuzzy yellow duck with fingerprints around the edges.

He heard Ray saying his name, then Mariah said, “Oh, don't bother him just yet. He's thinking about a project.”

Isaac, too deep into his observations, couldn't bring himself to look up. In a few minutes, Ray said, “It's good to be back.” He was leaning against the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen, making his voice seem louder even though he was speaking only to Mariah. He shifted, a vague shape above Isaac's photograph. A happy, tired tone was in his voice. Isaac sensed him looking his way into the living room again, but he couldn't glance up. Mariah's footsteps filled the silence as she padded barefoot across the tiles. There were small sounds after that, maybe Ray saying something, maybe Mariah giving him a sample of that night's dinner from the spoon she'd brought with her.

“Long day?” Mariah asked.

“Mm, yes,” he said, managing a reply. “That's delicious, whatever it is.” A pause, and Isaac could feel the warmth of both of their glances pulling over him. “Anything new here?”

“It's been a quiet afternoon,” Mariah said, and Isaac felt the warmth continuing to wash over him like tides. Another pause, a small sound.

“I'll be right back to taste test anything else that might need my services.”

Ray's vague shape moved out of Isaac's sight, and he felt a flush of internal heat take the place of the warmth he felt. He didn't like to pretend he couldn't hear them, but he didn't know what else to do. He seemed to be always able to tell when they were looking at him, but he didn't look back because he thought they might not want to include him in what they were talking about. It seemed too personal, and everyone else always looked away when he did it at school.

No, he was like the duck in the picture. Always running away, not looking back even though someone is watching.

As he had been thinking, he didn't realize that he'd lost focus on the picture, and now everything was blurry, caught hovering between his thoughts and everything else. It felt like his

eyes were crossed, so he put the picture down and blinked several times. The world came back into its usual sharpness, and he realized that Mariah was watching him from the kitchen doorway. She smiled, holding the spoon against her shoulder. “Five minutes, bean.”

A timer beeped, and she disappeared to tend to something. Isaac tried to get himself back inside the photo, but he couldn’t seem to engage it the same way as before. He stared at it, but his eyes kept slipping back into the thought of Mariah standing across the house, watching him from the kitchen.

Ray came back from the garage, coming all the way into the living room so Isaac knew he was going to say something.

“Hey, Zak. How’s the day?” He smiled, playing their usual game where Ray would find a new way to say his name.

“It’s Isaac,” he replied, smirking as Ray sat on the cushion beside him.

“All right, Eye Zak.” Isaac laughed and tried to correct him again. In rapid-fire, they went through “Izzik,” “Izzy,” and “I-ster” before Mariah said it was time to set the table. Ray slapped the cushion and propelled himself upright. “I still wanna know about your day,” he said, turning circles. “Tell me at the table.”

Isaac went back to his photo happily, but he still wasn’t focusing on it. There was the swing of a hinge and the gentle rattle of disturbed plates before the careful thud of each one being put down carefully. Three thuds, three plates.

Issac, letting his eyes cross, wondered if he should help set the table. He sometimes helped, but Mariah never asked him to do it. Ray usually handled that part and forgot which side the fork goes on every time. The sun was getting low outside, dimming the room, though the photograph still seemed to radiate with the last sunbeams.

He could hear them talking, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. He wanted to know. He wanted to say something, maybe before Ray could ask him, because it was always easier to say something than answer a question he didn't want someone else to ask him. A question meant he wasn't being open and they didn't know what was going on. But that's what he liked about Ray and Mariah. They hardly ever asked him questions.

Isaac looked at the kitchen and wondered if they could tell when he was thinking about them, because he thought about them a lot. Even when he was thinking about the photograph, he realized he'd been thinking about them, too. *But where could they be in this picture?* They weren't the photographer. They weren't the duck.

He looked at the kitchen and the square light it was casting onto the floor. Ray and Mariah's shadows crossed through it, but it was still bright, especially as the day faded outside. It matched the light in his photograph.

A thought popped into his mind. *What if the photographer wasn't important at all?*

Maybe the duck wasn't running away. It was running to. There could be a whole world of photographers behind it, but the little chick wasn't paying attention at all to that.

Maybe somewhere just beyond the edge of the frame, where Isaac couldn't quite see, a mom and dad were waiting for it.

Isaac got up from the window seat and walked towards the kitchen, feeling sensations as if he hadn't felt anything for years, the lush softness of the carpet squishing under his feet, the smooth wood of the doorframe leading into the kitchen where he paused just as Ray asked which side the fork went on.

“The left,” said Isaac, his voice sounding too loud.

Ray nodded to himself, shaking the utensils in his hand. “You’re absolutely right. You’d think I’d remember one of these days.”

Mariah gestured to a salad bowl. “Want to help me take this to the table, Isaac?”

He nodded and crossed into the kitchen where the overhead light felt like sunlight.

THE END

Apostrophe

The voice, earnest and clear, filtered into the young woman's perception as gently as the sunbeams trickling through the dusty window and dissolving into the glass of iced tea in her hand.

"Ena? You in here?"

She didn't answer, mainly because she knew that he would find her in a matter of seconds anyway, but partly because she was enjoying the silence in the small space. Everything was tucked away in the break room. Food was packed into multicolored containers and hidden away in the refrigerator that buzzed to itself, the filing cabinets in the corner were immaculately organized, the red and orange striped curtains around the window seat were pulled up to keep the trailing ends from touching the floor, conversations were folded up for later, and Ena's feet were tucked away beneath her on the window seat. Everything was neat and in place. She waited patiently, taking a sip from her glass and enjoying the quiet coolness.

"Hey, there you are," the voice said, much closer this time. She turned her head and smiled at the newest addition to the scene. He was of average height, nattily dressed in a tailored vest and coat, and as she stood, he made a last minute adjustment to the Windsor knot of his burgundy tie. "Ready to get back to work?"

Ena stood up, leaving her glass behind on the windowsill. "I guess so. But I'm still stuck..." she trailed off, frowning slightly. "Clay, is that a new tie pin?"

He brightened.

“I made it myself. I found some spare em dashes that had gotten left out of a document and put them together with a capital thorn. I mean, nobody uses those so I thought it’d be okay. Doesn’t it look great?”

Ena stared at the punctuation marks fitted together and had to admit, “It actually kind of works for you. But no more messing with the special characters, okay? Those need to stay in their proper boxes, and heaven knows that there are already enough typos in the world without you taking out extra punctuation or throwing a few around.”

They walked out of the break room together, Clay following her into a wide, spacious area lined with wooden cabinets reaching from the floor to the ceiling. In the center of it was a simple, self-conscious desk surrounded by boxes of every shape and size that overflowed with chaos. Ena meandered past a taller box that gushed with rolls of fabric and scraps of ribbons, snatching a small length of woven cream lace. As she did, she upset a precarious stack of photographs near her elbow.

“Oh dear,” she said, side-stepping the mess. “I’ll get around to filing those soon. Promise.”

The desk itself was clear except for a hooded green lamp and a stack of blank white paper in the center. Ena pulled out the chair and sat down.

“So I’m thinking it should be a story about true love,” she announced.

Clay raised an eyebrow that looked like a tilde stolen off a Spanish ñ.

“True love? Really? You’re going to write chick lit?”

“It’s not just going to be about love,” Ena told him quickly. “But it’ll be a big part.”

“But what do you know about love?” Clay moved over to a small box perched at the top of a stack of Jane Austen novels. He pulled out a dried corsage of faded pink roses and baby’s-breath that shed a few flakes when he held it up. “This wasn’t even from a boyfriend.”

“Maybe I don’t have anything to show for it, but I know when I see it, and I can feel it,” she told him, getting up from her seat. She walked over to a ladder resting against the wooden cabinets along the wall and rolled it over a few feet. As she climbed up, she said, “Besides, romantic love should have parts of the other loves in it, friendship and family.” She opened one of the boxes and began to pull out handfuls of letters. “Oops, dropped one of those e’s,” she muttered as the vowel disappeared with a faint rustle into a box full of bad jokes.

e

When she returned to her desk with an armful of letters, she deposited them onto the desk, looking up as Clay came over to the desk with a collection of his own gathered from the boxes.

“Try these,” he told her lightly, putting one item down at a time. He first put down a glass vase, dropped a few cut flowers into it, and then arranged a butterfly hairclip with green glittered wings, a few fabric scraps crudely stitched together, a half-burnt candle, and a thin ring in a tiny black box near it.

Ena stared at the still life for a moment and then daintily tied the bit of lace around the neck of the vase. Having done this, she narrowed her eyes and blurred all of the objects together. Then, she snatched some of the letters and started to arrange them on the paper. As she did, she said, “Like a cool summer MORNING, her HAPPINESS seemed ENDLESS, but the sun had NOT YET RISEN.”

She leaned back to appraise her work while Clay leaned over.

“... ..”

“Got nothing nice to say?” Ena crossed her arms.

“Sorry, that was, uh,” he stammered, sweeping the ellipses off the page into his hand and putting them back in his vest pocket where they had spilled from. “I thought I could get in a game of marbles with those.”

“How old are you anyway?” Ena shook her head with small smile, looking back at the page. “That seems...forced, doesn’t it?”

“Mmm, a bit, yeah.”

“Let me try this again with less drama. Less Romantic, eh?”

She moved the letters around, picking up new ones and taking some away.

“the sun hadn’t come up yet”

They both blinked at it this time.

“Now it’s too...imagist.” She traded in a capital T. “The sun hadn’t come up yet. No, that doesn’t help either. Maybe if I took out the contraction?”

“That’d make it more formal, but are you sure this is where you want to start? I mean, it’s a little trite.”

Ena dropped down into her chair and rested her chin on her hands. “Maybe it’s these items. They’re too sentimental, too touchy-feely. Maybe I need to start with something a little simpler, a little more real.”

With a sweep of his arm, Clay took away everything but the vase of flowers and the hairclip. As he walked off to put the rest back, Ena picked up the butterfly clip and snapped it onto her finger, watching with small delight as the wings, attached with springs, bobbed up and

down. Then, she clipped it onto one of the leaves in the vase, admiring the juxtaposition. Her eyes rested on it for a few minutes as she noted color, light, intrinsic value, and emotion. Then, she dashed off to the ladder to pull out more letters.

»————> “Hey!”

Ena yanked the arrow out of her desk and treated Clay to a hot glare. A few boxes away, Clay grinned at her. He hid a large ß behind his back, but the quiver full of arrows made from stolen single and double guillemets and em dashes was still in plain sight.

“I was right in the middle of...of...” Her fury suddenly snuffed out, and she slumped onto her desk. There were dozens of pages scattered across the table, some crumpled and others simply abandoned. “Middle of my failure,” she finished with a sigh that puffed a page off the desk and onto the floor.

Clay, putting aside his game, walked over. He pushed aside a few abandoned papers to sit on the edge of the desk.

“The story’s not turning out like you’d hoped?” he said softly.

Ena raised her head.

“Sometimes it’s not hard to find words that string together in really beautiful ways, and I know just how to layer the meaning to get the deepest shades. Sometimes I can even bring out the values in the theme with the best chiaroscuro. But I can’t do this job. I know the skills, the rhythms. But everything I’ve tried just doesn’t work. There’s no magic in my words, not like the masters. It’s immature. Naïve. There are just strands of silliness and I’ve written reams of

ridiculousness. No one's going to read this." She threw up her hands. "No one *should* read it, that's more the point."

She stood up, taking the vase of flowers and the butterfly. "So I think I'll find a new job. I don't belong in here."

Clay hopped off the desk and went after her. "What? You're quitting? But you've just started."

"I can't do it," Ena told him, wrapping the butterfly in tissue paper and setting it back in a box.

"Can't do what?"

She opened her arms to take in the whole studio.

"I can't take all of this stuff, all of these keepsakes, memories, observations, all these textures and moments, and make them into something that means anything to someone else. Maybe it is just junk after all." She shrugged, moving through the boxes. "Someone else could do it far better than me."

"But—"

"No. That's all there is to it, okay?" She moved despondently to an open drawer full of accent marks and sifted them through her fingers. As the marks dropped back into the drawer, they skittered like rain sighing on a roof. "Clay, look..."

"Yeah?" He moved closer.

"The ´s are all mixed up with the `s."

"You're joking."

"No, look, they're all mixed up." Before he could look, she pushed the drawer shut and moved off, biting her lip.

Ena pushed past a towering stack of boxes and opened a door partially hidden behind them. In the next room, she walked past an enormous & and rounded the bend of a giant @, not bothering to look behind her. Ideas fluttered and cooed in the rafters far above her head. She fought back tears and kept walking until she reached a mark that she could climb on. After a few tries to grip the slippery surface, she managed to pull herself up into the tight curve of an interrogation mark, tucking her feet under her.

“Fitting,” Clay commented, slowly walking up with his hands in his pockets.

“Please just go,” Ena said. “I’m done.”

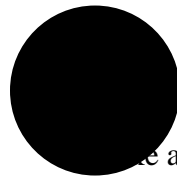
“You’re not, though! You’ve got work to do. And I don’t want to be out of a job.”

She slid off the ĵ and headed back towards the workshop.

“It’s not comfortable there anyway,” she said to herself.

“Wait, can’t we talk about this?” Clay asked, trying to keep up.

“There’s nothing to say,” Ena said, trying to stay composed. “I have nothing to say. End of story.” She paused a moment and rolled a period between them



their homes. They break their hearts.

te away their sleep. Teach them love.

“It’s not hard to pull those drawers out,
organize words and sentences, but it takes
more than skill to make them mean
something. I thought I could arrange them
like the masters do, but I don’t know *how*
they do it. Somehow they can take all this
stuff, this messy, unorganized,
incomprehensible stuff and make it fit into
language, shaped by serifs and ordered by
lines. Those words make people laugh.

Maybe I'm not old enough, not experienced enough to know how to arrange them right."

"When you're older, you can reflect back on things and see how they're all connected."

"You saw my attempts back there. That's nothing to be proud of."

"Look, I know you're bored to tears with it—"

"Don't make me throw these umlauts at you. But it seems like the story I should write."

"What's age got to do with it?"

"But what about the connections you see now? Don't they mean anything?"

"But what if that's not the story you should be writing?"

"Sooo bored."

“Seems? What about feels? What would you write if you wrote what you felt instead of what you thought?”

“Those aren’t the same thing?”

“Of course they’re not. If you want people to feel what you’re writing, you have to feel it, too.”

“You make that sound so simple.”

“You know it isn’t. Those drawers? Filled with letters and marks of all kinds. You’re right. They’re pretty easy to move around and order. There’s plenty of rules and those are easy enough to remember. But that all happens in the mind. Where the real shining comes through is not how you fit all of these memories, feelings, and textures into the boundaries of words, but how you make words look like all of those emotions and images.”

Ena hesitantly rolled the period aside.

“But what if I don’t do it right? If I break the wrong rules? If I’m a cheap imitation?”

Clay tossed a snow of asterisks over her head, and they both watched them drift to the floor. He swept them aside with his foot.

“Then you start over, easy as that, as many times as you want until it breathes for you.”

“What if no one likes it?”

“They don’t have to like it. You have to make them believe it’s alive.”

Ena stared into his unreadable eyes, her own beginning to fill with tears. “What if no one hears me?” she whispered.

With a smooth movement, Clay pulled her close and folded her in an embrace. She breathed in the smell of the dusty bookshop on Lewis Avenue, nights reading beneath covers, and lonely afternoons in libraries.

“Can you hear yourself?” he asked her.

“It’s too quiet,” she answered, her voice buried against him. “I can only hear myself.”

The stillness in the studio blanketed every surface, muffling even the ideas in the next room. Ena pulled away from him slowly, wiping her eyes.

“That’s not right, is it?”

“What isn’t?”

“It’s supposed to change. To make noise. Break things. Sing. Love.”

Clay smiled. “Now you’re getting it.”

“But how do I...make it do those things?” She gestured around at the boxes. “I only know how to arrange still-lives.”

He picked up one of the asterisks on the ground and tucked it behind her ear. “Play with it.”

Ena’s fingers followed the edges of the mark. “I suppose if you squint it kinda looks like a flower...”

“A rose by any other name—”

“Oh, now don’t you go dramatic.” A smile started twitching at her lips.

“What? I can’t reference the Bard?”

“Come on. You’re supposed to be original, not derivative. Last I checked, a Muse wasn’t supposed to keep a stash of clichés in his pocket. Don’t think I haven’t noticed those crinkly wrappers lying around.”

She looked around at the vast studio filled with all varieties of sights, sounds, and smells, and she considered the work ahead of her. It would drain her. It would ask more of her than she thought she could give. It would take the rest of her life.

Ena pointed to a light switch on the far wall. “Turn on that light, will you? I’ve got an idea.”

As the room brightened behind her, she walked back into the break room, taking a deep breath. The glass of iced tea still sat dripping onto the windowsill, and she sank down on the cushions. Picking up the glass, she took a drink and a long look outside the window where summer was still blazing on each leaf and blade of grass. Without a breeze, the scene looked as if it had been captured by an artist’s brush, suspended in the glow of a June afternoon.

But then a butterfly teased the flowers just below the window as it flitted from one to another. A slight zephyr wafted past, setting the leaves and grasses waving behind it and setting

the image back into life. Ena turned from the window, slipped her feet out from under her, and stood up. Taking the iced tea with her, she headed back into the other room.

Her room was small, but it felt larger when the sunlight streamed in through the wide window at the far end. A twin-sized bed occupied one corner while the rest of the walls were taken up with bookshelves filled with novels, notebooks, and curios like a porcelain tiger and a cut glass vase. Ena stepped over various pieces of paper scattered on the floor as she walked over to the desk in the center of the room. As she sat down, she set down the glass of tea with one hand and swept away crumpled balls of paper with the other. She flicked on the hooded green lamp.

“There, that’s better.” Taking a pencil in hand, she faced a blank sheet of paper. “Play with it...” She tapped the pencil against her lips a few times, eyes narrowed until the features of the room began to blur together. Then, she leaned forward over the page and wrote, “The voice, earnest and clear, filtered into the young woman’s perception as gently as the sunbeams trickling through the dusty window and dissolving into the glass of iced tea in her hand...”

Dr. Luckwood

Doctor August Luckwood III, was one of the last true country doctors in Arkansas. Most of his practice consisted of house calls made to ailing people throughout rural Johnson County. He rarely saw patients in his office in Pine Cliffs, which suited his wife, because their living room served as the waiting room, and their spare bedroom the examination room. The only thing that distinguished the house from any other in the upscale neighborhood, was a small sign hung over the front door which simply stated, "Office of Dr. August Luckwood III, M.D."

All but three years of the doctor's life had been spent in Johnson County. The three years of medical school in New Orleans, was the only time he ever ventured more than fifty miles from the place he was born. His father, Dr. August Luckwood Jr., had delivered him at their home in 1904.

For over 100 years there had been a Doctor August Luckwood in the town of Pine Cliffs. The farmhouse, which was affectionately referred to as, "Doctor Luckwood's summer house", was the same house that had been used during the Civil War as a Confederate hospital. Though the area saw very little fighting, the hospital stayed busy throughout the war with numerous outbreaks.

August Luckwood Sr. came to Pine Cliffs, Arkansas as a soldier with the sixteenth infantry from east Texas. The unit marched into Arkansas in 1862, bringing an infestation of smallpox and measles to the isolated community of Pine Cliffs.

Disease quickly took its toll on the civilian and military population, decimating the ranks and killing hundreds. Within a week of his arrival, August Sr. contracted smallpox and nearly died. He fought for his life for over a month in the makeshift hospital on an abandoned farm. When his strength returned, he began assisting the surgeons with the sick and dying, and soon proved to be a valuable asset. He could work closely with those infected without fear of contagion. The veterinary skills he acquired growing up on his father's farm in Texas, served him well. He soon advanced in rank from assistant surgeon to surgeon.

The entire regiment dispersed when Federal troops took over the area in 1864. August Sr. remained in the abandoned farmhouse and forged a deed to help legitimize his claim. Using the medical equipment left from the dispersing Confederate Army, August began his own medical practice to serve the isolated community.

He slowly worked to rebuild the farmhouse and the various barns and outbuildings. After two years of only attending to patients at the farm, he purchased a small and efficient doctor's buggy and began making house calls throughout the county. Although he was nearly fifty, as a doctor he became one of the most sought after bachelors in the county. In 1868, he married nineteen year old Maggie Smith and had three children in three years.

August Luckwood Jr. was born nine and half months after his parents were married, and was the spitting image of his father. By this time, the farm was a fully functioning operation which produced enough hay, corn, poultry and pork to support the family. Economic hardships after the war left most families unable to pay for the doctor's services, so additional income was a necessity.

By 1890, the doctor was able to send his eldest son to Tulane University in New Orleans to study medicine. August Jr. returned to the farm in Johnson County and took over his father's medical practice, as well as the responsibilities of the farm. He married Beatrice Cook, who was five years his senior and they produced two sons.

Born only eighteen months apart, August Luckwood III and Jesse Luckwood, were inseparable throughout their lives. August III even waited a full year to attend medical school at Tulane University, so his younger brother could join him. The two graduated in the same class and returned to Johnson County and the farm, just as their father had. August Jr. died of a heart attack one week after his sons' shared graduation ceremony. August inherited their father's medical practice, as well as the farm, and Jesse worked to establish a pharmacy in Pine Cliffs.

Within a month of returning to the farmhouse, August began building a new house in town so that he could live closer to his brother. The two remained close in their personal and professional lives. August's newly built house and medical office was only five blocks from his brother's pharmacy. The pharmacy was on Main Street and had a small apartment on the second floor. The farmhouse served as an escape from town and August began referring to it as his, "summer house", simply because it was the most enjoyable during that time of year.

While attending to an elderly patient at their home outside town, August became acquainted with the patient's granddaughter, Evelyn. She had spent much of her young life taking care of her grandparents in a rundown home near the railroad tracks. When she met August on that hot, May day, she knew that her life was going to change. Within two months she was married and living in a new house in the most affluent neighborhood in Pine Cliffs.

Although they planned to have a large family, August and Evelyn only had two children, Joseph and Abigail. Both children excelled in school, and August looked forward to an early retirement when his son would inherit the medical practice. To his disappointment, Joseph became more interested in healing men's spirits than healing their bodies, and he became a preacher instead of a doctor, breaking a one hundred year old tradition. Abigail dreamed of becoming a doctor herself, and frequently accompanied her father on house calls, where she served as an extremely competent assistant. As she approached womanhood, she was continually reminded by the adults in her life that she was expected to be a wife and a mother, and the masculine ambition of becoming a doctor was beyond her realm of possibilities. So, despite her intelligence and ability, Abigail began focusing on her appearance more than her grades, and she acquired many desirable suitors.

August and Evelyn expected that Abigail would marry one of the wealthy farmers' sons, or any number of upper middle class young men who pursued her. They were both heartbroken when she met Will and eloped before they could warn her against him. When Abigail returned from Hot Springs with her new husband, Evelyn was so upset she took to her bed for a week. It soon became evident to August and Evelyn, that Will was not only verbally abusive to Abigail, but was also physically violent with her, on an extremely regular basis. She often came to their house with bruises on her arms, where Will's fingers pressed into her flesh leaving purple hand prints resembling vice like bracelets. When Abigail announced she was pregnant a month after her elopement, her parents knew there was no turning back for their precious daughter, because with a baby on the way an annulment was impossible. August and Evelyn were delighted when Abigail decided to name the baby after her uncle, instead of Will. At least the boy would not

have to live in the shadow of such a despicable man. Although August and Evelyn grew to love Jesse, it was hard to look at the boy without remembering everything Abigail had given up by marrying his loathsome father.

Abigail had barely recovered from delivering Jesse when she became pregnant again, and delivered Robert when Jesse was only ten months old. She took to nursing the new baby and left Jesse wailing for his mother's milk, with only Pet Milk as a substitute. Before Jesse turned two he had two younger brothers, he was underfed and was almost completely ignored by his mother, because of her preoccupation with her two younger children. Will was a notorious drunk and was fired from every job he could get immediately after he received his first paycheck, which he inevitably spent on alcohol. Abigail, Will and the children were evicted from every house they rented. Between houses they stayed at the summer house on the farm, and that was the only stable home they knew.

In the fall of 1964 Abigail, Will and the boys had once again returned to the summer house, after the home they rented in Memphis mysteriously burned down. As August drove up to the house the day they returned, he was comforted by the fact that while they were staying at the farm, with Joseph to supervise, Will would have to take a break from his abuse. August was also excited to see Jesse. The boy was ten years old and was even more intelligent than his mother had been at his age. The greatest thrill of August's life had been watching the genuine interest his grandson showed in medicine. The afternoon after receiving his daughter's call about returning to the summer house, August drove to say hello and take Jesse on the last house call of the day. As the doctor ascended the steps into his summer house, he heard the boys run downstairs from

the upper floor in a mad dash to see him. Jesse got to him first and threw his arms around his grandfather in a tight hug that belied his small stature.

“Grand-daddy Doc, I’m so happy to see you!” Jesse said as he squeezed his beloved grandfather. “Do you have any other patients today? I’ve been practicing my sutures on one of Thomas’ stuffed animals. I think I’m ready to practice on a real person!”

August ruffled the boy’s hair and said, “I’m glad you have been working on your skills while you’ve been away, but I think you’re going to have to wait until after medical school before any person will allow you to stitch them up.” Seeing the disappointment on Jesse’s face, he added, “or at least you can wait until you turn twelve.” This brought a small look of satisfaction to the boy’s countenance.

August looked at the other two boys standing around him and bent down to talk to Thomas. “Boy you’re gittin big, since you’re a big eight year old now, I think you’re old enough for me to teach you to ride a horse. I just bought the perfect pony for you, his name’s Sammy and he’s a little stinker, just like you.” August then turned to Robert.

“Hey Bob, what do you say? You’re gittin so big, I think you’ve grown a foot since I saw you last.” While Jesse had the soft, gentle features of his mother, Robert had the hard, obstinate look of his father. Through squinted eyes Robert looked at August then replied, “I haven’t grown a foot and don’t I get a pony too?”

“Well, mister, you three can share Sammy. You will have to take turns but he will belong to all three of you. Okay?”

“If you say so, but I get to ride first and I’m not cleaning up his poop.” Robert turned and headed back up the stairs leaving August, Jesse and Thomas on the landing at the bottom.

Will was still sleeping after their over-night drive from Memphis, so August was able to visit with Abigail, Joseph and the boys, in peace over a late lunch in the dining room. They dined on the fried chicken Abigail started making shortly after she arrived that morning, along with fresh okra and tomatoes. Although the farm no longer operated on any marketable scale, Joseph found time between his professional obligations with the Baptist church, to raise chickens and maintain a large kitchen garden.

After lunch, August took Jesse to a follow-up appointment with an elderly patient at their home. Jesse was as helpful as always, and even helped bandage the patient’s wounded leg. After attending to the patient, August and Jesse walked out into the waning light of the late afternoon. August decided that after all his work, Jesse deserved a reward. “Alright boy, you did well today. Do you want to try your hand a drivin this old thing?”

Jesse stared in amazement at his grandfather’s shiny, black 1952 Hudson. “Are you sure? I don’t think daddy would like it.”

“What your daddy don’t know won’t hurt him. Now get in.”

Jesse drove remarkable well; he maneuvered the bulky sedan through town as if he had been driving for years. It was almost dark when Jesse crossed the cattle guard just past the Jones’ farm, which marked the beginning of the rural road leading to the summer house. The summer house sat two miles north of town at the end of a narrow, dirt road with an irrigation ditch on the

east side. There were only a few farm houses between Dr. Luckwood's summer house and town, and traffic was generally very limited on this isolated stretch of road. As Jesse got closer to his grandfather's house, he began to fear his father's response if he were to see Jesse driving the Hudson. "Grand-daddy Doc? Can you take over? I'm scared daddy's going to tan my hide if he sees me driving."

"Sure son, just ease her over to the right, and I'll slide over. You'll have to walk around. Just mind you don't drive into the ditch, it's full of water."

As Jesse slowed the car and kept a careful distance from the steep bank leading to the irrigation ditch, a light below the roadside caught his eye. There appeared to be a light coming from somewhere a little farther up the road, and it seemed to be coming from the water in the ditch.

"Grand-daddy Doc? Do you see that light?"

"I sure do. It almost looks like a headlight. Go ahead and park, and we'll get out to take a closer look."

August and Jesse walked about thirty yards before it became clear what they were looking at. A gray truck sat on its side almost completely submerged in the ditch, a single headlight sent an eerie beam over the dark water. Something about the truck looked familiar to August, but he couldn't quite place the owner. Suddenly Jesse yelled, "that's daddy's truck!", and took off running. August caught him by the shirt as he started down the bank into the water. "Jesse, I'm not sure what we're going to find in there. Run back to the Hudson and drive as fast as you can to the house. Tell your uncle what happened and tell him to call the sheriff. I think I'm going to need help."

Jesse started to protest but the look on his grandfather's face told him that there would be no negotiating this time. He turned and scrambled back up the bank and ran as fast as he could to the car. He was able to start it on the second try. He slammed on the gas and as he sped past the accident scene, he caught a quick glimpse of his grandfather sliding into the water near the truck.

The icy water was chest deep and it took August's breath away. The passenger side door stood above the water. The doctor eased it open and looked inside. His heart sank at what he saw. The truck was almost completely filled with water. Will lay in a heap on top of something that was wedged against the driver's side door. His face was just above the water and he was taking shallow, ragged breaths. He opened his eyes and focused on August. A look of recognition crossed his face, followed immediately by a look of terror. "It's going to be okay Will," August said. "I'm going to try to pull you out through this side. On the count of three I'm going to pull, try to push yourself up! One, two, three!" The doctor pulled on the back of Will's coat and tried to use his own weight to pull him through the passenger side. Will moved a few inches and then got stuck again. August ended up hanging half in and half out of truck. The truck moved slightly due to this extra weight, but it settled back into its original position.

August swallowed the lump in his throat and tried again. This time Will broke free from the object that was trapping him. After his first attempt, August wasn't sure he would be able to pull Will into the water and back out again, so his plan was simply to hold his head out of the water until help arrived. Just as August got a good hold of his head, the object Will was wedged against came into view. A small, blond head with long hair floated to the surface next to Will.

With his left hand, August cradled Will's head, and with his right he grabbed the hair on top of woman's head and pulled her face to the surface. He instinctively searched her face for signs of life, but it was immediately apparent that she was dead. At the same moment, August also recognized the woman. She was his neighbor's promiscuous seventeen year old daughter, who Will had openly flirted with since she was twelve. An empty bottle of whiskey floated in the water. August released her hair and turned his attention back to Will. "You miserable bastard! You have the nerve to run around with this child behind my daughter's back!" Before Will could respond, August began to pummel him with his right hand. After a full minute he stopped, completely out of breath from the effort. August looked at Will's bleeding face and the rage he felt brought tears to his eyes. "You really are miserable! You were given the best woman in the world and you run around with this trash! This is the last time you will hurt my family!" During the entire assault on Will's face, August had continued to hold his head above the water. After making this final vow, August moved both hands to the top of Will's head and pushed with all his remaining strength. Bubbles rose to the surface and Will thrashed about trying to push the hands off his head. Severe blood loss and a broken arm made him too weak to fight. After two minutes all movement ceased and August finally let go of Will's head. At that moment August heard the sound of a vehicle coming down the road. He took a final look at Will, and then pushed himself out of the truck the way he had come.

Before the Hudson had even stopped moving, Jesse jumped out of the passenger side and ran to August who had just reached the road. August was on his hands and knees panting from exhaustion.

"Where's daddy?" Jesse asked while trying to pull his grandfather to his feet.

August pushed his hands aside and sat down. “I’m sorry Jesse, I did everything I could. Your daddy’s gone.”

Jesse slumped to the ground and began to tremble, but he didn’t cry. “I can’t believe I killed him!”

August’s heart was still thumping in his chest and for an instant he wasn’t sure if he was the one who had made this declaration, or if it was Jesse. Finally realizing that he had not confessed, and Jesse had made the statement he said, “what do you mean son, you didn’t do anything wrong?”

“I have prayed that we would be rid of him every night since I can remember. And now I’ve finally done it!”

At that moment they heard sirens in the distance. “That must be the sheriff. Jesse, I want you to tell the sheriff that you were in the truck too and I pulled you out. You have to tell him that you and your daddy were just giving that girl a ride to town. Okay?”

Jesse looked confused, “what do you mean? What girl?”

“The neighbor’s daughter Kate is in there too, and I don’t want people to think the wrong thing, so I want you to say you were with them.” After a lifetime of listening to rumors about his father’s infidelity, Jesse understood the situation immediately and agreed with a silent nod.

Joseph stood nearby listening with tears in his eyes. His preacher’s heart ached at this senseless loss of life. He walked over to Jesse and pulled the boy into a hug.

A cough settled into August's chest that night while he lay in bed thinking about all that had happened. Two days later his brother diagnosed him with pneumonia. He died exactly one week after Will. His final thought was about the bitter irony that he was drowning just as Will had.