

Dieter

Lauren Light

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2014

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, Bothell

Creative Writing and Poetics

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Abstract

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English

Dieter is a fictional account how the sins of the father can continue to reverberate for thousands of years.

Told from the point of view of Snow, Hazard's (formally known as Dieter) mid-twenties estranged daughter, the reader rides with Snow and Hazard across the country as they seek to resolve a family curse.

Poetics Statement for Master's Thesis

By Lauren Light

Throughout my life, much like any other writer or artist, or even introverted teenager, books and stories have held a special place in my life. I could escape through Harry Potter, fall in love with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, cry at the beautiful world with Jonathan Safran Foer, be jealous of Zadie Smith and get lost for hours with Dumas. I knew that Sylvia Plath would understand my despair, Claudia Rankine my loneliness, and Elizabeth Grosz would sit with me and tell me that I'm not alone. Though I have read many books both in leisure and in my studies, it is the books that leave an emotional impact that I remember most. Like signifiers for different times in my life, I can reference them in my mind and recall the exact emotion, mixed with awe and gratitude that someone would bless my world, just by putting pen to paper. In many ways, Dieter is not only an appropriate culmination of my Masters of Fine Arts studies, but it also deeply autobiographical.

When I started in the MFA program I was nervous and looking to just do my best. I wanted one of my first papers I wrote to be a fiction/theory hybrid, with emphasis on the theory. Unfortunately, it was poorly executed—I recall that the story was salvageable, but the theory was flimsy. I had to accept that as much as I might love Elizabeth Grosz, that all-important author in my undergraduate work that I constantly revisited, I just wasn't at a point in my writing career where I could make an effective direct reference to her. When I tried to add "experimental" footnotes into my fiction, it just felt flat and like I was trying to impress someone. This isn't to say that experimental poetics have no place in my writing, I love the rule breakers, but I can't deny my love of a strong narrative. Some artists concern themselves with a special number of pages, or a special constraint on poetry, or pictures. When my experimental or Postmodernist-influenced poetics occur, it had to formally make sense, and it had to be organic.

When I talk about my poetics being “organic” what I mean to say is that I started Dieter with very little planning. I knew that I wanted to write a longer piece, but I knew that if I mapped out each chapter and character, I would lose all sense of creative impulse. I have tried this method in the past, building worlds and people all to feel so insurmountable once I actually have to translate these ideas into sentences. To talk about my process of writing is impossible without talking about biography. Dieter originally started off as a phone conversation with my father. My father and I had a strained relationship growing up, but once I moved out of the house, everything eventually improved. We began texting and talking on the phone more often. Through one of these precious conversations, I learned about his rich memories of Sebewaing (Sea-bah-wing). Despite nearly fifty years since he was last there, he was able to tell me vivid details of his house, the church, and the rest of this little farming community.

Both of my parents grew up down river, my mother in Dearborn Heights, and my father in Trenton (prior to that, as stated, was Sebewaing). When they married, they moved across the state and had my brother and I. For a variety of reasons still unclear to me even now, we never spent much time on the east side of the state. Once a year, we would load up the Ford Explorer with pillows and blankets, “church clothes” and snacks. We would leave barely before the sun rose, survive my father’s fast driving eastward down I-96 (“Oh god, I need to cover my eyes. I’m going to throw up,” was a phrase my mother uttered on more than one occasion), say awkward “hellos” to aunts and uncles and cousins, dutiful eat honey ham and scalloped potatoes, and drive back to Grand Haven, all in the same day. It was all done with a very proper sense of Lutheran shame, and even at a young age, I felt complicit that we “never visited.” My grandmother, Elizabeth Light (née Albrecht), the final thread that held the Light family together, died this past Christmas. Preceding her by nearly 20 years was my grandfather, Reverend Gordon Light.

In my first year’s winter quarter, I wrote several stories about children coming to terms with the world while growing up in Michigan. In some ways, writing about my family as a means to understand

Michigan seemed natural. And all the muddy ethical questions that come with writing about family were usually dealt with by obscuring and fictionalizing information and events.

I was never really interested in determining who my audience would be for this text. I figure those who are attracted to it are simply attracted to it. As far as genre is concerned, I didn't want to write a traditional historical tract, nor did I want to write a bodice-ripping historical romanticism. Instead I wanted to tread in the space between the two, taking full advantage of the freedom that I found in literary fiction. I could employ experimental poetics while at the same time engaging with traditional narrative. I had the freedom to create the fictional town of Casper and the Hotel du Lac while at the same time trying to maintain some historical accuracy for Detroit and Sebewaing. Tao Lin and David Sedaris inspired the creation of the Hotel du Lac. I wanted a place that had a lot of former glory and severely affected by globalization and not being able to fully participate in the evolving world due to lack of cultural and economic resources. I could embrace experimental poetics by employing a "drug-narrative" with stream-of-consciousness. I wanted the voice to morph into something completely different from the rest of the story. Here was a place where I could let loose with the really lyrical language. When I started writing Dieter I knew his voice would change as he aged, but changing his voice when he moves to Ann Arbor was a test. Because Dieter would have to devolve from a socially conscious entity into a hyper-bewildered perspective, I had to take special care not to fall into common drug narrative tropes. I didn't immediately want to start with him having deep spiritual connections the first time he smokes pot or takes acid. So I evolved time by not having Hazard name every person he met, but instead just referring to him or her by their nicknames. The reader is to infer that Hazard has spent a significant amount of time high with these people and has a whole list of back-stories he is too lazy to recall. Tom Wolfe uses a similar writing device in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* to give the impression that he was on acid, and I think my own attempt is also effective.

By deciding to write about my fictionalized family history, I had to come up against some long held preconceptions. The first time I went into the actual city of Detroit I was in my mid-twenties. It was nothing like I had ever encountered before: large buildings, some new, some old, and barely any traffic or pedestrians. I heard stories growing up about all of Detroit's faults, about its corrupt leaders, bankruptcy, crime, drugs, unemployment, and how it was dragging the whole state down. The narrative was this: when the unions came in they made unreasonable demands that drove away manufacturing, and when the blacks rioted in 1967 it set off "white flight" to the suburbs. Corrupt or inept leaders squandered any chance of saving the city from its plummeting tax base, consistently bowing down to the unions. Then the drugs and crimes came in, turning Detroit into an apocalyptic city.

I always suspected that this narrative was stretched and muddled, and so some of my first tasks in writing Dieter was researching the history of Michigan, specifically, Detroit. As my research progressed, I entered a state of Fanny Howe state of "bewilderment." Yes, the decline of Detroit was well documented, but there was also a sense of achievement and magic—more on that later. The first real clue that my story of Detroit was incorrect was when I started looking at the numbers relating to white flight. While the 1967 riots may have accelerated white families moving out to the suburbs, white families were packing up as soon as one or two black families moved into the neighborhood. Housing shortage and discrimination was a major root problem in Detroit and it started as soon as Ford rolled out his Model T. His factories and industry grew too fast for Detroit, and while Ford hired black workers, they were the last ones to get housing, often living in shacks and shanties outside of the plant. When the black families did finally get housing, it was all in one neighborhood, and the facilities were substandard. In the South, discrimination took place mostly socially, but when the Southern whites and blacks moved up North, discrimination took place mostly by confining families to certain neighborhoods. Housing associations, the Ku Klux Klan, and a wartime shortage on building materials severely impeded blacks obtaining better housing. From this problem of housing and racism, everything else follows. Fueling tensions are wars,

globalization, and President Nixon's War on Drugs. Certainly prominent leaders were corrupt (and down the ladder as well), and poor decisions were made, especially in regards to pension plans.

I wanted a way to portray this troubled land as something beautiful, so the creation of the curse allowed me to imbue more magic into the piece. To me, Michigan is magical. When the trees canopy overhead as I drive down Lake Michigan Drive and the cool lake breeze kisses my skin, it feels like a blessing. Michigan offered Motown, the Detroit Tigers, the Pistons, the Red Wings, and yes, even the Lions. Sonny Bono, Lucille Ball, Francis Ford Coppola, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, President Gerald R. Ford, co-founder of Hewlett Packard William Hewlett, Charlton Heston, Mike Illitch, Magic Johnson, James Earl Jones, Malcolm X, and many others either were born here or decided to make Michigan their home. The entire economy and the way the world operated were completely changed by Henry Ford's plant in Detroit. The University of Michigan was the first university in the country to offer an LGBT office on campus. The Red Cross was created in a response to the Great 1888 Thumb Fire. There is a specific dynamics about Michigan that I haven't been quite able to capture, except to say that there is a lot of ambition included with the magic.

Armed with this new historical knowledge of Detroit, new challenges arose. When I first started writing Dieter, I didn't have much planned after he and Peter go to Detroit during the 1967 riots to rescue Peter's father. This is based on a true story: my grandfather was being treated for tuberculosis at the Herman Kieffer Hospital, located on John C Lodge and Clairmount Avenue, just blocks from the epicenter of the riots at 12th and Clairmount. The story goes that he had to lie on the floor as bullets came through the windows until some deacons or elders from his church up in Sebewaing had enough sense to rescue him. I knew I also wanted to portray the 1943 riot, not only because it was a dynamic backdrop for a scene, but also because in a lot of ways the housing discrimination was more pronounced then. This brought up a lot of ethical questions concerning representation and portrayal of Detroit. I didn't want to

just make more “ruin porn,” but I didn’t want to shy away from the city’s history. I tried to ameliorate it with when Hazard goes back to Detroit with Snow and Starla, using him as a mouthpiece. I wanted to make the dialogue believable, yet at the same time, use it as a means to further Hazard’s character as well as give a more sympathetic look at Detroit.

A related concern was my portrayal of race. Because my characters are living in a racist society, some more insulated than others, it’s not until the end of the novel that I introduce a black character with a name. I didn’t want to fall on the trope of the “strong black woman” but at the same time, I wanted to show a kind of political involvement that the other character’s lacked. Claire is at the crossroads of the Civil Rights Movement, before the burgeoning days of Womanism, where exclusionary practices occurred both in the feminist, anti-war, and black social justice movements. I also wanted to make it ambiguous as to whether Claire and Peter were in a romantic relationship because I didn’t want to further the narrative of a “strong black woman showing a poor white boy the error of his ways through love.” Claire is obviously sympathetic to Peter’s problems, as she is the one that helps him after he has his bad acid trip, but she is secure enough in herself to take her time on who she gives her heart to. Perhaps in subsequent revisions I would include some dialogue between the two discussing some of the challenges and preconceptions that arise within interracial dating during this time period. I also made a cognizant effort to show that it was both white and black rioters who perpetuated the violence during the two riots.

The closest I came to being uncertain about using my own real last name in the text is when I made some of my characters overtly racist. Although I did consider it briefly, I decided to ultimately keep my name attached because the racist legacy in Michigan is real, and I wanted to draw attention to this ugly past (and present.) Similar to not wanting to portray Detroit as “ruin porn,” I also wanted to make sure that my characters were racist without actually writing a racist text. Robert was a member of the racist and discriminatory Home Owners Association and probably was well acquainted with the Ku Klux Klan in his youth. The KKK’s popularity in Michigan was great, although not as pervasive as it was in Indiana. His racism is slightly cooled compared to some other Detroiters because he is stable in his job

and primarily concerned with saving a friend and then spending time with Dawn. Dieter would have grown up hearing stories from his relatives about Detroit, but he would have been mostly insulated from black people in Sebewaing. We know that Dieter went to Detroit at least once to help Peter drop his father off at Herman Kieffer Hospital, but he doesn't comment on it so it must have not been memorable. The second time he goes to Detroit he sees some of the worse parts of humanity. Dieter and Peter would have probably made a few racist jokes after the riot in order to give themselves a false sense of security and superiority. When Hazard finally says his racist statement to Claire, the reader should infer that while he does believe it to a certain extent, most of his beliefs are founded on ignorance and an inability to critically analyze. Not to minimize it, but it is a deeply subconscious belief that surfaced as soon as he realized that his relationship with Lyons was threatened. This does not excuse the hateful and violent slur that Peter uses against Lyons, but Peter has hit his breaking point. Both Peter and Hazard feel the need to protect their mate, but their relationship didn't dissolve over romance and sex. Because Hazard spirals into addiction and dramatically alters his personality and perception, he becomes a stranger to Peter. Peter may also harbor some unrealized sexual and romantic feelings toward Hazard. I wanted to make it ambiguous, with the closest reference occurring when they wrestle at the church when they are young. If Hazard has any idea about Peter's feelings, he ultimately rejects them when he keeps referring to Peter as his brother. Thinking about Peter as his brother then replaces him actually acting like a friend to Peter. Not only is he taking advantage of their friendship, he is resting on his designation/laurels.

Another related problem in these racist and sexist exchanges were what slurs and words to use. My poetics and personal ethics require that I thoroughly analyze the usefulness of "the N-Word" before I add it to my story. Keen readers should recognize that I omitted any use of this word despite its historical prevalence, not because of erasure, but because I wanted to draw attention to its absence in my text. Many writers may disagree with this viewpoint, instead asserting that writing a solid story should take precedence over being politically correct, but in my heart I can't ethically use that word. That said, there was a significant struggle in having Peter use the word "fag*ot." I personally think in most hands it is a

vile, hateful word, and although I identify as a queer woman, I do not include myself in the group that can wield that word with personally affirmative political agency. Ultimately, I felt that this word was necessary to show that Peter not only has reached his breaking point in his friendship with Hazard, but also drawing attention to his own homosexual desire through his homophobic language.

Connected to writing an obscured family biography and a character study of Michigan, was my creation of Snow. I was inspired by Marguerite Duras' ambivalence in inserting a character heavily modeled after herself into the text. I wanted Snow to look like me, have similar a similar personality, and most importantly, share my last name. My name is Lauren Light, Snow's middle name is Lauren. I am the author, the reader can assume there is some level of truth in the narrative, and it is up to them to decide how much stock they wish to put in that truth. I wanted Snow to be a mostly reliable narrator, but I had to write it in such a way that acknowledged that she was skeptical of the curse when she first heard it, but not so much that the reader would constantly reference back to the curse's unreliability. Her own voice and her stability as a person is dubious until Hazard finally breaks down after finding his mother. Snow is continually trying to please Hazard despite the barriers both of them have put up in their relationship. Their first major test comes when Hazard picks up Starla and then proceeds to loudly fuck her in the hotel room next to his daughter. That Hazard would not ask Starla to be quiet shows a distinct lack of disrespect towards the interpersonal and familial barriers. Even more insulting is when Hazard agrees to take Starla across the country without even consulting Snow. Snow barely puts up a fight, and doesn't press down hard enough about deserving to spend exclusive time with her father. They may have already spent quite a bit of time together (I tried to give a sense of that with *The Mix*), but Snow needs this coming-of-age trip for her development. We never find out what Joan sees as Snow's past trauma, and I purposefully left that open ended. I did this because of pacing, and because I wanted to have focus more on Hazard. On a structural level, I wrote Snow's section with a different style of orality/ auralty than present in the other sections. I began to craft Snow's voice after I admired the casual lyricism of Eileen Myles' *Chelsea Girls*. When I write in my journal, or just record the day's events, I do so in a similar, yet unrefined, voice. I

looked towards Myles as an example of crafting a first person narrative that I felt could best describe my experience.

One of the first major challenges with Dieter involved deciding on the point-of-view. In my first submitted draft I only had Dieter, Mary, and Robert. Dieter was written in the first person as well as Mary. After spending such a long time writing in first person, I felt sluggish. On a whim, I experimented with writing Robert's section in close third person and I felt like it gave a fuller picture of the events. At the time this also made sense because Mary was in a much more insulated society. Days after I turned in my first draft I wrote Snow's character, and that changed everything. Because I wanted to achieve the aforementioned orality and reliability of the narrator, I had to write her in first person. I decided quickly that I would rewrite Mary's section into a close third person point of view because I was unsatisfied with how flat the first person narration felt. The problem lay with Dieter. Dieter, my first and most loved character was written in first person, and I couldn't bear to lose the intimacy created by transferring him to a close third. So I came up with the solution that it would be Snow acting as the author for the Mary and Robert sections. The readers are told that Snow did lots of varied research, both scholarly and metaphysical. The combination of these two allows for Snow to have latitude in describing events and utilizing the occasional lyrical language. The only time that she breaks the forth wall is when she directly addresses the reader at the end of Robert's section. Robert's final moments are uncertain, and although evidence seems to suggest a certain narrative, it is not conclusive. Instead of these articles drawing attention to how unreliable Snow's stretching of the truth, she is instead rewarded for reliability in her transparency.

Naming and renaming gradually entered its way into the story. I wanted the new names to be within the realm of believability, with strong vowels. I think there is something powerful about a person willingly changing their name as a way to manifest an inner metamorphosis. Dieter is named after the stern and stoic Lutheran pastor that confirmed me at St. Johns' Lutheran School in 2000. While most of my educators at the parochial school had a talent for dealing with children, this Pastor preferred to treat

the children as young adults. No horseplay, joking was forbidden, and his favorite students were the ones that had parents that consistently took them to church on Sunday mornings. I wanted the name Dieter to represent this kind of adult towards child alienation, and I wanted Dieter as a character to navigate this world. His father is obviously more authoritarian, naming his children with strong German names, and his mother is very concerned with preserving patriarchal notions of strength and masculinity (despite their harmful effects). During my studies of William Blake, we had a guest scholar by the name of Hazard Adams come in and I completely fell in love with his name. I decided that Hazard would be a fitting new name for Dieter, so completely opposite in its propriety and connotations. There is a pun present in the name “Hazard Light” and partially I wanted to show the inescapability of a last name, and also with partial ambivalence—my last name has always been commented upon since I was a young girl.

Starla/Tara was done because I wanted to showcase a character with ambition, if not misguided. Starla was added to the story partially as a foil to Hazard and Snow’s relationship, but then evolved to become emblematic of Michigan’s story. Starla is heavily modeled after my undergraduate freshman year roommate. Starla, like Michigan, has a troubled past but has lots of (perhaps misguided) ambition. There are a lot of elements working against Starla fulfilling her dream of becoming a professional wrestler—poverty, drug addiction, obesity, and a severe lack of resources. We are unsure if the support network that her cousin offers will be lasting. Midtown is recovering from economic recession, but at the cost of gentrification. Starla is at a better advantage because she is white, but her future is still uncertain.

One of the major life events during the writing of my thesis has been losing my best friend of nearly 10 years. While there is a kind of cultural narrative for how to deal with the end of a romantic relationship, I barely found any guides on how to deal with this dissolution. When Hazard wakes up in the morning and understands that Peter, his Rock, is gone, he is hit with abandonment and despair. If I “under wrote” this section of his reaction to losing Peter, it is only because the emotions were too close to me at the time. My own loss of a best friend came on suddenly, without warning, and despite how much I examined my life; I could find no logical reason for the breakup. I suppose in many ways I unconsciously

viewed it as a curse—there was this great unknowable force out there that took away something valuable for me. Of course, Hazard loses Peter due to his own negligence and denial, but Hazard, much like me, is seeking a reason for why things happened as they did.

Another early inspiration for the curse was my study of William Blake. When I first started writing Dieter, I had no real concept of the importance of his family members. One of Blake's main tenants is that there is always more than one way to view an event, and when we see another person sinning, we can't possibly have knowledge of what they are doing. Because we assume, we fall short of goodness and a divine creation. Translating that into Dieter came when I decided to give a counter point to Dieter's mother leaving by creating Mary's character. Mary and Dieter's mother both succumb to adultery, the difference is that one leaves her husband and child, and the other changes her mind when she hears she can not bring her children. I wanted the reader to assume that there must be some reason why a Dieter's mother would leave her husband and children. By making Thaddeus a horrible and abusive husband, the reader assumes that Dieter's father must be abusive as well. It was when I was creating Mary's story that I tried to picture what Samuel Hepps would look like and I decided I liked the look of red hair. But the problem was that I already used that trait in the man that Dieter's mother runs away with. Both men are described in a similar way because the first boy to break my 17 year old heart was a red-headed hulk of a farm boy named Seth. It was then that I came up with the idea of the curse and it being related to the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. I was more deliberate with choosing the names of the Delilah's descendents. Samuel is a derivative of Samson, and Dawn has a similar meaning to the name Samson ("man of the sun"), Lyons is referencing the lion that Samson killed when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and Honey is references the honey that Samson found in the lion at a later date. This doesn't seem to be something that Snow-as-an-author is completely aware of, but the reader should be able to catch it.

Another key element in William Blake's writing is the role of religion and sexuality. For Blake, organized and traditional religion was a destructive force, and many of our societal problems came from

puritanical sexual ethics. The Christian religion plays a major role in American history, especially in regards to Michigan. Many of Michigan's first founders were either German Lutherans or Dutch Protestants. For my characters, I wanted religion to constantly be a background factor, if not a major one. Obviously not only is young Dieter navigating the world in light of his authoritarian father, Peter and Mary are also influenced by religion. I think that faith can be a beautiful thing, especially when it's driven by grace and forgiveness. Peter's father offers a stable upbringing for Peter, and as such, Peter is better able to handle life when he and Dieter move to Ann Arbor. It's not that Peter thinks that drugs are evil, but he has enough sense to use them recreationally, not in the way that Dieter/Hazard uses them as a crutch. Peter also is in a good enough place to forgive Hazard when he denies him during their acid trip, even though he's angry. For both Peter and Mary the church plays a significant role in their socialization with the community and how they are raised. However, Mary is living at a time not only when patriarchal gender roles are strictly enforced, but also when sexuality is still largely a mystery for young women. For Mary sexual desire is a sin, and her guilt for her erotic dreams seemed like a natural extension. Dawn is the most forward with her sexuality, partially to show a progress of time, and also to offer Robert what he is missing in his life. This is not to excuse his behavior for cheating on the virginal Annie Jane but instead to further reinforce the fact that the Light family makes their own decisions in reference to the curse. Even though sex with Samson's descendents leads to dire consequences for the characters, I wanted to also portray sex as a good thing. If only the characters were in a different place in their lives, or if they made better decisions, there is the chance that they could have a fulfilling relationship. Of course, we ultimately find out that this was the case with Dieter's mother. Hazard had built up a whole narrative in his mind about his mother's downfall after leaving him when he was a child. Hazard also has a kind of sexual dysfunction, using sex like an addict would use drugs. The readers should get the sense that Hazard never went to Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, and although he stopped shooting heroin, he still has many self-destructive behaviors. William Blake might argue that there is nothing wrong with Hazard's promiscuity, and to a certain extent, there's not. It becomes a problem only when Hazard is incapable of maintaining fulfilling intimate relationships with individuals.

Writing this master's thesis has taken many turns along its creation. Ultimately the most enjoyable element of writing my first long-form work was the freedom to pursue an idea of documenting Michigan as a character. Narrative environments have always been important to my work and now that I live outside of Michigan, I distinctly feel the pull to write about it. Rebecca Brown once talked about the difference between devotion and obsession. One is a self-centered and destructive force, and the other is humble and generative. Dieter was both of these at different times. I know more about the history of my home state than I ever did before, but the lack of spending significant time in the places I wrote about is stark. Can you love something and not want to be with it? For me, yes. Visiting Michigan and spending time there is restorative and generative. But the pull of Seattle firmly places me in the category of Michigan's "brain drain." I admire the artists and writers who have decided not only do they love writing about Michigan as a narrative environment, but also have decided to make it their home. I also suspect that I will never be done researching and learning about the history of Michigan. Whenever I come across a promising book, my heart races and my fingers itch to dive in. It connects me not only with my home state, but also with my family, my ancestors, and my community at large.

Here are a few resources that have been invaluable: Ben Hamper's memoir *Rivertown: Tales from the Assembly Line*, Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's documentary *Detropia*, Alan Bradley's documentary *Rollin: The Fall of the Auto Industry and the Rise of the Drug Economy in Detroit*, Sarah Colt's PBS documentary *Henry Ford*, and my good friend and Detroit poet and author Leto Rankine.

Dieter/Hazard

Snow Light. Age 25. Seattle, Washington.

May 17th, 2013.

“Why won’t that dumb fuck get out of the goddamn left lane?” Hazard shouts over the din of windshield wipers. The car in question goes ten miles under the speed limit, and probably ten faster than what is weather and safety appropriate. Around us, cars hydroplane out into medians, semi trucks park with little yellow triangles trailing behind them, and minivans crawl along the freeway, emergency lights blinking. Hazard’s riding his ass now, and I’m hoping the guy in front of him isn’t, a complete idiot and doesn’t brake check us. Eventually Dumb Fuck changes lanes and I get the brunt of the middle finger as Hazard accelerates past him. I’d tell Haz over here to slow down, but he’d just say, “Pussies out here don’t know how to drive in real weather. I grew up in Michigan driving in blizzards. I should damn well know how to drive in a little summer rain.” Shit, I grew up there too, making the trek down I-96 from Grand Haven to Ypsilanti so many times you’d think I’d made a rut in the road, but I don’t say anything.

I never thought I would be friends with Hazard, much less driving cross country with him. Flighty, erratic, prone to long bouts of both silence that would rival a monk and non-stop chatter that would put a toddler on a sugar high to shame, Hazard is a rock-and-roll listening, classic car loving, illegal drug using, amateur yogi and rumored occasional participant in the Missouri Synod Lutheran

Church. Furthermore, he is a steadfast Detroit Lions' fan, with a slightly ambiguous sexuality, "if they have genitals, I'll find some way to work with it," and my biological father.

In the rearview mirror of his restored 1971 Thunderbird is the Seattle skyline, it's sleek yet grungy metropolis, fading behind veils of rain. Ahead is the motherland: Michigan. The Great Lakes state, that fallen empire of automobiles and furniture, home state of Madonna, Gerald R. Ford, Motown, Francis Ford Coppala, and the Insane Clown Posse. Michigan, the land stolen from the Pottawattomie Indians, invaded by the French, warred over in 1812, burnt by fires, consumed by factory smoke and political scandals, yet still voting blue. Where elementary children are taught to recite HOMES: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior and teenagers learn to predict cancelled school due to Lake Effect Snow. The home of my mother, my father, their parents, their parents' parents, and their parent's parents, all the way back before statehood. Michigan, my neglected ancestral home.

Truth be told I'd rather be driving with him than anyone else. He goes fast, but seems to have an innate sense on how to drive, as if the car were a congenital cybernetic extension of himself. If you would have told me five years ago I would be friends with Hazard, let alone trust him to drive us cross country in this deluge, I would have told you that you were out of your fucking mind. He left when I was three, and the five years he spent with my mother was one of the longest relationships he's ever had, at least, according to her. It wasn't easy for my mom to raise a child by herself in Grand Haven, part of the conservative Dutch Protestant Republican bubble emanating from metropolitan Grand Rapids, but she did well enough. I passed high school with decent grades, and managed to get into Eastern Michigan University to major in English. But the same itch that hit Hazard, hit me, and as soon as I graduated, I was out of the state. Spent a year dicking around, ending up in a little border town in New Mexico before I decided that I hated the heat and the cockroaches.

I'm thinking back to the first time we met was at the Luna Park Café in West Seattle. Its servers a trendy mix of counter culture: the 80s Goths, the Rockabillys, the queers and feminists, the stoners, and classical flannel and bespectacled hipsters. That morning the place was buzzing with bodies running food to full tables and by the conversations of wants and desires that rose and fell like waves. The walls were decorated in a mixture of ironic and earnest 1950s Americana. A tall man with blonde hair stood up, locking eyes with me. I realized that this is Hazard. That man. Out of politeness or awkwardness, I don't know, I gave an involuntary smile. Hazard had enough sense not to try to hug me or shake my hand, but instead he put his hand in his pockets and gave a small, big smiled, shrug. I would have rather preferred a booth, some place more private. Our table was in the middle of the diner, surrounded by families and couples having polite conversation about their weekend errands and outings. The first thing that strikes me is how healthy he looks, despite his years of running around, boozing, and hard drug use. After that, he looked almost nothing like me. His hair is a light sandy blonde, styled like a model's, and his eyes are bright green. My hair is dark brown, almost black, and the same with my eyes. My jaw line is narrower than his, and my eyes are less deep set. His nose looks nothing like mine, but it doesn't look anything like my mother's either. Some rouge sleeping gene? But I did notice our similar high cheekbones, and his ears are like mine: unattached, unlike my mother's. A visible tan-line where a wrist watch no longer sits exposed a pale expanse of skin, a shade similar to my own.

He found me on Facebook about a month ago when someone tagged me wishing me luck on my move to Seattle. He messaged me, and said he was my father. All that I had known about him growing up was that he lived a very troubled life. When I was younger and first heard about him, I assigned him a Christ-like martyrdom, cut down so cruelly in life, unable to see his dearest and beloved daughter. It wasn't until I was eleven when I overheard my Aunt Rhonda talking about his all-encompassing drug addiction that my opinion of him changed. I grew to hate him until it became not only a defining factor in my teenage angst, but also a part of my identity. I was the girl with the Deadbeat Dad. Ultimately I

couldn't sustain the hate and resolved to think of him less and less until he was no longer relevant in my life. I still don't know why I responded to his message a few days later. It became a mosquito in my ear--it was good not to respond, it was good not to respond, until I abruptly changed my mind and messaged him back. He said that he had something important to tell me, no, it wasn't some cancer or rare genetic disease, but it was important that I know nonetheless. I told him to just go ahead and tell me, but he said it was essential that he tell me in person. When he saw that I was unsure, he said he didn't want to waste my time, so he confessed all his sins to me. In long, dramatic, and sometimes uncomfortable emails. I felt pity, unexpectedly, much like my decision to first respond, after a gut reaction of disgust and scorn. It seeped into my blood like creeping lava, burning everything up in its path. So there we were, a month to the day when he first messaged me: Estranged Father and Daughter, sitting in an overcrowded and greasy diner, a chapel to 1950s family values and saccharine and sterilized pop culture.

He started with his hands folded in front of him, looking at my eyes, like some kind of seasoned beggar. "Snow, now I know you're my kid and I haven't done shit to earn being your father, but I'd like to try to have a relationship with you. There's nothing I can say to make you be ok with the fact that I wasn't there when you were growing up with your ma. I'm sorry. I tried several times to come back, tried to think of a way to do right by you, but I just couldn't. I didn't want to come waltzing back into your life when I knew I wasn't ready for it."

He'd told me this before. The first time I read it over his message I thought it was bullshit. Or at least, mostly bullshit. But then, hearing the words come out of his mouth, deep and sincere, I wasn't sure anymore. While I tried to decide how sympathetic I was feeling, a turquoise haired server with a bright quarter-sleeve tattoo came by to take our order. If Hazard was put off by this interruption, he didn't show it. Effortlessly he glided into a polite and fun conversation with her, and when she smiled, her eyes

crinkled. I remember an odd sense of pride for having such a charismatic father bubbling up, from where, I still don't know. Immediately, I reminded myself that charisma was dangerous, recalling the various farm boys and young athletic youth pastors who broke my teenage heart before I learned to identify their common trait.

"As I was saying," he began again, "I've done a lot of research as to why I wasn't able to do this before, and I finally think I have the answer. And you might think that this is just some bullshit spiritual enlightenment or some 12-step bunk, but it's not. I did honest-to-God research. The fact of the matter is that our family is cursed, and if you want to escape with your skin intact, you better know about it."

At that moment I was dumbfounded, struck by the injustice of having not only a Deadbeat Dad but also a crazy one. Looking back on it I can remember how assured and confident Hazard seemed at this point in his speech.

"Now I don't know your personal spiritual beliefs, or where you fit in some great cosmic library, but we are a cursed family. You can look back generations and generations and the same pattern keeps popping up." He hits the table with his palms as if to illustrate the point.

"Jesus," I whispered, and looked to the other tables to see if anyone was watching us. Fortunately, the polite families are still immersed in their Eggs Benedict and plans to go to the farmers market.

"Please, just hear me out," he begged, but before I can respond to this, he continued. "Sure, it'll skip most family members, but don't think it won't pop up. One day you'll be scratching your ear on the

bus, and the next minute, you're swept away in some damn paperback love affair. If you're lucky, you'll die. If you're not, then you might as well announce to your friends and family that you're a neo-Nazi looking for children to molest and sacrifice to the Great Satan, because all your relationships, and I mean all of them that ever meant a damn to you, are going to go to shit."

I lifted my palm up in an attempt to silence him. His voice was getting louder and louder, drawing attention. My eyes darted around again to the polite families and I could tell at least one of the booths was listening in, unabashedly staring at us.

He started again, this time in a lower voice. "Now I'm not operating under the impression that whatever relationship we have will last, I've certainly not deposited enough in the karmic bank to warrant that, but I am hoping that maybe we can figure out a way to break this curse. You seem like a smart girl. Woman. I can tell by the way you carry yourself that you're smarter than I'll ever be. And I figure that maybe with our blood combined, my life experience, and your book smarts, we can maybe save this family."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I said, pushing my chair back and not caring about the surrounding strangers. Debates about heirloom tomatoes ceased along with the clinks of silverware. Fathers sat up straighter, and mothers shot visual daggers at me.

I won't go into all the yelling or the very cutting questions about his sanity I shot back at him at this point. After we were kicked out the café and the cops were brought in, I managed to calm down.

Then, after two weeks on my own mulling things over and reflecting on my own past, I decided it was a good time to move forward with my life, Hazard included. I had some terms of contact that I wanted him to abide by, that he readily agreed to: namely, he wasn't allowed to tell me what to do and to never ask me for money. But there was one he wouldn't accept—to call me by my middle name, Lauren.

“Listen, Snow, I know I haven't earned a lot of things with you, but this is one I won't budge on. Your mother and I named you Snow. Believe me, I know about horrible names—mine was Dieter for Christsakes. But I earned my name change, and I have it under good authority that you've gone by 'Snow' up until the last year or so. But now you prefer to go by 'Lauren' because it sounds more adult or some shit like that. But both your mother and I hated the name Lauren. The only reason we named you that was to appease your bitch of a grandmother (no offense). My point is, if you want to change your name, fine, but at least earn your new one.”

There is a picture of me, taken at about three years old, where I am looking up into the camera. I am sitting on my favorite blanket: mint green with satin around the edges. In this picture, in a rare moment worthy of capturing with my mother's Olympia camera (a first born child investment), my fingers are not in my mouth. Normally and without shame, I would run the sharp edge of the satin across my upper lip while my ring and middle finger were sucked away in my mouth. It took years for my mother to break the habit, and I would sneak to doing it in my sleep well until I was ten years old. Now (less than two decades later) my fingers bear the signs of obsessive sucking: a ten degree slant to the left on my right hand middle finger, and scars of tooth marks on the ring finger. In this picture, my skin is porcelain, my eyelashes, long and black like my hair, my lips, ruddy. A face unspoiled by puberty or environmental factors. To look at this picture, one could possibly make the jump that my parents named me aptly, if not slightly fantastical.

Snow Light was not an easy name to grow up with. Most people do a double take at my name, and my grade school classmates were ruthless. Junior high was a nightmare: awkwardly too big for my age, covered in acne, and no small amount of prominent orthodontics made me the last girl at White Pines Middle School to ever be considered possessing a fairy tale beauty. Fortunately, by the time I got to high school, my name was more or less accepted without a second glance. I never turned into a great beauty, or even an average beauty. While the braces were eventually removed, and the acne slightly abated, I was still the chubby and slightly awkward teenager. For other classmates similar traits could mean invisibility or bullying, but oddly enough, I was generally well liked and popular. If I had to guess, I'd chalk it up to having a thick skin and a sharp sense of humor, but more than likely, it was probably because I lacked the social clout to ever be cruel to anyone. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't as if I were homecoming queen or the student body president, but I did have enough popularity to get elected to be one of the homecoming duchesses, even if I didn't win.

Before Hazard got into the details of the curse, and in turn, his life story, I thought maybe well-likability was genetic. I certainly didn't get it from my mother. Who, although witty and kind, did not go out of her way to display these qualities. She had a shyness to her, and as much as she tried to hide it from the other mothers, I could tell from a young age what an effort it was on her part to socialize. The way he acted with the tattooed server the first time we met was only a small display of his charisma. Once I began to spend more and more time with Hazard, I found that he had a smattering of friends from all over the country. We'd go to a bar in the middle of nowhere, and he'd manage to know someone who'd buy us drinks. Or we'd be at a gas station late at night at some place we'd never been and he'd manage to get a phone number. Checkout clerks, bus drivers, and librarians were taken with his charms. To Hazard, the world was his choir, and all he needed to do to get an offering was smile and say hello.

But Hazard did eventually tell me about the curse. I find it hard to separate Hazard the easy-going and charismatic man and Hazard my cursed, delusional father. It took me a while to corroborate his story, and even more research on my end to fill in some of the pieces missing from his narrative. I'm still leaving room that his interpretation is a fantasy. After all, how reliable are acid trips and psychics? But Hazard stands by his story and until I can prove otherwise, I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt. I won't admit it to him, but he made a good point when I tried to tell him he was full of shit. He said, "Kid, we can barely categorize our thinking of what exists and what doesn't exist. All the philosophers out there are trying, but they can't come up with anything solid. I know this tree exists because I can climb it. But by what other criteria? And if we can't categorize what exists and what doesn't exist, then how the hell are you going to tell me that this curse is not real

Things we know about the curse: 1. It is tied to two families- ours and the Janson's (more on them later), 2. It only occurs to family members born in Michigan, 3. A redhead will come and will offer love or whatever else is lacking in the family member's life, 4. If you accept whatever the red head is offering, you will die. 5. Regardless of whether you accept or reject what the red head offers, you will be separated from those you love and care about. Samson's decedents main objective is to cause division. "Now this is not to say," Hazard explains, "that all red-heads are dangerous. Personally I like a good roll in the sack with one, but there will be something slightly off about them, and once you realize it, it will be too late. Luckily, I think it is only a once-in-a-lifetime thing."

After he told me all the history of the curse, I made the mistake of asking him why he thinks we are cursed.

“Well, Snow, that’s the kicker. I couldn’t figure it out for the damndest time. With my redhead, it was a bad acid trip that illuminated me to the fact that he was bad news. I looked around a long time and eventually I found myself with a psychic. She told me that we are the decedents of Deliah. You went to Sunday school, right? Samson and Delilah? The whole ‘if you cut my seven braids of redhair I’ll lose my super human strength’ Samson? Apparently, we are Delilah's great-great-great- grandchildren—who knows how many removed, and that Samson bastard doesn’t feel like his score is settled. It doesn’t matter how many Light family lives he and his decedents are ruining, he’s on a rampage.”

Before Kwame came and ran his administration like a bad episode of "Law & Order," before Ememin rapped on 8 Mile, before white flight and the race riot of '67, before the arsenal of democracy and the other race riot of '43, before the unions, before Ford rolled out the black model T and instituted the \$5 a day pay, before the Ku Klux Klan chapters there was a very pregnant young woman crossing the Detroit River from Canada who just happened to be my great, great, great, great grandmother.

Henry Light packed all his possessions, including a shotgun, two children Alfred and Thomas, and a very angry and pregnant Elizabeth onto his wagon and headed west. They nearly drowned on the Erie Canal on the Michigan, but by quite a bit of luck the crew was able to make the boat stay afloat.

If there were any sin in the marriage that was used as fodder or credit for future fights, my great-great-great-great grandmother Elizabeth Light certainly used having to trek down the Erie canal while seven months pregnant as her down payment against Henry. Through a series of bad land investments in New York, Henry found that he could no longer support his family. So in the spring of 1870, Henry made the journey down to Michigan to look for land. After fighting the mosquitoes, unsavory traders, and the occasional Indian, Henry found himself a little piece of heaven in Dearborneville (later to be renamed Dearborn, boasting the largest concentration of Arab-Americans in the United States.) Full of towering white pines and rich dark soil, Henry found where he wanted to live. Elizabeth, conversely, was not having it. In her journal, she writes of how she cried "innumerable tears" trying to persuade Henry not to make this decision, but it was for naught. Hazard has this theory that Elizabeth knew, or at least had an inclination that birthing a child in this land would stir up the curse. I think his evidence of this is pretty flimsy—he said he discovered this one day when he went to the Seattle aquarium on hallucinogens. "You have to understand it was all allegorical. There was this great symphony of emotion underwater, and there was an operatic like similarity between our curse and their lives. Don't look at me that way, Snow. I don't

actually believe that these fish are cursed by Jonah's cousin or something, I'm just saying that I think some kind of cosmic energy or Divine Being was looking out for me. I was meant to have that vision." When I asked him how this whole curse business was going to end, he said it that was unclear. When I pressed to find out what he say, he didn't answer. But he knew that he was on to something important, and that things would make sense after the fact.

When Hazard asks me to do my own research on our cursed family tree, I don't expect to write a narrative. But ultimately, that is what I do. I thought I would search Google, ransack libraries, go through dusty archives, and write letters to distant relatives and that would be the extent of it. But that only turned out to be the beginning. The more I read and discover, the deeper and more complicated it becomes. The more I try to search for patterns, the more I find myself dizzy. I started by writing just the facts, as I knew them: birth and death certificates, baptism and confirmation dates, weddings, newspapers, books, photographs and journals. And while the journals provided some of the heartiest information, these were still just faint shadows of my ancestors, of my relatives who share my same blood, and it seemed like no conclusion could be drawn. So I then move onto hearsay; gossip, neighbor's opinions, and even a newspaper editorial or two. This complicated things quite a bit, and although these lives are no longer shadows, they are still fractured, blurry, and unfocused. One night, over a bottle of Jack Daniels, I rant my frustrations to Hazard. He listens patiently, letting me talk and rage my head off for who knows how long. When I finish, he just looked at me and says with absolute seriousness, "Do you want to meet Joan?"

Joan is a wisp of a woman who can out-drink even Hazard. No one seems to know how old she is, some say thirty-five, others say she was really sixty-five. She never says. Hazard told me he once tried to get it out of her by asking if she remembered where she was when Kennedy was shot, but she just gave a tight-lipped smile. She has platinum blonde hair that falls in perfect ringlets, and she always wears a brightly colored silk caftan. The day I finally agreed to meet her, she welcomes us with an ancient and mangy cat on her shoulder, and enough silver and bronze bangles on her arm that she has to speak louder in order to be heard whenever she moved about the room. There is something about her that is kind and welcoming though, and not in that false-hippy sense of peace and liberal guilt. Before I'm even introduced and invited into her tiny cabin, she shoos Hazard away to get some beer from the corner store.

I immediately notice that her cabin is full of artwork, and almost immaculately clean. I make a move to take off my shoes, but she tells me not to bother. There are wind chimes in the window, neat stacks of books on the shelves, and a glass coffee table surrounded by an oxblood colored leather sectional. I sat there for a few moments, waiting for her to say something, but instead, she is looking me up and down like she's appraising a dress in a consignment store. When I am done being examined, she says to me, "Snow, sweetheart, I can tell you two things right now. One is that you're a good person. You've had moderately easy life. Don't get me wrong, you've had your share of heartache, loneliness, and disappointment, but you're still tough as nails. The second is that you are definitely cursed. This one isn't going to skip you. I can't tell when it's going to happen, but it's going to happen sometime in your life, maybe next week, maybe ten years from now, maybe more: you're going to meet one of that bastard's offspring. And it's not going to be pretty."

Generally speaking, I try not to mock other's beliefs. The metaphysics is a messy realm. But despite this ingrained social nicety, I can't help but let a small scoff escape my mouth. Apparently, sweet Joan is a bit of a pit bull.

"What girl, you think I'm full of shit? Then why are you here?" She doesn't wait for my answer. "Oh, I know why. You're wondering if that little redhead in your life who broke your heart is the one who cursed you. Well, I'll give you this piece of advice, free, you to me. That little heartbreak was nothing, and I mean nothing compared to what this one is going to do to you. You think you're so damaged, so broken, so incapable of genuine human interaction. You think no one will love you because you're so fundamentally flawed. I'm telling you right now to get over it. This whole weak, damsel-in-distress shit has got to go. Not that it's going to mean a damn, but if you want to survive this, you better put on your big girl panties and tough the fuck up."

Like how any reasonable person would respond, I storm out of the cabin. “What the hell, Hazard,” I yell, as he gets out of the Chevy with impeccable timing, beer in tow. “You didn’t warn me she was a crazy bitch.” I empathize these last two words in the form of a shout, just to make sure she hears me inside.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Snow bean, what’s going on? Here, sit down, have a cigarette, and bring ol’ Hazard here up to speed.”

We sit down at a white metal picnic table that has bright pink plastic seat cushions. I think this is tacky. He gives me a cigarette and we sit in silence. I don’t really want to tell him the exact things that she told me, but half a cigarette later, the nicotine buzz is calming me down slightly so I give him an edited relay of events. To my surprise, Hazard laughs.

“I’m sorry about that, kiddo, I should have warned you. Never, and I mean, ever, laugh at Joan. I’ve seen what she’s done to other men, and I can tell you right now you got off lucky.” Hazard throws down his cigarette and stands up. “Come on, Snow baby, let’s go apologize and straighten this out.”

“Why should I apologize? Can’t you see all this curse stuff is just made up? It’s not real. And I’m not going back in there to get berated by a woman who’s just making wild guesses and assumptions about my life.”

I almost expect Hazard to pull me back in there by my ear, but if he does have that inclination, he thinks better of it. (Which is a good thing: rule number one of our relationship, he is not the boss of me.) “Alright, alright. It’s your decision. But tell me this, was what she said true?”

I don’t answer him. I’m certainly not going to dignify that with an answer. It’s too private to say aloud. It’s all too deep, too personal.

“You know, maybe it wasn’t right of me to ask you to do all this. And I don’t just mean coming out here to get torn a new asshole by Joan. You’ve been working hard to figure out this curse business

and the family tree, and for what? I don't know why you're doing it, but whatever the reason, I don't want to see you get hurt. I wasn't around to earn your love or friendship, and I don't want you to do this because you think you have some sort of duty or obligation to please me. I can tell that you're a people pleaser, Snow. But you don't have to do this."

Damn. This is probably blatant reverse-psychology, but it works. I think, maybe Joan is right. Maybe I do have to put on my big girl panties. I put out the remaining nub of my cigarette and stand back up. I march back into Joan's cabin, without giving so much of a second glance at Hazard.

"All right, Joan," I begin, with slightly gritted teeth. "I'm sorry I was rude. I am going to ask for your patience though as I wrap my head around all this curse business. I'm not completely sold that this is the answer, but I'm willing to listen."

Joan is a little bit nicer this time around, but only slightly. She shoos out Hazard again and tells him to drink a few beers while he's waiting. She still tells me things about myself that no one knows, things I'd rather not were said aloud. But they're things that Hazard couldn't have possibly slipped to her, so I begrudgingly allow that she might be right on some other things. When she convinces me that she might have a valid viewpoint on this whole curse business, she sticks her head outside and calls out to Hazard.

"Alright, Hazard, we're done with the niceties and ready to get down to business. If you want to come inside and listen, you can, but you better keep your mouth shut or I'll throw you out fast enough to make your head spin."

Hazard comes in, all grins and beer in hand. "Glad to hear you girls worked out your troubles. Now lets fill Snowbell here in."

Joan holds up a hand. "Not so fast there, space cowboy. You need to be aware of a few things too. Snow is related to you, but that doesn't mean she'll have the same story. I'm going to get a different

reading off of her than I did with you. Some of the things you may hear will probably contradict what I told you. I suggest you take notes on what's different. You can compare stories later."

"But Joan," I ask tentatively, "How does that make any sense? Shouldn't the facts stay the same? Either an event happened or it didn't."

"You ever read the Bible? Specifically the New Testament?"

"Well, yeah. You mean, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John."

"That's a good girl. Now tell me, do all of these accounts of Jesus agree?"

I start to get where she's coming from, but I figure its better to not interrupt her. "No, they're all slightly different."

"But most people seem to agree that Jesus was at least an historical figure that existed, right? It's the same deal with people. I might not give you the same details as Hazard about your ancestors, but it's going to be up to you to decide what the real story is. I'll give you what I'm reading off of you, and you can take that as fact, or Hazard can tell you what I told him, you can compare and contrast and hopefully get a better picture of what happened."

It's after this strange meeting that I have a better idea about my family and the curse. It takes me a few days alone in my apartment to process everything that was said, but eventually, I agreed to meet with Hazard and compare notes. Now these fuzzy and unfocused images of my family became clearer, more real. I'm still not sure everything I wrote is Gods-to-honest truth, but it feels like I'm getting closer.

Dieter Ezekiel Light. Age 10. Sebewaing, Michigan

October 16, 1960

“I’m telling you, it’s really neat. You can see the whole town from up there. I’ll hold on to the ladder. Just don’t let go and you’ll be fine,” Peter says. I look up but I can’t see the top. Peter says it goes all the way up the bell tower, all the way up to the roof. From there, Mr. Hess, the church janitor, can check the roof to make sure nothing’s rotted out. Usually the ladder isn’t here, it’s all folded up and put in the musty church closet, but Mr. Hess left it out for some reason. The first rung hits right below my knee. There are three ladders connected, running up about 120 feet. I know this because Peter told me its 90 feet to the roof of the church, 120 to the top of the bell tower. One hundred and twenty. I don’t know how many rungs that is.

“Come on, Deet, you’ve got to go up there. Hess is going to be back any minute.”

I start climbing. I stop at the second rung when I realize that the ladder wobbles, but it seems like it is only doing it slightly. I need to be brave. A few more rungs and I realize that I can slap The Stone. Sometimes Peter lets me help him ring the bells for church. It’s pretty fun—Peter puts his hands on the rope above mine (because he’s taller) and we pull down and let the weight of the bells lift us off the ground. Our game was to always hit this brick (“The Stone”) that always stuck out kind of funny. A couple of weeks ago we really went at it and Peter managed to hit The Stone. When I told Fritz about it though, he just kind of laughed. Sometimes we get carried away and one of the elders has to come by and tell us “That’s enough, boys” but for the most part no one seems to mind much (except for Mrs. Geller, but she seems to mind everyone’s business). My favorite time to ring the bells is for Christmas and

Easter services because Peter's dad, Reverend Albrecht, pretty much just let us go at it. I like Peter's father. For being someone who does a lot of preaching on right and wrong, he's a pretty nice guy and lets us have fun in the church, as long as we don't damage anything. The only thing we aren't allowed to do is do the funeral bells. Reverend Albrecht sends the Elders to do that one. One long ring for ten years, and then short rings for every year after that. Everyone in the town stops when those bells go off, counting aloud trying to figure out who recently 'passed on.'

"I hate those damn bells. Always wondering how many rings it's going to be," Mama says. The only times I see Mama cry is when the bells don't last long on account of a child. Luther told me once that when Mama was a young girl, before she met Father, she had a good friend die in the Sebewaing River and no one told her until she heard the bells ringing.

If I were to fall, they'd only have to do one long ring. My stomach clenches.

"You're almost half way there," Peter yells out.

I swallow the fear in my chest. Mama is always saying, "I didn't baptize you Dieter Ezekiel Light for you to be a sissy. God wants you to be strong like your Father and your brothers." I know Peter won't tell if I wussed out, but I don't want to think about what Fritz or Luther would do if they ever found out.

I keep climbing. A cobweb brushes up against my shoulder, but I try to ignore it. Men aren't afraid of spiders. I am finally getting closer. I approach the bell, surprised to find messy paint strokes. There is copper, gold and green underneath the black paint. I always thought the bell was iron. I run my

fingers over the surface and they pick up dust. I can't even guess how many times this bell has been painted. I like the way the black iron bells shine in the sun. Up close, its not smooth or shiny.

I am tempted to look down, but I don't. Finally, the sky opens up and the last rung is at my waist.

I can see everything: long swatches of pock-marked farmland already harvested, the restaurants and the car dealership, the old brewery that churns out light blue cans with Pheasants on them, pig and cow farms with small milk houses, and finally, the sugar mill, with all the local farmers in line to drop off their harvest of sugar beets. The long line of pickup trucks ends just a little bit before our house. I bet by tomorrow they'll be past it. Luther tells me that The Blade is already reporting this as the biggest harvest yet, and it's only expected to keep growing. I breathe deeply, making my chest big. I feel joy. I feel strong.

"Dieter, I think I see Hess coming," Peter says.

I take another look around and start the climb downward. When I pass the bell, I stop and twist my torso around. I draw my initials in the dust. D.E.L printed in big letters. No teacher to make me use cursive up here. I was here.

"What are you doing up there? Get down from there," Hess shouts.

I groan and continue downward. I hope Hess doesn't tell my folks about this, but I won't argue if he does. I made it to the top. I try to hide my smile when I come face to face with Hess. A lot of people avoid Hess cause he's got rot mouth, but he's usually pretty fair all things considered.

"Peter, I know your father doesn't mind if you go exploring, but if something were to happen to Dieter, I'm fairly certain his mother would murder me," Hess says, not unkindly. I try not to blanch at his breath.

"Sorry, Mr. Hess," we both mumble.

"Go run along then," he says.

With that, we're off, running out the back. But something weird happens: no matter how fast I run, it doesn't seem fast enough. There's always more land in front of me, and I feel angry that my legs are so short.

The next day, I wake up warm. Instead of feeling the relief of not shivering, I am confused. Mama likes to keep the windows open at night. Once, I got up in the middle of the night to close my window, but Mama said to stop being a sissy. She says it would make me strong like my brothers and my Father. I don't see how waking up with stiff limbs and a numb nose makes me strong, but I know better than to argue. Usually, Mama keeps the windows open until the first real snow comes but when I peak my head outside, I only see light tips of frost.

I think, maybe Mama is sick. I go to her bedroom, but find an unmade bed. Usually she makes it first thing in the morning. I pad out to the kitchen and I find her staring barefoot out the window. Outside there is a long line of sugar beet farmers already waiting for the sugar mill to open up.

I follow Mama's gaze to a man outside in line. He is staring straight at our house. He lights a cigarette and leans against his truck. The rising sun shines brightly off him, so hard it almost looks like his skin is on fire. His forearms are massive—even bigger than Father's—and covered in thick red hair. I hear a flick of a match and I look over to see Mama lighting a cigarette. I thought she stopped after Father caught her smoking outside one night. But here she is in the kitchen, not even a window open. I make a move to open up the window in front of her, but she stops me.

“Let it be,” she says. She takes a long draw, still not moving her eyes from the man outside. She smokes the entire cigarette without saying anything. When she finishes, she puts it out on the windowpane and lets it drop to the sill.

“Mama?”

At this, she finally turns to me. She cups my face in her hand and kisses me on the forehead. Then she wraps me into a deep hug.

“My strong boy...” she begins, but stops when she hears a door slam. The man outside has gotten back into his truck and inched along a few more feet. She looks like she is about to say something, but then doesn't.

“Go get ready for school,” she says. “I'll see you at lunch.”

I don't see Mama when I come home for lunch, but she left a note saying she had to go to town. She usually puts two slices of bologna in my sandwich, but today it's only one, so I figure she went to the grocery store. I take Fritz's and Luther's lunches to deliver them to the Gremel's farm. The Gremel's don't live that far away, and Fritz and Luther started working for them last spring when Mr. Gremel injured his knee one day. When I cross the line of farmers waiting to drop off their sugar beets, I look for the man with the red hair, but I don't see him.

The fields are mostly just mud now, with nothing much sticking out of them except a few stalks. Other times of year I would just cut across the fields, bypassing the roads. But now the ground is too soft to do that, so I have to take the long way around.

The Gremel's are dairy farmers, and own a dozen cows and some pigs. They sell to the Bach's who deliver milk, cream, and butter to our door. Fritz and Luther take care of most things on the farm. The only farm work I really do is sometimes thinning out corn stalks in the summer since I have to be in school during the fall and winter.

I get home from school and Mama isn't back from town yet, so I go back out to the church to play with Peter. Most days Mama will have me help her make dinner, but some days she's late, and she'll do it by herself. When I get to the church, I hear Peter by the school building. There's this long metal tube that acts as a fire escape from the second story classroom to the floor. Peter is climbing his way up the slide, metal popping and groaning until he reaches the top. Then he lets go and a few moments later his legs come out to where I'm standing.

"My turn," I say.

I crawl inside the tube: palms flat and knees bent I shimmy my way up. When we first started crawling up the fire escape a few years ago, I could only make it half way up. But now I'm strong, so I can make it all the way up easily. Near the top I almost cut my hand on a piece of metal bent out of the way, but I manage to miss it. When I slide down it echoes something harsh, louder inside than outside.

After a dozen runs or so, we start to tire and decide to make our way into the church. Peter absently goes up to check the organ, but its not plugged in, so we can't play it.

"Wanna race?" Peter asks.

"Yeah," I say, "but this time we start at the same time."

We go to the back row of the pews, him on the right side, and me on the left. We lie down on the floor, facing the underside of the pews.

“Ready?” I call out.

“Lets do this,” Peter says.

“Go!”

And with that, we begin sliding ourselves across the linoleum floor under the pews. Using the pews as a kind of ladder, we pull ourselves backwards towards the front of the church. My pants start to ride down my waist, but I know I need to start off with a strong start if I want to beat Peter. Stop now to adjust, and he'll pull out in the lead. I win about half the time, maybe him a little bit more since he does this with his brothers sometimes too. My arms are starting to ache, and because of the all the runs I did up the fire escape slide, I can tell I'm running slower than normal. But I keep pulling. A few more pews and I'll be at the front of the church. My chest starts to burn and I'm breathing hard.

“You're going to lose!” Peter calls out, sounding as strained as I do. I can't place where the voice is coming from, so I pull even faster. When my head finally gets to the last pew I look over just to see Peters hands gripping the edge. I lie on the ground and break out into a huge grin.

“Beat you!”

“Aw shucks,” Peter says. I stay on the ground and catch my breath. Peter crawls over to me, panting hard. He collapses next to me.

“Want to go again?”

“What? No way,” I say. “I’m tired.”

He turns his head and looks at my face. His cheeks are flushed.

“What, are you a sissy?”

Without giving me a chance to respond, he jumps on me and we start wrestling. I try to wrap my arm around his neck to take him down, but he’s too quick. I’m on the ground.

“Say it,” Peter says.

His knee pins my bicep.

“No way!” and I try to use my legs to kick him out, but I can’t get the right angle.

“Say it!”

He shifts his other leg so his knee is now pins my other bicep. I struggle to kick him off, but he leans back so far I can’t get a good angle. My arms and chest are starting to burn even more now.

“Uncle,” I yell out.

“What did you say?”

“Uncle, damnit.”

Peter moves his knees off my bicep but it still sitting on my chest. He is silent for a moment, as if contemplating his situation, and then lets loose a long and wet fart.

“Oh geeze, Peter, that’s gross,” I say, half laughing and pushing him off. And then, just to prove my point, I let my own fart out.

It's been twelve days since anyone last saw Mama. Nobody really talks about her being gone. I know better than to ask Father about it. He comes home later and later in the evening after work. Last weekend, I didn't see him at all. I heard his footsteps in the house early in the mornings, but that was it. Luther started smoking on the back porch or in the garage. Fritz is quiet now, almost as quiet as Luther. Nobody talks. I can't stand the quiet, even if Mama wasn't talking, at least she made noise. She cooked food, or cleaned, or turned pages in her books. I spend more and more time with Peter's family. They don't ask me about Mama, but I can tell they want to say something. I wouldn't know what to say. I feel awkward when I take home the casseroles Mrs. Albrecht makes, but no one else cooks.

At school, everything is pretty much the same except Miss Wolter tells me more often what a good job I'm doing. Yesterday she told me that if I needed anything or wanted to talk, she was available. I don't know what she could do, although I suppose it was a nice enough thing for her to say.

I keep sleeping with my windows open. This is a good time for me to be strong. I think that she'll be back before the first snow. I don't want Mama to come back and think I'm weak.

A few hours after I get home from school, Father, Luther, and Fritz all come back to the house. A little bit later I hear a knock on the door. It's Pastor Albrecht, Mrs. Albrecht and Peter. It's been a few years since Peter and his parents have been over. Mama made them dinner one night after Pastor Albrecht first started at the church. Despite Father greeting them warmly, they don't fit right in our house. I can't explain it, but it's almost like they take up too much room. Or they are too happy. Or something. After a few moments, Pastor Albrecht suggests that he and my Father go grab a beer in the garage. Mrs. Albrecht then turns to Fritz.

“Well, young man, let’s figure out some dinner for you boys,” she says brightly.

Peter and I follow them into the kitchen. I hope Mrs. Albrecht doesn’t get mad that her casserole dish isn’t washed yet. We tried to eat most of it, but there was something not right about the texture.

“Let me just look around and see what you have,” Mrs. Albrecht says, “Ok? Ok.” She seems disappointed when she opens the refrigerator. Besides a half empty bottle of milk, there are only leftovers from the casseroles.

“Dieter, dear, will you go find me a pencil and some paper?” she asks.

When I come back, she is sitting at the table with Luther trying to figure out what we eat for dinner. He shrugs. “Dieter was the one who helped her cook.”

“Dieter,” Mrs. Albrecht says turning to me, “What kind of things do you like to eat?”

What kind of things do I like to eat? What food did I help make? Usually I just chopped things up. She did the meat part. She did the putting everything together part. Mama just made everything smell and taste good. I want to say good-tasting things, but I don’t think this is what Mrs. Albrecht means. Luther is looking at me like I better answer this question right. I think he knows less about cooking than I do.

“Um,” I begin, trying to think of something. “Usually something with meat and a vegetable.”

“Like burgers or chicken?”

“Yeah.” I don’t know what else to say. Luther is looking hard at the piece of paper in front of him.

“Why don’t you go see what Peter’s doing,” Mrs. Albrecht offers.

I find Peter down by the river, poking the sand with a stick.

“Find anything good this time?” I ask.

“I’m not sure. Maybe an arrowhead.” He hands me a small stone. It’s almost triangular in shape, but there isn’t a real point to it. “Naw, it’s just a rock,” I say.

I find my own stick and I go poking around. Most times it will just be beer cans that wash up on the shore, or cigarette butts, but one time we found a pocketknife. It was small, and mostly rusted, but we were still able to carve into some wood with it.

“Whoa! Come look at this!” Peter yells out. In his sand covered hands he holds a cardboard box, half dry. The writing in primary colors is faded, and a cartoon bird is on the front. We look inside. There are three small firecrackers. One is completely drenched, and another one looks mostly wet. The last one, however, is mostly dry. Peter puts all three in his pocket. Giving up on half real arrowheads, we decide to head back to the church.

Peter is walking fast. Is he just trying to lose me? He seems intent on getting to his house for reasons I don’t know. Peter heads straight to the fireplace.

Peter takes the three firecrackers out of his pocket.

"Hey, watch this," he says, and throws them into the fireplace. Nothing.

"Damn. They must have gotten all wet," I say.

I start fidgeting around until I see a box of .22 long rifle shells. "Think these would do anything?" I ask Peter.

Before he can reply though, I've thrown one into the fire. There is a loud crack of explosion, the scent of sulfur in the air. It breaks up our stunned silence. I throw another one in. Crack. The another. Crack. And another. Crack. Everything is noise. I can't hear anything else. I can't hear anything although I can tell Peter is shouting at me. Who cares? My hands start to tremble as I throw more in, and then, in groups of twos and threes. I start laughing. Everything is loud and fire. I grab a fistful and throw it into the fire. Something hits me in the upper thigh, stinging. I look down. A red wet stain comes out from my leg.

Peter's face is white, like the color you'd expect to see on a model in a magazine. He's breathing hard. I feel light headed and fall to the floor. He helps me to a chair and tells me to sit still and leaves. Everyone is going to be really mad at me for this. My father is going to kill me.

Peter puts a towel on my leg and pushes on it. "Ow!"

"Shut up, just shut Up!", says Peter. There isn't much blood, but I'm not going to be able to hide this and Peter knows that, too.

"I'm taking you back on my bike to the river. We're going to walk to your house. We're going to tell your Dad you fell on a pointed stick. Maybe it was even an arrow head on the stick."

Sounded good to me. I sure couldn't come up with anything better. We follow the plan and get to my house.

Mrs. Albrecht is the first to see me. "Heavens, Dieter! What happened?!"

"I fell at the river and got poked by a stick. It might have even had an arrow on the end of it."

My Dad stares at me. I know he wants to say something but he doesn't. "I'll take care of him. Thank you for the talk Reverend."

The Albrechts leave and then my Dad turns to me.

He tells me to take my pants off. It's cold in the kitchen, but I try not to shiver. He prods the wound. "What the hell, Dieter," my father yells. He runs a hand through his hair. "I don't have time for this nonsense."

“Stop crying. You got yourself into this mess.” He looks deeper into the wound and finds the bullet.

“You did this with that Albrecht boy, didn’t you? Christ, even the great and perfect Reverend can’t keep his kids together. And he comes over here to talk to me like I don’t know how to take care of my own. And his wife comes all over and she’s just so perfect too, like we don’t know how to cook. We aren’t some charity case. You get that straight right now, Dieter, we do not need them to tell us how to live. What your mother does is no business of theirs or anyone else’s.”

My stomach drops. This is all my fault. I don’t understand. The Albrechts are so nice. But I was wrong? I must be wrong. Everything hurts. The pressure in the back of my throat travels all the way down my spine. My thigh burns hot. “Well, the good news is that it isn’t that deep. We should be able to get it out without a trip to the hospital.” I am confused to what he means, the bullet is still inside me, but I don’t argue when he tells me to follow him. We go out to the garage. “Sit down,” he says, motioning to his workbench. I sit down on the stool as he rummages around for something. I am still in my underwear and it is even colder in the garage. He turns around. “Not there,” he mumbles. “Sit on the bench. I need to sit on the stool.” A flame comes out. He is heating up something metal. I feel like I might poop my pants. I grip the edge of the bench. Everything will be ok.

“Alright, Dieter, sit still.”

“What are you going—“ I blurt out.

“Just sit still,” he commands, “I’m going to get this bullet out of you.” He is holding a pair of pliers. I can’t look. I can feel him dig into the tender flesh and I can’t help screaming.

Thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five. I count the leaves on the tree outside to ignore the pain that has spread through my entire body. As soon as I get to bed, I cry into my pillow, as quietly as possible. Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight leaves. My leg burns. I want to muffle a scream, but I don't want Father to come back to my room. By the time I get to the low-sixties, I hear Father's footsteps leading out the front door. An engine starts, and the gravel crunches as the car rolls out onto road. As soon as I can't hear the car anymore, a light comes on in my room. It's Fritz. He sits on the edge of my bed.

"How you doing, Deet?" he asks, softly.

I don't say anything. I keep my body turned to the window, away from him. I know if I talk, my throat will give it away that I've been sobbing. He puts a hand on my foot and gives me a reassuring squeeze. Tears start rolling down my cheeks, but I hold my breath so he can't hear me sniffle.

"Don't tell Father, but I have something that might help a bit." I roll over. In his hands, Fritz holds a small silver flask. I sit up, trying not to move my leg, but it still sears. I take the case he offers me and unscrew the lid. Just as I'm about to drink it, Fritz tells me to wait. Despite the coldness in my room, I start to sweat.

"Here," Fritz says, handing me a soda. It's warm, but I don't care. "So take a sip out of the flask, and then, take a sip out of the soda. It helps if you hold your breath." I do as he tells me, and it tastes awful. As soon as I breathe in, the raw taste burns my chest and throat. I try not to gag.

“Take another sip,” Fritz says, moving the soda to my mouth. It helps a bit, but the taste still lingers. After a few moments, I steel my courage and take another sip out of the flask, followed quickly by another sip of soda. I find it helps if I breathe through my mouth. I have another sip. And then soon after that, another. I notice that it doesn’t taste as bad as it used to, and I feel a warmth and lightness starting to spread through my body. I feel the pain in my leg, but I don’t care as much.

“How you feeling now?” Fritz asks.

“Better,” I say.

“Alright, that’s probably enough,” and he starts to make a movement for the flask.

“One more?” I dare.

“Alright, one more. But I’m going to get you a glass of water.” He leaves the room. I take a big sip, bigger than the other ones. It burns, but I want to feel better. When Fritz comes back, he makes me drink the water. I give him the flask and the empty soda can. I lay back down, finding it easier to move now, and close my eyes. I can feel sleep coming. Fritz makes his way to the door and then stops, turns around, and closes the window.

“There’s no reason for you to keep this open tonight. I don’t care what Father says, you were strong tonight.”

This is not right, but I don’t say anything. I’ll think about what I need to do about Peter and everything else tomorrow. As soon as Fritz closes the door to my bedroom, I sit up and swing my legs over the bed. My head is swimming, but I need to open the window. I can’t close the window. Mama

could come back tonight, and she wouldn't know what happened. I take my good leg and lead myself out, propping my body up against the bedside table. I'm unsteady, but I keep moving. But then I put a little bit more weight on my leg than I should and it shoots through me. My teeth clench, and I breathe in and out. I grasp the edges of the window and pull up, all the way. The window will stay open all the way, not just half way. It needs to be open. I hobble back to bed and fall asleep quickly.

The next morning, I ache all over. My jaw is clenched hard. It is freezing. I open my eyes and I can see my breath. I try to roll over to close the window, but notice my leg is stuck to the blanket. I look down and see blood has soaked through my bandage and to the sheet. I wince as I pull it away. I start to remember fragments from last night, and my stomach turns over. My mouth is dry. I let out a soft groan. I lay back on bed. I need to get ready for school, but everything hurts. I debate about staying home sick, but I don't think Father would allow that. I really wish I could stay home.

"Christ, why'd you open your windows for? It's freezing in here," I hear Fritz mutter. He crosses the room and closes the window. He sits on the corner of the bed and feels my forehead. "Damn it," he mutters and leaves the room. He comes back with the big quilt from his room and lays it on top of me. He leaves the room again and I hear him go into Mama and Father's room, and then to the kitchen. I start to hear noises, and then he comes back with Mama's bright pink hot water bottle. He wraps it in a towel and places it by my side. It's so hot that I can only hold onto it for a few seconds before letting go and just keep it close to me. Eventually I can hold the entire thing, and I start to feel myself warm up more and more. A little while later I start to smell Fritz cooking breakfast. He comes in with some fried eggs and a potato. The eggs have a little bit of black on them, but I don't say anything about this.

“Think you can make it to school today?” he asks.

I consider this for a moment. My leg aches, but everything else feels better. I try to move out of bed. My thigh goes on fire. My jaw clenches.

“Yes,” I say, trying to be brave. I know Father will be furious if I stay home.

“Ok. I dropped Luther off at the Gremel’s this morning, so I can drive you to school if you want. I’ll pick you up too.”

I am surprised when Fritz gets out of the car when I get to school.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m just going to talk to Ms. Wolter for a moment.”

“Please don’t,” I plead. The other kids can’t know I’m weak. What if Peter thinks I’m weak?

Father said that his family pitied ours. I don’t want to be pitied.

Fritz seems to debate arguing with me, but then grabs my backpack and pulls out a piece of notebook paper.

“If I write her a note, will that be ok? I’ll tell her not to let the other kids know.” I’m not sure this will work out, but I don’t say anything. After he scrawls out his signature, I stuff it into my backpack.

Peter tries to talk to me when I get into the classroom, but I try to avoid him. I make a show of organizing my desk and sharpening pencils. When he tries to corner me between lessons, I ask to use the bathroom. It’s not until lunch that I don’t have any more ways to avoid him.

“What’s going on, Deet?” he asks quietly. “Are you mad at me?”

“I don’t know,” I mumble.

“What happened after your dad got you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did you go to the hospital?”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it,” I say, louder this time. He doesn’t say anything for a few minutes.

“Want to come over after school today?”

I should say no. Father will be upset.

“I can’t,” I say. “Fritz is picking me up.”

“Oh.”

We eat the rest of our lunch in silence. Something starts to seep in my stomach though and I know I should tell him that I do want to come over, but I don’t say anything. Peter is my best friend. Maybe I can keep it a secret from Father, or try not to be so obvious about going over to his house. I wonder if we’ll go back to church. Mama says its important for us to go to church, and that I should look forward to being confirmed. Peter’s dad teaches it now, but I still have a few years before I have to go

through the classes. Would Father really stop me from being confirmed? No, I decide. Mama will be back by then and everything will be fine. Mama will probably be back soon, and she'll talk to Father about letting me spend time with Peter and his family. Mama will think it was nice that Pastor Albrecht and his wife took care of us. She'll be glad that Fritz started helping around the house. She used to argue with Father a lot about what Fritz's chores were.

A few days later my leg still aches, but it doesn't burn. Fritz helps me change the bandage when he gets home from the Gremel's and puts iodine on it. It stings, and I have to grit my teeth through it, but it gets less and less intense each day. I miss playing with Peter after school, but this is the way it has to be. He and his family made their choice. Father knows what to do. He wouldn't be in charge if he didn't know what to do. I need to be good. I try to focus on my class work, but its hard with Peter there. I know Peter's birthday party is coming up soon, but I don't know if he'll ask me over. I hope he does, even though I will say no. Mama will be home soon though, it's getting late in the year and snow should be coming any day. Once she gets home she'll straighten everything out.

The next Monday, I wake up chilled. I can see my breath and my nose is numb. I look outside my frost covered window to see there is a thin blanket of snow on the ground. I immediately jump out of bed and to go look around the house. I can't hear anyone, but that doesn't mean that Mama didn't come home sometime last night. First I go to the kitchen, but its empty and cold. Only three coffee cups are sitting on the counter: Father, Fritz, and Luther. Maybe Mama went out to go shopping for food? Maybe she wanted to make me breakfast? I go to her and Father's bedroom, but it is empty as well. The bed is already made. I go over to the Mama's pillow to see if I can smell her. I inhale deeply: faintly, there is a scent of baby powder and hair. It is too faint to be recent though. I go to their bathroom too, but all of Mama's stuff is still untouched. Everything is just how it should be, all her toiletries facing forward. But

then I peer closer and my heart leaps: her perfume bottle is turned ever so slightly to the left! She must have been here, sprayed a bit of perfume on herself, and gone off to the grocery store. That must be it.

I decide instantly that I will not be going to school today, but instead I will wait for her. It's been so long that I've seen her that I'm sure she won't mind at all. I think I should make it nice for her here, so I go into the kitchen to clean up. She'd like that. First I go through the refrigerator and clean out all the old casseroles. I take the garbage out, and wipe down all the surfaces in the kitchen. After that, I sweep and mop all the floors. She still hasn't gotten back yet, so I decide to clean and dust the living room. And then the hallway. Then our bathroom. Finally I do my room. She still isn't back, but I'm sure she'll be back any moment. Since I'm a little bit sweaty from the cleaning despite the cold, I go take a shower and clean myself really well. I put on clean clothes and comb my hair so it lays flat. She still hasn't gotten back by the time I've done bathing, so I go into the living room and sit on the couch. I try watching The Flintstones, and then when that's over, a rerun of Sky King, but I'm too distracted to really pay attention. Besides, I want to make sure I don't miss hearing her when she opens the door. She might need help carrying things into the house. Another twenty minutes pass by. And then another twenty minutes. Something in my stomach is starting to sink. It's almost two o'clock. If I did go to school, I'd be getting out in a half hour. Maybe she is going to meet me there. I didn't think about that.

I decide that I should try to meet her at the school. I'll stay kind of hidden so that the teachers won't see me and won't ask why I didn't go, but I'll still see where Mama is. I pull on my winter clothes and take care to make sure everything still looks nice and clean for Mama. The walk to school isn't that far, and although there aren't a lot of trees in Sebewaing, there is a small patch of pine trees that I can hide behind to get a good view. I don't see Mama's car waiting, but that doesn't mean that she won't be here soon. Ten minutes later and I hear the school bell ring and kids are starting to pile out of the

building. Fifteen minutes later and almost all the kids are gone, with a few stragglers left. Mama still hasn't come.

I figure maybe she is back home and we must have missed each other while I was out. I start to make my way back home when I hear Peter's voice from a few feet behind me.

"Hey, why weren't you in school today?" he asks.

"I just wasn't," I say, still walking, "I got to go, I need to be home."

"Wait, what's going on? You just come here and hide out in the pines after school and now you're going home? What gives?"

I decide maybe I shouldn't tell him, but in the end, I don't really care. "Mama's coming home today," I explain, still walking.

"Wow, Deet, that's great!" Peter bounces, "When did you hear from her?"

"I haven't really heard from her," I say, "but there's no way she'd be gone longer than the first snow."

Peter is quiet, but he is still walking beside me. "Are you sure about that, Deet?"

I stop. "Of course I'm sure about that. I even went to the bathroom today and saw that her perfume was moved a little bit." I can feel myself getting angry. I don't understand why Peter is so stupid.

"Could someone else have touched her perfume?" Peter asks quietly, not looking at me.

“What kind of stupid question is that? Why would my Father or brothers be playing with my Mama’s perfume? It’s a woman thing, they wouldn’t have any use for it,” I say.

“Dieter,” Peter begins, and suddenly his voice sounds like an adult. “Maybe I’m just saying there’s another explanation for why your mother’s perfume wasn’t in the same place. Couldn’t your dad have moved it?”

“Why do you have to be so stupid,” I’m yelling and I can feel my face getting red.

“I’m not being stupid. You’re being the stupid one!” he yells back.

“Why don’t you want my Mama to come back?”

“I do, Deet, I just don’t think that she came back to town because it snowed.”

“You don’t even know anything. You don’t want my Mama to come back. You and your family think you’re so much better than ours!” I scream at him. I don’t even bother to wipe the tears running down my face or the snot dripping down into my mouth. “You have this dad with this great car and a great mom and everyone thinks you’re just so great.” I want to punch him. “And you’re not all that great, you know that? I don’t want you to be my friend because you feel sorry for me.”

He choked out tears now. “Look, I’m sorry, whatever I did. I just want to be your friend again.”

Peter isn’t supposed to cry. He doesn’t cry. This is stupid. I don’t want to see this so I get up to leave. He doesn’t follow me.

By the time I get to my street, I can already see that Mama's car isn't there. I don't want to go inside, but I know I have to. Tears are still in my eyes and my throat is getting tighter and tighter as I approach the house. I open the door and everything is silent. Nothing has been moved since I left. I don't bother looking through the other rooms, I slip down to the floor and start crying.

After my voice is gone from sobbing and my sleeve is soaked from tears and snot, I go to the bathroom to blow my nose. Everything hurts. Mama is gone. She left us. She left me. She is supposed to see how strong I am. I look in the mirror and see my blotchy red face. My eyes are swollen and bloodshot. I can feel myself start to cry some more. I hold back my tears for a moment and go to Fritz' bedroom. He doesn't know, but I found his flask a few days after the night after I got a bullet in my leg. I've taken small sips when I was still in pain, but not so much he would notice. I lift up his mattress expecting to find the only the flask, but instead I find a mostly empty bottle of something brown. I bet its from this last weekend when Hank Thorner and him were hanging out in the garage. I pick up the bottle. It's about two thirds gone. I unscrew the lid and without hesitating, take a long drink. It burns worse than whatever he gave me before, and I almost choke and want to spit it out, but I don't. I go to the kitchen and grab myself a glass and a soda from the refrigerator. I go back to Fritz' bedroom and pour a good portion of the booze into the cup, and then top it off with the soda. It's still too strong, but I drink it anyway.

Fritz will be mad when he sees how much of his booze is gone, but I don't care. Maybe I'll fill some of the bottle with some water so he doesn't notice. Or maybe he'll just think Luther drank it. Although I don't think Luther has ever drank. Who knows? Maybe he does and I just don't know it. I try not to think of Mama, and I try not to start crying again. I finish the drink and feel like going for a walk. I don't want to be in this house any more. Mama's not coming back.

I don't really notice it, but somehow I've ended up by the lake. I suppose that someone might find it peaceful or pretty here with the fresh new snow, but I think it all looks cold and bare. I see a flash of brown out of the corner of my eye, and it takes me a few moments to steady myself and find the source. A deer has run off one of the docks and is now struggling in the cold deep water. Water is splashing everywhere, and its cries are loud.

My gut churns and I bend over and vomit. Everything about how the animal is struggling looks unnatural, its panicking. I've heard about this before from my Uncle James. I remember how he told me sometimes deer just go crazy in the winter and they'll jump in the water. That it's pointless to try to save them if you didn't want to drown with them. They're stronger than they look, especially in the neck. I always thought it was later in the year when they were more likely to do it, more likely to stumble out and get trapped under the ice. I hear a faint crack in the distance and it sounds like bone breaking. I feel like I'm going to be sick again. I sit down on the cold ground. The deer is getting more and more frantic by the moment, trying to find a way to shallower waters, but not doing a good job at it. It looks disoriented, and even at this distance I can see that it looks like drool is coming out of its mouth.

I don't even hear anyone, but I look over to see Peter sitting down next to me. I don't know why, but I'm starting to cry again. Mama is gone. And she's not coming back. Father is barely there, same with Luther. Fritz helps in his own way, more than the two of them, but it's not the same as Mama. She would actually talk to me. And now I've lost my best friend because of something stupid. My chest burns and aches, I'm hyperventilating. I don't know after how long, but Peter puts his hand on my shoulder.

Something in my chest breaks and I'm sobbing even harder now. Peter now has his arm around me and is hugging me. I start taking deep breaths, trying to get under control.

"I don't care what your Father says." Peter whispers. "You're my best friend."

"Ok," I say.

We don't say anything for a while. We watch as the deer becomes more and more tired, struggling to keep its head above water. Eventually, it stops struggling and sinks down below the surface.

I still feel kind of sick and dizzy, but I'm more aware of my surroundings than earlier. Peter stands up and grabs my hand. We pass my pile of vomit.

"That smells really gross, Deet, what did you eat?" Peter asks.

I don't say anything for a few moments. I think about brushing him off or lying, but I feel like I should be honest with him.

"I stole some of Fritz' booze earlier."

"Wow, no way. I thought I smelled something familiar but I wasn't sure. Have you had that before?"

"I had some after I got the bullet in my leg."

"Why'd you do that?"

"Fritz said it would take some of the pain away. It tastes awful, but it helped."

“Didn’t a doctor give you something for the pain when you went in?”

I sigh. I still don’t really want to talk about this.

“I didn’t go to a doctor. My Father took care of it.”

“Oh,” Peter says. For whatever reason, he decides to let this statement slide and not say anymore.

We walk in a silence back to my house, broken up only by sound of Peter and I sucking snot up our runny noises.

“Think I’ll see you at my birthday party this weekend?” Peter asks, with an edge of hope in his voice.

“Depends on where my Father is. If he’s gone, then I can sneak out without a problem. If he’s there, we might have to celebrate with something later.”

“Ok,” he says smiling, “I think I can live with that.”

Dieter Light. Age 18. Sebewaing, Michigan.

July 23rd 1967

The mosquitoes are out in full force this summer. I have a few fresh bites that I got on my arms last night as I was sleeping, or rather, wasn't sleeping, but I have enough sense not to go itching them at a funeral. Chris Limb was brought back a few days ago from Vietnam and nearly everybody's made it out. Except for Pastor Albrecht—he's down at the hospital in the city getting some treatments for TB. The sun's beating down hard and I'm wishing that Peter and I didn't drink so much last night. He's got to be feeling it too, but we're good at not showing it. It started off as us drinking to Chris and his Duce Coup. Chris bought it off of Pastor Albrecht and outfitted it over a span of a few months. It was painted bright red, a hot streak across farmlands. A few summers ago before he left for basic, he took Peter and me for a ride.

It was a hot day like today, only drier. It hadn't rained in a few weeks and we were looking for a way to cool down. So we piled into Chris's car and he starts down one of the back roads. Everything is going great, we've got the radio on, the windows down, shooting the shit. And then Chris revs up his engine and we're flying down past the Gremel's farm, past the cows and the fences. Peter is in the front seat, and he's calling out the speed Chris is getting up to: sixty, sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five and then he finally gets us up to ninety miles per hour. I'm sitting in the back, no seatbelt, and I swear we were going to fly off and crash and die, but we didn't. The wind was wiping at my hair and face, tears running down my cheeks as I sit up a little higher. I starting to shout and holler, and then Peter and Chris start whooping it up too. The edge of life and death held so precariously in the metal carriage

was thrilling. We wanted more and more, for the road to keep jutting out into the dusty horizon. To keep listening to endless rock and roll songs on the radio, to have our hair turn slick and oily from the wind.

Instead, Chris gets himself shot in Vietnam. And I'm trying not to look at all the old men in their old uniforms openly crying. A woman crying is one thing, but when a man breaks down, it's a hard kick to the gut. Girls at school will cry over the silliest things, a sappy song on the radio or another girl mentioning she doesn't like her lipstick. The look on the faces of these men crying would silence any silly crying girl instantly. Tears rolling over sun burnt faces, over beards, crying over Chris. Alfie Lutz is a hard sight to see. He always seemed to be the center of the social circle, inviting families over to watch the game, cookouts, and various food and booze-filled holiday parties. He never talked about his time in the war, never let on what he saw. As kids we used to ask him about it, but he'd just change the subject by pulling a nickel out of our ears or telling us to pull his finger. But now, hunched over in a metallic fold out chair in the middle of the cemetery, he's shrunken into himself, hands shaking as they bring a dirty handkerchief to his face, he doesn't even acknowledge that his wife has put her hand on his back.

Even worse is Chester Limb, Chris's father. He dry heaves into his sobs. He, like Alfie, was in WWII, but unlike Alfie, preferred a more reserved existence. I don't think I ever heard him talk aside from more than a few grunts. And now he's making the most noise I've ever heard him make. He's muttering these things, but it isn't my business to hear them. Or anyone else in this town, but that isn't stopping Kitty Geller from making sympathetic clucking and trying to comfort him. Chris's mother gives Kitty Geller a mean look that says to "go away," but Kitty either doesn't see it or doesn't care. I think about going over there and telling them where they can put their stares, but Peter sees me, and stops me. He reminds me that it will eventually get back to one of our fathers, and we'd have hell to pay for stirring up trouble at a funeral.

After the funeral we're all milling around in the cemetery kicking at the dirt and grass, trying to figure out something appropriate to say. How long does one stay afterwards? How long is it appropriate to linger? It's a death. Something that's going to stick around after we leave, no matter what we say. Some people are already leaving. I look over to Peter and he's telling Mrs. Limb about his memories of Chris taking us out in his car. I'm thinking about the shower I want to take when I get home: cold enough to numb me and wash away the sweat that has already soaked through my shirt. I notice Edna Strassenburg walking quickly up to Mrs. Limb. There is a worried look on her face. But instead of talking to Mrs. Limb, she gently grabs Peter's elbow and pulls him aside. Peter leans down and she whispers something to him and he immediately shoots up. Without saying a word he turns around and starts for the car. I have to jog to keep up with him.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"There's trouble in Detroit. Edna didn't know what—she said reports are sketchy. But she said it sounded like a riot."

We get in my 63' Ford Galaxie and Peter turns on the engine. We mess with the radio dials trying to find a relevant signal. The voice is loud and mostly clear, but every few moments it crackles and breaks. We catch the words, "Detroit" and then "last night at a blind pig," "mass fighting," "fires and looting," "race riot," and "national guard." My throat goes dry. How far does the rioting go. Is it just limited to the black neighborhoods? Peter looks pale,

Finally, we catch the fragment "It started when what Detroiters call a Blind Pig, and illegal after hours bar, was raided at 12th Avenue and Clarimont." My palms start to sweat.

"How far is that from Herman Keiffer Hospital?" Peter asks.

"Only a few blocks away." Peter's father is in the middle of the violence.

We slam the car doors shut and Peter peels out of the parking lot. I expect him to go straight to the highway, but he turns instead towards his house.

“What are we doing, Pete?”

He doesn't answer me, or more likely, he doesn't hear me. Leaning forward into the steering wheel and tense, I can see his thoughts racing. I ask again.

“I just need to pick up a few things,” he finally mutters.

“What kinds of things?”

“Protection.”

Peter turns into the driveway, and almost before the car is properly parked he's half way to the front door. I run out to the garage and grab a baseball bat. Peter is only gone for a few moments when he comes back with a gun. I didn't know his dad had a gun. I look down at the bat and decide I better bring something else. I go back into the garage and take stock of his dad's tools. I grab the seven-pound claw hammer. I think about taking the crow bar, but decide to leave it. We get into the convertible and peel out of the driveway and down the street. It's not long before we reach the highway. It's a little over two hours to get to Detroit, and at the rate Peter is going, we'll get there faster. But that's if we can get there. The radio says that police are already shutting down roads. I'd like to think that the police would protect the hospitals, but it seems like nobody knows anything.

“They wouldn't hurt sick people, would they?” Peter asks, his voice breaks. I don't know how to respond. All I've ever heard about Negroes was from Uncle Robert when he worked with them at Ford.

“Of course not. They’re not animals. Your dad is probably fine. We’ll just pull in and get him,” I
tell him.

*

It doesn't take us long to get to the outer limits of Detroit. The highway is surprisingly empty of police force. "All the police are probably downtown," I say.

"Sounds like we won't have to worry about being pulled over," Peter mumbles, and accelerates over the speed limit.

We keep scanning the radio to try to pick up more bits of information, but there isn't much helpful. Most stations aren't talking about what's going on. If we didn't hear what was going on from Mrs. Starassenberg or from the one shaky radio report, I doubt we would know anything was happening. I'm trying to remember where things in Detroit are located. I've only been there a few times. We drove Peter and his dad to the hospital a few months ago to drop off Peter's dad. Peter was always nervous about driving in the city, always managed to get himself turned around. Peter's dad says my mind is like a steel trap for directions, if I go someplace once, I always remember how to get back there.

"When we get closer, I'm going to let you drive. I think we're going to have to drive around trying to find open streets. We'll get as close as we can and you'll stay with the car and protect it. I'll go get my dad and bring him to you." Peter says.

It's not long before we see giant plumes of smoke rising off from the area around 12th avenue. Not wanting to cross 12th, I decide to go east, I figure we can double back. When we hit Elmhurst we see a patrol car. He motions us to pull over.

“You boys better turn around. It isn’t safe here,” the officer says. He looks tired.

“My dad is at Herman Keiffer Hospital. I need to get him out of there.”

“I suppose you do. Avoid the negroes as much as possible. They wont hesitate to beat you bloody.”

“Can you tell us what’s going on?” I ask.

“I don’t know much. I’ve been told to look out here to make sure there’s no trouble, but I don’t know what they want me to do. There aren’t enough officers on the ground to make much of a difference at this point. There’s rumor that they’ll bring in more, and I hope to God they do, but I don’t know when that’s going to happen.”

He motions us onward. I drive slowly through the streets. Last thing I want to do is rush into trouble when I can avoid it.

We turn the corner and we see a young teenager being sucker punched by a slightly older negro boy. I stop the car and grab my bat. The white teenager is curled up in a small ball, trying to protect himself. “Hey,” I yell. “Get out of here!” He looks at me, and my bat, and then he looks at Peter. His eyes go wide and he runs away. I turn around and see Peter is holding his dad’s gun.

I crouch down by the boy, “Are you ok?” I ask. He is grabbing his sides and trying to catch his breath. His nose is bleeding. “Hey, Pete, you got anything for his nose?” After a few moments, Peter throws me his white dress shirt. I suppose the funeral clothes had to go soon anyway. I’m sure I’ll lose my shirt soon enough. I help the boy up and drag him into the back seat of the car.

“Thanks,” he says. “He wasn’t holding back at all.” Just then, a group of three white boys round the corner.

“Dickie,” one of them yells out and comes running to the car. “What happened?”

“He got sucker punched. We scared him away though,” Peter says.

“I thought you were right behind us,” another boy asks.

“Everything is going crazy. Did you get any shots at him, Dick?” one of the boy asks.

“No, he punched me right onto the ground. He started kicking me, too.”

One of the older boy stands up straight and runs a hand through his hair.

“Thanks for taking care of my little brother,” he says. He takes a steady look at us. “You fellas get all dressed up for a fight?”

“We just came from a funeral,” Peter says. “We found out what was going on and we left right away.”

“You farm boys looking for a fight?” one of them says.

“No, his dad is at Herman Keiffer. We need to get him out of there.”

The boys go silent and look at each other. “We should get you to Chuck,” Dickie’s older brother says.

“Yeah, that might be a good idea,” one of the other boys agree.

“Who’s Chuck?” I ask.

“Chuck is a buddy of ours. He’s got his little sister at Herman Keiffer too. I think he went back to his house to get some protection before heading out. We were just going to meet him. Maybe you should come with us. It might be safer that way.”

I look over at Peter. I can tell he is thinking.

“Let us talk it over for a moment,” I say.

“Sure, before you do, I’m Hank, and this is Ed and Cal.” I size the three of them up. Hank, Dickie’s older brother, is taller than both Peter and I, but he probably weighs at least 15lbs less than us. Ed is shorter and stockier, with broad shoulders. He has a bit of a baby face, completely devoid of any facial hair. Cal, on the other hand, has a full beard and dark hair covering his forearms and hands. He’s a little bit shorter than me, but it looks like he’s got some lean muscle on him. They don’t look like fighters. They wear blue jeans and t-shirts. I can’t tell if they are rich or not. Would they steal a car? With everything going on, they might be able to get away with it.

“What do you think, Deet?” Peter asks quietly.

“I’m not sure. They could be lying just so they can steal the car,” I say.

“Yeah, or they could be telling the truth,” he says.

I let out a sigh. I think about what we have: car, hammer, baseball bat, gun. I can’t tell if they have any weapons on them. But they’ll know the area better.

“We’ll meet this Chuck guy and get a feel of him. If it doesn’t feel right, then we’ll dash. We can stick more or less to the original plan—I stay with the car and you run out to grab your dad. Chuck can come with you. I don’t think these kids are scrappers. As long as I’m not sucker punched, I think I can

hold them off for a while if I need to. You keep the gun, don't make a big deal about it, but keep it so they can see it. If they ask, tell them that I have one too," I say.

Peter sets his jaw. "Alright, we'll meet this Chuck guy."

The three boys pile into the backseat. "It's just a few blocks up on your right," Cal points out.

"Pull over," Cal points, "There's Chuck."

What the three boys lack in size and strength, Chuck makes up for. He's got at least four inches on Peter and I, and at least twenty pounds. His eyes are black, standing out in stark contrast to his sandy blonde hair. I notice that his knuckles on his right hand are bleeding. In his left hand, he carries a crow bar.

"What took you guys so long," Chuck asks.

"Some guy jumped Dickie," Ed says. Chuck peers in the back seat. "You ok, kid?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. Nothing's broken. These guys got to me before it got bad," he says, motioning to the front seat.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"I'm Peter, and this is Dieter. We're trying to get my dad out of Herman Keiffer."

Chuck doesn't hesitate. He opens the door and the three boys in back squeeze in tighter to make room.

"I guess that answers any questions we had about if we were going to do this or not," I mumble.

“Do you know what floor your dad’s on?” Chuck asks us.

I try to think. We weren’t allowed in the hospital, the last time we came by to see how his dad was doing, he waved at us out of the window.

“Third floor,” Peter says, before I can remember.

“What’s his name?” Chuck asks.

“Reverend Luke Albrecht,” I say.

“You guys picked up a preacher’s kids?” Chuck asks the boys incredulously. “Please tell me you aren’t afraid of a little blood.”

Peter pulls the gun out of his pocket. I look over; thankfully, he’s not pointing it at them. “We can handle ourselves.”

“Have you farm boys fought anything other than a cow before?” Chuck asks.

“Have you three even been in a fight before?” Peter asks slightly menacingly.

“Hey,” I say, trying to lighten the mood, “Cows weigh at least a ton.”

Chuck laughs, and then the other three boys join him.

“Alright, fair enough. We’ll drive as close as we can to the hospital and we’ll get out and grab your dad and my sister. Think you three can keep the car from getting damaged,” Chuck asks.

“I’m staying with the car,” I say.

“Alright. Fine by me. Between me and gun-toting farmer John here, we should be able to strong arm our way into the hospital.”

It takes us a while to find a clear street. I keep having to backtrack. We see fires in the near distance, alarms, broken glass, and trash cans toppled over. I see a few white guys pouring a can of white paint over a Negro man. It's not long before we see people looting, arms full of liquor bottles and food. Just when I think I've found a clear street, a loud thump comes from the back of my car. I can't tell if someone has thrown a rock at it or something, but I make a point to speed up. Then comes the sound of breaking glass, and more small hard things hitting the roof of my car.

We turn down another street, and window after window is being smashed. I stop immediately when I think I see someone lying naked on the ground, but when I squint, I see that it is half broken mannequin. There is a small group of white kids chasing two negro teenagers down the street. Someone steps out of a storefront with a gun and is yelling something I can't quite make out as people rush out of the store. The stores that have big signs that say "Soul Brother" seem not to have been broken into. Chuck points me down another street, and we get farther west of 12th. We pull into an alley between a middle class looking apartment building and a drug store. We can't see any fires, but we hear crashing and things breaking. The sky is getting smokier by the moment.

"Alright. We're a few blocks away from the hospital. Peter, I hope you can run fast. I don't want to risk cutting through all the yards, people around here own guns. We're going to go through the streets. When I tell you to stop or hide, you stop. I don't want to waste time saving you." Chuck says.

Peter gets out of the car and sticks his gun down the back of his pants. He bends down and reties his shoes.

"You sure you're ok to do this," I ask. "I can go with you."

“No,” Peter says, “you stay with the car. If for any reason you have to move it, tap the horn four times, once you find a new place to park.”

Chuck turns to Hank. “If we’re not back in an hour, make your way to the hospital. If something happens to me and I can’t get Sarah, I need you to promise me you’ll get her out of there.”

The color briefly drains from Hank’s face, but he quickly squares his shoulders. “I promise. I’m not going to let anything happen to her.”

Peter and Chuck run off toward the hospital. I’m sitting on edge here. I can hear chanting. The alley only has two exits. As long as we aren’t approached from both sides at the same time we should be fine. And as long as the adjacent buildings don’t catch on fire. I hear voices yelling about the fire trucks pulling away. I have the feeling whatever fires are out there right now are going to quickly grow uncontrollable.

I can’t tell if the looks that Hank, Dickie, and Cal are exchanging mean anything. I keep my right hand on the shift, and in my left hand, against my thigh, I grip the claw hammer. I hear a woman wailing in the distance about whitey. I can’t make out all of her complaints, but she sounds angry. I get the feeling that this thing is big. And I don’t belong here. This is not my fight. I don’t want to fight anyone. I just want to get Peter’s dad and leave. Getting Chuck’s sister might prove risky, but it’s too late to change that now.

“There’s a cop!” Dickie cries out. We all turn around. He is jogging with his hand on his gun, but it is still in the holster. I hope he doesn’t shoot anyone. I don’t think there are enough cops around to keep

him, or us, safe. He doesn't even take a second look at us. The sky is almost black with all the smoke in the air. I can't even see where the fires are beginning or ending. Another cop is running away, blood is coming down the side of his face. He doesn't even look at us.

"Maybe we should go help him," Dickie says.

"Are you kidding me? That is going to make us more targets than we already are," Hank scoffs.

"I'm pretty sure the only thing more dangerous than being white right now is being white in a uniform," Cal adds.

I check the clock again. Thirty-nine minutes since they left. It feels like three hours. I'm hoping that Peter's dad is strong enough to walk. Peter can probably carry him if he needs to, but it would be hard to do so dodging people. I see a man walking slowly across the entrance of the alley. He stops when he sees us. He looks alone. He takes a few steps into the alleyway. My heart stops. Hank, Cal, and Dickie all see them too.

"Give me your hammer and bat," Hank whispers.

"What? No. I'm not letting go of this," I say.

"Just give it to me. There's four of us in here, and one of him. I'm just going to scare him away."

Not knowing what else to do, I hand Hank the bat, and then the hammer. I shift the car into neutral. Slowly, Hank gets out of the car, hammer in his left hand, and bat in his right hand like some cowboy. He seems to age into a burly adult with these tools. The man at the end of the alley looks at him, and at his weapons. Then he cranes his neck, peeking in the car. He sees us seeing him. Without a word, the man turns around and leaves. Hank climbs back in the car.

"Maybe we should go, what if he comes back?" Dickie asks.

Hank taps the head of the hammer against his palm. "We need to stay here as long as possible. If they come back, we duck, and Dieter, you ram this car into them. As fast as possible we get out of here."

"How much longer do we have?" Cal asks.

"I have ten more minutes before I need to go out there," Hank says. If he's nervous, he's not showing it. I can almost feel the energy radiating off of him.

"I want my hammer back," I tell him.

For a moment I don't think he's going to give it back, but he does. "Farm boy, you think you can drive this thing like a mad man if it comes down to it?"

I give him a hard look. I'm not a child. I can drive a car. He can't be that much older than me. The sooner I get out of this city, the better. If only Peter would get here.

"There they are!" Dickie shouts out, pointing past me. Peter looks like he is bleeding from his face, and his father looks much smaller than I remember, but they're getting along fine. Chuck is carrying a small girl in his arms, her face is turned into his chest. Cal opens up the back door and squeezes all the way over to let the other people in. Hank gets out of the back seat and takes shotgun. As soon as he's in, I put the car into drive and peel out of the alleyway.

A week after Peter and I got back from our adventure in Detroit, we are, yet again, drinking beers in the back of the church. We are the talk of the town, rolling on up with bloody funeral clothes and dangerous stories. Everyone tells us how brave we are for rescuing the Reverend from those rioting Negroes. Everyone except my father. He feels that I was foolish for taking the car and driving into a war zone. I say a few things, and then he says a few things back, and we end up throwing a few punches. Peter broke us up before the cops were called, and I'd started to stay with his family for a few days. The funny thing is, no one really talks about it. I have no desire to go back to that house, and Peter's family is so busy dealing with the reverend that they barely noticed me. But now things just seem to stop: the riot ends and the news stations do investigative reporting, people across the country hem and haw over who's fault it was; some blame the blacks, some the cops, others blame Ford and the unions. But all of it seems so far away from our sleepy town. The hot days drag into hot nights. Flies and mosquitoes are ever-present, and we joke that it is only a few dozen short of a plague. Today's beers aren't even all that great—instead of giving us a nice buzz; they sit heavy in my stomach. I think about just maybe taking a cold shower and passing out.

“How's your father doing?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

“Better. We dropped him off at the new hospital this morning. This one is closer, which will put my ma at ease.”

We sit there for long moments. There is nothing really to say. In the distance, we hear the roar of an engine. Probably the Hoffmaster brothers with their newly supped up Deuce Coupe. Peter throws down his beer can and sits up straight.

“Let's go for a ride,” Peter says, standing up. He seems determined.

I down the rest of the beer and stand up. Walking to the car, Peter stops and turns to me seriously.

“I have a better idea. Let’s just leave.”

“What, like run away?”

“Deet, we’re eighteen, not twelve. No, we’re not running away. Let’s do it. Let’s get out of this town tonight. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life drinking hog-piss beers outside the church just waiting for the next stupid day to come. I’ve got a little money saved up. We’ll just grab some clothes, what money we have, and go.”

Something in my chest leaps up. My mind starts racing.

“Yes.” I don’t even care where we go. Peter’s right: it’s time to leave. I sneak into the house and start grabbing my things. Maybe I should pause and figure out what I really need and want, but I’m just grabbing the first things that come to mind: shirts, Levi’s, underwear, a pocket knife my Uncle Bob gave me that’s dull, but I like it anyway, some money, my journal, and a small toy car—a 1958 Ford Fairlane Skyliner. I’m just about out the door before I think of my Father. For the hell of a bastard that he is, I can’t just leave without letting him know what’s going on. I’m not her. At least I have some decency as a human being. I pull out a piece of paper and stare blankly at it. Do I write, “Thanks for being the shittiest father ever, I’m leaving and probably never coming back?” Or should I write, “Thanks for giving me nothing to keep me here?” In the end, I leave with a simple, “Father, I need to get out of this town. It’ll be for the best. -D.” I leave it on the kitchen table and I make my way out to the car. I throw my stuff in the back seat. I see Peter coming with all his stuff too. I have my handle on the car door before I stop. I run back inside and add a postscript, “Take care of yourself.”

I take shotgun in the Galaxie and let Peter rev her up. Before we even get to the end of the road, I start to feel more alert. By the time we get out of downtown, I feel completely invigorated by the breeze. I turn on the radio and The Who is on. Peter and I scream the lyrics to “I Can See for Miles,” and he’s

going so fast. We let out whoops of hollering, of joy. My muscles relax, and something deep inside me seems to shift. Peter goes faster and faster and we can barely hear the song over the roar of the engine but it doesn't matter because we know all the words anyway. And all lingering hurt and anger and fear that I didn't even know that I had seems to melt away as we cross county lines. Miles and miles and miles.

We finally stop driving when we hit Ann Arbor. Peter figures it's a good place to see people our age due to the university being right there. We stop on the outskirts of town, down some lonely road that we think is next to a park. Peter goes to the trunk and pulls out two beers.

"It's still tastes like hog-piss, but I wasn't going to let them go to waste," Peter says grinning.

"Cheers," I say.

We sleep in the car that night near a park and wake up by the screeching of so many birds. We walk down to the shopping district in search of some breakfast. The morning is surprisingly quiet for the amount of buildings in the area. There are a few older couples, families, walking in the streets doing shopping or going to work. A couple of times we see someone who looks around our age passed out against a tree or a building. It strikes me as strange, outside of the few times we'd been to Detroit, I had never really seen anybody on the street. Especially white kids. They look ragged, some of them worse than others. If it weren't for these few kids, you wouldn't think that kids our age lived here. It's not until late afternoon that the town starts to come to life. I'm starting to feel self-conscious; our clothes seem too conservative, our hair, too short. I wonder what are we going to do? Just walk around by ourselves until we get bored? Hope someone talks to us? Growing up in a small town it had never occurred to me that I'd have to introduce myself to strangers. How do people even meet? Everyone I know is from church or school or was related to someone. I always thought Peter was good with people, but compared to what? He always had some basis for meeting people. If I were to tell any of my concerns to Peter, he'd probably tell me that I was worrying too much. Ever since I was a kid I worried about things. The only difference now is that I've learned not to talk about it. Even though things work out more or less okay most of the time, I still can't switch my brain over. It starts as a feeling in my throat, and then spreads to my spine. It will usually escalate to me wanting to throw up, and then finally, my heart feels like it is about to jump out of my body. Everything becomes tight, too bright, too intense. It's best if I don't show it though. Mostly because I learned early on it didn't make a damn of a difference if I did. But I don't want to think about this now. I take a deep breath and try to remember last night. I am in a new town. Maybe I could be a new me. I don't even know what that would look like though. I feel a grin forming. I don't even know how I would do that, but I could. And suddenly I get that feeling of excitement back.

We turn down State Street and try my best not to stare. Every color is so bright; clothes flow down bodies. The smell of sweat and cigarettes and grease from burgers and something else I can't quite

identify hangs in the air. Some girls carry a couch with bright red lamps on it, other students pass out fliers, some laugh like their life is leaving them. I try not to stare at the women who aren't wearing bras. I never realized how soft bodies could look. I see that Peter is failing at not staring. There is a short girl with waist length white blonde hair walking toward us, breasts bouncing. It takes me long seconds to make eye contact to see that she is laughing at us. I blush fierce.

She stops and looks at us both. Then, starts laughing. Loudly. She is gasping for air, holding her sides, laughing. Tears are falling from her eyes. I turn to Peter, who has the same expression of bewilderment.

“Come on,” I mutter, pulling at his sleeve.

“Wait,” the girl cries out. “Wait a moment.” She takes a few deep breaths and puts her hands on her hips. Her face is flushed, but she looks so joyful.

“You guys are cute. Want to come to a concert?”

“What, what are you going on about?” Peter demands.

“I'm sorry, its just your faces are just so...” right before she finishes, a hand comes out of nowhere and claps it over her mouth.

“What crazy shit is my sister saying now?” the owner of the hand laughs.

“Tell me you see it too,” the girl laughs, pointing at our faces.

“Naw, I've already come down,” the boy says. “Come on, lets go to Jed's”

He turns to walk away, but the girl stops him. “Wait, I’ve already invited these guys.” The boy sighs. The girl looks up at him with a big smile. “Please?” she says.

“What’s your name?” the boy asks.

“I’m Peter, and this is Dieter,” Peter says.

“Dieter,” the boy snorts, “What kind of name is that?”

“It’s German. It means strength.” I say, standing up tall. My name is not funny. I can tell that Peter starts to tense up. I try to size up the boy. He’s about my height, a little taller, but his shoulders are broader and more muscular. He is suntanned and covered in long patches of freckles. Like his sister, his eye lashes and eyebrows are white blonde, which almost gives him an angry look. Unlike his sister though, he has long bright red hair that is tied back into a ponytail. For whatever reason, maybe because of Detroit, maybe because a girl’s here, I decide I don’t really want to fight.

“Peter, it’s fine,” I say quietly.

“And what’s your name?” Peter asks the boy.

“Be nice,” the girl says to the boy. “Please? They look like they’re just some farm boys.”

The boy shrugs. “Fine,” and then to us, “I’m Lyons, and this is my sister Honey.”

“Wait, you’re saying my name is funny? We have a ‘Honey’ and a ‘Lion’? At least I’m not calling myself after some animal in Africa,” I say sarcastically.

“Lyons is my last name, man. L-Y-O-N-S. Nobody calls me by my first name,” he says. “And as for Honey, well, I’m not going to argue with you there. I think it’s stupid, but only I’m allowed to say that. Got it?”

For some reason, this strikes Peter as funny and he starts laughing.

“We’re fine, we’re fine. It’s ,” he says.

“Good. Now we’re all cool. Let’s go to Jed’s and listen to some music.”

Honey grabs Peter’s and my hands and drags us along. I look over to Peter. “Let’s just go with it, if it gets weird, we’ll just leave.”

Lyons goes and gets us some beer and wine cooler from the Wikels and Robinson drugstore . Honey seems to know some people sitting against the building in the parking lot and gives one of them a cigarette.

“I have a good feeling about this place,” Peter says. “Everyone seems so relaxed.”

“Yeah,” I say. “The girls aren’t too bad either.”

We get to a huge house and make our way to the backyard where there is a keg and band equipment being set up. Some guys pull firewood out of someone’s truck. A group of about a half dozen pass around what I can only assume is a joint. The house looks like it’s falling apart, and long stretches of cloth or plywood are covered in murals and what I guess are political slogans. A couple different groups set up tents around the edge of the yard.

The band starts playing and all I can hear is noise. I have no idea what the singer is saying, but there are a few girls standing in front of them singing words. It's nothing like I've ever heard on the radio. It's messy, meandering like jazz but not quite. Long minutes pass without lyrics, and I'm not sure if the guitarist is making everything up on the spot. Honey hands me a joint. I take a hit and exhale. It tastes pungent and verdant.

"What are you doing?" Honey says, a smile spreading across her face. She takes the joint from me. Takes a long drag and holds her breath. After a while, she finally lets it go.

"You have to hold it in, like that," she says. She hands me the joint again.

This time, I breathe deeply in until it burns. I want to cough, but I suppress the urge. When I can't hold my breath any longer, I finally breathe out. My lungs burn and I start to cough. I try to stop, but I can't. My throat is raw. Tears are starting to pool in the corners of my eyes. I look up to Honey and she grabs a beer from her friend and hands me it. I drink the beer quickly and the coughing stops.

"First time?" she asks.

I blush. I'm not that sheltered. Maybe I haven't smoked pot before, but where was I going to find it back home? I've probably drank more than she has.

"It's cool. Everyone is like that their first time. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks. Um, when am I supposed to feel it kicking in?" I ask quietly.

"Have another hit and wait a little bit. If you don't feel anything after like ten minutes, have another."

I wonder if Peter knows this. I turn my head to search the crowd for him, but I don't see him. When I turn back, I see that Honey is holding her breath and takes a step closer to me. She pulls my head down for a kiss, but I'm surprised when I feel her start to blow her smoke into my mouth. Her lips are soft, and again I do my best not to feel surprised. This time I do a better job of not coughing, but as soon as she stops kissing me or whatever she is doing, I exhale. This time I don't cough.

"Figured I'd make it more fun for you," Honey says.

I can tell that the beer and the joint are starting to affect me. My whole body relaxes and every one seems infinitely capable of so much humor and beauty. I look across the fire and see Lyons talking to Peter. It's funny, the way the light is catching his face, his eyebrows and face look less menacing and more relaxed. His jaw is squarer than mine, but his lips are bigger than most men, like his sister's. I feel a hand pull at mine and at my shirt. Suddenly I am shirtless and the summer air feels good on my skin. A girl with black hair, I think Honey said her name was Judy, or maybe it's Julie, or Susie, but whoever she is she is pulling me over to a recliner, and she is moving fast. I'm stumbling, but I keep up. Just as my world stops spinning so fast, I realize that she is painting on my chest. Some other girl is painting on my bicep.

"You know," the girl who is painting me says, "you're too cute to be a Dieter."

"What do you mean?"

She breaks out into a wide grin and moves closer to me. "Want me to tell you a secret?" Her breath is hot on my neck.

“Ok”

“I grew up with the name Mildred. Mildred! Can you imagine? Look at me, do I look like a Mildred to you?”

“Not really,” I say, tentatively. I don’t want to offend her.

“Sure, some friends called me Millie growing up, but it never really felt like me. Once I moved out on my own I decided to make my own name.”

“What did you pick? For your name?”

“Pepper.”

“Like the spice?”

“Yeah. I think it suits me much better. I’ve also tried out Ginger, Lavender, and Sassafras. Didn’t you ever try to think of a different name for yourself?”

Truth be told, I’ve dreamed up about half a dozen names for myself. But you can’t go around telling people who’ve known you since you were in diapers to call you something else. I should just told Honey and Lyons that my name was “Deet.” Peter calls me that often enough. But that’s not something I ever really think about when meeting new people.

“Maybe,” I tell her.

“Well, if you want to do it, I’d shop around for a few names until you see what fits,” she says with a smirk. I don’t really like the idea of trying out different names though, so I decide that whatever I pick, that’s going to be it. No changing my mind. I get up off the recliner and look down at my torso. This

is my new skin. They painted a swirling vortex of colors that emanates from my heart. Blue, red, yellow, green. A few streaks of purple and white. Some globs of paint curl up in my chest hair like flower buds. I go back to watch the band, and everyone is really getting into the music. I can't tell where the songs are beginning or ending, but it doesn't really matter since it all seems so wonderful. I pay attention to every note, and I'm impressed by the creativity—each note seems to fit so right, yet is so surprising. I can't help but think this music could change everything, if only people would really listen.

I wear this new skin through the night, and don't even bother to wash it off the next day. Everyone pretty much ends up camping outside the house or going off in couples, so Peter and I borrow a few blankets and sleep under the stars. We hang out with Lyons and Honey and their friends for a few days. Some people come and go, others, like us, stick around. Most of the time we shoot the breeze, or play music, or walk around town. Honey seems intent on getting some specific drugs, which gets annoying after a while. Everything is going pretty great. Peter and I smoke pot with them a few more times, and everything seems new. The trees and the animals and all the people seem more intricate, more interesting, everybody is funny, and food tastes sweeter. We both warm up to Lyons more. Bad first impressions aside, he turns out to be a pretty nice guy. Although he isn't the most charismatic of everyone there, people genuinely seem to like him. Eventually, Peter and I acquire a simple tent that we take with us wherever we go. Honey makes a few hints about wanting to kiss me again, or that we should go to the tent alone, but although she's cute, I'm not really into it. Maybe it's her personality—always jumping from one point to the next, always moving, that becomes so tiring for me. When she's not going on about what drugs she wants to score, she talks about depressing political stuff. I suppose the things she talks about are valid—she can usually get a few people to agree with her and go off on long political rants—but it seems too serious for me, too out of place. When I tell her this, she rolls her eyes and says that I'm part of the problem. But before she can decently work herself up over this, she pulls out some weed and calms down.

A few nights later we're having another party. Lyons and a couple of guys play instruments. Peter is off talking to some other guys, and I think how great it is that we can go off and hang out with other people. The first day or two we were constantly together, unsure of how to make conversation and friends on our own. Now, we'll only really talk once we go back to our tent. It's not that we don't enjoy each other's company, it's just that having other friends is so new. I don't feel threatened here, and even though I'm sleeping on hard ground, I can't think of a time I was more relaxed.

I look over across the fire, and Lyons gives me a look that makes something turn over in my stomach. His eyes look right through me. My throat goes dry and I feel the pull of urge below my navel. I look away, ashamed. Whatever I just felt seems wrong. I get up from the circle and light up a cigarette. I turn back around, and Lyons is talking to somebody next to him. I take stock of all the angles from his neck that lead down to his broad shoulders and chest, his forearms, and finally his lean and muscular thighs. When I look back up to his face, he is staring at me again, this time with a slight grin. I feel my face go red.

Somebody suggests that we go to someplace called "The Arb," so we all make our way down the street. Peter seems to be in a good mood. He jumps on my back and I start running through the street. Everyone is happy and vibrating, our laughter carries through the night. There is a faint breeze that lifts the oaks and the maples, and under the streetlights there seems to be a never-ending pattern of colors. The moon is big tonight, and everything is washed in a soft glow. Lyons carries a guitar on his back and jokes around with Honey. When we get there, I am surprised at how big the park is. We end up half falling, half tumbling down a big hill. There are a couple of other groups of kids our age there, and we say hi.

After a few beers, Honey yells out that we should play capture the flag. We ask a couple of the other groups of kids if they want to play, and they agree. To make things easy, we eventually agree to divide the teams up into men and women. We vote on the leaders, and Pepper gets some white fabric out of her bag and she gives the piece to some girl named Audrey, and the other piece to Lyons. We huddle up and discuss our strategy. In groups of two, the guys go off in different directions in search of the flag. Peter goes off with some guy to climb a tree to see if they can figure out where the girls are going. I feel like I should probably attach myself to some other groups, but I feel the urge to stay next to Lyons.

We walk to the area that Lyons said we were going to hide the flag in silence. My palms start to sweat and my stomach feels tight. The pine trees seem to close us in. We are both quiet walking in the leaves, careful not to break twigs. Peter could never be quiet when we were out walking. It was as if his muscles simply didn't know any other way to move. Lyons finds a suitable tree and ties the flag around one of the branches. He motions for me to follow him off to hide so that we can keep an eye on our flag. I find some branches that are low to the ground and lay on my stomach.

Lyons lies down next to me. He starts pointing out different places where he thinks that the girls could come from. My heart is beating so loud I'm afraid that he'll hear me in this quiet. I can feel his hot breath. Forever passes, and I don't even know if anyone else is around. All I know is that Lyons is a few inches from me. I try to tell myself to calm down, that nothing is happening, and I'm getting myself worked up over nothing. But then, Lyons shifts ever so slightly and his finger lightly runs over mine. I immediately get hard. I'm terrified to move or acknowledge what is going on in fear that he'll stop or that I'm imagining it. He just keeps running his finger over my hand. I shift my hand ever so slightly and he locks his fingers through mine. My mouth goes dry. I get enough courage to look at him, and he is staring

at me. He moves his face closer, slowly. I can smell musk and flowers. I look down at his lips. He leans in closer and brushes his lips against mine. He is right here. Against my lips. I freeze.

I pull away, and stand up hastily. I mumble something about needing to go check the perimeter, and that I think I heard a noise. I know I'm breaking twigs, and probably alerting anyone paying half attention to the sounds around them exactly where I am, but I don't care. My chest starts to tighten up. I need to get out of these woods and into a clearing. I don't know what's going on. Guilt stretches over me skintight. Lyons is a guy. That's not right. I'm not right. I start to feel tears running down my cheeks. I feel disgusted with my whole body. My breath is shallow and I can't seem to get enough air. I finally get out to the clearing. When I see people off in the distance, I try my best to steady my breathing. I don't walk to talk about what's wrong. I pretend that I was tagged and I go stand around the other people who are out. I stay quiet, afraid of what my voice would sound like if I said anything. It's not long before when one of the guys who Peter went off with is doing a full sprint back across the clearing with a flag in his hand, cheering. There are half a dozen girls chasing after him, but he has too much of lead for any of them to catch up. When he gets to the tree that we designated as home, the guys let out whoops and cheers. A couple of them start teasing the girls. Peter and everyone else still in the woods make their way back to the clearing. I keep an eye out for Lyons, but I don't see him anywhere. I can't tell if I'm thankful for that or not.

Peter comes up behind me and slaps me on the back. "That was fun. I don't remember the last time we played it."

"Yeah," I say. "It was great." Peter looks at me. He can tell something is wrong, but he doesn't ask about it. We start walking back to where we left our tent and out of the corner of my eye, I see Lyons' unmistakable figure emerge from the woods. He doesn't look at me. Instead, he goes to his sister and

some other friends. The back of my neck starts to prickle. What if he tells someone? I try to over hear what they're talking about, but I only catch parts of the conversation. They don't seem to be talking about me.

"Dieter!" Peter says.

"What?"

"I've been trying to talk to you for the last five minutes and I don't even think you're in this world. Did Honey give you anything?"

"Oh, no. Sorry. I was just distracted."

"You doing alright?" he asks quietly.

I let out a sigh. "Yeah. Something weird happened. I'll tell you about it later." I don't actually intend on telling Peter later, but I want him to stop asking me about what's going on. He'd just become more curious and suspicious about it. It's best to let him think that I'll tell him later and then I can just make up something stupid.

Most everybody decides that this is a good place to camp for the night, so we set up our tents. Everyone's tired, so no one bothers building a fire. I notice one of the girls is crying and a few girls are trying to comfort her. I don't want to get involved, but I get the idea that she someone she liked is hooking up with someone else. I notice that a lot of the couples seem to only stay together for a few days. I don't think I've had anyone really introduced to me as someone's 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend.' I never really dated any girls back in high school mostly because no one was interested in me. That, and it was kind of weird thinking about a girl romantically since I knew her since she was in first grade. Peter dated a few girls in high school, but they never lasted more than a few weeks. But now I'm starting to wonder

maybe I didn't date girls for a reason. Oh God. Do I like girls? I've never had a girlfriend, but I know I'm attracted to them. Breasts and hips and everything else are wonderful. I let out a long sigh of relief. I like girls. I am ok. Tonight must have just been something out of the ordinary. It will be fine tomorrow. We can still have a good time.

Just as I'm about to close my eyes, the tent flap opens and Lyons comes in. "I can't sleep. You guys want to hotbox?" he asks without ceremony.

"Yeah," Peter says. "That actually sounds great. I've never smoked before I've gone to bed."

"It's pretty rad. Your mind will go all these great places. And when you're tired, you're already in bed."

Lyons sits down cross-legged between us and lights a bowl. Peter is already sitting up. I think about passing the bowl over and not smoking, but I decide that it would be a good thing to do to calm down. I take a deep hit. Everything will be ok. Lyons starts telling us this crazy story about how he hitchhiked around Canada for a few weeks last summer. He's waving his hands around, and Peter is in hysterics. There's something about a trucker and a deer, or maybe it was a police officer and an opossum, but either way, I can't follow along because I'm too far-gone. I mumble something about going out to take a leak and find everyone else is pretty quiet. The grass is soft and wet under my feet. I look up and all I see is stars. I lean back so far that I nearly fall over. I regain my footing and leave the clearing, compelled to explore the woods. Everything is so quiet out here. I can't stop looking at the way the moonlight cuts through the pine needles and leaves. When I look down, I see fireflies. It takes me a couple of tries to catch one, but eventually I am able to. I look around, and see that I'm pretty deep in the woods. I'm not sure exactly where the clearing is. I try to remember the general direction of where I came from, and start walking. Nothing looks familiar. I sober up very quickly. I have no idea how big these woods are, or where the campsite is. This was so stupid.

“Dieter,” a voice calls out of nowhere.

My heart jumps. I turn around and I see Lyons, coming out from between two trees. “You ok, man? I got worried when you didn’t come back.”

I let out a deep breath and try to steady myself. “Jesus, you scared me. Yeah, I kind of got lost.”

“Glad to see you’re good. The clearing is this way,” he says. The silence is awkward, and I’m trying to think of something to say, but I can’t think of anything.

“Look, I’m sorry about earlier. I just thought I saw something there that wasn’t. I don’t want things to be awkward between us.”

I’ve calmed down a bit from earlier, but I do not want to talk about this. I don’t want to think that there was something there. And as much as I hate to admit it, he wasn’t far off in his assumptions. But that’s not ok.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it.” I say, trying to lighten the mood. If we can just both pretend that nothing happened, then maybe everything will just blow over.

“Thanks, Dieter,” he says. There isn’t any particular inflection or emotion he puts behind my name, but for some reason, the way he says it pulls at below my navel.

“I’m thinking about going by something different,” I say, changing the subject.

“Different? You don’t want to be Dieter anymore?”

“Would you?”

Lyons laughs, but not unkindly. “No, I suppose not. But once you get used to it, its not all that bad. It’s different.”

Apart from my mother and grandparents, this is the closest anyone has come to saying something nice about my name. And all those people are gone. Lyons’ half complement is too little, too late. It is time to change my name.

“I think I’m going to start going by ‘Hazard’ now.”

Lyons lets out a low chuckle. “Hazard, eh? Well, if that’s what you want to go by, then go for it. I think it’s rad. Alright, so, Hazard, shall we go back to the campsite?”

Hazard's face spreads into a wide grin. Hazard. Hazard. This is a good name. The vowel sound is stronger than the "ee" sound in Dieter. Hazard is more masculine. Hazard is braver, less anxious. Hazard is not just some farm boy hick. Hazard is an adventurer.

He is surprised on how fast his new name catches on. A lot of people think it's cool and transition almost seamlessly. Peter balks slightly, but knows better to say anything in front of their new friends. For that, Hazard is grateful. They come to an unspoken agreement that Peter can call him "Deet" when it's just them. Otherwise, he avoids saying his new name as much as possible.

The summer seems endless, with the days and nights flowing into each other. The partying gets a little dull after a while, and we're running low on cash, so Peter and I decide to get day jobs going door to door asking for campaign donations. It's hard work, and people ask us more questions than I have the answers for, but it gives us a chance to sober up for a few days. By the time the weekend comes, it feels like we've earned the right to party. Peter and I don't talk about what we want to do when the summer ends. Instead we pretend that we can live the rest of our lives like this.

One Friday, Peter tells me he wants to stop by one of the anti-War rallies on the campus Diag. I'm not really in the mood for anything serious—I've been fantasizing about smoking a fat blunt since noon. Some of the other people on staff will smoke on breaks, but I tried it once and found that I couldn't make any sense of what was going on. One of the people on my route, Wyatt, tells me that I shouldn't worry about money so much, that I should be more concerned about spreading and living a peaceful existence, but I find this unsettling. He tells me to stop being such a farm boy and to learn to "really live." I can't tell if he's assuming too much about me. This summer feels like I am actually living for the first time in my life, but Wyatt and some others make me think its not good enough. I talk to Peter about it though and he agrees with me—we're in a good place right now. I don't want to end up like one of those ragged skinny kids on the streets who don't know when people are talking to them, begging for change and hoping someone gives them drugs. We both straddle something, in moments it feels like we could fall either one way or the other, but we can't stop walking this line. We can't go back to Sebewaing. We can't end up in the gutter. So we balance.

There seems to be a couple of groups gathering on the Diag, and I'm surprised to find Lyons and Honey there as well. Honey talks to some people with VOICE, and Lyons sits under a tree with some of the Non Violent Student folks talking animatedly and passing a joint. There are a couple of other groups scattered around, each holding their own signs. I make my way to Lyons, and Peter goes to Honey.

I sit down at the crotch of the tree next to Lyons, and he greets me with a big smile.

“Ready to have a good night?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

He produces a small piece of paper with a pink star on it.

“What is this?”

“This, my dear Hazard, is how you’re going to see the world in color. It’s LSD. It’s going to expand your mind.”

I’ve heard Honey talking about LSD a few times before, about how it’s a life changing experience, and how to have a good or a bad trip.

“The trip will last around 6 or 8 hours. If you feel like you’re in a bad place, let us know and we’ll get you out of there. Stay positive and be open and everything will be groovy, Hazard,” Lyons says.

“So no one will judge me if something happens and I need to move?”

“No way,” he says, “I’ll take care of you.” I try to suppress the warmth that flares up in my chest knowing that Lyons will keep me safe.

“Why don’t you go tell Peter and he can take some too,” he suggests.

I get up from the cool chair of the tree and eye Peter across the Diag talking to a black woman. They seem to be in an intense conversation and while there are other people in whatever group he is talking to milling around them, they are not paying attention. As I get closer though, I can pick up parts of conversation.

“You see, that’s the problem though, you white kids think that it’s all separate. The white kids protest what’s going on in Vietnam and materialism, the black men want equality, and where does that leave black women? It leaves them behind. Don’t you see it’s all connected?”

“Yeah, but we can’t solve all the issues in one big group. There’s too many different goals. Why can’t you just work with the feminists?” Peter says, motioning to another part of the Diag where some women have gathered.

The woman scoffs. “They don’t want nothing to do with black women. Sure, they’ll spout off about sisterhood, but it aint real sisterhood. They think their experiences apply to everyone, and it dosen’t.”

“That sounds like something you need to work out with them,” Peter offers. The woman is just about to open her mouth before I clamp a hand on Peter’s shoulder.

“Hey Pete,” I say.

He greets me and introduces me to the woman. “This is Claire, Claire, this is my friend Hazard.” I’m secretly pleased that Peter has become so seamless in introducing me by my new name. Claire is a little bit shorter than me, with a long neck and an open face. She wears her hair in two pigtails in an Afro style. If she seems annoyed at me butting in their conversation, she doesn’t show it.

“Sounds like you guys are having a fun debate,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

“It’s all in a day’s work,” Claire says, smirking.

Peter looks at me expectantly like he wants to get back to the conversation so I mention the LSD. He seems open to the idea.

“Sure, but not right now though. I want to keep talking with some people,” he says. At that, I say goodbye and head back to Lyons, who gives me the small blotter paper to put on my tongue.

We all leave from the rally and head over to a house on Hill Street to see a band. Lyons tells me it's supposed to be really freeing, because it's actually an original band, not one of the many Top Forty cover bands that usually play at the frat parties. So far the only difference I can tell since taking the LSD is that things are starting to look slightly off, although I can't tell how, and there is a slight pressure in my head.

The house is three stories, with a great big half circle porch. The back yard slopes down slightly, with a fire pit in one corner, and a small stage off to a flat part on the right. The band is just starting to warm up: loud screeches of static are followed by quick chords that reverberate throughout the air. These only momentarily drown out the birds, because once the sound settles, they are back to chirping away, singing higher than the human voices that are gathering below. The sun sets in the background, violent red and orange, with a few wisps of clouds throwing yellow shadows across the sky. The grass and dirt are lush under my feet, and I enjoy the grainy texture between my toes. I become mesmerized when I notice that I can see the trees breathing. Their rough bark rises and falls, woody lungs shake squirrels and birds and small insects in their homes. I realize that the squirrels and the birds and the small insects must breathe in tune with the tree's breath, so connected they are to their home. The leaves stretch and reach outward to drink up the last of the fuchsia daylight. Small silver-winged insects fly through the air, gossamer and iridescent. Peter clamps a hand on my back and smiles at me. Wordlessly, he opens his mouth and places the small piece of paper with a pink star on his tongue. I watch his Adam apple bob as he swallows, and I understand that Peter and I have the same dirt in our blood. It's the same Sebewaing soil, and even though I'm gone from there and don't want to go back, this to be a good and pure thing. Eternal blood in our muscles with everything coming from our heart, that organ full of rich black soil, good for growing sugar beets and delightful to get under my fingernails. We are Sebewaing. Sebewaing of the dirt and rain and pig shit. Sebewaing of long country roads and horizons stretching into infinity. Sebewaing with its blessed soil. "Hey! Did you hear me? I asked you how long it took for it to kick in?"

Peter asks. I'm not sure how much time has gone by but I tell him I guess its been about an hour, but I've been feeling the affects for a little while now. Peter's eyes narrow, and brings his face closer to mine. Brother. Brother. Brother. Bother. Bobtailed wild brother running through the forest, bopping on bitty field mice on the head. "Yeah, you're pupils are so dilated now." I tell him that's because I'm seeing so much more. He asks me if I want to sit down or go stand by the band. I tell him that standing and being tall is good for my vantage, and all the bobbing heads in the crowd are like little arcade gophers. The grass slopes downward and flattens as we get closer to the band. There are two colored lights sandwiching the stage, throwing blue and green across the band's faces. Everything pulses, breaths in, breaths out, the trees jigsaw and the music slips through the air like silk. I turn and find Lyons standing next to me and he asks me if I can see the notes but as much as I try, I can't. His eyes are wide my eyes are wide and we stare into spring coil life around us, snapping and stretching. "We're all strange, Hazard-a-roo," Lyons says to me and he points to Pepper who is stripping down with a few other people. Their flesh and hair and muscle and fat all take on different qualities of the rainbow lights and skin rolls like waves over the bodies and its just so beautiful and then I realize I can take my shirt off. Pull it over my head my vision is blocked by cotton twirled into fabric twirled and constructed into seams and stitching. I expose more skin to the world and everything tingles in the warm air. Lyons grabs my hand and this foreign extension of my body leads me forward through the yard, away from the band.

We go to the fire pit where a few people are hanging out and I can't look away from the fire because it sparkles and leaves trails all over everything like a blessing. While I'm sitting there looking at the fire, I realize that there is dirt in my mouth. I put my palms to my tongue to wipe it, but I can't get it off. The sand crunches against my teeth and I keep trying to swirl and spit it out but it doesn't seem to make any difference. Part of me thinks that maybe I should go find Peter but I don't want to move away from this fire. It's so cleansing. Clearing. Cleansing. Burning. Cracks of smoke fissure up through the sky fueled by woody arms. I look over again to Lyons and he's tracing out some pattern with his fingers and I

can tell exactly the kind of picture he's making and I realize how much art there is in this place and how many posters and color and shapes everywhere.

“Hey Hazard! We've been looking all over for you. Peter's been asking for you. We had to move him a few times but he keeps saying he needs to see you.” I let Chatty Cathy lead me to Peter and he is curled up in a ball near the back of the porch. I go to him and put my arm around him, rocking him back and forth. His tears are wet against my skin. He must be really upset. Brother. Peter is my brother. “Peter I'm so sorry I forgot about you but I'm here now and everything is going to be ok.” I try to ignore everything that I'm seeing and focus on Peter but its difficult. He keeps asking why I didn't come sooner and I don't really have an answer for him so I keep telling him that its ok. Chatty Cathy pulls us both up by the hands and leads us to the less populated front yard. The streets are quiet and I notice this seems to put Peter in a better space because he is running his hands over the smooth metal lamppost.

The visual hallucinations begin to die down and an extreme sense of peace and well-being washes over me. Peter stares up at the sky and I get the urge to lie down on the grass and let the plants tickle my skin. Peter lies down next to me and watches the sky, not saying anything. Brother. Peter would always be my brother. He will never abandon me. He will always accept me. Lyons. Lyons. On repeat. Repeat. Lyons. I think about how he makes me feel, Lyons, about how it would feel to kiss him. He is beautiful, Lyons, more beautiful than Pepper or Karen or Nelly even though they are beautiful too, Lyons is different. Lyons with his fire skin and his fire hair always catching in the sunlight like a shiny bobble at Christmas. I need to be ok with this. The way my brain turns off whenever he looks at me. I think about him kissing me, me kissing him, about how it wouldn't be weird to kiss a guy, but how right it seems. It would be right. How could anything be evil when it's Lyons? We could be together. He could be my boyfriend. Boyfriend. Boy. Friend. Boy and Boy. Everything is pure. Wanting Lyons is pure and beautiful. I need to tell him. Tell Lyons that I want him. The sexual stuff will come later and he will help me discover it and it will be new and scary but it will be a good thing. Lyons will lead me on an

adventure. Hazard the adventurer. Lyons and Hazard. I tell Peter that I need to do something and that I'll be right back. Peter doesn't say anything, so I grab his hand and lead him to sit on the front porch.

I get up and start my quest across the yard. I can still see trails of color and light flowing behind and past me as I walk. The band is either done or taking a break because the only music I hear comes from voices and a lone acoustic guitar by the fire pit. I spot Lyons immediately. I can always pick him out in a crowd. Everyone seems to just fall away, sets the stage for me to approach him. One of the lights from the stage washes him in red. He stands by himself. I am meant to talk to him now. I walk up to him and look him in the eyes. I don't know what to say, so I put my palm against his chest. I feel his lungs expand. His heart thumps against my palm. He closes his eyes. My heart and lungs sync with his. He understands. I understand. We are. Understand. He puts his hand on top of my hand, slowly floating his palms downward until he grabs my wrist. I let him take me by the hand and lead me away from the party and into the house. I don't even notice anyone else. It is just us. Lyons and Hazard. We enter an abandoned bedroom and he kisses me. My chest explodes open with joy. Kissing him feels new. All I want is more, to not stop. He leads me to the bed. Lyons and Hazard. Hazard and Lyons.

The next morning I wake up next to Lyons and feel brand new, if not slightly groggy. We talk afterwards. I've never talked that much about myself or what I was really thinking or feeling. I tell him things I haven't even told Peter.

Peter.

“Oh shit.”

“What's wrong?” Lyons asks, very concerned.

“I forgot about Peter. I was supposed to come back and check on him.”

“Let me put on my pants and we’ll go find him.”

We wander through the yard and find a variety of bodies still asleep in odd places. A few people curl up naked at the foot of the couch with what looks to be curtains covering them. Guilt for leaving Peter courses through my gut. Lyons suggests that we head back to his house as maybe he got back there and slept in our tent. We walk the few blocks to his place, but when we get there, I can’t find him. My breath begins to get faster. What if he got hurt? What if he was picked up by the cops? Or someone else? Lyons is trying to calm me down, telling me that he is probably fine and that he will turn up soon.

“I just can’t believe I left him and forgot about him. And oh, Jesus, I just remembered. He was having a bad trip before I found him.” I sink down to my knees. I feel like I’m going to throw up. I swallow back tears. I don’t want to cry in front of Lyons.

Lyons puts a hand on my shoulder. I run my hands through my hair. “Do you think we should call the cops?”

Lyons lets out a sigh and bites his bottom lip. “Let’s go to the Diag and ask around for a little bit. I’m sure someone saw something.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I get up and make my way to the door. I gather that Lyons is following me, and that he’ll catch up, so I jog towards the Diag. Part of me thinks that I should slow down and scan my surroundings more carefully, but I want to get there now. My legs start to burn and sweat comes off the small of my back. I see the Diag in the distance, but I don’t see many people in the area. When I get there, I look around trees and under benches, but Peter is nowhere to be found. I crouch down again, staring at the grass.

Then again I feel Lyons’ hand on my shoulder. “Hazard,” he says, “look over there.” And he points across the street and there is Peter sitting in the big front window of a café with Claire. I look up

toward the sky, simultaneously thanking whatever power out there for Peter being ok, and dreading the oncoming confrontation. I barely look up as I make my way to the café.

When I get to the front door of the café, Peter is already turned around in his chair and looking at me.

“Hey man,” Lyons says overly cheerful, “we were worried about you. Glad we found you alright.”

One look from Peter and I can tell that he already knows about Lyons and I. I flinch when he puts his coffee cup down and stands up.

“Give us a minute, ok?” Peter says to Claire.

Claire says nothing but scowls at me. I wince slightly. Lyons has enough sense to sit down at the table, as Peter and I head outside. We leave the restaurant and stand outside. But just before I’m about to apologize, he puts a hand up.

“Not one word. Not right now.” He says quietly and with great effort, evenly. “You really messed up last night and I can tell you know this. I’m really angry right now. Last night was one of the scariest things I’ve ever had happen to me, and it was mostly because you abandoned me. You’re my friend so I’m going to forgive you, but right now you need to give me some space.”

My throat goes dry. I want to say something, tell him that I’m sorry and that I’ll do anything to make it better, but its useless. I want to revolt against his commands, but I have enough sense to keep my mouth shut.

“One more thing, Claire really helped me out last night. So I don’t know if you have any hang-ups about black people since what happened in Detroit, but I’m telling you right now that you better not say a single bad thing to her.”

I nod dumbly. There were a few times this past summer where we talked about how the blacks were like animals for what they did in Detroit, but we never talked about it in front of other people. We always just exchanged a knowing look whenever someone talked about the riots.

Without another word, Peter turns and goes back into the café. I should move, but my feet seem stuck. I watch his lips move as he says a few things to Lyons. He doesn't seem angry with Lyons, and I can see Lyons nodding in agreement with something. I suddenly feel very aware that my best friend and my possible boyfriend or whatever is talking about me and I'm not allowed in. After a few moments, Lyons stands up and waves a friendly goodbye to Claire and Peter.

I feel really crummy when Lyon leaves the café, so he decides that we should smoke some weed and then get breakfast. On our way back to his house, he reassures me that Peter will forgive me and that things will be ok between us, but that he just needs some time to get over it. If possible, this makes me feel even worse. Peter cares about me so much that he lets me know that our friendship isn't over. He cares about me so much that he knew I needed someone to reassure me of that.

“Hey, do you need some space?” Lyons asks me after finishing up some eggs and toast.

I feel myself deflate. I don't want to be alone, but I also don't want to bring Lyons down with my morose mood. He must be able to tell that I can't figure it out one way or another, so he grabs a book and goes to the porch. I take that as a sign that I can stay here and be quiet, and that he is available to talk if I want to.

Over the next few weeks, life steadily gets better. Peter forgives me, although he does subject me to an in-depth description of what he experienced that night on LSD. What he tells me was horrifying, and I promise him that I will never leave him next time he wants to try acid. He tells me he will never do it again, and I let it drop. Peter was unsure of how to feel at first when he found out that I was dating a man, but it doesn't take long for him to accept it. Everyone likes Lyons. Or at least it seems that way to me. We spend the time in a blissful blur of sex and drug, occasionally with others joining in on one or both events. Peter continues to smoke weed with us sometimes, but only on the weekends. He spends more and more time with Claire and her activist group of friends, and is often at different meetings or events. I think it bothers him that I'm not very interested in direct political action and organizing, so I try to explain to him that just by living my life the way I wanted to it was a form of resistance (Lyons suggests I tell that to him). LSD opened my mind, and the subsequent trips I take with Lyons keep getting better and more intense. I feel cleansed of my pain with my family and free from Sebewaing. After everything that happened in my life, I deserved to be happy. And the happiness didn't seem to have an end date despite the end of summer quickly approaching.

Tonight, Pepper and Honey lay out a feast for dinner in their back yard. There are over two-dozen of us, smoking and drinking beers, sucking barbeque sauce off our fingers and eating corn on the cob. Chatty Cathy hangs a crystal from one of the porch beams and we watch mesmerized as everyone becomes bathed in spinning rainbows. I'm feeling heavy headed from all the beer and joints, kind of sleepy. I see that I'm not the only one. Timmy, Willow, June, and Buck all stare off into space. A few others sit off from the table on the ground and blow bubbles through the air, heads on stomachs. Honey and a few of her friends do most of the talking. Peter is at the other end of the table with Claire. They've been spending more and more time together. When I ask him if they are a couple, he says he doesn't know and tells me he doesn't want to talk about it. I get the impression that he likes her, but she is unsure. Claire joins us in the smoking and drinking, but only rarely. Her and Peter spend most of their

time working with the activist groups. I don't understand why he can't just relax and enjoy the summer, but for some reason, the things they talk about in the groups are important to him. I still don't know why he wants to work with racial cooperation after what we saw in Detroit, but I know better than to push it.

"It's like we're adventurers. But instead of exploring Africa or South America, we're exploring our minds. And we can look at the natives. They are all about magic and the body. They aren't polluted with the television or concepts of money. Yeah, I mean, it's good to study them, but it shouldn't be so academic. Man, could you imagine if we had some real natives with us now smoking? They'd probably tell us things that are out of this world." Honey says to Pepper.

Claire rolls her eyes. Peter smirks, seemingly enjoying a private joke.

"What?" Honey asks. "Come on, Claire, don't tell me that you don't feel more in tune with the earthly spirits." Pepper raises her hands and waves them back and forth, and whispers "wwoooooo." She's done this a few times before in the group, but never in front of Claire.

"Do you have any idea how offensive that is?" Claire asks Honey, staring directly at her. Peter looks tense, ready to jump to her defense.

Pepper looks like she's about to say something, but Peter looks straight at her and says, "No. You are done."

"Honey," Peter says, "let it go. You're just making yourself look stupid."

"Hey, man, not cool," Lyons says. I grab his hand under the table and he squeezes mine.

Peter looks at me like he expects me to say something. Like I'm supposed to defend him.

"I don't see how it's offensive. You have something that we don't," Honey says. I let out a groan. I can't believe how dumb she is to keep talking about this.

Claire massages the bridge of her nose, and then puts a hand on Peter's tense forearm. "It's ok," she whispers to Peter, and then, louder, "Honey. Do you see me watching television? Do you see me using technology and conveniences like every other person sitting here at this table? I was raised in a house, not a hut."

"Ok, ok, I get it." She says, putting her hands up. "But what about your ancestors? Don't you, like, feel their blood through your veins? How do you feel about nature? I'm just saying you've got to feel more pure about things."

"Pure? What do you even know about people of the Africa Diaspora? What do you know of our ancestors? They were warriors."

"Yeah, but," Honey stars.

"Honey, shut the hell up. Now." Peter says, standing up and rattling the table.

"Back down," Lyons barks. The table tenses. The girls look around nervously, and the guys are ready for fists to start flying.

Before I even know what the words are before they come out of my mouth, I say, "Yeah, they were some kind of warrior. Pete and I saw that in Detroit. They were animals."

Peter makes a movement to lunge towards me, but Claire holds him back. Lyons stands up so fast his chair falls behind him. Honey rushes over to Lyons and starts yelling him to calm down, that violence isn't the answer. "We need to be peaceful" Honey squeals. Timmy stands up and gathers Honey and Pepper, putting both hands on their backs and leading them away from the situation. They try to fight against him, but Timmy pushes back against them. Other guys are restraining Peter, and a few others are keeping Lyons back.

"Just leave," I yell out to Peter.

He spits. “Are you such a fucking coward? Are you just going to let your faggot boyfriend defend you?”

I leap over the table and lunge at Peter. His fist makes it to the side of my face. I stumble to the side, disoriented for a moment. I pull back up quick and throw a punch, landing in his stomach. Our arms lock around each other now, both of us punching and trying to break loose at the same time. My adrenaline pumps through my body, all I need to do is keep hitting. Finally, Peter lands a hard punch at the back of my head. My eyes black out for a moment, and I stumble backwards. Peter backs up, breathing hard and spits on the ground. He’s bleeding from his cheek. I am covered in blood, sweat, and other fluids. Some other guys are holding back Lyons, telling him that is over, it’s over. Peter walks away. Lyons is fuming. I’m feeling dizzy, so I sit down. Someone hands me a cigarette. That first hit of nicotine calms me down, and I start to notice all the places he hurt me. My stomach throbs, and I wince when I put a hand to my head and withdraw a bloody hand. Honey and Pepper cry in the background, and some of the other girls try to calm them down.

“I’m going to kill him,” Lyons seethes. He paces around above me.

“Don’t,” I say. “It’s over. I need to handle him.” I put a hand up.

I grab the closest beer and slam it back in order to get the pain to subside. As soon as I’m finished with that, I grab another beer. Lyons’ tries to tell me to slow down, but I tell him that I’m fine. A little while later, he leaves to try to calm down Honey. I decide that I need to go for a walk to cool down a bit more. I stumble away from the porch and the party and start walking down the sidewalks. A few blocks away, I run into Peter by himself smoking a cigarette by an alley.

“Why’d you have to start shit with Lyons, man?” I ask.

“Jesus, Dieter, what the hell are you doing?” Peter asks me.

“Why do you care if I’m doing anything with Lyons. It’s none of your damn business.” I shout back.

“It is my damn business when you completely ignore me. Or when you start acting like a real bastard. You’ve only known these people for a month, you change your fucking name, and who am I?”

“What the fuck do you want from me, Peter? You want me to stop being with Lyons? Cause it’s not going to happen. You’re just going to have to deal with it.”

“I want you to stop acting like an asshole. After that bullshit with the acid trip I told you that Claire was off limits. And what do you do? You bring up some shit because you’re boyfriend was getting pissy. Was that so fucking hard to understand? All I want you to spend a few fucking days sober, I want you to stop pretending to be someone you’re not. I want you to talk to me, to be my friend.”

“Why can’t you just be happy for me? I’m finally able to be on my own without having to rely on you. You’d think you’d be happy not having to constantly deal with such a fucking loser charity case.”

I don’t even see Peter’s fist until I’m on the ground. Black spots appear in front of my eyes. I get up, dizzy, and swing. I don’t care where I’m hitting, as long as it hits flesh. I feel one of my fingers break, but I don’t care. If I want to be new, I need to kill everything dealing with Dieter. Bastard. Fucking bastard. I’m about to go for another punch when Peter lands a hard fist in my stomach, causing me to double over. I fall to the ground, gasping for breath.

“I’m done with you,” Peter says, and walks away.

I wake up the next morning with a tar pit of guilt in my chest. Peter is gone. I don't know the name of the girl next to me, but she is smoking a cigarette. I don't remember much after Peter punched me that last time. I think this girl found me. Maybe she knows Lyons? My eyes focus and unfocus on the haze of trailing smoke in the morning sun. I wipe the sleep out of my eye and find my face is covered in a filth of ash and sweat. Peter is gone. I should get out of this bed, out of this strange house. But where would I go? I suppose I could go to the park. Or maybe I could walk around downtown. But what would I do? I try to motivate myself to sit up but my muscles feel like they're dead weight. I should get out of this bed. I should eat. Peter is gone. I don't want to see Lyons right now.

Peter is gone.

I am alone.

"Want some breakfast?" the girl asks.

I look at her for a moment, trying to find something to say to that. She tells me that I must be facing a rough hangover and to go take a shower. That she'll feed me when I get out. I suppose this is a nice thing to do, but I don't say thank you.

I walk around downtown, but eventually just find a place to sit. It feels like my chest cavity has been hooked down with ropes. Eventually I stop by the liquor store and pick up something stronger than beer. I sit outside the liquor store and drink, giving sips to a few of the street kids, and bumming cigarettes.

Lyons finds me a few days later, reeking of booze. I don't get up when he tells me to, so he leaves me there. I don't care. I keep drinking until I forget what happened. No brother, no memories worth having.

Peter is gone.

Author's note: The following is an account of my great-great aunt Mary Light Bach. I was able to piece together her story through the remains of her journal, as well as her daughter Katherine's diary. Some sections, mostly towards the end, Joan acted as a consult. Although she was unable to tell me specific details, she was able to provide a rough sketch. That said, some details are fictionalized, but I tried my best to remain faithful to the spirit of Mary's story. - Snow

Mary Elizabeth Light. Age 13. Bay City, Michigan.

April 23rd, 1869

Today was the first warm day since the snow had finally melted, and Mary and her four older brothers spent it down at the stream fishing and poking around the budding earth. Alfred promised Mary that he would catch her a frog for a pet, but he was unable to find one. Mary searched for this creature as well, which resulted in the hem of her skirt being covered over six inches in thick, black, mud. Mary suggested that perhaps she might prefer a sparrow as a pet, but Alfred laughed, "Little sister, if you think catching a frog is difficult, I'd like to see you catch a bird."

“Maybe I will,” Mary teased. She sat down against the roots of a nearby tree, not caring about the cool wet earth soaking through the seat of her dress. Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine the perspective of a bird looking down on her head. The grove was still mostly just skeletons, but every few trees, a bright fist of green was set to burst forth from a woody fingertip. From one of these branches, Mary perched, taking in the view of the world. She imagined herself rising from the branch into the bright sky. If she were a bird, Mary thought, she would leave Dearbornville. Susan Beacher had shown her a postcard that she had received from her cousin the other week. On the front was a picture of a great cathedral, with so many intricate crisscrossing of stones and bricks that Mary could hardly make sense of it. On the back her cousin described the tour that she and her new husband were taking across France. Mary thought she would very much like to go to France someday, but she knew it was not likely. If she were a bird, she would fly not only to France, but to Africa as well. She imagined flying over cities with hundreds of lights, over ports bustling with people, and over to the plains of Africa full of dangerous lions and crocodiles.

Mary opened her eyes, back again on the ground and saw a small robin perched on the tree above her. It ducked into its hole, and after a few moments, came back out again. Inspired, she stood up and walked over to assess the tree. The tree itself wasn't really suitable for her to climb, it was too feeble, and she would likely cause the bird to fly away the moment it's home started shaking with her weight. There was, however, a great sprawling ghost of a maple tree that had died a year or two before. Its branches stretched out in all directions, low lying and parallel to the ground before lifting up and twisting into the sharp blue sky. Mary cautiously put her palms flat against the rough bark of the lowest branch and pushed down as hard as she could. The give was slight, the rot had not penetrated deeply yet, so Mary hoisted herself up onto the branch. Even at this height, the change in perception was refreshing—and even

though her brothers paid her no mind, she enjoyed that she was taller than them now. Mary shifted her torso around and used the trunk to steady herself as she stood up. There was another thick branch slightly above shoulder level, and this one, although it didn't quite reach the robin in the neighboring tree, came closest. This one took a bit more effort to conquer, as it was just far and high enough away to be awkward. Eventually, she decided to take a longer way around that included using another branch above the one she wanted, and then lowering herself onto her target. This branch was a bit thinner than she'd prefer, but she could walk out a good distance toward the robin's tree before sitting down and scooting herself closer. Her bird was gone at the moment, but inside a small hole, she saw bits of grass and brightly colored eggs. The sun was setting, and bright red slashes of light cut through the trees. Mary could see her brothers out in the distance, Alfred and John were wrestling, and Charles and Eugene were watching and laughing. Mary looked down and tried to think about how high she was, but couldn't come up with an estimate. Perhaps less than twenty feet? Before she gave it more thought, her robin returned to her nest. Any desire she might have held to keep this robin as a pet immediately fled. Could she bring such a creature into her lowly home when everything was so wondrous up here? She certainly couldn't deprive these eggs of their mother.

"Little sister," Alfred called out, "I do believe Mother will have our hides if you don't come down right now." Eugene and John laughed, but her oldest brother, Charles, was not impressed. "Just scoot yourself backwards, Mary, and I'll climb up there and get you down." Truthfully, Mary thought she was a better climber than Charles, he was too short and bulky to really reach the trees, but she didn't argue. Instead, she scooted backwards and stood up when she got a chance. She steadily climbed down, paying no mind to Charles telling her to wait, and was just about to jump onto the lowest branch when Charles finally was able to hoist himself up. "I think she would do better to rescue him," Alfred said to Eugene.

Charles didn't respond to this, but his ears turned red. "That may be, Alfred, but I'm certain that Charles would save us all if we were in danger of drowning." Mary said, trying to lighten the mood. This seemed to appease Charles, as he jumped down to the ground without trying to help her. Mary jumped after him, and wiped her hands on her filthy dress.

"I'm sure Mother will be angry for what you did to your dress," Charles muttered.

"Oh Charles," Mary said, grabbing his arm, "surely she can't hold it against me, it's the first real spring day. I think she'll just be happy that I wasn't pestering her all day long for the first time in months."

Mary sat iron bar straight on the hard wagon bench, looking back and forth between at the rear musculature of the horse as it moved them along the pine needle strewn path, and off into the distance where she knew there was a small stream. The wagon was moving at a steady pace across the well worn track in the woods that connected Mary's family with their nearest neighbors, the Allan's. The air was damp from last night's rain, and despite the distance, Mary could smell the heavy odor of pig waste from their other neighbors' farm to the south, the Bach's. Her brother Alfred would joke that you always knew when they entered the church because you could smell them before you saw them. Despite the offending scents, it was nearly a perfect day.

Three things kept it from being an absolutely perfect day, in Mary's estimation. Firstly was the niggling sensation of a nightmare the night before. It was the type of dream so disturbing and so deeply immoral that Mary felt the weight of it in her waking. She was unable to recall specifics except to know that there was something wrong about it. The second, and more permanent element that marred this beautiful day was that Mary was now a woman. Sometime last night she started her first blood, and woke up to soaked bedding. And although her mother prepared her for the changes that her body would go through, she did not expect the mess, pain, and discomfort. She found that she was constantly aware of the cloth between her legs, and was terrified of making a wrong move that could cause the protective cloth to shift. She was in no fit state to be going after frogs or robins, even if she could. Today she and the rest of her family were occupied with the third element that prevented today from being perfect. The Light's were on their way to a funeral.

Ruth Allan had recently lost yet another child this past week. Out of seven children, Ruth had lost three. The first one, Tess, had died when she was five years old when she fell through some ice. The second child, Jacob, died a week after he was born. Today, they were going to the funeral of Bonnie, who was born deformed and died a few hours after birth.

Secretly, Mary was hoping that Gerard, Ruth's brother-in-law, would not be attending. Gerard kept mostly to himself, even at church. When others would offer peace after the service, he would simply nod his head and grunt lightly. Mary couldn't think of a single time she had heard him speak and yet she found herself constantly aware of his presence. She made it a point not to look at him, but she knew that he was always staring at her. His beard grew in uneven tufts, his face marred and pitted from the war, his left eye drooped, always watery and bloodshot, and he walked with a deep limp. Mary's mother said that she shouldn't stare—good men had seen too many horrible things in the war, and as a Christian, she was to show love and charity to all. Furthermore, as much as she tried to avoid it, Mary's mother always made her approach Gerard after church and offer a "Peace be with you." He never grunted or nodded to her in return, but instead looked at her steadily, as if he were examining something dead. If anyone else noticed, no one said anything.

All these unsettling looks she could deal with if it weren't for the most recent development. Last week at church, after she had offered "Peace be with you" to Gerard, and while her mother's back was turned, he offered her a note. He didn't say anything, but instead, burned his stare at her. Immediately Mary panicked: in no possible way did she want to accept anything from this man, let alone communication. She looked around to see if anyone might notice this interaction, and either fortunately or unfortunately, everyone seemed to be occupied with other conversations. Despite her reluctance to take the parchment from him, Gerard never wavered, never withdrew his hand, but instead shoved it forward, insisting. He grunted, lowly, and this seemed to force Mary to lift her hand, but just before she had it in her possession, a whirlwind of hands snatched it out of Gerard's possession. Luke Billow, just a few years older than Mary and already sprouting a full beard, stole the note and without a word, opened it up and read it. Mary felt faint, wishing desperately that this never happened, praying that Luke would

understand that she was not interested in being in any way intimate with this man. She watched as his eyes scanned the letter, his smooth tan skin with no hint of emotion. At length, a big smile spread across Luke's face and he snickered and absently handed the note to Mary. Luke looked at Gerard and laughed, "Looks like you have a suitor, Mary. Congratulations."

Mary could feel the color rise. "Never," she started to stutter, "I'd never..." Not wanting to attract more attention, Mary turned around and stalked off to her brothers, never once looking back. That night she cried tears and burned the note in the fireplace after reading it. It read, "Mary, I can tell that you are ripening into womanhood. God ordained men to pursue the woman. It is only natural that we obey these divine commands. You have the characteristics of a good wife. I know I am not good with words, but you seem to understand me. I will keep in contact in hopes that we can consummate a union."

When Mary's father informed the family that they would be attending the funeral, Mary tried to think of any possible way she could get out of it. She tried talking to her mother, claiming that the woman's blood made her weak and in pain. Her mother told her that it was part of being a woman, and that she needed to be strong. She simply could not miss supporting Ruth.

The woods became less dense and the clearing to the Allen's property started to open up. The fields were muddy, and the horse slowed down slightly as the texture of the earth changed. A few of the younger children were milling about outside, looking like they wanted to play, but knew that it was inappropriate. The older children were probably inside with Ruth, her husband David, and most likely, Gerard. Upon seeing them in the distance, one of the children darted inside, to let the rest of the family know they had arrived. One by one the Allen's filed out of the small cabin. First came the elder children

Richard, Thomas, Henry, Jacob, Theresa, Sarah, and then the younger children, Matthew, Paul, and Rebecca, and then finally, Ruth came out, clinging to her husband's arm. Ruth wasn't just frail, she seemed to sink into herself: her shoulders hunched and stomach concave, her eyes dropped. Her dress was wrinkled, her cheeks blotchy.

Behind her, Gerard came out, limping on his cane. He didn't acknowledge anyone in the family, no precursory looks. He simply stared at Mary, unwavering. If her brothers or the rest of the family noticed this, they had enough propriety not to mention it. With all the children, and most of their attention on Ruth, his looks were easy to overlook. Mary's mother rushed forward and embraced Ruth, but she just stood there like a limp doll. She whispered coos to Ruth, and smoothed her hair. Gerard kept staring. Mary glanced at Alfred, unsure of how long they should stand there while the woman had their private moment. Alfred was standing tall, with a serious look on his face. He was staring right back at Gerard. If, however, Gerard was aware of this glaring, he made no motion of acknowledgement. But instead of making Mary feel more at ease knowing that she had one of her brother's looking out for her, her fear intensified. If Gerard didn't care about a young man nearly twice his size staring him down, then what was he afraid of? What would he stop at? Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Alfred ever so slightly nudge Charles. Charles made a point of clearing his throat loudly. David Allan went over to Mary's father, breaking the scene between the two women. At this, some of the other Allan boys filed out to talk to some of Mary's other brothers. Alfred turned to Mary and whispered to her, "I don't like the look that Gerard is giving you."

"It unsettles me as well. Don't cause a scene, but stay near me today," she said in a low voice.

“Don’t worry little sister, you’ve got four older brothers and a Father who will keep him in place.”

That seemed to be the end of the conversation, but then Alfred said lowly, “Do you know why he is so interested in you?”

“He’s always looked at me that way in church.” Mary thought for a moment about telling Alfred about the unread note that he hoisted her way last Sunday, but decided she’d rather not.

“Was there anything else?”

“No.”

Mary looked at the oldest Allan brother, Richard, who was bent over a bible. His fingers traced the words like a prayer. He was lean and short, and despite his sunken cheeks, there was something young about him. Recently, he had expressed interest in going into the ministry. The past few months he had gone in front of the congregation and read a few bible verses. At first Richard was so soft spoken that Mary could barely hear him. But as the weeks went on, he became more confident, and his voice a great deep boom, as if he were Abraham himself. At first she thought it was all an act, but as he read over the Old Testament, and finally the gospels, she felt as if his breath carried the Holy Spirit. Later, Mary reflected upon his person, away from the pulpet, and found something slightly unsettling about his fervor.

It was the same kind of intensity that Gerard possessed when he stared her down. Perhaps it was a family trait.

Typically the minister would be officiating the service, but Mary had the impression that Richard would have some role in the funeral. As if on cue, one of the younger Allan children pointed off into the distance, where the minister was ambling across the fields. Reverend Dickinson was a great bulk of a man. He rarely used a horse, but instead walked all over the area to visit his parishioners. He was a great lover of the outdoors, and often would decide to move a sermon outside “to bask in the glories of our Lord’s hand”, weather permitting. Under his great big arm, unmistakable, was the small wooden coffin.

Ruth let out a small gasp, and Mary’s mother pulled her closer into her arms. Mary’s father put a hand on Mr. Allan’s shoulder, and her older brothers looked down at the dirt, unsure of what to do. Gerard still stared at her, but at least now he was sitting in a chair behind the two women. At length, the reverend finally made his way to the front porch, with only a bit of sweat on his brow. Richard wordlessly took the coffin away from the reverend, and carried it inside the cabin. Mary could tell he tried to do this as quickly and as quietly as possible, but that didn’t stop Ruth from reaching out to him as he passed by. She touched the pale white pine. Richard disappeared inside the house. The Reverend held a hand out to Mr. Allan, but before he was able to offer any words of comfort, Ruth yelled out, “Richard, don’t put Bonnie in there.”

“Oh Ruth,” Mary’s mother whispered to her. She tried to put her hand on her shoulder again, but Ruth shook it off. “No,” she said. “Richard, don’t put Bonnie in there. I will place my own child in the coffin.”

Ruth walked straight into the house, and after a few moments, Richard came back out. Mary's mother made a movement to go inside, but Richard stopped her. "She says she wants to do it by herself."

After a few minutes, less time than Mary thought it would take, Ruth emerged from the cabin. Her face was dry, but she still looked sunken. Mr. Allen moved to her and she put her arm through his.

"Alright, Reverend," he said. "We're ready."

They buried Bonnie next to the other children that the Allan's had lost. The small gravestones were recently cleared of the winter debris of twigs and rotted leaves. And although a great oak hung over the family's plot, no leaves had yet sprouted. As the Reverend read from the book of Psalms, Richard and his father lowered the tiny casket into the ground. One of the older girls gripped Ruth's hand, but neither made any noise or movement. Mary felt her own tears start to well up in her eyes, but blinked them away quickly. If Ruth wasn't crying, neither would she.

Mary risked a look at Gerard, who fortunately had enough sense of decorum not to stare at her while his niece was being buried. She tried to decipher his feelings—was he upset at all? was he mourning? but she could detect no emotion. Then again, men were always hard to read when it came to that element. Her brothers were easy to read, but she seemed to always be guessing with her father. Unless he was angry, which he seldom was, but in that event, it was best to just accept the punishment and get it over with.

Richard and Mr. Allan started to shovel big shovel-fulls over Bonnie. The sound that the dirt made as it hit the coffin was loud, but after a while, it got softer. Mary felt a sudden stab of pain in her lower stomach. She wanted to cry out, but her mother warned her that the pain might come on unexpectedly. After a few moments, the pain subsided slightly. Mary was surprised by the intensity of the pain. She wondered if women really did endure so much pain so often. And then, in a moment of utmost clarity, Mary realized why she was considered the weaker sex. It was so simple, so unfair. She would never again be able to play with the same abandon with her brothers as she had before. She would be constantly counting days, days until she bled, days until it ended, days until it started again.

After the funeral, Mary and her brothers milled about on the other side of the oak tree while Ruth and the rest of the adults stood silent by the grave. Truthfully, she was ready to leave, but she knew that her family was expected to stay for dinner. Mary heard a twig snap behind her and she turned to find Gerard right behind her.

“You’re a woman now. I can smell your blood,” he said, in an even voice.

“Leave me alone!” Mary whispered shrilly.

“I told you, I’m going to make you mine once you’re a woman.”

“Please,” Mary begged, “stay away from me. I don’t want you.” Her voice became quieter and quieter.

Alfred came up and laid a hand on Gerard’s shoulder. “Everything going alright here, Sis?” he asked, with a slight edge in his voice.

Mary said nothing. Of course nothing was “alright”. But she couldn’t say it aloud.

“Everything is fine, boy,” Gerard said.

Seeing that Alfred made no move to leave his sister, Gerard eventually admitted defeat and walked away. “I thought you were going to stay by me,” Mary said.

“I’m sorry. I just turned around for a moment. What did he say to you?”

“I’d rather not say.” She did not want to tell Alfred. This was private. Alfred grabbed Mary by the arms and looked straight at her.

“Please, Mary, I need to know if I need to have a discussion with him.”

“This is not the right time,” Mary said. “We are at a funeral.”

“Will you tell me later, when we get home?”

Mary did not want to tell anyone the horrible things he said to her. She would rather forget them. But could he really smell her blood? Did her brothers know? Could her father smell her? Did they all know of her secret embarrassment? Or was Gerard an outlier? She desperately wanted to ask her mother this very moment, but she knew that at best it would have to wait until tonight. If that was the case, if men were always aware of her fertility like some animal, then she would never leave the house again when she bled. And if that were the case, she would always hate Gerard. She hated everything about him: the way he looked, the way he talked, how he smelled like pig waste, the way he acted, the way he stared, the things he said. He was a horrible and dangerous person. Good Christian or not, she would not suffer Gerard anymore.

Later Ruth and the rest of the adults left the graveside of tiny Bonnie and headed back towards the Allan's cabin. It seemed they were just at the moment when they could leave and not travel home in the dark. The birds seemed to enjoy this last bit of sunlight, chirping with renewed vigor. Yesterday she would have been tempted to try again to flush one of these noisy birds out again. But she knew that was impossible tonight. All she wanted to do was go home to her bed. She was tempted to say something to her father, but she knew it would be considered impolite. So no, dinner would be had and they would spend part of their journey in the dark. Ruth and Mary's mother headed inside the cabin to prepare dinner, and Mary's father paired off with Mr. Allan and a few of the older boys to walk around the property. Gerard seated himself on the porch where a few of the younger children played, and Mary and Alfred wandered around the great big field.

Mary desperately wanted to climb some of the Allan's great big trees, but instead resigned herself to leaning against the tree that Alfred climbed.

"I wonder what Bonnie looked like when she was born."

"I heard Mother say that she was born deformed."

"Do you think it was God's punishment?"

"Why would God punish a baby? That baby did nothing wrong with its life."

"Maybe Gerard is the father and that's why it was born deformed and died."

"MARY," came a loud booming voice behind her. She didn't want to turn around. She could see by the way that Alfred was quickly climbing down the tree that they were in serious trouble

“Yes, Father,” she said as she turned around to face not only her father, but also Mr. Allan and a few of the older Allan boys. She felt a deep flush come up across her face. Mr. Allan looked angry, but refused to look at her. The other boys glared at her. None of this compared to the look her father was giving her.

“I want you to apologize to Mr. Allan and the brothers right now.” His tone brokered no debate. Mary wanted to run away at this point, perhaps just head back to her house and wait for her father’s wrath to fall, but instead she stood her ground. Her legs didn’t feel like they could move even if she wanted to. The combined power of the Allan family’s glares seemed to burn into her with disgust far deeper and angrier than Gerard could ever muster. She bent her eyes downward. She couldn’t look at them.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“No,” her Father’s voice boomed. “You will look at them and you will say what you did wrong.” Mary could feel the tears welling up in her eyes and her cheeks growing hot. She looked up at the Allan’s again, unmoved by her apology. Her eyes went to her Father, and then to Mr. Allan. His look was more restrained than her Father, but still angry, and even hurt.

“I’m sorry Mr. Allan. I’m sorry for my thoughtless words.” Tears were now freely pouring down her face and she began to snifle. “I’m sorry for your loss, and I’m sorry for the further pain I’ve caused your family today.” She wanted to keep going, to say anything to make the situation right, but Alfred came up and lightly touched her arm. She looked back down at the ground.

Mr. Allan’s voice broke first. “Boys,” he said, “you will not mention this to your mother.” He must have looked at the boys for agreement, but none of them said anything. Then, after a long moment of silence, he turned around to go back to the house. The Allan boys started to follow him, leaving Mary’s father and Alfred behind.

“I will deal with you later. Now, you will join us for dinner and you will not say a word.” And then, as an afterthought, “Make yourself presentable first. I will not have you coming into their house crying.”

Mary looked up, but her Father had already turned away. Alfred put a hand on her shoulder. If either of them wanted to say anything, they didn't. Alfred gave Mary a hug, and she allowed a few tears to fall on his shoulder. Then she stood up, and wiped her tears across the back of her sleeve.

Dinner was a horribly awkward and quiet affair. The sound of utensils against plates seemed to stifle any potential conversation. Even Ruth and Mary's mother had stopped talking, taking their cue from the men. Thankfully, Mr. Allan didn't give Mary even a glance. Whenever Mary did risk looking up from her plate, she found at least one Allan brother glaring at her. If any of the brothers told their Uncle Gerard about the conversation, he didn't show it. He still leered at her, but at least had enough sense to only do it in short bursts. He would look down at his food, or at his sister, and then finally at Mary for a few moments. This could also be because Alfred was sitting next to her and was risking as many stares as possible at Gerard without attracting attention from the rest of the families. For that, she was thankful. Mary wasn't sure if she could survive if any more disturbances occurred this evening. All she wanted to do was to go home and face the punishment from her Father. She wanted her judgment now, waiting for the unknown was tortuous. Would he beat her? How would she be punished? How hard would she regret ever saying such careless things?

She did consider it a small blessing that Mr. Allan ordered the boys not to say anything to Ruth. She wasn't sure if she could repeat the words to her face. Ruth had been so strong today. Mary remembered just a few weeks ago the beaming joy on her face as she went to church, her belly swelling and full of life and anticipation. She certainly didn't mean to insult Ruth with her careless comment. It

was Gerard who was the sinner; it was Gerard who was so vile. She wanted the world to know what kind of man he was, but instead with one comment she would no longer have any moral room to publicly judge him. What would it be like in the future? Would her family still be invited over to the Allan's on occasion? Would she still be expected to socialize with them at church? Eventually Ruth would find out, all it would take would be for one of the Allan brothers to say something to a friend and then the entire community would know. Secrets, once they were out, spread quickly, fodder for gossip and dinner tables. How none of them had realized the pervasiveness of Gerard's rude and animal-like stares directed her way was a mystery. Then again, perhaps Luke had told someone of the letter's vile contents. Perhaps once people understood why she would say such a thing all the anger would be deflected off of her. Then again, the thought of the rest of the community knowing what Gerard wrote to her made her stomach turn. The words were so private, and it was no one's business what changes her body was going through. She was not some animal in heat that could be treated with such disdain.

But just as Mary might have had some slight feeling of injustice about the whole situation, she risked another look at her Father. He still did not even glance her way and she was reminded again that it didn't matter what the circumstances were, she said an awful thing about Ruth and her dead child on the day of a funeral. Which her husband and sons heard. She wanted to bury her head in her hands, but she didn't move at all, lest she draw attention to herself.

On their way home, Mary's mother made the mistake of asking her why she was so quiet. Her Father then informed her and also the rest of her siblings about the day's events. Mary's mother was appalled; she buried her face in her hands before looking at Mary and saying that she would be paying for that vicious comment for a while. Once she quieted down for a while, a few moments of silence passed before she would rile herself up again and lecture her anew about all the possible ways her actions were

wrong. Mary risked a look at Alfred whose face seemed to be a mixture of “I’m glad I’m not in your position” and “I think we already understand the point Mother is making over and over.” When they finally got home, Mary’s Father took a sapling to her rear. It stung sharp, and left hot, bloody welts on her skin. After he was finished, he told her that she would be spending time with her Mother and the Bible, and they would figure out later how she would pay her penance.

When Mary finally laid down in bed, very sore and full of stomach pains, she didn’t think that she would be able to sleep. But sleep finally did come. She dreamt that she was walking through her home, but it was different. Everything was dark and hazy; she couldn’t see much of anything. She kept trying to open her eyes wider to find her family or someone else familiar, but no one was there. She felt another presence nearby, something completely dark and evil. She put her hands out, trying to reach for something familiar before they came in contact with skin. It was a man, or some type of man. His chest was bare and muscular, and his skin felt like smooth, cold, stone. She felt a sudden need swell up between her thighs, and the unknown figure wrapped her up in his arms. She was weightless and pressed against his chest. There was something so completely wrong and evil about this demon, but she still desired him. She had never felt this kind of attraction to a man before, and her body responded in with a nice kind of ache. She wanted to be touched more, touched all over by this man. Suddenly her eyes focused and she was able to see that this was a demon with blood red skin. She felt her blood drip down on his arms. When she looked up at his face, she couldn’t see a face, just an emptiness.

Mary awoke with a start, her heart racing. She immediately felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for having dreamed such a thing about a demon. She got on her knees and started to pray: she prayed for forgiveness for that kind of desire, she prayed that she would never sin in her mind like that again. She

prayed for protection, to be pure and holy. All these things she repeated over and over, determined to never again be disobedient.

Mary Bach (nee Light). Age 25. Huron County, Michigan

July 28th, 1881

Thaddeus Bach stretched out his long legs and arms across the small cabin, cracking his bones in an attempt to relax. He was still riled up from the day, and his drink was yet to take affect. Trying to get his body to settle from a long day of logging was always double edged—once he got one part of his body to relax, another part flared up aching, a hard reminder that no matter what he did, he'd always be in pain. It seemed as if he were more muscle knots and tree sap than man. Mary once commented that he looked like “Christ himself” when he was sprawled out like that. He didn't know how he felt about that comparison, but he supposed it was accurate enough.

He thought tonight's dinner was well enough, but he didn't say anything to Mary about it. Once she got an idea in her head that he liked something in particular, she was always trying to use it as a bargaining method. It would always start off subtle—a small repair here, a new dress for the girls there—but eventually it would grow more and more obvious. She always wanted to go see her family or her brothers. But it always came down to the same elements: Thaddeus didn't want Mary traveling alone, and he was unwilling to spend any of his rare moments of leisure enduring the hardships of the road. At first, Thaddeus felt sorry for Mary that she couldn't easily see her family, and then, after her repeated attempts and different wording, he felt annoyance, and finally, anger. When she asked again a few months ago Thaddeus had no choice but to discipline her.

Years ago, after Thaddeus hit her the first time he felt remorseful. But now life seemed to be eating away at his edges and work was more and more demanding. When he drank to let his body unwind, his emotions became less guarded. He didn't like to admit that sometimes he disciplined Mary for no real reason, but she took it so well. Granted, all this disciplining made her more unwilling to give Thaddeus a woman's touch, but Thaddeus was no one to be denied his rights as a husband. And he felt that was the core issue that Mary seemed to keep forgetting: He was her family. He was her husband. If only she would honor him then their marriage would be so much more endurable.

As Mary bent down to clear away his food, her bones cracked. Thaddeus let out a small, aggravated sigh. "I don't understand why your body cracks. It ain't like you're doing hard work."

Mary said nothing to this, but instead turned to clean off his dish. The girls were already in bed. Thaddeus hated the way they looked at him, always as if they were on the brink of tears whenever he said anything. He did love the girls, even if he didn't understand them. A son would make things better, he thought. Something young, and dirty and strong that would look like him. Thaddeus and Mary had tried for a son for years, but without success.

A pleasant warmth and numbness spread through Thaddeus' body as he finished off the last sips of his drink. He stood up to take off his clothes, teetering slightly. Mary bent to pick up his clothes so she could wash them, and in doing so, her knees and back cracked again. Despite her stooped figure, Thaddeus desired a quick release before he went to bed. He reached for her waist, grabbing her a bit more roughly than necessary. She knew better than to refuse him, at least she had learned that by now. Mary

might not be ready for him, but she didn't put up a fight when he rutted her. He paid no mind to the bruises on her collarbone or her hips, and no mind to the way she stared at the ceiling. He kneaded her breasts, wishing that they were firmer like before she had the girls, but he spilled into her anyway.

After Thaddeus passed out, Mary gathered up his clothes and headed to the river, not bothering to clean off the blood and his seed. The pine needles were soft under her feet, and in the distance, she saw a bright ribbon of fire. The fires had been going on for a couple months now—ever since the snow had melted and the ground had been dry enough for clearing. She once asked Thaddeus about the fires, worried that they would spread beyond the controlled reach of the lumber companies. He told her not to worry about it, and she knew it was best if she didn't pester him. She inhaled deeply, taking in the scents of the fire, the pine, the earth and the slight sweetness of the summer air. The fireflies were out, as were the cicadas, chirping noisily. It was in these moments that Mary felt at most peace. Of course she was always aware of the danger of the night, of unseen faces and figures looming just beyond the moon's light, but to be alone for a few hours was precious.

At first she used to contemplate taking off in the middle of the night to see her family. But that was before the girls were born. If only she could bring the girls with her, she was sure that Alfred wouldn't refuse them. On foot, by herself, she figured it would take at least a week to get there. If she had a horse, a few days. But with two young girls, it would be impossible to traverse the distance down South. She once tried to write Alfred and give some hint to how her life had turned out, but Thaddeus intercepted the letter. Now, she was allowed to write him only of happy or mundane affairs, to send her love, and to promise to see her nieces and nephews perhaps next summer.

Before the logging industry picked up, she was able to wash Thaddeus' and the rest of the families clothes in the river that was about a mile away from her home. Now, with the great amounts of soot and ash and debris from the trees, she had to travel further and further downriver away from the fires. If Thaddeus knew how far she walked at night to get his clothes clean, he would be furious. But if she washed the clothes in the soot water, he would be even more furious. As far as Mary was concerned, the less Thaddeus knew about her life, the better. It wasn't as though she enjoyed having a marriage based on spite and secrecy, it was merely survival. Telling the truth was dangerous, and with the girls in the picture, she needed to be as safe as possible. God was Mary's confessor; Jesus was the keeper of her secrets. Why God had sent her Thaddeus, she didn't know. But she tried to be devout and obedient, as much as her safety allowed.

A scrape of wood against flint and a quick hint of sulfur in the air alerted Mary to the presence of another body. She whirled around, clutching the laundry against her breasts until she found the source of the cigarette. A tall man, about three yards away, leaned against a tree next to the river.

"You're bleeding," the man said.

Mary's throat went dry. She wondered how fast she could run out of here. She remembered the forgotten knife that sat on the kitchen table at home.

"I can smell it," he said plainly.

"Stay away from me," she warned, backing up toward the edge of the clearing.

"I mean no harm, ma'am. I just wanted to see if you were alright."

"I'm fine. Now leave."

Mary held her breath for the long silent moments as neither she nor the man move. Finally he raised his hand and took another draw off of his cigarette. The small nub of orange flare seemed to center every thing on him. His face was round and hearty. When he finished his cigarette, he snuffs it out on a tree and turns around. She heard footsteps and twigs breaking as he leaves the clearing, as if he wanted to be as loud as possible.

The next evening, after Thaddeus falls asleep, Mary steadied her nerves and took the knife before heading back out to the river. When the man with the cigarette left the night before, she didn't bother to wash Thaddeus' clothes. Instead, she dunked them quickly in water and ran back to the cabin as fast as possible. Thaddeus, of course, was furious in the morning when he discovered that his clothes were still covered in sand and tree sap. He railed on about what a good-for-nothing she was, and they would talk when he got home. He disciplined her after breakfast, and again after dinner. The session after dinner was worse. He said his skin was raw and he made her look at it. Despite her pleadings, the girls saw and heard everything.

Mary resolved herself though. She would go even further down the river and she would not let the knife leave her side. If the man with the cigarette were to return, she would defend herself. Mary didn't want to think about rape, but she knew it was entirely possible. She wouldn't allow herself to be snuck up upon again, and at the slightest sound, she would run. Unfortunately, the combination of the ache between her thighs and the fresh bruises that were sure to appear by morning made it slow going to get down to the river. Mary tried to ignore the pain, to instead think about the task at hand. Perhaps it was just a one-time occurrence or a mistake that the man had shown himself. Why would God punish Mary by

taking away her one time during her day that she felt at ease? Was it a punishment for her secrecy from Thaddeus?

As Mary bent over in the cold river water a twig snap startled her. As she made a quick move to turn around, she lost her balance and falls into the water. Dirt and coldness seeped through her dress, and the rocks in the river dug and cut into her palms. She made a lot of noise getting out of the water, and she heard the hem of her dress rip slightly. The man with the cigarette is stood only a yard away from her. Mary made a quick move for the knife and holds it tightly in front of her.

“Easy,” the man said, his voice low. His puts his hands up in front of him. “Easy, there. I won’t hurt you.” There was something sincere in his voice, something calming that Mary couldn't figure out. She lowered the knife, but only slightly.

“You’re bleeding again,” the man said.

“I fell into the river.”

The man raised his hands in a non threatening way and backs up to the river. Eyes still locked on hers, he puts a hand in the water. “Jesus,” he muttered, “you must be freezing.”

A slight breeze picked up and deepened the chill in Mary’s skin. She tried her best not to shiver. She doesn’t want to seem weak.

“I’m not going to move closer to you, but I am going to build a fire. It may be summer, but you’ll get sick if you stay cold like this.” He picked up sticks and put them in a pile. Mary glanced at the clothes, strewn a few feet away. She debated about running, and just leaving the clothes, but Thaddeus’ wrath might be worse after he discovered the circumstances. Mary edged her way to the clothes and bent slightly to pick them up.

“Stay there,” the man commanded without breaking from his task, “I’m almost done. Once I have the fire built, I will go away and keep watch to make sure no one else comes upon you. I give my word.” There was something almost pleading in his voice, but Mary doesn’t think that is it. His voice thick and deep: a mixture of something deeply familiar yet completely separate from her knowledge. After a few moments, he lit some tinder and his small fire quickly came to life.

The man was perhaps in his mid twenties, but he had a bright and open face like a child. His beard was bushy but not wild like Alfred’s. Mary took a step closer and saw that he had bright red hair. His arms were larger and more muscular than she thought, and from this distance she can see they are covered with scars. His eyes were deep set and he smiled at her. His mouth was full of the whitest teeth Mary had ever seen, and his eyes crinkled in a way that stirs desire. Against her better judgment, she took a step forward, and then another. And although she was unable to explain it, Mary felt there was something about this man that is good. And strong. And completely different from Thaddeus.

At the thought of Thaddeus, her knees locked up and she thought again about running. She wanted to move backward, away from this stranger. She gripped the knife tighter and raised it slightly.

“Wait,” the man said. Mary stopped for a moment and considers. “I’m going on my way. Stay by the fire and warm yourself. You’ll hear me if I move any closer.” With that, he turns, and walks noisily out into the distance. After she was sure that he was gone, Mary rushed to the fire and began to warm herself. She started first with her hands, and then her sleeves. Once she got the feeling back to her limbs, she turned around so the fire could begin to dry her backside. Mary looked around cautiously and saw nothing. Every few minutes or so she walked away from the crackling fire to listen if the man had returned to the clearing. It was silent. After she was mostly dried, she returned to the task of washing Thaddeus’ clothes. The cloth scraped rough against her wounded palms, but she wasn’t bleeding anymore. The fire helped. My secret fire, Mary thought to herself, with a small smile.

If the man continued to visit Mary's washing river, he didn't show himself. Once or twice during the weeks Mary suspected that he may have watched her in the distance, but oddly, instead of making her fearful, she felt safe. She still gripped the knife whenever she got the sensation of being watched though, more to be cautious of the unknown than anything else. Thaddeus continued to be dour, coming home angrier and sorer. Mary wondered how long it will be before his body gave out. At the rate that he worked and drank, she'll be a widow before the girls are married. Mary thought that a good wife would probably counsel him to relax, to treat his body better, but Mary, especially of late, did not think of herself as a "good wife." No, she was a spiteful wife. She was a wife who would endure the world burning if it meant that Thaddeus went before her. Perhaps she was being too spirited, too dramatic, too rebellious, but whatever the reason, all Mary wanted was a few years of peace without Thaddeus. And if all she had to do was survive a few more years until he drove himself into an early grave, then so be it.

The river levels started to get lower and lower. Mary had to take special care to hoist up her skirt so she wouldn't get mud on it while she did the wash. The long ribbon of fire still burned in the distance, and lately Mary thought that they reminded her of the candles at church. Behind her, she heard some twigs break and steady approaching footsteps. She clutched the knife, but did not raise it up just quite yet. She turned around to see the same man from before in the middle of the clearing.

"Hello ma'am. How are you faring tonight," he asked.

"Well enough, thank you," she said. Although she didn't go for the knife, she is still aware where it is on the ground next to her.

"Might I light a fire here? I'd like to eat my dinner," he asked politely.

Mary pondered this only for a moment before she told him that he is welcome to cook his dinner there. She continued with her wash, watching him out of the corner of her eye as he piled branches and twigs together in the clearing. After a few minutes, she smelled smoke coming from his fire. A little bit later, the fire crackled with pine needles. Mary was done with the clothes, but instead of gathering them and heading back home, she took a seat on the ground next to the fire to warm her cold hands. She minded her distance though, making sure that the fire is between them. Without saying anything, the man took some bloody meat from his sack and placed it on a metal bar. After a few minutes of fat dripping and flesh charring, he finally broke the silence.

“Mind if I ask how you hurt your hip?”

“It’s nothing,” she said.

He couldn't see it, but she blushed. Thaddeus was rough tonight, but not anymore than usual. Mary barely noticed it at this point. Her mind was somewhere else tonight as Thaddeus was taking her.

“I figured you’d say that. Women like you are liable to bleed a lot in your life.”

Mary tensed up. “What do you mean by that?”

“Please don’t get me wrong, ma’am, it’s just that the wives in these parts are used to their own hardships. I know the men can be something fierce. It’s in the land. It makes them mean.”

Mary had never heard it put like that before. Certainly not all men are like Thaddeus? Could her brothers be capable of treating their wives so harshly? No. At least not Alfred. He adored his wife. And her father, although he raised a hand to her and her brothers, she never saw him speak an unkind word to her mother. But what about the other families? Perhaps one or two, but she couldn’t be certain. Her

mother wouldn't allow the other wives in the county to gossip when she or her brothers were around. And it had been so long since Thaddeus had allowed Mary and the girls to go to church that she didn't know what the men in these parts were like.

"We do what we need to do to survive," she replied at length.

"That you do. I don't like seeing women hurt. Men should be protectors," he said.

Mary felt the color rising her in throat again. "I'd rather you not concern yourself about such things. As I said, we get by fine enough."

"That you do. I suppose that's why you come in the middle of the night to do your wash," he said.

Mary didn't know how to respond to this observation, so she asked him why he came here.

"Not quite sure of the reason for that," he said. "Suppose there's just something different about this place."

"Something different? I don't see how this place is any different from any other place in the county. It's just water and trees and dirt."

"You're here," he said. "Out of all the places you could have chosen to do your wash, you chose here. I figure the company of another human being can just about make any place tolerable, if not more enjoyable."

A lump rose in her throat.

"What is your name?"

"Samuel Hepps, ma'am" he said as he took off his hat and stood up.

“I’m Mary Bach.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Bach,” he said kindly.

She felt the sudden urge to laugh. This man who had caused her so much trouble and had been around for weeks and she only now learned of his name. “Alright, Mr. Hepps. Thank you for the company. Enjoy your dinner. Goodnight,” she said. She picked up the wash and left the clearing.

The next night, Mr. Hepps was already at the clearing, fire blazing. After Mary finished her wash, she again sat down by the fire as Mr. Hepps ate his dinner. He told her of how he grew up in Canada and made his way out here for the timber. He told her of his sisters, and his nieces and nephews. He told her about falling through the ice when he was fishing one winter, and how his neighbor pulled him out just in time. She told him about her brothers, about her church back home, and her two beautiful girls. She didn’t talk about Thaddeus, nor did he ask her anything about him. Often times, the conversation skirted close to him, but Mary always changed the subject. She didn’t want to think of the consequences, she just wanted to enjoy a real conversation, a friendship. After she left that night, she thought how it must have been years since she last had a conversation like that with anyone. She felt tears beginning to form, and a pain between her shoulder blades. All Mary wanted in this moment was a long cry. But she knew that once she started crying, she would be unable to stop. And Thaddeus would need his breakfast soon. Instead of thinking about Mr. Hepps, Mary prayed that Thaddeus had not noticed her absence.

Fortunately for Mary, Thaddeus was still deeply asleep when she returned. Rather than risk waking him up, she began breakfast slightly earlier than usual. This morning, she would put more effort into the meal. The girls would enjoy it, and so would she. As she worked, she replayed bits of the conversation in her head, over and over. Turns of phrases became like a devotion. She wondered if she

would see him again tonight. She wondered what she would do if he ever tried to kiss her. Before she could think of her answer, she heard the cracks of Thaddeus' bed as he began to wake. He was obviously still feeling the affects of last night's drink and the previous day's exertions. He stretched his long arms and legs, taking up as much space as possible. If the girls heard him start to move about the house, they made no movements in their bed. Thaddeus grabbed his freshly cleaned shirt and threw it over his head before heading to the outhouse. Mary knew it was best to let him acknowledge her first in the morning. If she were to say 'good morning,' he would be in a foul mood until he left. Instead, by the time he had reentered the cabin, she already had a steaming hot cup of coffee on the table.

That day, Mary had a difficult time concentrating on her chores. She found herself staring into the distance, again replaying her interactions with Mr. Hepps. She began to think of more and more questions, more things about him she was insatiably curious about. Later that night, Mr. Hepps was again at the clearing with his dinner. Mary barely paid any mind to her wash, hurrying it along while still conversing with Mr. Hepps. He told her more about himself, always asking questions, but never anything inappropriate. She was surprised at the amount of kindness a grown man can show her. Never had Thaddeus thought to ask such questions of her.

Thaddeus, for his part, seemed to notice that Mary was more distracted as of late. In turn, his beatings become more violent, and he took her rougher than usual. He wanted to remind her of who he is, to remain mindful of her wifely duties. Mary didn't mind this though. She thought this was a small price to pay for friendship. Mr. Hepps, however, does mind. After one particularly rough night a few weeks later, Mary went again to the river.

At first, he didn't say anything, but merely stared at her slack jawed. Then, his jaw tensed and he began to pace. She could see the veins in his neck and forehead bulging. "Why are you always bleeding so much?" he shouted,, "No man should treat anyone, least of all you, like that."

Without thought, Mary reached out and touched Mr. Hepps shoulder. He stopped abruptly and stared at the ground. His breathing was haggard and when he finally looked up, he stared right into Mary's eyes. She didn't know who made the first movement, but before she could make sense of anything, they kissed passionately. Never had Mary wanted a man so keenly, so intimately. She knew that she should stop, but delightful sensations overtook rational thought. She wanted to be enveloped by him, wanted to crawl deep into his gut and stay there. She wanted to give all of her body, all of her kisses. She trembled and glowed.

Afterwards, as they lay by the fire, Samuel turned to Mary, brushing a piece of hair away from her face.

"Come away with me," he said without preamble.

"Yes," Mary said.

"Tonight."

"I'll meet you here at the same time we meet every night."

That day Mary's whole body seemed to be twittering with excitement. She barely paid any attention to Thaddeus, and didn't even notice his grumbles and insults. When he hit her that morning, she watched him do it as if he were doing it to another person. It was just her body, and that would be gone soon. Samuel had her heart and her mind.

It wasn't until Mary heard the girls turn over in bed from the commotion that she realized the severity of her situation. She never asked Samuel about bringing the girls with them. Of course he knew about them—Mary had talked about them at length. But he never mentioned them. Why didn't he? She suddenly felt sick to her stomach and light headed all at once. She thought that she might faint, but she holds herself together long enough for Thaddeus to leave for work.

The moment that he left, Mary thought of possible places that she could find Samuel during the day. She could not wait until the evening to know if she could bring her girls with her. She came up with a list of three different areas where she suspected that he might be working today. By the time she found him, it was almost late afternoon.

“Can my daughters come?” she asked, shrilly. His face clouded over, thinking.

“Mary...” Samuel began.

She balled her fists up at her side. “Yes or no. Tell me if my girls can come with us.”

“I'm sorry, Mary, but I don't have the money to support four of us.”

This time, Mary made no attempt to hold the tears back. Without another word, she turned and ran into the forest. Her thoughts were racing. She thought that she cannot leave the girls. That she cannot continue being with Samuel; that Thaddeus would find out. He would kill Samuel, perhaps Mary as well. She knows that he wants to have a wife, but she didn't know how much that would temper his anger. She thought of her girls, who are so beautiful, who were her only joy before meeting Samuel. She scolded herself for not asking Samuel immediately. She wished she was a better mother. She wished that she

could be with Samuel. She wished Thaddeus was dead. The tears did not stop. Sobs continued to roll over her body like waves, one after another. Mary didn't know if she'll ever be able to stop crying. She cursed God.

In the distance, Mary looked up and saw great big plumes of black smoke. She heard trees cracking and breaking. Two deer ran by, followed by a few birds and other animals. Mary began to run.

The fire roared onward, crashed through the trees, the flames reached higher and higher into the pines. The undergrowth kept catching and catching, as easily if it were a breeze were rolling over grass. She kept running in what she thought was the direction of the river. Nothing looked like it was supposed to. Smoke stung her eyes and settled hot on her skin. Even though it wasn't that late in the day the sun was gone. Mary kept clawing her way forward, stumbling and tripping over roots and rocks. She heard a loud crash behind her and a scream of white pain ran across her back. Mary nearly missed the bulk of a falling tree, but its flaming branches were perilously close to grabbing her. She managed to untangle herself from the heat, and kept running blind. Her lungs tightened and she dropped to her knees in order to breathe. A roar like dynamite exploded by her head, nearly deafening her. Her face was hot. Too hot. She rolled and turned in the hot dirt. Mary felt sticky with blood. Her vision faded, but she kept moving forward. The back of her thighs burned, and each movement grated against her skin. She put another hand forward and she felt her limb submerged by cool wetness. Water. Blessed. Mary dragged herself until submerged. It cooled her skin but it also made her aware of all the parts that hurt. Mary tried to open her eyes to see if fire was around and found she can only open one. She could barely make out some red shapes that are not far from her. She moved deeper into the water until she hit a log. The log was soaked. Fire wouldn't catch here, she thought dimly. If I can just stay here until this is over, I might live. I am so tired. Her arms ached, her skin blazed.

Mary felt herself slipping in and out into darkness. It's so cool here, in the water. I could just let go and slip under. She slipped deeper into the coolness and allowed her muscles to relax. It's so peaceful here. This darkness. This cool water where I float. I should breathe. I can hold my breath a little longer. A foot touched the bottom. The sand burned. I should breathe. She resigned herself to rise up for breath. She tried to swim. Her lungs burned. I went so deep down. She swam more. I need breath. Darkness is coming again. Keep swimming. Finally, her hand reached the cool air. She surged forward. Breath. She coughed. Her lungs stretched and burned. She was in the middle of the lake. I can't tread water for long. She scanned the muddled horizon for a fallen tree. She found one a bit off. I can make it. Just get to the tree. You will hoist yourself up there, Mary. You will survive. She couldn't move how she needed to move. Her body refused. She went under again. Pull up. Swim some more. She felt herself starting to sink under again but then she got to the tree. Her breathing was hard. She was so tired. Everything in the distance was either red or black. She could hear trees falling in the background. Yelling. And now, screaming. God, please let my girls be unharmed. I am a sinner, but please. Just please. I'll never look at another man again. Deciding she will not feel any better, Mary allowed herself one last burst of energy and hoisted herself atop of the tree. The bark cut at her tender skin. But she was sturdy. Mary let the darkness take her.

Time slipped into nothingness.

Mary awoke. Everything burned. Seared. Is tender. Enflamed. She couldn't move. She opened her good eye. It took a long time to adjust to the brightness. Finally she saw that she was in her room. She tried to call out for her girls but all she could do is moan. They rushed to her side. They were safe. Healthy. Thank you, God. Thank you. They are so beautiful. So clean and unmarred. Thank you. Thank

you. I am blessed. The girls were crying. Don't cry, everything is fine, she wanted to tell them. But she couldn't make the words. Everything will be fine. She slipped into darkness again. Blessed sleep.

She awoke again, this time, the room was dark for but a candle. Everything hurt worse than before, if possible. There was a man in the other room.

"I'm afraid at this point there's not much to do for your wife. I would administer some medicine for the pain, but unfortunately my stores were burnt down as well," She heard the doctor say quietly to Thaddeus. I need relief. There is no relief to be had. So I will die. Am I not yet dead? Am I not yet in hell? I hear sobbing. Is the doctor comforting Thaddeus? Will he comfort the girls? Did Samuel survive? What is there waiting for me? A cold grave? Peace? If this pain would go away every thing could be all right.

Mary heard what she assumed to be the doctor's footsteps walk out the door. Silence. There were no bird songs outside, or small creatures on the roof. The air still smelled strongly of death and smoke.

"Girls, go down to the river and see if you can find some clear water," Thaddeus choked out. The girls left silently. Mary heard Thaddeus walk over to the bed. She opened her eye. He was standing over her, crying quietly. She wanted to call out to him. To comfort him. All she could do is moan.

"It has to be done, Mary," Thaddeus whispered, and then, "I'm sorry."

Suddenly a great force pressed against her face. Her raw skin screamed and her nose bent to the side. Mary tried to take a breath, but couldn't. She wanted to shove this pillow off, to get precious air, but she couldn't move. She tried to breathe in again, but couldn't. Everything went dark. Thaddeus was always the strong one.

Author's note: I've known that there was a semi-famous murder mystery in my family ever since I was thirteen years old and did a Google search for a school project. At the time, I researched all I could through Google, but it wasn't until meeting Hazard that I decided to go through the archives and look for newspaper sources. Somehow, Hazard managed to track down William Potters' journal so I have some of the events that happened that fateful night. Joan refused to tell me many details about the case, saying that after a few brief moments of looking into it, the pain and the anger was too much even for her. She said it was dangerous for her to keep looking, and afterwards she feel asleep on the couch for hours. I tried the best I could, and in the sections that are unclear, I have included some of the relevant newspaper clippings. I have omitted some of the more sensational ones that rely more on speculation than the facts I have already unearthed.--Snow

Robert Light. Age 27. Detroit, Michigan.

June 20th, 1943

For the last time this week, Robert Light sat down at his usual spot at the diner near the Ford plant for his breakfast. It had been a rough week—harder than the previous ones when you took into account the near 90-degree temperatures, and that was outside of the factory.

The heat, combined with the constant repetitive movements of building Liberty Bombers, had aged Robert quickly. After five years at the plant, he was almost considered an old timer. Most came and went within the first few months, despite the pay. He had once been a strikingly tall young man with a head of full black hair. Now he was slopped and graying noticeably at the temples. His hands were

constantly covered in callous and grease that would never come off, his forearms and stomach were a mess of scars and burns.

Despite losing the majority of his looks, Robert was proud that he had snatched up a lovely girl and would be marrying her in a few weeks time.

Annie Jane Masker was no great beauty but she suited Robert just fine. Over the months of courting her, from the cinema to various dances, he had found her to be very nice. Sure, her bottom teeth overlapped in such a way that she barely smiled, and her blonde hair lay flat and oily against her forehead, but she had a good heart. Weak chin and all. And what more could Robert ask for? He was lucky enough to have his own apartment, which was more than a lot of men could say. He might not be rich, but he had enough to get by.

The diner where Robert Light went to breakfast was a din of cooking, eating, and conversation. Ceramic cups clinked against saucers, flicks of matches lit cigarettes, knives and forks scraped away the last vestiges of egg or potato, coffee bubbled over in the steaming percolator, metal spatulas met grill, hollering came from the kitchen, waitresses called out responses to bits of conversation with some regulars while they swiveled their hips though the mess of tables, and finally, his “friends”: William Potters, Chip Benson, and Walter Glass sat talking. Robert supposed they were his friends because that they sat together for their breakfast, and would occasionally watch a game together. They’d come to his wedding, and probably get him properly drunk the night before. But at this hour of the day, Robert would prefer to eat in relative silence. Instead the trio deemed it appropriate to maw on about everything under the sun: from working conditions, weather, how the Tigers were shaping up, the war, politics, and

whatever they read in that damn newspaper. Robert mostly kept his opinions to himself, he was never a morning person. But sometimes they'd wrangle others into the discussion, if the talk was good enough.

"Look, the war's getting on, Italy is bound to surrender anytime now and Algiers is looking better by the day," William began, putting down the newspaper.

"Eh, Italy might be on its way out, but there's no denying that Russia and France are still in the deep of it," Walter countered.

"Listen to what Patton is saying," William said, using his best reading voice, "Too little and too late now will cost hundreds of thousands of lives tomorrow." He asked, "You think that the mine workers will strike tomorrow?"

It was the same old discussion all the time. Patton was probably only half talking about the coal miners. Willow Run was frequently critiqued by the press and the government for the lack of output. Of course it didn't help that Ford himself promised 1,000 planes a month. It's not as bad as it used to be, but Robert thought he'd be surprised if they were turning out under a third of that.

"We'd all be doing better if it weren't for those damn coal miners," Chip Benson said loudly. "Taking the country down for some low down reasons."

“Don’t worry about the miners, worry about the negroes. What, they’ve stirred up trouble in Inkster, the amusement park, and at the Packard plant, and that’s only in the past month. And those are only the bigger ones,” Walter Glass said, wiping his forehead with a napkin. “I don’t understand why the police don’t just shoot ‘em. Lock ‘em up and all they get is a free meal. This back and forth of dealing with the problem isn’t working.”

“With what police force? We’ve barely got enough for our city,” another voice said.

“I’ve heard Kelly is talking with the 728th down at River Rouge.”

“God help us if we ever get to the point of needing them. It ain’t going to be pretty, but I suspect we’ll be seeing them eventually.”

“I think the folks in Beaumont had the right idea,” Henry added.

“You want to go out there and start beating them, Henry?” Jesse McNair asked in a raw and raspy voice. Robert turned his attention back to his coffee. He knew where this was going. “I know you were probably still trading baseball cards with your buddies when we were trying to form the Workers’ Union, but I’m telling ya, violence ain’t some pretty thing. Those negroes will give as good as they take, they don’t give a damn about any fair fighting. There was one time when we were on the picket line, they were up on the roof throwing nuts and bolts at us. I took a bolt to the chest, and that cracked one of my ribs, and a big bolt to my throat. And there I was thinking I was going to die, lying on the ground not being able to breathe. They started aiming at me again once I was down—they got me again in the legs and my hand. I thought I was going to the Lord that day, but we rallied in the end. Some fellas sensed that trouble

was brewing and they left early to go get some baseball bats and axes. Eventually, we were able to break them. And it was bloody. A good buddy of mine got to a group of them, and he got them back good with this big piece of rebar. Saw one of them with their jaw hanging off. You're young now. You think you can take a few good hits, and maybe you can. But when you're throwing metal up against flesh, it turns into something ugly. Leave the fighting to the army boys. There's enough killing out there."

Robert didn't know how much of Jesse's story was true. Rumors spread that it was Ford who hired the blacks to break the picketers. Sure, Robert wanted to unionize. Who didn't? But Robert knew how to play it safe. He got some flack from the union guys for not being there on the picket lines, but in the end, it all worked out. He paid his dues just like everyone else, and they were serving his best interests. He didn't even mind that the Negroes were in the union too. They took the jobs nobody wanted. Fair pay for fair work. It all got hitched up though to the housing situation. There were barely enough houses to go around, and Robert was damn sure he didn't want a Negro for a neighbor. Once they moved in, everything went down with them. They just didn't know how to keep things clean. Although not as bad as it was a year or two ago, the shanties outlying Willow Run stank almost worse than the plant itself. Sweat, human waste, rotten food, and barely clothed children. That's not how men live. They couldn't even be bothered to keep their own little place clean. Robert knew about small spaces—he grew up in a one-room cabin until he moved out to the city. His folks didn't have much but they knew how to keep things clean. He assumed it might be only slightly better in the Negro neighborhoods—Paradise Valley and Black Bottom being two, at least those people had enough sense to be able to afford a place with a real roof, but he still would not want to live next to him. One of the fellas in the union, Frank Stalsman, lived near Paradise Valley, and he complained all the time of loud music, voices, smoke, and fighting. Even worse, they usually packed at least a dozen people into a room only meant for one small family. "And I'll be damned if I don't go out with my own protection. I keep a Colt .45 in my jacket whenever I

go out. Millie will only take the car to do her shopping, afraid to use the bus. The sooner we can move out of here, the better. If anyone tries to start something with me, they'll be sorry soon enough."

Robert supposed if he were pressed, he'd do what he'd have to do to defend himself and Annie Jane. He wasn't the type to go looking for trouble, but he certainly wasn't going to shirk away from responsibility. Lately, he'd been thinking more and more about joining one of the local housing associations. As long as the Negroes stayed in their neighborhoods and didn't try to move out of that area, and as long as they paid their taxes, Robert could begrudgingly work with them. But living next to them? That was out of the question.

Robert finished up the remainder of his coffee, and took a deep breath. Another day at the plant. It had gotten better, he used to work seven days a week, but the union had negotiated it down to five. Having two days off to do whatever he wanted was probably the only reason he found Annie Jane. It took him a couple of weeks after it was instituted to actually get out of his apartment to try to do something. He spent long days in bed for the sheer novelty of it, letting his body get the rest he didn't even know how much he wanted. Eventually, he moved on to listening to the game, and then went to a diner for lunch. The war effort took away a lot of the food from his youth, or at least made it scarce, but there was something he found extremely pleasurable about having someone else make food for him. Sometimes it felt so different from how he grew up—when he was younger, it seemed as if he never stopped moving, and there was always seen with a light sheen of sweat on his face. His folks were back up North in the thumb, and when he turned seventeen, he moved down to Detroit in order to make something of himself. It was almost as if it were a natural extension of running across the landscape. But instead of going through fields or brushing the beach grass along Lake Huron, he went further to the city. Ran toward the skyscrapers and bright lights, to the dance halls and roads filled with cars, to the huge colorful

advertisements and fashionable department stores, the never-ending hexagonal grids of streets, intersecting and full of different neighborhoods with their own personalities.

It took him a while to find the right neighborhood to live, the cheaper areas were often close to the negroes or other undesirables. The first apartment he looked at reeked of rot and damp, neighbors making loud love in the middle of the day, and children screamed and ran up and down stairs. Admittedly, the apartment he chose wasn't much better in terms of noise, but at least it was moderately well kept. Annie Jane visited it a few weeks ago for the first time, and although she said it "needed a woman's touch," she mostly approved. He could tell that she was nervous in his apartment, flitting from one corner to another. He thought it adorable, her nervousness, and wanted to grab and kiss her. When Robert tried to sooth her worries, she replied that she needed to leave. And although frustrated with her staunch virginity, he reminded himself that she was the kind of girl that men were supposed to marry. No one else would have her, and he felt a strong sense of confidence that he would be her first and last.

Robert decided he could like a life with a woman's touch, a lively city, and two days off a week.

Tonight he would take Annie Jane to the new Hitchcock movie. It was supposed to be a detective murder mystery. There was probably some romance in it as well, which Annie Jane would like. It seemed she was always devouring a romance novel whenever she had spare time. Often, he saw her with great bags under her eyes and she would try to hide her yawns until she finally relented and drank a cup of coffee. Only later would she admit that she had stayed up half the night reading. At first, Robert worried that he wouldn't be able to be romantic enough for Annie Jane. Words and feelings often felt unwieldy unless he had a drink or two to loosen up. But apparently this tipsy talk was enough to sustain Annie Jane, for he found her sighing deeper and deeper into her latest romance novel after such conversations.

When they first met, she was reading one of those books on a bus. Normally Robert wouldn't think twice about a gal with her nose stuck in a book, but there was something about her that he found charming. It also didn't hurt that he just left early from a night with the Trio and was still a bit drunk. It took a bit of pestering for her to warm up to him, but somehow, he convinced her to grab a drink with him the next night. Before Annie Jane, his luck with girls had been dismal: he was always scared of saying the wrong thing. He didn't understand the giggles and thoughts, their appearance and attention to particular details. Whenever he overheard women talking to one another, Robert was distinctly aware that they saw the world completely different from him. This gap seemed insurmountable, and so Robert didn't even mind that Annie Jane wasn't the looker he drunkenly remembered when he met her the next night sober. When they finally sat down for the drink, the conversation carried him up like a great wind; never before had he talked with a woman so effortlessly. He was delighted the first time he made Annie Jane laugh, a complete lightness seemed to come from her face and spread down to her shoulders and chest: her smile opened wide and even though he was momentarily alarmed by her teeth, he found them easy to ignore. When it first saw her smile Robert decided he would do what it took to keep her happy and safe.

Robert took Annie Jane out for a cup of coffee before they went to the movie. Again, she was stifling yawns, but quickly admitted with a small laugh that she just couldn't put the book down. The long days of summer were already in full swing, and the heat of the day had both of them fanning themselves with menus.

“Have you given any thought to where you would like to go for our honeymoon?” Robert asked.

Annie Jane's face spread into a tight-lipped smile. "Honestly, I think I would like to go to Chicago or New York."

Robert preferred the country for a few days, some space away from noisy neighbors, the ever-present car exhaust, and the din of sirens and city life, but he said nothing.

"I would love to get a room in a big hotel on one of the top floors and look down at the whole world. And then at night we could have dinner and catch a show."

"Well," Robert started, "I think that sounds like a swell idea. Is there any hotel you prefer?"

"I hadn't really thought about that. Just something nice and relaxing."

"I'll ask a few of the guys and see what they recommend."

"Just make sure it's not too expensive. I don't want to be worrying about being in the poor house when we get back."

Robert said nothing to this, making instead a mental note to talk to a travel agent about something affordable. Perhaps, if played his cards right, they could just stay in the hotel room the entire time and order take out. It might not be the quiet country, but at least perhaps he could avoid people for a few days.

After coffee, they made their way to the cinema. Although he knew that Annie Jane would get anxious as she watched the newsreels, he preferred to watch them whenever possible. He had more than a few friends from his high school class in the service right now, and only by a fraction of a congenital misplaced heartbeat did he escape the army greens. Instead, he answered the call to manufacturing, honorably enough. He came to work sober, kept his eye on the repetitive tasks, and did his best to save and reduce waste around the house. It wasn't the life he'd imagined, instead it was constant movement

without a feeling of actually going anywhere. The bomber parts arrived before his workstation with clockwork precision, until he was unable to see any progression of time or space. The only indications of time passing were a hunched back and hair graying at the temples. Sometimes a deep sense of guilt crept up on him in the middle of the night for not serving, something he'd only mentioned to Annie Jane in passing, but looking at anyone who returned home, he was even more secretly glad he didn't go. When the newsreels came on, he would strain to see anyone he recognized, but for the most part, they all just looked like scrawny and tired kids.

Robert and Annie Jane watched on as the mass of infantry men marched across the screen before the title card announced that this newsreel would be showcasing the efforts in the South Pacific. There was a great big medical care ship filled with American and Australian nurses, all smiling and waving at the camera. They loaded prone bodies on stretchers into a van. The camera only showed their feet. One man was propped up on his elbow, smiling with missing teeth. The next section changes to a group of Japanese prisoners of war. They were thin, their calves no bigger than Robert's wrist, and their chests were so sunken in he could see the outline of their ribs on their sternum. The announcer proclaimed that they were taken care of humanely, and an American GI shared a cigarette with one of the prisoners. The scene changed again and they watched as great big 105mm and 155mm howitzers blasted off trying to defend Guadalcanal. They boomed, and then recoiled, boomed and recoiled again. The next scene shows how air force men took classes at Yale. Robert couldn't help but be slightly jealous and stopped paying attention until Annie Jane nudged his arm to point out that Clark Gable was getting his Silver Wings. Of course she would only be interested in Clark Gable, he thought. It really shocked him the first time he saw one of these kids come back with a limb missing. Kids like that were supposed to have sunburns and cut up hands from labor. Arms and legs and sides of faces were all supposed to stay intact, not be covered up with eye patches or safety pinned sleeves.

Suddenly, the lights on the theatre popped on. There were a couple of shouts of surprise, and Robert tried to adjust to the new brightness. A man with a torn and sweat soaked shirt ran to the front of the theatre and jumped on the small stage in front of the movie screen.

“The negroes are rioting! They threw a white woman and her baby off the bridge at Belle Island! They’re coming this way!”

A great roar erupted from the theatergoers, and Robert stood up. Annie Jane clutched her collar and her mouth was slightly agape. “Get me out of here, Robert,” she cried.

If there was a riot going on, there’s no end to the possible damage that could occur. Robert grabbed her elbow and tried to lead her out of the jumbling and excited crowd. Everyone moved for the exits, but it barely seemed fast enough. Some people jumped over chairs, fell down, picked themselves back up and shoot through the crowd. Robert almost lost track of Annie Jane, and just barely managed to keep a hold of her elbow. He briefly hoped that he didn’t hurt her shoulder, but at this point his main concern was getting out of the theatre as fast as possible. When they leave their row of chairs, the main thoroughfare bisecting the rows of chairs was a rush of traffic. There were mostly younger couples at this time at night, but there were a few children being carried over shoulders, and old women was shielded by teenagers. Everybody pressed against everyone else, no one could move fast enough. Robert began to feel lightheaded—he never did like the crowds. Just when he thought that he might break down if he couldn’t get out of there, they reached the front doors and spilled out to into the street. It was crowded, people ran in all directions. He smelled smoke in the air, and heard glass break. He guessed that his apartment is in a slightly better neighborhood, and just a little bit further from Belle Island compared to Annie Jane’s. There was a mess of cars, people piled into taxis and buses. All the sailors and younger men headed towards Belle Island, and the older men took their wives away from the fray. Two young Negro boys stumbled out of a five and dime, laughing and joking. They didn't even see their attackers before they were on the ground. Men kicked the two boys, and the sound of screaming cuts the way through the

crowd. Annie Jane went pale and clutched her stomach. Robert put his arm around her shoulder and lead her away from the scene. They walked a few blocks, past the strangers coming out of their houses, and looked where the street lights fail to illuminate.

A voice behind them yelled for Robert. Both of them wanted to keep walking, wanted to keep searching for a taxi, but the voice was persistent. Eventually, the owner of the voice caught up with them. It was William Potters from work. He was covered in sweat and blood.

“Robert, I’m so glad I found you. I need your help.”

“William...William, what’s happened?”

“Chip and I were out at a bar downtown. We heard about the mess going on in Belle Island so we started making our way to the bridge. There had to be thousands. Mostly all I saw was white folks, but in the distance, I could see some coloreds coming off the bridge. We were a few blocks away. One moment we’re running down toward the crowd, and the next moment I turn around and Chip is on the ground being pummeled. So I jump on the guy and start beating him.”

“Oh my goodness,” Annie Jane said pointing, “your hand.”

William’s right hand looked broken, two fingers twisted in an unnatural direction, and his knuckles were covered in blood.

William looked at his hand, “I didn’t even notice. I must have gone hard on that guy.”

“William, where’s Chip?” Robert asked.

“That’s why I need your help. I dragged him into the closest bar and told the bartender to hide him and that I’d be back with a cab. But I can’t find one. There’s no way I can get him out of there myself. Robert, you have to help me get him out of there. I don’t know how long he’ll be safe.”

Robert looked to Annie Jane. "I need to take her home. I can't leave her here."

William paced and looked around. Then he stopped, "One of my cousin's lives a few blocks away from here. She'll be safe there. We'll go get Chip, and then we'll come right back."

Robert set his jaw and looked at Annie Jane. He loved her, and truth be told he didn't much care about Chip. But he couldn't leave a man to bleed to death. He couldn't just do nothing.

"Who's this cousin of yours?" he asked.

"Daisy Potters. She lives with one of her girlfriends, I think her name is Sarah," William rushed.

"I'm not happy with this idea, but I don't see what other choice there is," Annie Jane said.

"I'm not happy about this either." Robert looked around and saw small groups making their way out of downtown.

Annie Jane took a deep breath and then took both of Robert's hands into hers.

"Go," she said.

"Alright, where is this place?"

Daisy's apartment wasn't far from where they are. The rooms were small and Daisy took a few moments to unlock the heavy door. She was surprised to see William, but she readily took in Annie Jane. With promises to be back soon, William and Robert started their way back downtown.

Streets are beginning to get closed off by the police, and in the distance, the men could hear the sound of breaking glass. They made their way down Woodward, but then veered west, away from Paradise Valley, until they crossed over on one of the small side streets to get to the bar. Packed on the street were sailors and black men, large groups congregated around fights. There was blood on faces and knuckles, and it seemed as if rocks flew from every angle. They tried their best to move quickly and close to the sides of buildings, careful to look down every alley. A block away from the bar, Robert looked down an alleyway and saw a group of police officers beating two black men. He couldn't stop from watching as a baton came down over and over. William pulled him away. He pointed to the bar on the other side of the street. Right before they were about to cross, something hard hit Robert's leg. William ducked down and tried his best to pull him along. Robert covered his head, but a rock skimmed the top of his forearm. A gunshot went off and everything stopped for a moment. People looked around but there was no immediate source. The men ran through the street and hunched down low by a parked car. Its windows were already smashed in. Somebody, Robert couldn't see who, broke the windows to the bar. William rushed in, and Robert followed. The bar was dark and mostly empty save for a few people who nursed their wounds. Broken glass crunched underfoot and the bite of different liquors was overpowering. William moved quickly, looking under tables for Chip, but there was no sign of him. They made their way back through the kitchen, and then checked in the freezers and the pantry. Still nothing. Robert opened up the back door into the alley. The street lamp barely illuminated anything, and he had to get close to the shadows and squint to see if anyone is there. He looked behind the dumpster. He moved to one back corner, but found nothing. He was about to give up when he thought he saw a hint of movement. He moved closer and reached out. A hot slash ran through his hand and he pulled it back.

“Don't come any closer,” a feminine voice growled.

“What the hell was that for?”

“I’ll cut you if you try to do anything.”

“I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just looking for my friend.”

She paused for a moment. “Are you drunk?”

“What? No. What are you getting at?”

“Oh, perhaps its because there is a riot going on and I’m all alone in a dark alley? Anything could happen right now. Step backward toward the light. I want to have a better look at you.”

Robert gritted his teeth and backed up into the light. His hand was bleeding fierce and his leg throbbled. “Have you seen anyone named Chip? He’s about my height with blonde hair. My friend said he got a big cut on his head.”

“That scrawny guy in a white shirt? Had kind of a square head?”

“Yes! That’s him. Do you know where he went?”

She didn't answer. He had to suppress the urge to throttle information out of her. But he would never hurt a woman.

“Please. Just tell me a direction. We need to get him to the hospital.”

“He looked like he was getting out of here. I’ll show you what direction he stumbled to, but you and your friend need to help me get out of this mess.”

They couldn't afford another person dragging them down. A woman would be in a more dangerous position this time of night with everything going on. But he had no choice. “Fine. Come with me.”

A petite woman with mussed cherry hair stepped into the light. Robert was immediately struck by her beauty. Her stockings were torn and her dress smelled like it is soaked with liquor and garbage juice.

Her face pointed down into a sharp angle, but her eyes were large and slightly protruding. Williams head poked out of the door, “Robert? Where are you? He’s not here?”

“I’m right here. I’ve found someone who might know what direction he went off in, but she says we need to help her get out of the alley.”

“That’s fine. I don’t care. We just need to get going. It’s getting rougher out there.”

The woman stalked her way to the entrance of the alley and waited for them.

“Ok, we’re going to need to cross the street and go to the alley directly in front of us,” she said. “I want one of you in front of me, and one of you behind me. Don’t let anyone get to me and keep low. They’re throwing rocks and God only knows what else.”

The street outside looked worse than when they first crossed it. The fighting increased and there was more screaming and things breaking. Robert looked to William and the woman. “I’ll lead. Are you two ready?” They nodded. He started off, trying to duck as much as possible. He had to weave a bit to avoid some white men chasing a black man, but Robert made it to the other alley in one piece. The woman and William were right behind him. William held his arm, and the woman lost one of her shoes. She hobbled a step closer to Robert and puts a hand on his shoulder to steady herself as she took off her other shoe.

“Ok, I think I saw him go to this side of the alley. I don’t know if he’s behind a dumpster or if he managed to duck into one of the kitchens,” the woman said. The three made their way down the alley, and tried to peek into the shadows. William thought he saw a movement by the dumpster, but it turned out to be just a rat. The woman pointed to a door. “Let’s try in here. One of you go first.”

“Alright, but be quiet. We don’t know what’s in there,” Robert said.

He led the way into the restaurant. It looked like it was recently abandoned—the only light available came from the burner under a greasy and now burnt soup that was left on the stove. He could tell that someone lit a cigarette in here recently. He heard a faint sound. He hepd his arm up to get the other two to stop moving. He stopped breathing to listen more carefully. Then, unmistakable this time, a low moan escaped. William called out, “Chip?” quietly.

He heard another moan, this time, a little bit louder. Robert followed the voice until he found a bloody Chip collapsed against a bag of potatoes. William squatted and lifted up his head. “Chip, it’s William and Robert. We’re here. We’re going to get you out of here. Just hold it together a little bit longer. Think you can stand up?”

Chip more or less nodded, and William stood up and both men grab Chip by the shoulders. The woman peeked out of the kitchen and into the front of the restaurant. Seeing its clear, she looked out the window at the front door, and then returned to the three men. “I think we should go back the way we came. If we can make it to Adams, we can get to Grand River. From there, we just keep heading west till we reach a hospital. I wouldn’t risk going to the one closest to here.”

William looked down at Chip. “I think we need to get him to a hospital as soon as possible. What do you think, Robert?”

To Robert, none of this sounded good. He should have gone back with Annie Jane. “I think our best bet is going to be trying to get out of this mess. We get a few blocks away and hopefully we can try to hail a cab.”

Silently, they left through the back alley. Just as Robert was about to step out into the street, William stopped him.

“I think I should carry Chip. You’re a taller guy so hopefully no one will want to start anything with you. You worry about giving out punches, and I’ll worry about carrying this sorry S.O.B through this mess.”

Robert let go and William shifted Chip around to better carry him.

“I still have my knife. I’m going to keep it on me. I’ll watch your back too,” the woman said, looking directly into Robert’s eyes.

“Who is this gal again?” William asked.

“I’m Dawn,” she said, “and we’re going to get out of here as best as we can.”

It was slow going with William dragging Chip down the street, but by sheer luck, most of the people fighting seem to be already engaged. They dodged a few beer cans, but they made it out of the street more or less intact. Dawn limped slightly, but didn’t slow down; she left a bloody footprint behind her, probably due to her lost shoes. They arrived to one of the less populated side streets, and although there were fewer people here, the commotion was still in full swing. A woman’s voice screamed obscenities from her window. Another man hollered for people to stop and think of Jesus. They get a few more blocks down, and the streets seemed calmer.

“I need a break,” Chip moaned. William panted heavily. “Just a moment, let’s stop for just a moment.”

They found shelter under a corner store stoop. Chip sunk to the ground and leaned up against a brick pillar, his face paled. Dawn kept peeking around the corner, body rigid in attentiveness. Robert tried to lean back against the wall and relax, but he couldn’t stop moving. He should have felt fear, but all that

he can feel is the rush of adrenaline. He didn't want to stop here. It wasn't safe. Suddenly, Dawn juttled back behind the brick wall.

“There's a car coming,” she whispered loudly.

The four of them tried their best to hide in the shadows. Robert prayed that it was a taxi, or at least white people. The car got closer, and from the whooping and yelling, it didn't sound like a taxicab. Just as it was about to approach the intersection where the four were hiding, the car pulled over. Three black men got out, and one of them carried a baseball bat. The others cheered him along as he broke windows and car windshields. One of the men picked up a brick and threw it through a storefront window.

“We should just try to sneak out of here, we'll turn the corner away from them,” Robert whispered. Quietly, they helped Chip get back up and situated back onto William. William and Chip led the way, with Dawn behind, and finally, Robert. William and Chip managed to dodge inside an overhang of a storefront, which got them off the sidewalk. Dawn followed. Robert was just about to join them when a voice broke out crying, “There's whitey! Let's get him!”

The four of them made a run for it. Robert heard a few pairs of shoes slapping the pavement behind them, running fast, and he heard the car engine roar to life again. It pulled out, tires screeching, and before he knew it, they were all caught in its headlights.

“Don't stop,” Robert yelled, “I'll stay here.”

He advanced towards one of the men and threw a punch, sending him onto the ground. Before he could register it, another one shoved him into a wall. He punched him in his stomach, and Robert doubled over in pain. Then he went for his head. But abruptly, he stopped. Dawn jumped on the man, her arms locked around his neck. The man screamed as she bit off a piece of his ear. The other man who was

driving ran out of the car and pulled Dawn's hair, trying to dislodge her. Robert lunged for the man attacking Dawn. He wrestled him to the ground and punched his face. Behind him, Dawn managed to get free and pulled out her knife. Whenever the man tried to approach her, she swung it back and forth. Blood covered Robert's hands. The man on the ground wasn't moving. He got up and looked at the man engaged with Dawn.

"I think you should go," Robert said.

The man turned around and saw his friend. He looked murderous, but walked away. He spits on the ground and picked up his friend. The friend that Robert punched a few moments ago finally got up, and swayed a few times before he finally collapsed into the car.

"Let's get out of here," Dawn said.

They ran across the street and down for a few blocks, not stopping. Finally, they found a quiet corner and stopped to catch their breath. Both of them were breathing hard.

"Look," Dawn cried, "There's Chip and William."

Up ahead, Chip and William walked down the street. Robert was just about to yell for them, but a taxicab pulled out from around the corner. William hailed it and they both got in. Robert and Dawn ran again to catch up with them before they left, but it's no use. The cab had already pulled away.

Robert leaned up against building, hands on his knees to try to catch his breath. When he looked up, Dawn stared at him, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape. Robert stands and pulled her into his arms, kissing her with everything. His body was hot and he felt like his chest will explode. Her hands tangled through his sweaty hair and there was no hesitation in her kiss. He lifted her up off the ground and pushed her against the brick wall. As she pressed her body into his, he was surprised to find how light and

muscular she was. He wanted more, his hands roamed over her body, and was delighted to find that not only did she not stop him, but she started touching him as well. She moaned deeply into his mouth and as much as he doesn't want to, he pulls away. "Let's get out of here," she said.

"Yes."

Robert and Dawn ran down the street, their hearts raced with adrenaline and desire. The neighborhood they were in was relatively quiet. Dawn reached for his hand, and a thrill went down his spine. Half a block ahead, a taxi dropped off a couple and they went into a house. They both ran to the taxi, and Dawn laughed. Robert was barely able to give the address to his apartment before Dawn pulled him into another kiss. They didn't care that the driver was right in front of them, all that matters in this moment was more and more physical contact. Beneath the smell of sweat and dried rubbish from the alley, Robert noticed that she smelled womanly, soft, and slightly spicy. She moved her hand to his thigh and he nearly moaned. He opened his eyes and saw that he was only a few blocks away from his apartment. He pulled away from her kiss and put an arm around her shoulder. He leaned back in the seat to catch his breath and slow his heart rate.

For Robert, it was a complete blur between paying the cab driver and throwing Dawn up against his door inside his apartment. Drunk from sensation, they both stripped, barely breaking their mouths apart for air. It had been a while for Robert, but he didn't even have time to worry as she pulsated through the both of them. They made love wildly, desperately into the night. Afterwards, instead of falling asleep, Robert stared at the ceiling tried not to cry. If it could be so simple, he'd say he was in love. But that wasn't quite it; it was more like an epiphany. Every emotion that he had ever felt seemed to rushed back to him in one mess. There was no way he could go back to his old life after he felt all these things with this woman. In her kiss was every streak through every warm summer night, every rough patch of bark

against his skin when he climbed a tree, every thrust forward when he accelerated down country roads in his Chevy. He felt young. Time wound itself backwards, and all the plane and auto parts he ever assembled were erased. He needed to move, a forward thrust out of the inertia of the city and into something new.

Dawn rolled up onto her side and slid off the bed. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes from her purse. "Do you have any matches?" she asked. Robert didn't trust himself to form words, so he pointed toward the stove. She walked naked across his apartment, past open windows that let the yellow light of the city in. She got back into bed and laid on her side, not bothering to get under the sheets.

"The papers are going to run out of ink talking about tonight," she said.

"I wonder when everything is going to die down," he said.

"It's the heat. People just go crazy. Everyone works all week in that furnace of a factory, and then they crowd around outside looking for somewhere to get a breath of fresh air.

"People were behaving like animals. And not just the Negroes. I saw white folks doing things like they were in a war zone."

"I think its because men are missing something in the city. They feel the need to be protective of the little they have, so afraid that someone might take it away. They look at everyone who doesn't look like them like they're some threat."

"And you don't think that they're right? Who was doing the looting?"

"If I lived with nothing, and everyone thought I was already breaking the law, what would stop me?"

"I'd like to think I'd be more honorable than that."

“It is an easy thing to triumph in the summer’s sun, and in the vintage and to sing on the wagon loaded with corn, it is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted, to speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer,” Dawn replied.

He didn’t say anything for a while, and tried to understand the words.

“What’s that about?”

“It’s this thing that William Blake wrote. There’s this woman, kind of like a goddess, who loses her love because of her jealousy, and she laments so loud all of heaven and the world can hear her. She reminds all that listen that often we only have one side of the story, and can’t possibly understand someone else’s position until we’ve been there.” Dawn let out a plume of cigarette smoke that curled around above her head.

“That all sounds fine and dandy, but I don’t think it’s reasonable. What about the Japs and the Germans. How many people have lost loved ones because of what happened at Pearl Harbor?”

“Everything changed then too. I don’t know, maybe it was the same thing. Men were afraid that what little they had was going to be taken away by some imaginary monster.”

Robert felt a prickle of irritation start at the back of his neck. Women just didn’t have a sense of the real world. He let out a sigh.

“You didn’t seem to think that man was an imaginary monster when you pulled your knife.”

To his surprise, Dawn let out a loud laugh. “There’s no shame in defending yourself. I just think that we need more forgiveness in the world.”

“I think this Blake fellow should have added that forgiveness is easy when you don’t know real injury.”

Dawn sat straight up. “Don’t tell me about real injury,” she said seriously. She didn't say anything for a few moments, but stared out his bedroom window. “This city is completely mad, you know, this world. A few hours ago I was having a drink with my brother and a few of his friends. It all seems so banal.”

Robert couldn't figure out what to say, but then she turned to him with a big smile and giggled.

“I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not,” he laughed.

“I’m always serious,” she said. And with that, she pounced and kissed him playfully.

Afterwards, it was hard for them to fall asleep with all the sirens, but somehow they managed to. Robert woke up first and laid in bed and looked at the woman next to him. He thought about last night, about how different reality was only a few hours ago. About how easy it would be for her to walk out of his apartment and pretend that nothing happened. He would go to work tomorrow, take home another paycheck, and marry Annie Jane. He supposed that he should feel guilty about last night, but he didn't.

He didn't move, but watched Dawn as she got out of bed and made her way to the bathroom. He expected her to come back to the bedroom, but instead she walked naked to the kitchen and opened drawers.

“Please tell me you have coffee,” she called out.

Robert was slightly surprised that she felt so natural in his apartment. She moved about the space without a care, without nervousness. “Ah, never mind, I found it,” she said. He supposed he should help her, but he was not going to stop a beautiful woman from making coffee in his apartment. She peeked back into the bedroom. “Don’t you have any breakfast food here?”

“I go to the diner most mornings before work.”

“What about weekends?”

“I usually sleep in, and then go get some lunch.”

She returned with two cups of coffee. “What would you like to do today?” she asked.

“Are you going to put on any clothes?”

“Eventually. I don’t feel like it right now.” She leaned over and grabbed another cigarette out of her purse.

“I suppose I’ll go down to the diner and get some food. Maybe I’ll listen to the game.”

“I have a better idea. Let’s get food for a picnic and I’ll take you for a drive.”

Robert was floored. “You’ll take me for a drive?”

“Of course. Why shouldn’t I?”

“I’m the man here, I’m the one who’s supposed to take you for a ride.”

Dawn laughed, but not maliciously. Robert noted how her eyes crinkled ever so slightly, and like everything else about her, found it absolutely irresistible.

“Well, I don’t know if you have a car. I think it would be presumptuous for me to assume that you have to cater to my whim like that. I know I have a car, and I enjoy driving. So why shouldn’t I offer?”

He didn’t know how he felt about this. On one hand, it should have been him who takes the lead. He had a strange desire to let this puzzling young woman lead him wherever she wanted. If there were a point of turning back, of going back to his old life at the factory and back to Annie Jane, this would be it.

He could simply tell Dawn that he was engaged, it was a mistake made in the heat of high emotions, and that it would be best for them to pretend it never happened. Something so seemingly insignificant as letting this woman take him for a drive one afternoon felt like he was standing at the edge of some marvelous forest. They could follow any path, any event could happen. She could drive him anywhere, she could take him anywhere.

“You have a point there,” Robert said. “Let’s go for a drive.”

They piled together their gas rations, and drove west; away from smokestacks of Detroit and toward the white beaches outlining Lake Michigan, to the small town of Grand Haven. He didn't even object when they had been on the road for hours, or that they would have to drive in the dark if they were to return to Detroit anytime soon. He let her drive, across the fields and small towns, across the state capital and various parks, down dirt roads and gravel. The breeze seemed to lift the car along, and he agreed with each leaf as it danced in the wind. When they parked at the beach, Robert ran until he got a stitch in his side. When the evening came, they decided to get a hotel room. They made love through the night and day. They ate catfish and blueberries. They talked for hours. They got their legs cut by beach grass. They walked up to five-mile hill and kissed. They counted the boats. They ate ice cream. They swam naked in Lake Michigan when the sun went down. They warmed each other up in between sandy bed sheets. They spent another day there. They fought. They held hands. They confessed love then cried into hollows of the others collarbone.

Three days later, they drove back to Detroit.

The riot had finally been broken. Gone were the tanks and the troops. Out came the shopkeepers and the insurance men. The newspapers printed statements from church leaders and government officials. News crews ran their cameras, eager to talk to anyone who was there. Columnists and pundits blasted the racial tensions in Detroit for disrupting the arsenal of democracy, wondering how many lives will be lost overseas. Trucks loaded up with furniture began their great trek outward, further and further out into suburbia.

As they walked down the repairing streets they found Dawn's brother. He looked a little rough for wear, as if he hadn't slept in a few days.

"Dawn, there you are. I looked everywhere for you," he said. He then told his story of how he got separated from her due to a fight. When the fight was over, he went back to the bar to find her, but she wasn't there. Eventually the city imposed a strict curfew and the military were brought in. "There's a lot of people scared and angry right now, we didn't expect Kelly to bring in the troops." They tried to go to the diner that Robert went to before work, but it still hadn't opened yet. They walked for a few blocks until they reached a place that looks relatively unharmed.

They tucked into a small sample of sandwiches and coffee. The bread was a little stale, but nothing inedible. Dawn's brother told them more about the events of the past couple of days. "I told you this city went mad," Dawn said as an aside to Robert. Robert smiled at the memory of her being naked.

"Oh Robert!" the voice of Annie Jane called out across the diner. She made her way through the tables. "I'm so glad you're ok. I was worried sick. After you didn't come back to get me from Daisy's, I went to your apartment. I tried contacting the police but they said they had so many people missing or in the hospital that it would take a while to account for everyone."

Annie Jane looked at Robert with big excited eyes. She was about to move in for an embrace before she stopped to see that he was holding hands with Dawn. Her eyes widened and her mouth forms a small o as understanding washed over her. She looked down at her left hand where the engagement ring

sat mockingly. Her shoulders slumped inward; her limbs and torso crumbled like paper. Everything in the diner seemed to stop. Families put down their forks and spoons, the griddle ceases to sizzle, the coffee stops percolating. Dawn's expression was blank. The silence was broken when she inhaled sharply.

"This isn't supposed to happen," she whispered. "This isn't supposed to happen," she repeated, this time, louder. "You were only gone for three days..." she trailed off.

She tried to take off the ring with some difficulty. Her eyes began to water before she managed to pry it off. She looked like she might throw the ring at Robert, but after a slight hesitation, she put it calmly down on the table. She turned, and after an almost imperceptible wobble, walked out of the diner. When the door closed, the nearby women give Dawn and Robert dirty looks. The ring sparkled against the Formica of the table top, a beacon to cast accusation and damnation.

From Annie Jane Hasker's Personal Journal, dated July 2nd, 1943

I feel like my world has been ripped from under me. My ribs ache and flare with pain. Breathing is cursed. And yet I still inhale, exhale, my heart keeps beating. Why does my body continue? I keep telling it to stop, to go away, but it persists. I am unable to cry anymore. The last time I cried, I cried blood. The shock of seeing blood on my cheeks in the bathroom mirror must have turned everything off. I feel nothing. Everything is distant. My telephone rings and I can't understand voices. All language is foreign. I don't open the windows. I lie naked in bed, sweating in the summer heat. Why should I have comfort? I could not keep love. I am unlovable. My teeth disgust me. I don't want to open my mouth. I don't want to chew. I just want my teeth to fall out and rot. I grind them when I sleep. Liquor helps me sleep. I have to barter my rations, but why would I need sugar? Why would I need flour? Or corn? Why would I nourish this vile body? The world makes no sense. I am unlovable.

From the back of a diner receipt, dated July 3rd, 1943 (found next to plate of diner food)

Dell,

Something is wrong with Annie Jane. Have my dinner before it gets cold. I will be back soon.

Love,

Rob

From the Detroit Free Press, dated July 5th, 1943

Two unidentified bodies, a male and female, were found at 6:30 this morning by a boater off of the Detroit River. Time of death is estimated to be at 40 hours. Jane Doe is in her mid twenties, 5 foot 4 inches, with chin length blonde hair and crooked teeth. John Doe is in his late twenties, 6 foot 2 inches, with dark hair graying at the temples. Anyone with information about either of these two individuals is instructed to contact their local police department.

From the Detroit Free Press, July 20th, 1943

Area police are baffled by what journalists call this decade's "whodoneit." The remains of Annie Jane Hasker, 25, of Detroit, Michigan and Robert John Light, 27, of Bay City, Michigan, were found off of the Detroit River by Belle Island on July 5th. In what has been an apparent lovers murder-suicide, the facts are puzzling. The police discovered that while Light was shot by Hasker, Hasker had bruising around her neck from a belt. Both Light and Haskers' fingerprints were found on the unregistered Colt .45.

The last time Light and Hasker were seen together was in late June after Light broke off his engagement with Hasker in a Detroit area café. Natalie Belvin recalls, “That woman [Hasker] came in and the man [Light] was with someone else. She threw her ring at him and ran out crying. I told the woman who was with him [Dawn Staggers] afterwards that ‘if he cheated on her, he would cheat on you.’”

Dawn Staggers, 25 of Chicago, IL was questioned by police but cleared of any suspicion.

Snow Light. Part two. Somewhere on the road.

Hazard and I stop outside of Casper to stay at the Hotel du Lac. It has been a long day of driving, and Haz isn't keen on continuing through the night. I offer to pull the graveyard shift, but he says he needs a comfortable bed.

The Hotel du Lac looks like it may have been a family-friendly, nice, mid range hotel about thirty-five years ago. The entire lobby is shrouded in dim florescent lights that barely illuminated years of caked on tobacco, dust, and other unidentifiable flotsam and jetsam. On the walls are dusty framed posters of geometric art that had obviously been previously tacked up with pushpins, the corners torn. Atop of the wood paneling check out desk, there is a small box television blaring reruns of Miami Vice.

“You want a single room?” an old woman asks exhaling from her cigarette. Her hair was buzzed short and she wore a stained blue nightgown.

“Can we get two rooms?” Hazard asks.

“Yeah, but one of them is getting the bathroom remodeled.”

“How bad is it?” I ask.

“It’s almost done. My son Stevie has been working on it. He was supposed to be working tonight but I don’t know where he’s got up and gone to.”

“Sounds fine by me. We’ll take the two.”

“Alright, but you let me know soon if you’ll be needing any extra linens or anything. I’m going to bed soon, and I’m not sure when Stevie will be back.”

“Wait, you’re going to bed? What if someone else comes wanting a room?” I blurt out.

“If they really want a room, they’ll wait around for it, missy.” The woman says.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Hazard says with a wide toothed smile.

When we ask about food, she promises us that the bar next door, The Lady of the Water, is still serving dinner. So we make our way down the musty and claustrophobic hallways until we reach our rooms. The supposed “almost-finished” remodel looks like it was started years ago. Plastic tarp half-hangs up over the shower, half fallen off, and the top lid to the toilet tank is missing. I shudder when I peek inside the shit-stained tank.

“No way. Nope. Hazard, you’re taking this room,” I say. Luckily, Hazard doesn’t seem to mind, and as soon as he throws his bag onto the bed, he has some how magically produced a joint.

“Good idea,” I say. I figure if there is any appropriate time to be high in the middle of nowhere, its right before what I’m sure to be is questionable food. I pull out my iPod and put on The Mix that we put together. I remember that we debated for days over what the ideal music playlist was, him preferring The Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin, and I enjoying Radiohead, The Smiths, and Sigur Rós. Eventually we found a good combination of the two, with plenty of Fleetwood Mac, Cat Stevens, and The Black Keys thrown in for good measure. I was constantly adding to The Mix, always testing out new songs that I think Haz would like, and throwing in some older ones that I found interesting. Hazard, for his part, would veer the conversation back to The Mix, often breaking one of his multi-hour long silences to say that we needed to add some Abbey Road or Graceland tracks. We each had veto power, and were both fairly open minded to suggestions. The only thing we disagreed on was The Red Hot Chili Peppers: Hazard thought that I would love them because they were more modern, and I told him that I would rather listen to a cat in heat than Anthony Kiedis wail on. At the moment, Don McLean’s “American Pie” was playing.

“God,” Hazard says exhaling, “I hadn’t heard this song in years. Your ma and I used to take long drives down Lakeshore Drive listening to this.”

I try to imagine my mother singing along with Hazard winding down the tree-lined road, but it seems odd. She always told me growing up that she was in love with my father, but it just didn’t work out. Before I met Hazard, I vowed to hate him for breaking her heart. And after I had my own heart broken for the first time at age 16 by a farm boy, I fanaticized about slapping Hazard across the face, about delivering long deserved justice. Luckily a couple of years had made me more mature in my reactions, but I still didn’t risk telling Mom that Hazard and I had met.

“Think we should stop by and see her?” Hazard asks after the song ends.

“No,” I say without hesitation. If he wants to me to elaborate, he doesn’t ask. We finish the joint again in silence, and get up to go to The Lady of the Water.

Compared to the hotel, the bar seems marginally more modern, although still dated. Gone are the fluorescent lights of the hotel and are instead replaced with neon Budweiser adverts. For a Tuesday night, the place is lively: there are about a half dozen older men sitting at the bar drinking cheap whiskey and even cheaper beer. A group of five slightly younger men throw darts at the wall, with a few middle-aged women hanging around them. It looks like there are two women my age, one is a hard butch bartender with an intricate Koi fish tattoo running up her neck, and the other is a woman dancing by herself on the small, otherwise deserted, dance floor. She wears a too small, halter-style red dress, and a large Playboy bunny style necklace hangs between her large, obviously bra-free, breasts. Her ankles and feet seem to strain against her strappy high heels, and on her arms are elbow length black satin gloves. Appropriately

enough, she sways to “Lady in Red,” and once the song finishes, goes over to the Jukebox to put the same song in again.

“Damn it, Tara, give a break tonight,” the bartender calls out. She doesn’t seem to mind, because she closes her eyes and begins to sway again, lost in her own little world.

Hazard and I split a plate of hot wings, which are surprisingly decent. I wash it down with a Diet Coke, and Hazard has a double whiskey. I’d tell him to slow down, but I’ve never seen the man have a hangover, so I figure I’ll let him do what he pleases. After his third double, I watch him go over to Tara and ask her to dance. A few of the guys playing darts snicker loudly and elbow each other, but the older men at the bar pay no mind. She throws her arms around his neck, and presses her breasts against his chest. Hazard starts whispering things into her ear and she laughs theatrically. After the second dance, and when his hands are almost on her ass, I decide to call it a night and head back to the hotel. I try to get his attention with a wave, which he responds with a head nod.

Not long later, I am awoken by the sound of them having loud sex. I put my earphones on to drown out the noise of her moaning like an amateur porn star. I wonder if Hazard knows that she’s faking it, but I suppose neither of them is in a state to really care. I try to ignore them by thinking about the curse. At first I didn’t want to believe it, but the more and more I research it, the more likely it seems. Hazard is right: there is a pattern. Every relative I’ve researched all has a red head intervene before their life goes to the dumps. I wonder about my own red head, about my own descendent of Samson. Do they know to look out for me? Do they know that they are destined to destroy? Or is a complete accident for them? Is there someone out there researching their own side of the curse? Do they feel guilt? Or are they

unaware like all of my relatives—thinking that they are merely kind and loving to an individual until some horrible fate befalls them? The hardest step of my research would be to see if all of the red heads were related somehow. But I only know two full names, and so far I can't find any connection. It's entirely possible that they are related through marriage, or remarriages, or they lied about their names. Or hell, what if one of them was adopted out? Fuck, I hadn't thought of that. My mind starts to swim with the different possibilities. I finally fall asleep a few hours later, completely overwhelmed and having no idea on how to solve the curse.

I knock on Hazard's door a little bit after 9 the next morning to wake him up, but no one answers the door. Hazard's always been a heavy sleeper, and unfortunately, I don't have a key to get into his room. It's not until after breakfast and a shower that I'm able to get an answer from the door an hour and a half later. Charmingly enough, Tara answers the door in one of Hazard's flannel shirts, ass hanging out. I almost gag at the smell of sex and sweat that permeates the room.

“Come on, Haz,” I say. “We need to get going.”

“Sure. Mind if I use your shower?”

“Me too!” Tara pipes up.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, figuring there is no harm in her using the shower. I'm already packed at this point, so she can't nick any of my stuff.

“I'm going to go put some gas in the Bird, ok?”

“Thanks, Snowball,” Hazard says, and throws me the keys.

When I get back, Tara sits at a table in the lodge with Hazard, still wearing his clothes.

“Ready to go,” I ask.

Hazard stands up with bag in hand. Tara also stands up, purse bulging slightly.

“Are we dropping her off somewhere?” I ask.

Hazard pulls me aside. I can see where this is going. My blood rises.

“So I was thinking that Starla could come with us,” Hazard says quietly.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I yell.

“Calm down, it’s all right, just hear me out,” he says. I cross my arms and start debating the merits of trying to find a Greyhound to take me back to Seattle.

“She’s just a kid trying to get by. She says that she has a cousin in Detroit that she’s been trying to get to, but doesn’t have the money.”

“If she’s such a kid, then why were you fucking her like a dying sow last night,” I snap back.

“Hey, that’s none of your business. We are both consenting adults.”

“Look at her, Hazard. Are you seriously telling me you think this is a good idea?” Hazard looks down at his shoes. “And besides, I thought I heard the bartender call her ‘Tara’.”

Hazard hesitates for a moment. “Starla is her stage name.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I mutter. I massage the bridge of my nose. Two straight days already on the road, and another three or four more with some crazy drugged out random girl from the middle of nowhere riding shotgun. Tears begin to well up in my eyes, but I brush them away.

“I thought it was just going to be us, you and me, figuring out this whole family business,” I say quietly.

Hazard wraps me up in a hug. “Of course it’s you and me, kiddo. You’re the important one here, you’re my Snowbean. I just remember when I was her age and I was into a lot of bad stuff, and if it weren’t for a few well-placed random acts of kindness, I’m sure I wouldn’t be here today. She just needs a little help, and I need to pay it forward.”

I wipe the tears out of my eyes. “You sound like a self-help book,” I say, half-laughing.

“I’m serious, Snow. I’ll make you a deal. We take her as far as you can stand, and if it gets to a breaking point, I buy her a bus ticket to Detroit and wish her well.”

I let out a deep sigh. I should say no, but with much like everything else concerning Hazard, I say yes. “All right. But I’m going to hold you to that promise.”

“Will you at least give her a chance? She really is a nice girl.”

“I’ll try.”

Starla, as it turns out, is quite the chatterbox. Long stretches pass where she tries to talk over the music about her life. Haz only gets a few words in occasionally, mostly to acknowledge what she just said. Within three hours I hear her entire life story: from growing up in North Dakota and being hot shit in high school, to her failed dream of going to cosmetology school. Now, all she wants to do was to be a professional wrestler, with plans to start off as a ring girl. She says that as soon as she gets to Detroit her cousin will teach her how to fight in a nearby gym, about how she will lose all her excess weight and bulk up. The only thing she is nervous about was are boobs getting smaller, because then she would have to

save up for implants. She also has seven tattoos: the Playboy bunny logo on her lower back, the Japanese symbol for “ambition” on her shoulder, a Grateful Dead teddy bear on her ankle, a peace sign on her other ankle, an infinity symbol on her wrist, a circle of ivy around her belly button, and her mother’s initials over her heart next to a rose. She says that the next thing she wants to tattoo on her is the word “Diva” under her bra line. She tells us how she considers herself a really loving and positive person, but sometimes people are just cruel to her. She tells us how many people she slept with. When she tells us that her mother died when she was a teenager, I feel bad for judging her. I try to imagine growing up without my mom but I can’t. A few hours later, Starla offers me a Xanax, and after I politely decline, she pops a few herself, and quickly falls asleep.

As soon as she falls asleep, Hazard turns off the music. I think we both need the silence. I’m try to remember what Hazard told me about his family back in Michigan, and I’m wondering if we’re going to meet either Fritz or Luther when we get there. Hazard hasn’t mentioned anything about his father, but part of me is wondering if I’ll be meeting my grandfather as well. I once asked Hazard if any of his family knows about me, knows that he had a kid and a wife at one point. He replied with something vague and quickly changed the subject. I figure that’s about as clear as anything that they definitely do not know about my existence. Part of me is nervous meeting them, wondering if they will like me, or if they’ll hate me merely because I’m Hazard’s offspring. I’m sure it would have been different if they knew about me from a young age, if they held me when I was a baby, but I’m an adult now, and a stranger at that.

Depending on how long we drive today, I expect us to get there by late tomorrow afternoon. If Hazard had let me drive, we would have been there almost a day ago. But as it stands, between only him driving, and our daily late starts, it’s taken us nearly 5 days to get to Wisconsin. Dropping Starla off will probably add a couple of hours to our trip. She keeps talking about how her cousin is a gourmet chef and will certainly treat us. At this point, anything that isn’t a gut bomb of greasy car food sounds amazing. Even the few times I’ve managed to find some type of produce, it’s usually been mealy or anemic.

“Hey, Haz, we should try to stop for food at someplace that isn’t a diner or a gas station,” I say.

“Like a Subway?”

I think of the unappealing pale lettuce and limp tomatoes. “Nah, something else.” We barter back and forth for a while, Hazard making worse and worse suggestions. We finally crack up after he suggests White Castle.

“I like White Castle,” Starla mumbles, not opening her eyes.

I let out a snort, and Hazard laughs good-naturedly.

We stop at a pub outside of Madison. The food looks heavier than I’d like, but I manage to find a salad that by its description seems passable. Starla orders chicken strips with fries, and Hazard gets a burger. I notice that although he is nice to our server, he at least has enough decency not to overly flirt with her in front of Starla. Once I tried to figure out if he had a type: men, women, race, weight, hair color, anything—but I’ve found no connecting traits. I asked him about it once and he just shrugged and said that he liked who he liked. I’m a bit surprised given how much Starla talked during the past few hours before falling asleep that Hazard is in one of his talkative modes again.

“Man, Snowbean, now here is something that I haven’t had in years,” he says, holding up his glass when the waitress brings it to him. “Vernors Ginger Ale,” he says, reverently. He closes his eyes as he brings the glass to his lips. He takes a sip, and holds it in his mouth for a while before swallowing. Starla asks if she can try some, and Hazard hands it over. She takes a small sip and blanches.

“I don’t know how you drink that stuff. It tastes so sharp,” she says.

“Eh, we were brought up on it, right, Snow?” he says.

I nod. I never really cared for the taste, sharp and bitter and slightly hot from the ginger, but my mom always gave it to me when I had an upset stomach.

“Man, I remember mixing this stuff with some Wild Turkey back when I was at GM,” Hazard says.

“Oh, god, that sounds disgusting,” I say, trying not to remember my one and only experience with Wild Turkey when I was 19.

“It was cheap, and it made the day go by,” he says, laughing.

“Wait, you mean you were drinking at work?” I ask.

“Oh hell yeah. Most of the guys on the line were loaded up on something.”

“Didn’t you worry about getting hurt? There’s gotta be a lot of heavy machinery there. And not only that, weren’t you worried about getting fired?”

“Shit,” Hazard laughs, “I used to work with this one guy, Clarence, who was this scrawny bag of bones who managed to get completely tanked every day. Now, at first we had a system worked out, I’d get drunk in the morning and he would do my job, and then we’d switch later in the afternoon after I sobered up a bit, and then Clarence would get plowed and nap on top of one of the pallets. Believe me, we weren’t the only guys on the line who had worked out a system like that. There was usually a big fight over who got what jobs, and it was all based on how much you could slack off. There was a shoprat hierarchy. Putting on windshields, dipsticks, bumpers, gaskets—we all knew which ones were the jobs we wanted. So anyway, one morning we get word that one of the big bosses is coming to walk the line with some Japanese investor type guys. Once we hear this we start scrambling—hiding our booze, our radios, our joints, we start guzzling coffee and kicking awake anyone who was passed out. Except for Clarence. For the life of me, I can’t get the SOB to wake up. I’m kicking, and hollering, throwing cold coffee on him, the works. He doesn’t stir. He’s out. I figure that there’s maybe a slight chance that these bigwigs

won't see him, he's a little bit out of the way and kind of hidden, but if anyone looks closely, his ass is gone. Once break our break is over I get back to being a Good Worker and I can see these guys in suits moving down the line. The big boss is pointing different things out and they're coming closer and closer. When they finally get to my station they don't really talk to me, just ask the boss some questions. Out of the corner of my eye I see Zombie Clarence stumbling around looking for a light for his cigarette. I want to yell at him to go back to his pallet, but I can't call him out without drawing attention to him. I figure maybe he'll see the suits and go back into hiding. Nope. Big boss sees him shuffling around and can see right away that he's tanked. And the boss is trying to lead the suits away from Clarence, I guess hoping that maybe they don't see him, but Clarence, in only what I can describe as like a scene out of a movie, staggers forward and vomits everywhere. I'm talking full on spewing chunks across the floor, across the boss' shoes, onto equipment, everywhere. And it seems like pure alcohol except mixed with bile. The big boss starts spouting off apologies to the businessmen and even though you can tell they're disgusted, they don't say anything. By now the floor manager sees what's going on and he comes up and grabs Clarence by the arm and drags him away. Except while he's doing that the manager calls him a "dumb fuck" and the big boss overhears this and has to apologize again to the Japanese suits. It was legendary," Hazard says laughing, tears gathering at the corner of his eyes.

"I guess that's one way to go out if you don't care about your job," I say.

"Oh, he was gone for a few months, went over to some other car parts plant, but it wasn't long until he was shuffled back onto the GM line."

"You're kidding me. How would a company hire someone like that? I don't understand how the floor manager would let all this go on," I say.

"It was just part of the culture. Clarence had experience, which meant that they didn't have to retrain him. As long as we didn't stop the line, meaning, as long as we didn't halt production, the floor managers looked the other way. It didn't matter if something went on crooked, you'd just try to get better

on the next car. The whole point was to Just. Keep. Moving,” he says, hitting his palms against the table. When he sees that I’m still disgusted at the idea of going into work fucked up, he continues.

“Have you ever even been in a factory?” He asks, but doesn’t wait for my answer. “Didn’t think so. First of all, it’s loud as hell. Even when we took a break, there was always something going on in the background. Loud enough that your ears ring after you leave and lie down in bed. You have to yell constantly if you want to talk to someone, and I can’t tell you how many times we almost blew out the speakers in the radio just to have something to make the day go by quicker. Then, there’s the smell. It’s greasy, oily, sweaty, and then add the heat and it ends up smelling like Satan’s asshole. And the thing is, it’s the same damn movement day in, day out. Eight hours of turning, eight hours of putting windshields on cars. Eight hours of the same damn thing. There’s no future there, no past, no dream of getting out of the line, because all of it is part after part. It’s nothingness. It’s a great fucking void of nothing. You don’t go anywhere. You don’t get to see what the car looks like when its finished except in commercials where some blonde is driving it through some Californian mountains. And you know what the kicker is, Snow? There’s men out on that line who have been doing it for decades. So if they have to shoot their liver to shit just to get by, just to make a living for their family, then they wont get a damn note of judgment from me.”

“My dad died on the line because he was drinking,” Starla says quietly. “He got his arm caught in one of the belts. They wouldn’t let me see him afterwards. Mom saw him once, and she wouldn’t let me. She just had him cremated.” If she starts to cry, I don’t see it because she’s already out of the booth and jogging across the restaurant before either Hazard or I can make sense of what she just said. Hazard looks guilty as hell, and I can’t believe I goaded him on. I didn’t even notice Starla wasn’t saying anything, or wasn’t responding to his story.

“Christ,” Hazard mutters, and starts to get up.

“No, stay here. I’ll go talk to her,” I tell him. Hazard’s done enough damage. As much as Starla is a shit-show, I don’t want to leave her in an unfamiliar city with no one she knows.

I find her in the bathroom, locked in a stall. I can hear her digging through her purse.

“Hey, Starla, it’s Snow,” I say softly.

She doesn’t say anything, but keeps rummaging through her purse until I hear the click of a child’s safety seal being opened and the rattle of pills.

“Easy there,” I say.

“I’m just taking one. It’ll be fine,” she says, her voice shaky.

“Look, I know Hazard can be a real insensitive asshole sometimes, but he doesn’t mean to be malicious. I know he feels terrible for upsetting you.”

She comes out of the stall. “It’s just not fucking fair, you know? He does the same shit as my dad and he gets to live, traveling around the country with his daughter.”

“You know he only recently came into my life. Up until about half a year ago, I hadn’t even met him. And I didn’t know how I was going to forgive him for never being there. Your dad may have died young, but at least you got to spend some time with him. You at least have some good memories from when you were younger, right?”

“Yeah, but at least you had your mom. You know what happened after my mom died? My own aunt and uncle wouldn’t even take me in. I had to go into a group home. There was so much fucked up shit going on there. And all I could think was if my Daddy just thought about either me or my Mom, maybe he’d be a little bit more careful. It was selfish when my dad did it, and it sure as hell was selfish when your dad did it too.”

I sigh and lean against the cold tile wall. “You’re right.” I look down at my shoes. The floor is dirty, and there is a small pile of discarded toilet paper next to my left foot. Starla doesn’t say anything, but she blows her nose and wipes at her eyes.

“Come on. Lets go have a cigarette,” she says.

I follow her out of the bathroom, and I see Hazard craning his neck from our table on the lookout. Starla doesn’t stop or look at him, but makes a line for the door. I hold my hand up in a “stop” motion, letting him know that I’m not done yet and for him to stay there.

“I’m going to grab our coats. I’ll meet you out there, ok?” I tell Starla.

I don’t want Starla to think that I’m spilling all her secrets to Hazard, so I grab my coats and quickly tell him that we’ll be back soon. When I get outside, Starla has her arms wrapped around herself. I kick some snow off a bench, and we pull our coats down over our butts.

“I hate smoking outdoors,” she says, handing me the lighter.

“Yeah, I was never a big smoker, but it’s always weird to me that we can’t smoke inside bars or whatever any more.” We sit there in silence for a while, watching the various families trekking across the icy parking lot.

“It’s going to be ok,” Starla says aloud.

“It is going to be ok,” I say. “Tomorrow you’re going to be with your cousin, at least that’s better than The Lady of the Water.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just that sometimes I just get so tired of constantly fighting. It’d be so easy to end up like my Daddy, drunk off his ass at work just to get by. I don’t want to live that kind of life where I have to do the same soul-crushing shit over and over. Don’t get me wrong: I have my vices. But I’m not going to stay settled in a bad situation. I’m not going to waste my life away.”

I wrap my arm around Starla. “You wont. You’re resilient. Tough.”

“Thanks,” she says.

“You know, when I first met you I wasn’t happy that you were coming with us. All I knew was that you were some woman from a bar that my dad had banged. But just in this short time of knowing you, I can tell that you’re strong, and that you’re going to be ok. You got out of that small town, and you’re going to meet up with family. Things will get better.” I’m not sure I actually believe this, but I want to. And I want Starla to believe it as well. I hope she doesn’t call me out on my bullshit and just accepts this pep talk.

She squares back her shoulders, sitting up straighter.

“It was past time to get out of that shit hole anyway. I kept trying to find someone to love or take care of me while I was there. And then I just became a big joke. It got to the point where I would spend all day in my room, nervous and terrified about going out to the bar, but I knew I just had to go. I wasn’t going to meet anyone staying in my room, avoiding the world. I had to pretend that I didn’t hear them, what they called me. You know why I kept playing the same song over and over?”

“Why?”

“Because the first time I heard it all I could think was that a lady in red was someone who was really special, really loved. I wanted to be like that. It was the only song that I could listen to that would tune out all the other jackasses in the bar.”

I don’t really know what to say about this, so I put what I hope is a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She quickly turns and gives me a tight hug, surprising me.

“Alright. Let’s go back to Hazard and get out of here,” she says.

After a few awkward apologies, I manage to get a sufficiently nicotine and Xanax sated Starla into the car. Hazard tries his best to be as non-offensive as possible, and Starla relaxes and looks fairly content, all things considered. We put on The Mix and it isn't long before Starla asks if I have "Lady in Red." I've always hated the song, but I don't tell her this, I just apologize for not having it. She doesn't seem to mind and after a few minutes asks me if I have any Spice Girls. What doesn't surprise me is that I had one of their albums, but rather, that Hazard seemed to know all the words. We give him a good ribbing about this. Ahead of us is Michigan—and despite the long miles of overcast sky, this Midwest welcome feels appropriate, a heralding for our homestate.

We curl around Chicago, and drive up into Michigan on 94. The semis, those great behemoths, drive in both the left and right hand lane, mercilessly passing small cars. I even see Hazard passed a few times by sports cars and SUVs, seemingly a first in this trip. Eventually we see the great big Michelin Uniroyal tire ballooning up into the landscape, 80-odd some feet of glowing Americana. The blue LED lights faintly glow the mess of drifting grey snow. We turn onto Cass Avenue, and Hazard slows down and lets out a low whistle.

“I knew that it changed since I was here, but I didn’t expect this,” he mutters.

Hazard waited a while in our relationship before he told me about the time he spent in Detroit during the 70s and 80s before he started working for GM. He left Ann Arbor after the summer of 67’, bouncing around for a while, eventually ending up back in Detroit using heroin. He said it was bad, but when I pressed for details, he changed the subject. All he said was that he got clean, moved to Lansing, met my mom and started some of the happiest times of his life.

“Are these your old stomping grounds?”

“Yeah, Snowbean,” he says distractedly, and then points, “I used to stay right there. Junkies, pimps, prostitutes, dealers, we were the city’s finest.” I try to imagine Hazard in this place, and from what he’s told me about himself, it isn’t hard to do. The hotel itself is flanked by a vacant lot on one side, and two abandoned houses on the other. Most of the windows on the ground floor are covered with plywood, and the ones up higher are mostly intact. The windows are skeletal, empty. A six foot high brick wall is covered in graffiti. It feels out of place from the nicer and modern looking buildings up the street.

“Was it dangerous when you were here?” Starla asks. At first I feel a hint of uneasiness, afraid that this is uncomfortable for Hazard. But apparently, he’s in one of his chatty manic moods.

“Shit, kids were getting gunned down, or beat, or robbed all the time. Just over on that corner were at least three different shootings that I witnessed. And a few blocks that way they found some guys

actually fucking beheaded. But don't get me wrong. Cass Corridor was bad, but Hamtramck and Highland Park were worse."

"Looks fine now," I say, pointing out a yoga studio.

Hazard takes a turn down Mack and he points out place near Woodward. "See that hotel? The YBI's used to sell right out of there. I'd use to roll up and find like twenty five guys just waiting around, and then they'd bring out a grocery bag of heroin." I stare out the window. I don't understand why Hazard would harm himself like that. I don't want to talk about my feelings and reactions to this news with Starla in the car, so I don't say anything.

"Did the police ever bust you?" Starla asks excitedly. I am annoyed that she is giving off the impression that this was cool.

"Before Nixon got worried about his precious white Vietnam veterans smoking smack, the police left this area alone. I almost never saw a police officer in here. Then Nixon starts his War on Drugs, and we get all these crazy white undercover cops who just keep shooting black kids."

"At least they were getting rid of the criminals," she says.

"People just don't understand it. Ok, so like everyone is told that Detroit went to shit because of black people or the unions or whatever other racist bullshit. But there were always ghettos. When people came up from the South for jobs, its not like they just left their racism there," he scoffs. "So white flight happens, and the city loses a lot of money. The auto industry is declining, and the only way to make money is selling drugs. The city was abandoned. People had to survive, they had to eat. So I hustled drugs as long as I could until I was smoking too much of it. Luckily, Nixon put the Methadone clinic in, but that place was a madhouse. Never enough stuff, and shit, half the people in there didn't even have track marks. I lost a lot of friends living here. I have no idea how I made it out alive."

Starla doesn't say anything more as Hazard continues down Mack. Most of the houses look nice, but I can tell that many are abandoned as well. The street starts to glow white-blue as the day ends.

Without warning, he turns, and a completely different scene emerges. Houses, covered in stuffed animals, polka dots, and all sorts of things that I can't even tell. Nailed to the houses, leaning up against trees, are large sheets of plywood with abstract faces and animals painted on them. Some of them have slogans, others reference God.

"Still here, eh. I remember a few years after I left one of my friends wrote me describing this place." Hazard mentions.

"What is this?" Starla asks.

"Before I met him, he failed out of his senior year while studying art at U of M. We found each other at one of the houses and became friends and would go out and score smack together. After I left, he gets clean and tells me about this art project going on and how he is apart of it, and how important it is socially, and all this stuff."

He pulls over, and we get out of the car. There are a few other couples on the block, looking at the houses and taking pictures. I notice that Starla tries unsuccessfully to hold Hazard's hand, but he subtly shakes her off. Feeling better, I wander into the various yards of these crazy houses. I have to avoid a patch of yard that has been turned into some type of vacuum cleaner graveyard. The snow is stamped down from lots of footprints, but its still slippery. I find one house in particular that I'm drawn to: a bright orange house with a mustard yellow garage next door. All sorts of masks cover the house, as if it were a gallery. One large piece of abstract art is so interesting that I can't decide if it's a mermaid, a candle, or a kind of amoeba. As I'm studying these bursts of color, Hazard puts a hand on my shoulder and whispers to me, "Your mom always did love art. She'd love this. Sometimes you look so much like her." Hazard snuffles slightly from the cold and I take that as a sign to get back into the car. Starla is already waiting for us, looking reserved.

Hazard circles back around and drives us back to Midtown to drop off Starla. I'm not sure if she's gotten in contact with her cousin to let her know when she's coming, but she knows exactly where the house is. It's one of the nicer homes, one with a fresher coat of paint and a big wreath on the door. I hear the unmistakable pop of her opening her Xanax medication, and after a few seconds, she opens the car door.

A young woman covered in piercings and tattoos opens the door. It takes her a few moments, but then she wraps Starla up in a hug.

"Tara! What are you doing here?"

"I made it out of that shithole. I thought we could spend some time together." Apparently Starla/Tara didn't announce that she was driving across the country to live with her cousin. The other woman blinks, but offers for Starla to come in. She points to Hazard and I. "These are my friends. I thought maybe we could all go out for dinner or you could cook." The woman hesitates, and bites her lip.

"Actually I have class tomorrow. Not a good night. But why don't you come in."

"Oh, that's fine. Just let me say goodbye," she says, and bounds down the steps. Without warning, she full on kisses Hazard on the lips, his eyes wide, as she holds his face. When she pulls away, Hazard wraps her up into a lose hug and pats her on the back. I've never been the "hugging type," especially with near strangers, so I make an effort to give Starla a high five. She ignores this and wraps me in a tight hug. She insists on giving me her phone number, and I promise that I'll keep in touch.

With one last burst of flair, Starla walks a few steps up the porch, turns, blows Hazard and me a kiss, and walks inside.

By the time that we leave Detroit and get to Sebawaing, it's nearly nine at night. Most of the houses look the same: single story built in the 1950s, with big flat yards covered in snow. Hazard doesn't seem to second guess himself at all on where he needs to go, but from what I can tell, there are not a lot of opportunities to take a wrong turn in this small town. We pass a funeral home, a quick lube, and bank, all with German sounding names. We pull up into the driveway of another small looking house, and although I can't make out faces, I can see two figures in front of a yellow lighted window. When I make a move to get out of the car, Hazard stops me.

"Alright, kiddo, here's the plan: I'm going to go up there and talk for a few moments, and I'll wave you in to let you know when it's time to come out."

I agree that this is the best option, and watch him as he walks around the car and too the front door. Before he can even get there though, I see a head quickly peek out of the front room curtain, and then leave. The front door swings open, and before I even realize what's going on, I see Hazard spin around violently and then fall to his knees. I run out of the car to make sure that he's ok. The blood flows from his nose onto the porch. A man about Hazard's age is standing with his fist clenched at the doorway, and inside I hear an old woman's voice yelling about what's going on.

"Are you ok?" I ask, leaning down.

"I'm fine," Hazard spurts. "Get back in the car."

"I'm not leaving you. They'll just have to deal with me," I say.

"Who are you?" The man in the doorway asks.

I stand up and face the man. He's taller than Hazard, and pudgier. But he has the same eyes and nose. I can tell he's sizing me up for a moment to, before he utters a single "damnit."

“Fritz, who’s there?” the old woman asks again.

“Go back to the kitchen, ma. Let me figure this out,” Fritz says.

Hazard’s head shoots upward, his eyes big. He blinks a few times and then stands up so quickly that he stumbles. I grab a hold of his arm. “Mom?” he says.

The old woman comes back to the door and pushes Fritz aside.

“Oh my god, is it you Dieter?”

This small woman rushes forward and hugs Hazard tightly. She’s cries, and Hazard cries too, long rivulets of blood running down the back of her shoulder. The amount of blood makes me light headed, so I shoulder my way past Fritz to go inside and find Hazard some kind of towel. Last thing we need is him passing out from blood loss right now. I walk into the bright kitchen and see a variety of newspaper clippings and photographs on the table. Next to the sink are a few bunches of flowers in different vases. I glance at one of the cards and it reads “In deepest sympathy.” I turn back to the table and in the center is an obituary for Alfred T. Light, my grandfather, and Hazard’s father. He died last week. I let out a long breath. Hazard is going to have one hell of a night. A wave of clam and purpose flows over me—my protective instinct kicking in, and before I know it, I’m back at the front door handing Hazard a worn kitchen towel for his nose. Both are still crying, and Hazard takes the towel without breaking the embrace. I give Fritz a hard look that I hope conveys “do not fuck with my dad anymore” and I see his entire posture soften before my eyes. He slumps into the wall and runs one of his doughy hands through his thinning hair.

“Come on,” I say quietly, “let’s give them a moment. We can talk.” Fritz doesn’t object, and he leads me back into the kitchen. He slumps into a chair, and I start filling a nearby kettle with water.

“There’s some tea and instant coffee next to the stove,” he says half-heartedly pointing. I grab two mugs from the drying rack near the sink, and eyeball a few tablespoons of the instant coffee. I don’t want to sit down right now, so I lean against the counter.

“What’s your name?” Fritz asks.

“Snow.”

“Dieter named you Snow? Did you take his last name too? The kids must have loved you growing up,” he said.

“Yeah. Snow Light. I know.” I said.

“So you’re his daughter.”

“Yes.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

Fritz lets out a long low whistle. “Dieter never told us that he had a kid. Not that I would know—I haven’t seen him in almost two decades.”

Part of me wonders if I should let Hazard do the talking about his life, but I look over in the doorway, and he is now sitting against the wall with his mom next to him. I think at this point letting his family know about me is the least of his concerns.

“Yeah, he was married to my mom for a few years before he left. I was two at the time.”

“Of course he runs out on his wife and kid,” Fritz snorts. He stands up and starts pacing. “What a lowlife.”

“Hey, settle down. Now.” Fritz stops pacing at this command and looks at me square in the face.

“Whatever happened between my mother, Hazard, and I is only our business. I’m not excusing what he did. I don’t expect you to forgive him tonight, but I’ve already come to terms with what happened. I’ve let him back into my life, for better or for worse.”

Fritz averts his eyes downward, and slumps back into the kitchen chair. I decide to give him a bit of space in the conversation, and I don’t say anything more, letting him process what is happening. After long minutes, he starts talking again, stopping and stuttering, with long pauses between his sentences.

“I’m sorry that you have to walk in on this. I’m sure you’re a nice person. But you have to understand that man out there has put this family through hell. Packs up and leaves when he’s barely 18 without a goodbye, doesn’t tell us where he’s going, if he’s alive or dead. The last time I saw him he must have been maybe twenty-one, twenty-two. He comes back one day strung out on some kind of drug with a male prostitute asking for money. I tried to get him to sober up, stay a while, but he was gone before morning and managed to clear out my wallet . And that’s it. That’s the last I saw of that man before tonight. I’ve tried contacting him for years, but I can never seem to find him. And on the one or two occasions that I manage to call him up, it goes straight to voicemail that he never returns. I tried to contact him about the funeral, but I wasn’t even able to find an address or telephone number. I’m assuming he doesn’t know about your grandfather yet. So you tell me, what are you two doing here?”

My mouth has gone dry and my knees are weak. I knew Hazard made some bad choices, but I didn’t know what. I start to feel angry and dizzy and nauseous all at once. Fritz stands up.

“Sit down,” he says, and pulls out a chair. Now it’s my turn to slump down and process everything. Suddenly, I feel really foolish about this whole curse business. I’m wondering again if these were just the ravings of a severely damaged man. But that is something I just need to sit on for a while.

As much as I want answers, tonight is not the night to ask Fritz or anyone else about the curse. I just need to hold it together for a little while longer. I won't add to the drama tonight.

"I'm here to meet the family," I say.

"Did Dieter mention anything about his father? Did he know that he died?"

"He didn't say anything to me. He doesn't like talking about his past a lot except that he's made a lot of mistakes. This trip was supposed to be good for him."

Tears start to gather in my eyes, and I can tell that I'm on the edge of a breakdown. I don't want to cry. My throat is tight. Once the first tear rolls over my cheek, I stand up and let out a breath.

"I need a cigarette. I'll be back in a moment."

"You can go out through the garage so you don't have to walk over those two," Fritz offers and points to a door attached to the kitchen.

"Think we can put a hold on further drama until I get back?" I ask with a half smirk. Fritz snorts, and I take that as a yes.

A quick flip of the light switch and the fluorescent light shudders, casting white shadows over what looks to be an early 1970s Mustang. I don't bother to look more than this, but I can tell it is older and rusted out. I doubt Hazard knows of his brother's love of cars. There are so many boxes and various antiques scattered around that I have to be careful sidestepping them all.

Fortunately, Hazard left his cigarettes in The Bird, although at this point if they weren't there I would be seriously tempted to slip away to a gas station for a moment. Hazard and my grandmother have completely moved inside the house at this point, and the front door is closed behind them. The porch light still shines off Hazard's red metallic pool of blood. It's stopped snowing, but the clouds are still hanging

heavily overhead. Sebewaing seems like a place where you would see an infinite curtain of stars if it were a clear night. There's something completely peaceful about this town, something pure. No wonder Hazard left.

The peace is quickly shattered when I hear more yelling coming from inside. I throw down my half smoked cigarette, and dash back in, hoping that there's no more violence.

"I don't understand," Hazard is sobbing.

"What do you mean?" Fritz asks.

"Mom was supposed to have a horrible life," Hazard says.

"Why on earth would you think that?" His mother says, putting an arm on his shoulder.

"Because of the curse. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Shit. I should interject something here, tell Haz to shut up, but I'm completely frozen. It's like I'm watching the scene unfold like a movie in front of me, completely incapable of changing the direction that has already been filmed.

"What the hell are you talking about, Dieter," Fritz asks.

"Samson and Delilah! The curse! Our family is cursed to have a red head come into their life and either kill them or separate them from the ones they love. Mom was cursed. Our ancestors were cursed. I'm cursed. Snow's cursed too."

Somehow, my knees become unstuck and I rush over to Hazard and wrap him up in a hug. "Shhhh, it's ok, it's ok. Calm down." I whisper, trying to stop his raving. I glance at Fritz and my grandmother, and both of them look horrified.

"Who is this?" my grandmother asks.

I guess Hazard didn't get around to telling her about me.

"Mom, this is my daughter, Snow. Snow baby, tell them about the curse. Tell them about what you've found," Hazard pleads.

"I'm not sure this is the right time. Why don't we all just calm down, and we can talk about this later when we have a clear head. It's going to be ok, Dad," I say.

At hearing me call him "dad" for the first time, Hazard sobbing intensifies and he sinks to his knees. He is folding into himself, breaking right in front of our eyes. I've never seen a grown man cry like this. I wish that Fritz and my grandmother weren't here right now, the last thing Hazard needs is for them to see him like this. They already have so much anger towards him, they don't need to think he's crazy as well.

"Come on, Dad, let's go outside for a minute." I look over to Fritz and my grandmother, "Can I have a moment alone with him, please?"

"No," Hazard sobs, "No, Snow. You tell them right now. Tell them what you found. I'm not crazy. I'm not."

"What is he talking about," Fritz asks sternly.

"It's a long story," I say. Fritz doesn't look appeased. Nor does Hazard. I pull up Hazard's face so that he is looking at me. "Alright. I will tell them everything I know, once you calm down. Deal?" He snuffles, and a mixture of blood and snot drips down his face. "Let's get you to the bathroom and clean you up, ok?"

Hazard doesn't respond, but he doesn't object when I lead him to the bathroom. I close the door behind us, even though the others don't follow. Once we get in there, he crumbles to the floor besides the toilet. I wet a washcloth in the sink, and then put it over his forehead. Right as I think that his tears have

stopped, he proceeds to open up the toilet and vomit. His body is breaking in front of me. My stomach twists painfully, and all I want to do is not process what is going on. I just want his pain to end. When he finally stops vomiting, I again wipe his forehead with the washcloth. He leans against the tub, completely slack. His tears have stopped.

“Want to tell me what happened to set you off like this?” I ask softly.

“She said she had a good life. She ended up marrying the man she left my dad for and moved to Tallahassee. She had a couple of kids. I have a half sister.” He closes his eyes and runs a hand through his hair.

“I don’t understand.”

“She tried to write to us for years, but apparently my dad never passed along the letters. She was happy, Snow. How could she be cursed if she was happy? I just don’t understand.”

I don’t want to say this aloud, I don’t want to say that maybe the curse doesn’t exist. But Hazard needs to come to reality.

“What if there is no curse?” These words hang heavy in the air. Hazard looks up at me as if I slapped him.

“No. No. You researched it. You found the curse line.”

“What if it was just a coincidence? Sometimes bad things happen to good people, Hazard.” He doesn’t object or say anything to this, so I continue. “I mean, doesn’t it strike you as odd that if there is this big curse we’ve only been able to find two other people aside from yourself and your mother that were cursed? What if Mary and Robert were just unlucky?”

“Then what the fuck does that mean for me, Snow,” he yells. “Where does that leave me? What does that mean for my life? Every thing that I’ve done wrong, everything. What kind of person am I if I’m not cursed?”

Instead of crying anew, Hazard zones out completely, staring straight ahead.

“I don’t know. We all make mistakes, we all do things we regret. But we need to own up to our mistakes. We need to try to be better people without finding a scapegoat.”

I don’t even know what these words mean until they have tumbled out of my mouth. So it’s true. There is no curse. Hazard is delusional. And he took me along for the ride. A wave of guilt washes over me for enabling him. I feel dirty. I have taken advantage of this man, feeding into his delusions just so I could have a relationship with him. And now I may have damaged him beyond repair.

“Hazard, Dad, I’m so sorry,” I say, tears rolling down my cheeks.

He still doesn’t say anything. I bury my face in my hands. I press my palms to my eye sockets, wanting to concentrate on something else.

“You ok in there?” my grandmother’s small voice asks.

“Yeah. Just give us a few more minutes,” I choke out.

“We’re going to go to bed. It’s been a long night for all of us. There are some blankets and pillows in the guest bedroom and on the couch for you two. I was supposed to fly back to Florida tomorrow, but I’ve pushed my flight back to Thursday. We’ll all talk more tomorrow, but don’t be afraid to wake me if you need anything, ok?”

Hazard and I don’t say anything to each other for the rest of the night. After another forty-five minutes or so, we finally get off the bathroom floor and I put him to bed. I don’t want to leave

Hazard alone, so I decide to sleep on the floor of the guest bedroom. Surprisingly, it doesn't take long for me to fall asleep, completely exhausted by the day's events.

The next morning I awake with a start, and immediately recall last night's events. Hazard snores beside me, and I stare at the ceiling. I try to wrap my mind around everything that I know, every thing that has happened now that I don't have to talk Hazard off the crazy ledge. Hazard, Dieter, whoever the fuck this man is, is not a good man. This is a man that abandoned his best friend, his family, and my mother. He's broken more than his fair share of hearts. He's a drug addict and a thief. He's completely fucking delusional and has sucked me into one of the biggest messes that I didn't need in my life.

And I've completely enabled him in all of this.

Guilt washes over me. How many times could I have turned back? How many times could I have refocused his attentions? Truly, this is a man that should probably be in therapy, not driving across the country with his estranged adult daughter smoking pot and picking up questionable women in trashy hotels. I feel like I'm going to throw up. Why did I allow myself to be taken in with him so much?

And then, like a punch to the throat, everything becomes clear. Because he has charisma. He charmed me just like he charmed everyone else. Aren't addicts supposed to be good at this? How could I have ignored my intuition? Because I was threatened that my life would turn out like shit just like his because of that stupid lie of a curse. Tears start to collect in the corners of my eyes. I roll out of bed and make my way to the bathroom to blow my nose. After I emerge, I find Fritz and my grandmother sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee.

They look up at me expectantly, as if I know what's going on and what I should do. The sunlight pours into the room almost too happily. My eyes are red, and I know if I were to talk, my voice would quake.

"Good morning, Snow," my grandmother says politely.

I nod. Fritz looks like he's about to say something, but my grandmother lays a hand on his forearm. I clear my throat and gather up my strength.

"How about we talk later once Hazard is awake."

Fritz snorts, "I can't believe he makes his own daughter call him that stupid name."

"Please, Fritz, that isn't helpful," my grandmother says sternly.

"I'm already awake," Hazard says, coming up behind me. His chest and shoulders look sunken in. When I try to make eye contact with him, he just stares off to the side. For some reason this stabs through my heart.

We both take a seat at the table and my grandmother gets Hazard and I coffee. She carefully puts out cream and sugar, but no one takes any. The birds chirp loudly outside, too brightly for this morning.

"Alright Snow," Hazard says, "let's get this over with."

"Don't you want to tell them?" I ask.

"No. It will be better if it comes from you. I don't know what is right and what is wrong anymore. I need an outside perspective."

I take a breath. I certainly don't want to be the one to tell Hazard's story, but Fritz and my grandmother look at me like I am the responsible one.

"Ok," I say, trying to think of a place on where to begin. "A few months ago I moved up to Seattle and Hazard contacted me..."

When I'm finished with the tale, Fritz looks so mad he could spit, and my grandmother is silent.

"It's all my fault," she says. "If I didn't leave you boys, then you wouldn't be in this mess. If only you had a mother to guide you, you wouldn't be where you are today."

"Mom, it's ok, you did what you had to do. I loved Dad, but he was a downright bastard. He didn't deserve to have you in your life. Sure, I wish we would have gotten in contact sooner, but that's more of Dad's fault than yours."

"What are you talking about?" Hazard asks, his voice haggard.

"Oh honey. I tried writing you several times starting about a year after I left. But your father decided that he wouldn't share any of these letters with you."

Hazard stands up and starts pacing around the kitchen. He runs his hands through his hair, and I've never seen him look so old. He looks like he aged ten years in one night. He crouches down to the floor and buries his palms inside of his eye sockets.

I'm crying now. It's just not fair. It wasn't fair for me, and it wasn't fair for Fritz or any of my other uncles, it wasn't fair for my grandmother, and it wasn't fair for Hazard. Hazard starts hyperventilating, and I feel myself starting to do the same. I need to get out of here. I bolt out of the kitchen and make my way to the overly bright back porch.

I stare at the weeds and dandelions poking out of the edges of the cement walkway. I run my hands through my hair. I clench my jaw and it feels like my heart breaks all over again. It's just not fair. I cry hard for a while, letting the snot and the tears collect on the ground. I cry until it feels like I've cried out every last bit of my being. Then I wipe my nose on the back of my hand a few times and stand up, determined.

My grandmother sits on the floor next to Hazard and Fritz stands off to the side disapprovingly. Hazard turns his head when I enter, his face broken. This is a man that needs me more than ever. There is no charisma in this moment.

"Dad," I start, clearing my throat. He looks up into my eyes. "Dad, if you want a relationship with me, I need you to go into therapy. You have a lot of issues you need to work out, and frankly, I'm not capable of dealing with them. I don't want to enable you, but I don't want to abandon you either. But it's your choice. You can either run away again from all those you love, or you can stand up and take responsibility for your actions. You can get help and restart your life."

Fritz and my grandmother stare at me wide-eyed. Hazard breaks down again, his shoulders heaving with great sobs.

"Yes, Snow, yes. Yes I will absolutely go to therapy," he says.

"Starting today," I say, not as a question, but as a stipulation.

"Starting today," my Dad says.

Epilogue:

It's been about half a year now that Dad's spent in the mental hospital and things are looking better and better by the day. He goes to individual as well as group therapy sessions, and he's started to have sessions with me, Fritz, and my grandmother. I've moved back to Michigan for the time being, figuring there was nothing nearly as important that could keep me in Seattle. Mom's even visited him once, but says that she's going to have to give it some time before they can even consider being friend's

again. The doctors figure that in another month or so he can start living on his own again. Dad says he's excited to get some real food, but he's always realistic to say he doesn't want to rush anything.

Last night, my grandmother flew up again and we made a big dinner to bring to Dad. Fried chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes. His favorite. His face lights up when we enter the clinic. He talks happily yet evenly about how he and his therapist finally read the letters that my grandmother wrote to him over the years. There are a few tears shed, but Dad says that he's getting closer and closer to a place of forgiveness both for himself and his mother. He says that it will still take him a while, and that there will be starts and upsets, but he is on the right track. Fritz still holds a lot of bitterness, but him and I are starting to come around. Mostly Fritz and I try to build a relationship between the both of us, without mention of Dad. I don't know if Fritz will ever forgive Dad for all the things he's done, but he has me and his mom. It might not be every one who he's ever lost, but for now, its genuinely more than enough.

