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The Language of Blame
A Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Christopher Allen Brennan

December 2011

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University of California, Riverside

The Language of Blame

a novel

Christopher Brennan

for Bari

“Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.”

Cormac McCarthy
All the Pretty Horses

"...the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over."

Tim Winton
The Turning

11 September 2001

PROLOGUE

Los Angeles

He approaches the mirror on the back of the open door and stops a few feet away from it. The early morning sun beaming through the skylight sends a ray across the room and illuminates him as if from the inside. Arms at his sides, he stands very still and stares.

He never knows when he's going to do it. Usually a few days will pass and he will begin to feel this need and, almost simultaneously, the dread. But he still does it. In some sick, strange way, it has become a means of acknowledgement, a way to try and accept the way things turned out. A way to pay back.

He reaches down and unties one shoe and then the other, pushing each off with the opposite foot. The cold floor refreshes his bare feet and, for a moment, he forgets. He lifts his toes up, first on the left, then on the right. Left, right, one, two: a steady two-four. Lately he has started to use the mirror attached to the inside of the hallway closet so he can stand a safe distance away, but today he has this need to move in very close, close enough to even touch it, put his nose to the glass and create an impression from the oil on his skin. His eyes, bright blue, the same color as Lou's, the same almond shape as their Mother's, are dry, the whites cracked with red from restless sleep and rubbing, a few flecks of blood on the delicate skin around them chafed from the roughness of the gauze on his hand.

Mother. Who always said to never trust a man with thin lips. His own are now puffy, the lower a little more pouty, a distinct feature both he and Lou took from her, after the guy put it between his teeth and got a bit carried away sucking and tugging on it. He presses them to the glass several times in quick succession and succeeds in giving himself a bloody lip.

Hah.

So. As the wind blows, or some other cliché, but it is true: Mother turned out the biggest lies of all. How could he not have known? The world told beautiful people they deserved it, the more of a life, not the less, and Mother had believed this. If only she could have defined her life and shaped it the way it was *supposed* to be, the way *they* were supposed to be, she would have had the answer. Everything would have turned out the right way.

Right.

But would it have been enough?

Holding down the bottom seam against the floor with his right big toe, Kym slides his jeans off the left leg and then bends over and pulls the right side off with his left hand. He leaves them on the floor in front of him and reaches behind his back to grab the top of his t-shirt and pulls it over his head. He will try and look straight on to start, but the front always bothers him more, the boyishness, the lack of muscle, so he slowly turns to the side. He can see more definition this way, more angularity, especially when he tightens his stomach and pulls the loose skin up with his fingers. Whenever he used to make some negative remark about the way he looked, Larry would say how much he loved his body and reach over and slowly rub his arm with his index finger or blow this imaginary kiss across whatever space they were in. Simply amazing, he would say of Kym's hairless skin. "Can you believe this?" he would ask, as if he expected Kym to respond.

Front on, his chest still seems shapeless, just there. He bends his elbows and flexes his chest muscles, but all he sees are a couple of hairs near the navel and rubs them flat with his fingers. He can still see the imprints from the guy's teeth last night. It felt like he was trying to nibble around the fat like it was a layer of gristle on a spare-rib.

"You're hurting me," Kym kept saying, but when the guy made motions to leave, he begged him not to stop. He needed to let him do it. He still needs to control at least this much, the ability to say when he leaves. The guy pointed at Kym's hand and said he thought he wanted it, the pain. After Kym had had many too many at the Carousel, a

small downtown guy bar that on a weeknight had ten patrons, often less, he confessed why it was wrapped.

He reaches his arms straight up, reaching into the air for something, and suddenly sees them: the orchestra waiting for his cue, the members poised ready to perform. But there is nothing but silence and stillness: string players have no bows in their raised arms, the woodwinds have no mouthpieces. He sits back down at the piano, the stage suddenly vacant, and sees the instrument has no hammers to hit the strings.

Sometimes when he is feeling more brave, he will move even closer and really stare at himself, look long enough to see if he can see him still hiding there - his twelve-year-old self and the smooth androgynous body during those years with Steve and Deidre. The ways they had violated each other were a disgrace. Knowing now they were part of a bigger, unstoppable, something even the love of parents couldn't contain, is the thing he tells himself only Lou could have the words for, the wreckage and craziness of it all, things Lou could embrace and embody with a truth that was mysteriously hidden somewhere within her.

He kneels down, reaches inside the closet and grabs the hammer. He lays it beside him and begins to un-wrap the bandage on his right-hand. He told the man at the hardware store that he wanted the hammer to have a solid wood handle. The man said they were out of them, didn't know if they made such a thing anymore.

"Right."

The rubber handles are safer, easier to hold, the man said and asked what he was going to use it for.

"For fixing things," Kym had said, and left it at that.

His fourth finger is still swollen around the knuckle; the third has a smudge of blood around the top of the nail, but looks as if it is already starting to grow back. The resilience of the body, the need for it to keep going, both amazes and disgusts him.

The music was supposed to fix everything. It was supposed to take him away but instead led him further and deeper into the past.

Go ahead.

Just look at it.

He turns and sees the old upright still sitting in the open space next to the front door. Kym told the movers to leave it there when they insisted on delivering it. "We'll lose our jobs if we leave it outside," they said, after he asked.

He had just turned four the first day it arrived. He had watched from the living room window, one hand pulling the thin curtain sheer to the side, the other rubbing his left thigh up and down hoping the men would hurry and get it inside before someone changed their mind. Mother said it was time for him to have it.

The first few days Kym would simply sit in front of it and grin. He loved the size, the enormous weight that announced the arrival of something solid and permanent in his life. Clasp his right-hand fingers tightly together, he would slide the tips of his nails up and down the white keys, the sound he imagined of a distant helicopter approaching closer as he went up, and then moving away as he went down. There is a long mirror

attached to the top part of it, but he doesn't remember ever looking into it. He was too short in the beginning, but even later on, he avoided that reflection. It was somehow off limits to look in.

It began to feel so much bigger: the piano, the sounds he could create. He and the piano seemed to be more of each other and the world was outside, behind the door, outside the walls, across the street, but not interfering with this world they had created. There wasn't room for anything else.

With the lessons came the books. The green one, the red, the pieces with titles and pictures that suggested mystery or something so simple it was simply happy. No danger, no noise, just notes and sound and something new.

His parents and their yelling: the loudness of him, the weakness of her: the threat of the quiet afterwards. Kym learned to play louder, adding clusters of notes using the palm of his hand, his full arm when necessary. Even with the clashing of keys, the pedal down to continue ringing them out, it was never as ugly.

Eventually, they moved the old upright into his room and his sister Lou down the hall. She always seemed to be there anyway, in the tub, in the yard, in the car, on the church pew, her needs always the right thing to be thinking about. Even through the empty bunk bed above him, he could still feel her seeping her way through the wooden slats that separated the soft mattress between them.

Except on the bench.

Folding his legs underneath him so that he can balance the weight in the upper part of his body, Kym tilts his head far to the right, then to the left, stretching the muscles

of his neck as if preparing for some elaborate dance move. He splays the fingers of his right-hand out flat against the floor, the way he has countless times with young students: moving them slowly apart, each into its own space, tracing around the small delicate fingers, one by one, and then finally around the sides of the hand, having them write the numbers above each to learn the finger numbers in the sheet music.

He picks up the hammer and brings it down.

Lou lay one hand on top of mine, I would slide it from underneath and cover hers, and so on, back and forth, but then she started sliding across the backseat away from me as Dad began to drive faster, the car squealing at the corners and sharper curves in the road.

"Slow down, Ron," Mother said from the front seat. "You're scaring them."

Dad laughed. He reached across the seat and grabbed a clump of her hair.

"I will kill you and your two slut-ridden kids if you leave. Do you understand what I'm saying Fay? DO you?" he asked again, and pushed her. One side of her slammed against the car window, her hair jostling around her face to hide her response.

The car still smelled of popcorn, the kernels dropped on the way to the backseat at the drive-in now getting scrunched between us as Lou and I lost control. Lou suddenly grabbed a few and put them in her mouth.

“Mom, I need to go potty,” Lou said, and leaned forward across the seat towards Mother, spitting out the popcorn now covered with hair and seat grit.

I looked out the car window and could only see flashes of trees and houses of different colors popping in and out. Dad had never driven this fast before.

“IN your seat, Lou!”

Mother grabbed Lou’s arm and pushed her back towards me, leaning across the seat.

James Bond had finally found his way to east Tennessee. Two years later! Mother said, preaching about how she hated living in this next to nothing town, away from everything important...“Hollywood,” she had said, tilting her head back, her eyes staring at the ceiling of the Ford as the picture started. I was convinced she could somehow see through it to the stars.

“Hold my hand,” I said to Lou. “Here, take it.”

“JESUS CHRIST, Ron. SLOW DOWN.”

I held onto Lou’s hand tightly with my left-hand and reached over to roll up the window. It was starting to get darker outside making it harder to see how close we were to getting home.

Lou started to cry.

I heard Mother say something about flushing her ring down the toilet then watched Dad take his hands off the steering wheel. Mother screamed and leaned over across him and grabbed the wheel trying to straighten the car, Dad busy trying to pull his ring off his left-hand saying he was going to throw it out the window.

I could hear the woman's haunting voice from the movie:

"Goldfinger: pretty girl, beware of his heart of gold. He loves only gold. Only gold."

Lou began to rock back and forth on the seat, her crying getting louder to match the level of the screams in the front, Mother crying now saying they'll work it out, she'll stay.

Dad wanted to know how long she was going to keep lying about it.

"How long, Fay? Huh? How long," Dad said repeatedly, poking his fingers into her arm.

"Just please, let us go home," Mother said.

I felt the car begin to slow down and noticed it had begun to rain.

9-10 November 2000

ONE

Atlanta

I woke up thinking about Kym's hands, mine numb like they usually are, my feet, too. I tried moving my fingers up and down on the bed, one at a time, like an exercise Kym might do at the piano to warm up a bit, but they felt awful, heavy and thick, just like my eyelids, with stones or weights on them or something. It's always like this, slow first thing in the morning. I'm getting so sick of it, so much of myself just to get out of the bed, so much of myself just to get to the toilet so I don't make a mess. A few times I didn't quite make it and had the hardest time getting the dirty sheets off the bed, tugging and pulling like some crazy person, just so Jude wouldn't have to see my accident.

Most mornings I will stay lying down, real still-like until my evening meds wear off so I can start on the morning ones that help me get out of bed. I know one may not believe this, considering this state that I am in, but I have been busy nonetheless. Sometimes I spend an entire day just getting through it, and most of the time, this seems

to be enough. Actually, it feels like an accomplishment, this getting by. But today I can't, I need to be clear-headed about things I've got to do to get myself ready. God. Get up, you fool.

But I'm not no fool. I know some things. I know that getting Kym's old piano back is not going to be easy, a piece of cake some might say, but maybe it'll fix things between us, maybe it won't, maybe the thing between us will just keep expanding like my body which is swelling up by the minutes, these meds taking up every extra inch of space inside and pushing, literally pushing even further, and I told Jude, I CANNOT afford no new clothes, and he said, you don't need any, Miss Lou, to just wear sweatpants since no one sees me much anymore, and I said no one in their right mind wears just sweatpants, that's ridiculous.

Now Bullet is getting all worked up, moving around in crazy circles over and over, about to make me nuts.

"Stop it now." I reach over to nudge him just enough.

I call him my rat-dog since he isn't no bigger than a minute. He's got this nasty cough that's keeping me up nights, but I can't afford to take care of it. The government's check is barely covering the meds now that Sherry's money has run out. She left us, came back, then left us again, then came back, but only partly, but I haven't got time to figure that out since Jude's leaving soon for some fancy job he got down in Florida, but says he will help me remedy the situation before he heads out. That wife of his insisted on his taking it. I guess my money's just not enough for her or the life she thinks she should

have. It seems to me people are just not happy with enough these days. Having the necessities is considered just getting by, and everyone wants more than that.

I got a bit riled up a couple of weeks ago when I changed my mind, said I didn't want to do this thing, going after the piano, realizing I must be crazy to think it could change anything. I had called about the piano waiting to hear Kym's excitement, but here it is already morning, and he still hasn't called me back, but Jude said it was too late, that obviously I had some other business to take of, namely, the "crucial stuff," this convincing Kym to take me in. I went on and on for some time I reckon, because he finally walked out without cleaning up the dishes from dinner. Nothing but a couple of bowls for spaghetti and a couple of glasses for the beer we drink in the evenings since I still like to have my bottle or two and like drinking it from a glass since I am not a heathen. The first time I said that he just shook his head and said "it must be a strange white-woman thing," and I said nothing, which made me very proud since I am not at all prejudiced. Then he showed up with Bullet, a few months after I hired him through the home health care services office that sent a bunch of potentials over, him saying I was "fit to be tied," needed something to calm me down. It was clear from the beginning that most of them were NOT going to work. I mean, and I don't mean to be nasty, but they hadn't the sense of a bird, let alone taking care of some sick crippled woman (me) and all of my pills and whatnots. Well, and I don't want to get trapped in all that, so let's just say that Jude has worked out, just like I said, that he isn't like some of the blacks around here, he is from a better side, didn't still hate every white person there was, and I know I can trust him. For the life of me, I believe that. And this new thing between us, the note

leaving, the clippings (well, and a few bad words), see, there's nothing under my pillow today, is just a spat, nothing more. We'll get past it.

The TV says it's nine-forty two, Bette Davis moving about the screen like she owns it, she does, and Jude now reminding me that I have this hair appointment in just over an hour. How could I forget? I like watching old black and white pictures, especially when I'm going to sleep. Sometimes I leave it on all night, their voices offering me some company, and in the wintry months, when it's colder up here in the attic, I nestle up with my old quilts, the old movies telling me what I already knew myself: the best has already happened, it won't get any better than that. But, now this opportunity, something about this feels right to me, this getting Kym's old piano back could repair things, give us our old life again, maybe he won't say no to me moving in with him this time, maybe he just won't be able to because he will see the necessity of it. But I have to admit, I don't understand Deidre having it, how she ended up with it. It's got to be the strangest thing, that.

"Jesus," Jude said when he found me still in the bed, inspecting myself in the hand mirror, saying I needed to get myself ready, and I haven't even done my hair. I keep Ma-maw's old vanity mirror on the nightstand just in case, because one never knows. One time Jude sent up the cable repairwoman before I even had the chance to push my hair down and pinch some color into my cheeks, bloated as they are. This disease has been taking it from me in parts, wearing me down, but I can pull back my gums with a couple of fingers and still see my straight white teeth, and my eyes, soft blue Sherry said, are a bit more cloudy, but one can see I still have some things to say, that I'm not done yet.

One thing's for sure, I need to wash and blow-dry my hair here shortly. Well, this could be a story into itself, this hair business. God, I know it shouldn't matter, but having my hair done and fixed right is still important to me. Sometimes I'll have it cut like that skater girl, the one who won the Olympics, partly because her hair was so lush and when she tilted her head back it just swooshed around like some fancy hair commercial, good enough to eat, like a chocolate Dreamsicle. The girls down at the shop say it's so seventies, that I need a style more modern, *contemporary*, but I don't care what they think. Not really.

Bullet's stirring around again, seeing me move my feet, still in my wooly socks, towards the floor. Sometimes I feel god-awful about not getting him out more, seeing something besides me and this bed, maybe a short drive in the car, but Jude has helped me with that, says Bullet doesn't like them much anyway, probably on account of not being with me every minute. I have to be careful since I fell and ended up lying on the floor a few times waiting until Jude showed up, moving about like I still have the energy for it. They gave me a walking stick, but I am NOT about to use that thing, not yet. Jude says I should move to the downstairs bedroom, but I have explained to him numerous times that that was Mother's room and I plan on leaving it just the same as when she was in it. It didn't matter that it was for just a few weeks, Mother had been there. So, that's that, I said, and he said I am being ridiculous and quite outright silly about it, and I said that obviously he didn't understand these things, the complications of our relationship, and he said, trust him, he didn't want to know. Fine, I said.

"I'm through waiting," I say to Bullet, and stand up and walk carefully to the window next to my bed. Jude is down there messing about in the car again, I don't know what that's about, but then he closes the trunk and looks up and sees me standing here. He waves.

"I'm gonna take a look."

"Don't do it. Stay here."

"I'll be quiet. I promise."

Like always, it was the middle of the night. Lou moved over to peer out the window, the rotating red lights from the police car flashing into our bedroom from the driveway below.

"Don't, Lou. It's bad. I know it," I whispered as I pulled on her pajama sleeve.

Lou turned back to look at me.

"He isn't there," Lou said, referring to the Harrison's son Burt who lived next door. A few times we had seen him staring out his bedroom window at the scene in our driveway, a long circular drive that mirrored his own that I always thought, if pushed together, would resemble an eye, the large sycamore on the border a dark dilated pupil. Lou was fascinated by Burt, partly because he spoke to no one, but more because he only went outside to toss his basketball into the hoop attached to his garage. I never once saw him stand up from his wheelchair.

Lou moved to the door.

“Please, Lou.”

I never understood it. Lou always wanted to sneak down the hall before coming back to report so we could proceed together. She always wanted to hold my hand.

But I didn't need Lou's prelude. I could smell it: mother's fear, but also this mixture of alcohol and vomit that became a boogeyman about to seep under our door and suffocate us.

Mother was trying to cover her mouth, one hand pinching her nose together, as she tried to clean up the wall and the floor with dishtowels and washcloths with the other. Once she used the brown paper sacks from the IGA. Dad was still lying on the floor passed out as she walked by and kicked him with her foot wishing he were dead. Mother moved to the front door and continued to argue with the policeman who had come to arrest her saying she had to figure out what to do with her kids. How could she be writing bad checks in South Carolina when she was obviously at home with her kids in East Tennessee? Lou began to get the shakes.

“Get your shoes. And take Snow-White with you,” Mother said as she pointed at nothing, everything in the room. Then she moved over to Lou and began to squeeze Lou's upper arm, shaking her back and forth, telling her to just stop it, to please just stop as she covered Lou's mouth with her hand trying to stop the crying.

Snow-White had arrived a couple of years earlier as a gift, an offering from Dad to say he was sorry, again. He found her during one of his temporary construction jobs by the steps of a diner. She had gnawed a small hole next to her tail from eating away at the fleas, but still looked like she had been etched from the snow: an overgrown snowball

with flecks of black dirt on her tail and ears. He said she fit into the small brown bag he took away with the leftovers.

“Come on, Lou,” I said, and reached to take one of Lou’s hands, purposely touching Mother’s arm and pulling both it and her hand gently off. Mother turned and looked at me, her eyes saying, thank you.

The crybaby, Mother often referred to Lou, seemed to be crying more lately and at everything. I had begun to sense that Lou absorbed the tension and the violence, pulling it onto herself, tattooing it on like a popsicle bleeding around her mouth, staining her fingers, wearing it on her skin, hoping, perhaps, this would draw the attention more to her; whereas, I began to hear sounds: musical ones. Lately, they seemed to be getting louder and blocking everything out.

I led Lou into the kitchen and quickly opened the door that went to the basement. Snow-White rushed out and bumped into Lou almost knocking her down, her brown bag size now grown into a full size collie-mix. I grabbed her collar and pushed on her to sit down, Lou and I joining her on the kitchen floor to form a pack: safety in numbers, I had heard somewhere. We waited, as we always did, for Ma-maw to take us away, the sounds from the living room beginning to fade out as Lou began to explain to Snow-White that our other mother was on her way to rescue us, that she will stop crying as soon as we get to our other home. Ma-maw said that Snow-White was sent, like an angel, to watch over Lou when she wasn’t around, to make sure nothing bad would happen, like the picture she had hung between the two beds she referred to as “your stable home away from

home,” the angel clothed in white flowing robes and smiling with pink lips leading two children across a rickety bridge to safety. Once I asked her about my angel.

“You have something else, growing inside of you,” she whispered into my ear.

“Just listen to the music.”

I looked up to see Mother standing in the doorway from the living room, one hand covering her mouth, the other touching her ear where blood had started to dry. She lowered her hand and mouthed the words I’m sorry, moving her fingers slowly in the air as she waved. My stomach tightened up as I began to breathe faster, my lungs filling with air so quickly, I felt I was going to choke.

What will happen to her?

I began to hum.

TWO

Pasadena, California

The dream was always the same: it is sometime in the middle of the night, and someone is in the house. He sits up in bed and sees Kimball standing near the edge, listening and looking as well. Kimball jumps down from the bed and runs down the hallway, but not barking. Kym calls his name, but Kimball ignores him and continues on his search. He goes after him, stepping softly on the floor.

The first thing he notices is the window next to the baby grand piano open and a television set placed on the sill with the screen facing out to the back yard. He moves closer to the window and sees the set is not on, the cord leading outside. He looks out to the back and sees a large table about twenty feet away with a matching TV. This one is also turned off. He turns back and sees a man standing in the room. He has no idea who this man is. The man is in his mid-forties, average height, slightly stocky. He speaks calmly. The man wants to know how many are in the house, and says not to fuck with him.

Kym responds by holding up his right-hand with his index finger raised, too afraid to speak. The man tells him that the whole thing will be filmed with him under the piano. The man will tie each of Kym's legs to one of the front legs of the piano, his hands tied together on the back leg, and then he will proceed to do what he says. After it is over, he will free his hands and they will pray.

He hears Kimball barking outside, having somehow found his way out. He runs down the hallway through the kitchen to the side door and finds him barking at a skunk that has moved underneath Kym's car on the carport. He decides to let him get sprayed and calls him inside hoping to make the man leave.

Suddenly the man's voice is close, close enough that he can smell the tobacco on his breath. He tells Kym he has to be held accountable. He presses a metal cross into the back of his neck.

"Jesus, Kym."

He wakes up to Larry shaking his shoulder, already sitting up in bed, one of the pillows bundled in both his hands as if ready for a fight.

"God."

"Same thing, again?" Larry asks.

"I'm sorry," Kym says, and pushes the damp sheets off with his feet thinking, for a moment, he might see Kimball at the foot of the bed.

"Same thing?"

"You were screaming, Kym. I mean, when is this going to be enough for you?"

Kym pulls the front of his undershirt away from his chest and holds it, the sweat around the neck and front beginning to give him chills.

"Enough for what?"

"To *do* something, Kym. To make it stop."

Atlanta

Jude keeps raising his voice saying we're going to be late, "to quit staring in that mirror and let's go." I know what he's saying since I do get caught up sometimes standing in front of it, hoping it will reveal the nagging part, maybe *tell* me some reasonable answer I can live with to the question I keep asking over and over about how I made such a shamble of things. That's what I keep hearing now, so I figure there's got to be some truth in it, though if I spend my whole life apologizing, I wonder will that even be enough?

I do know this falling apart, this moving towards the end, is embarrassing. I can see the white coming in as I push the comb around, but the hair actually *coming out*, now this is just too much. Then trying to make some decent shape out of this lopsided eyebrow, well, it's just never looked right since my fall a few years back, back when my MS seizures started. Sherry was still around then.

I met her when I was at my best. I'm telling the absolute truth here when I say this, that I could have had any woman in the world then, straight or not, it didn't matter. I

tell you, there were times when I just had to get them into my bed and it would flat out overwhelm me until I did it. I had something, and believe me, I used it when I suspected that that woman there was going to do it for me, or even, if for the moment, I thought she just might be enough to satisfy this feeling I often got of not being given to properly, 'not given where due,' I once heard said, and that about summed it up, especially my relationship with Mother.

"They tell me you can fix this thing," Sherry had said, pointing at her desktop computer, and I walked over and could see that the mouse was frozen and that blasted message on the window saying the user had performed an illegal function (now, how in the world someone using their *own* computer can do this, I have never understood), and, of course, I told her that I could take care of it.

"I can fix a lot of things," I said, and reached over and pushed her hand away from her hair she was re-adjusting. I noticed that she looked a bit like my ex, Rosemary, with the few extra pounds, but her skin, my, it was smooth and clear, much like Kym's, with a touch of blush on her fleshy cheeks. Jude always says that I have some of the prettiest clear skin he has ever seen, and I say that that wouldn't matter neither here nor there to my brother Kym because he has the prettiest skin I have ever seen, and then Jude storms out, not slamming the door, but acting like he was going to.

Poor Kym. That skin of his has gotten him into more trouble in his life. Now, Mother was the one that gave us this skin, herself being beauty queen of her pathetic little high school in the town of Milton Hill, population 925, and still one of the few dry towns in the state of Tennessee. Mother happened to be working at a downtown Chattanooga

office as a secretary when our future father showed up at the start of her day a month later as the guy who was parking the cars. Believe it or not, people used to have their cars parked at work for free. This was part of the service. Now this was 1958, and Mother just happened to be pregnant at the time, but of course they were not about to tell us this part of the story until some twenty-five years too late. I know it seems as if I'm rambling on a bit, but this has everything to do with my name and though I hate to admit it, I know she was right when Sherry once said there was everything wrong with us being named the way we are, Kym with a girl's, me with a boy's. There's a whole history in this, too, since Mother insisted on calling me Lou, not short for Louise or Betty Lou (God forbid, that, even though I once knew a gal named that, but I might have had to end it all right there and then), just Lou. Lou Doherty. Kym Doherty. A good Irish last name, even though Mother's family was Dutch and a bit French, I think. Kym suffered the most with the name calling, because I think, and still believe this deeply, that Southern boys are mostly just Momma boys with tendencies towards other boys. They just like to think they are rough and masculine and all that, but to tell the truth, most all of them I grew up with would drop their pants for most anything. Now, I know this sounds crude, but it has been my experience.

There was once this young man that was seriously interested in me, even went so far as to ask me to *marry* him, if you can believe that, knowing the whole time that I was not interested in his parts, that I had a girl at the time that knew him, so that was the initial connection. Well, this guy wouldn't give up, just insisted on my thinking about this life that he was going to give me, and so I did what I had to do, I set him up on a date,

really just an evening get together with Kym, and of course they ended up doing it right there in my bedroom, me in the next room with Sally, my sweetheart at the time. Of course, Kym swore up and down that he wasn't responsible, and you know what? I believed him, and still do.

Now that was many years ago before I woke up lying on the floor next to this vanity, my brow catching the sharp edge of this counter.

Then it all started. The different doctors, I can't tell you how many there was or what kind. I lost track after a while with all the guessing they did. Sherry went with me, but then started getting all worked up each time, asking was it cancer, is it permanent (I'm can see now she was thinking of herself when she asked about that), was it AIDS (I couldn't believe she would ask THAT after being so secretive and hush hush about us). She even had the nerve to ask if it was all in my mind, and I said I would not even respond to that, and each time we went, the madder she got, and then after that last appointment with the neurologist, she slammed the car door so hard she yanked off the armrest from the door, and that's when I told her that I thought maybe I should go alone for the final tests he wanted to run. I sat that night in front of the TV with her hoping, as I usually could, to get lost in the voices of the characters because I could just feel the tension in the room, like it was going to jump right out of her and choke me.

"Just nonsense," Sherry said, and grabbed the remote off the arm of my Lazy Boy chair.

"You know, I was watching that," I told her.

Sherry always said that re-runs were lame. How many times did she have to sit through another episode of *Gunsmoke*, and I said, well, several times more, I wasn't sure of the exact number, at least until I got tired of it myself, and she changed the channel.

We watched as some zebra, well, some striped creature, kept trying to get up, the lion that had gotten it onto the ground now ripping another chunk from its neck.

I told Sherry I was not going watch no murder, and moved across the room to get the remote back. She held it in the air, saying she didn't think it a "good idea" in my *condition* to start something.

"It's nature," she said. "The order of the food chain."

I didn't know she was such an expert, I said, perhaps she had a degree in the natural sciences I didn't know about.

"You just don't know people, or what they'll do," I said, and went outside for a smoke, since for a moment there, I didn't trust her. I know that sounds awful to say, but it's the truth.

Finally, they all agreed, the brain one, the back one, the nerve one, that I had Multiple Sclerosis advancing quickly and that their job was to try and prevent seizures and that mine was to quit my job, to stop with the physical labor of re-wiring and lifting the computers and electronics, since it would only aggravate the disease and speed it up. This did not go over well.

I still have my beautiful breasts, useless as they are. I wonder if any of them still have thoughts about me, the pleasures we had together that only women can have together, pushing breasts up against each other to make four, curves everywhere, softness

leading to more softness when you move your hands, sometimes a hint of lotion or perfume with a touch of sweetness in it.

I can see Carrie lying there afterwards, surprised and shocked that she enjoyed it, skin beaded with sweat, still eking out the last bit of *White Shoulders*, her upper lip curled up in that half mocking way that she had, pushing my basketball 'round the bed with the balls of her feet, her toenails painted glossy white. I finally convinced Kym to bring his best friend, his "girl friend," to one of my final games of the high-school season now that I was no longer sitting through most of them but starting since I finally proved that I could hover and cower that ball like nobody's business, partly because I was shorter, but mostly I was NOT going to let that ball go before I figured out who should have it, who could *actually* make the basket when, it hit me: practicing with Burt had finally paid off: his inability to move had forced me to dance around him: my moves were, I think one would say, an illusion.

Rolled onto her side, her head propped up on one hand, wavy dark hair brushing the sheets of the bed, Carrie asked me how to tell Kym. Kym liked to think he was dating her, but I already knew who he was before he did, and I also knew (hoped) that Carrie was desperate for more than just hand holding and a bit of cuddling. I thought, maybe, that winning Carrie over would entice Kym back in as well. He kept getting further away, the pull of the music getting stronger, and I have to say, it scared me. Now, this was a huge mess, this business with Carrie, and I will not get into this now, not yet. I have at times even let myself think about it because Kym, who thinks he knows everything,

knows nothing, and I am not so proud of this any more, though I used to be. I realize pride is where people start to get themselves into trouble.

After Sherry left, I was tempted to cut my breasts off, or, if I had to, scrape them off and mail them to her at work with a note stapled on the them that said "This is why you left," hoping to humiliate her for abandoning me and Bullet. But I know she stayed here as long as she could, that most people can't handle all of this, though I know most women are better at it than men are. Mother had done it, surviving with Ron for as long as she did.

The doctors put in my stomach pump a few months ago to get me off of some of the oral meds. My dopiness, which is a kind way of saying my craziness had started to make the situation here with Jude about to pop, especially when I began to see flying things and things crawling into my bed, nibbling at my legs. Jude said he was about to leave me, with all my talk of varmints jumping around on my sheets, swearing they were in there to get me.

But, God knows, I need him, at least until I can get this thing with Kym set up. I keep hoping the old piano of his will do it. I have to admit, I'm a bit conflicted about it since, as soon as that gadget showed up, he began to leave me. At first, it wasn't so much, just the time he spent there, playing nameless tunes, clusters of notes that didn't make any sense. But still, I could feel him going off, moving into another place without me, even with me sitting right there.

I slid the glass door of the small bookcase open and pulled out a couple of songbooks. I placed them on top of the hymnal, the copy from church that stays on top of Ma-maw's coffee table, and carried them out to the backyard.

It wasn't really a yard, not like the one at home with tall un-mown grass and a rotted fence at the far end of marking the end to our place and the start of the woods beyond. Here the ground was gravel, the squared off area bound on two sides by the neighbor's chain link fence, the other sides formed by Ma-Maw's four-room brick house and the end of her driveway.

I stepped carefully on the rocks, my feet bare, to make my way around the swing-set to the one corner that has a small patch of dirt where there is a speck of shade from the neighbor's tree. I tried to move faster when I heard the low rumblings, a sudden clap of thunder. I looked up at the sky and saw the clouds getting bigger, moving faster across the sky, and remembered Ma-maw had said we might be walking back from church in the rain.

I decided it would be quieter without my worn black shoes, the bottoms hard and clickety-clack on the wooden floors, to make my way outside without Lou. I felt a bit ashamed about it, going without her, but I wanted a few minutes alone with the books. Going anywhere without her, even just to sneak down the hall to hear Mother as she hummed along with the flute in what I would later learn was the opening to the second movement of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, (while we were supposed to be napping so that Mother could have some alone time), Lou will get all weepy-eyed, and tell me that I am not supposed to leave her.

But Lou feels safer here, also more important (Worthy, I would later refer to Lou's attitude of herself during these visits). Even at the church service today when Grace got a little "carried away by the spirit," Lou didn't show the least hint of crying or being scared when Grace stood and began to walk through the aisles, reaching out at one point like she was going to touch us. Ma-maw had explained Grace's un-expected roving as a calling, a response to a voice only she could hear, so I decided I was fine with it, as long as she didn't touch me. I understood hearing things others did not.

I placed the books on the dirt, reached into my pocket, and took out the cigarette case. The first time I picked it up off Ma-maw's bedside table, it had an un-opened pack of cigarettes inside: Pall-Mall, "PM's" she called them. I loved the clasp on the white case which made almost the same sound as her pocketbook when she snapped it after taking out two pieces of Dentyne for Lou and me during the morning walk to Sunday school. Several months later, I discovered it under my pillow the morning after one of the messier nights at home: Dad had put his fist through the paneling so Mother had knocked him out with the blue phone, pulling it off the wall of the kitchen. Ma-maw said, no, she wanted me to have it, that she was trying to quit since she couldn't wash off the smell on her fingertips, even with the dish soap. That and the ink stains from the paper plant were starting to make her embarrassed around the other women in the church choir.

"Women should have soft, delicate hands," she said, as we watched her lay her hands out on the kitchen table and spread her fingers to paint on the pink polish.

I opened the case and took out one of the tiny pencils I snuck from the back of the church pew. Someone kept replacing them along with the envelopes to give ten percent,

that's what the preacher said belonged to the church, so I figured they wouldn't mind just one or two missing.

I opened one of the songbooks, lay it on the ground in front of me, and began to pencil in the different shape notes: some are already black, so I skipped over these.

I look in the hymnal for the one we sang this morning. I can't really read all of the words yet, but this one I have sung enough times to know by heart.

*There's a call comes ringing o'er the restless wave,
Send the light! Send the light!
There are souls to rescue, there are souls to save,
Send the light! Send the Light!
Send the Light! Send the Light! The blessed gospel light;
Let it shine Let it shine
for evermore.*

I opened my eyes and discovered I have been sliding my left-hand back and forth in the dirt as I sang, just like Mrs. Frank after she responded to the preacher's signal for her to move to the piano and begin playing the closing hymn. I would watch her hands from the pew where I always sat with Lou and Ma-maw: third one from the front on the right side, the side with a clear view to the piano.

At first it seemed Mrs. Frank would hardly do anything, just barely move her fingers so the music stayed soft and didn't interfere with the preacher's final words, words that were supposed to encourage the ones in need, but mostly the sinners to come forward, to repent, or what seemed like the best reason to walk down the aisle: to be saved. The preacher would raise his hands, which was the sign for the rest of us to stand

and begin to sing. This was when Mrs. Frank seemed to get all excited as her left-hand began to move from the middle of the keyboard then back down, back and forth, and her right-hand fingers began to move faster creating sometimes ten, twenty sounds to every one I sang. I couldn't believe the power of it. It was like she was able to make the rest of us sing louder, sing with more strength, with the magic in her hands. I wanted to do this. The sound of the piano had made its way into me, and I just knew, then, that the piano and I were somehow saying the same thing.

THREE

Pasadena

Larry said it made him look younger.

Kym found him in the master bath with his right leg propped up on the vanity, his face set with intense scrutiny as he moved the razor towards his knee.

“It’s not going to work.”

“What isn’t?” Larry asked, without looking up.

“Give you back your youth.”

He gave Kym a quick glance in the mirror without so much as a pause from his task.

“Thanks. Now let me finish, Mister ‘I hardly have body hair.’”

Kym muttered an apology of sorts and began to knead his right forearm. During the third session yesterday, the Rolfer began to use his elbows, saying things like “stay with the pain” and “breathe into the pain,” as he dug deeper into his arm and palm.

“I wanted to talk to you about the message, the one from Lou.”

Nothing.

The relentless calls from his sister had finally stopped after Kym had made it *nastily clear* that he was not moving back to the South just because Mother was suddenly dead and Lou's madness had convinced her that he wanted to spend the next decade reliving the past with her. For more than two years, Kym's *selfishness* had worked.

"Larry, I need to get in here. I have students later."

During Aaron's lesson yesterday, he kept having flashes of himself hiding under the piano. No, it was more a vision of sorts. He must have been the boy's age, twelve or thirteen, and it felt as if the piano was acting as a physical barrier, a safety-net, a place to find solace, a place to feel safe. A nest. It was as if someone had layered blankets on top of his body during a cold winter's sleep, a feeling of weight, of solidness, impenetrable. He wondered if he or any of his students had ever felt this kinship, this bond to the instrument. It surprised him, because the recurring nightmare of being tied under it had haunted his sleep for years. This and the freakish release of the television movie *Sybil* the year after everything ended with Steve. He can still see her being tied to the leg of the piano after being given an enema while the mother continues to play and play the piano, forcing her to hold, to wait. To be abused and humiliated.

Larry turned on the faucet and the steam slowly began to fog the glass above the sink.

"Sara? What's the latest?"

"I see her tomorrow," Kym said. For the first time in seven years, Larry had decided to show interest in one of his students. After his first meeting with Sara (he still

refused to call it a lesson), he told Larry he didn't want another student, didn't know how much more of this he could take; the struggling music career, the ongoing arm problem. The decision to go back and do graduate work had obviously been a mistake. Larry's decision to go back to get his Bachelor of Music in Cello Performance was uncomplicated: he could afford to do it. He had made a gold mine in real estate.

“Lou called last night around eight. Something about Steve's sister having your old piano.”

“You must be Kym.”

I had heard this girl laughing a few minutes earlier, her high-pitched voice bouncing off the neighbor’s carport across the street as she turned the young boy with her around in circles, touching his hair, touching his face, in some kind of dance. I tried to keep my focus on the grass I’d been raking for the last half-hour when I noticed them walking towards me. I looked up and nodded yes, and asked the girl how she knew my name.

“I’m Deidre, this here is Randy. He lives over there,” Deidre said, pointing. “I live next to him.”

I figured she had to be several years older, fourteen or even fifteen. She stood four or five inches taller than me and Randy, her thick blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, the bottoms of her white pants stuffed inside cowboy boots. My nose began to itch, but I ignored it.

“How...”

“Your sister told me,” Deidre interrupted. “She’s always with Eileen’s babies. More than their Momma.”

Lou and I had been in the new house less than two weeks when Lou met the divorced lady up the street with two toddlers and became their daily sitter. I could see Mother was conflicted about it, raising eyebrows and sighing in big huffs as Lou repeatedly announced her duties, talking of little Mike and Angie as if they were her own, saying how Eileen just loved how she was with them, and wasn’t it such a shame, seeing as how pretty Eileen was that she was raising them by herself. But lately, I had sensed

Mother also wanting to be alone, so let this with Lou pass. She was tired all the time, asking me to go to my room to practice, she was going to have a lie-down in front of the TV, and no, to just leave it turned on, she liked the company of it.

“Kym’s a funny name,” Randy suddenly said.

“Yeah,” I said, raising my shoulders in a quick response. Randy’s cheeks were a deep red color, one more than the other.

“Lou’s funny, too. For a girl,” Randy said.

It was make-up. When he blinked, I could see sparkly blue powder brushed onto his eyelids. I let the rake fall to the grass and took out a wad of crumpled Kleenex from the back pocket of my shorts. My nose dripped all summer, the alleriges would eventually show as sores on the outside, but “boys work in the yard, doing outside chores,” Dad insisted.

“You play music,” Deidre said. “I’ve heard it when your window is open.”

Yes, I said, I play. But lately, I don’t play much music. Maxwell had taken me on, as a project, at least until I mastered scales and arpeggios: the fundamentals. The new teacher told Mother she had to buy me a metronome.

“Steve listens, too, but in the car,” Deidre said.

We all turned at the slam of the car door. I watched as the tall, car-wash boy walked around to the passenger side and got back in.

“He lives in it,” Randy said, twirling his index finger in circles next to his head.

Deidre reached over and rubbed some of the blush powder off Randy’s cheek, then re-adjusted his hair, tucking the sides behind his ears. Randy was her living doll.

They both turned, straightening their backs, and looked at me, as if presenting themselves for the first time.

I had seen Steve the first day we moved into the new house. I would practice Mrs. Currier's improved fingerings in the Clementi Sonatina for about five minutes, and then move over to the window and watch the production across the street. Except for the piano, my bedroom was still empty.

Dad and two "good ole' boys" who "owed" him had moved it the four miles up the road a day before the rest of our stuff. Mother said she didn't want to know, raising her hand in the air like the pledge of allegiance. She was absolutely certain knowing the nature of their debts would only make her more nervous, especially with names like Juicyfruit and Bug. I was pacing around the hallway when I heard the scrape on the floor as they pulled the piano away from the wall.

"Jesus, Bug, you almost took off my foot," Dad shouted as he pushed past me, Juicyfruit following him.

Mrs. Currier had informed me at last week's lesson that she needed to let me go, that she had done all she could, and had set up an audition with a new teacher the day after our move. Apparently this Mr. Maxwell was a "tyrant." The director of music at the

First Baptist Milton Hill, both choral and instrumental, Mrs. Currier said I would have to audition. He has a reputation, she had said.

“I’m getting us gloves,” Dad said. “Go do something, Kym. Quit standing around like a nervous pansy-ass.”

I heard him slam the front screen door.

“Shit. Just back off, Fruit.”

I stepped into my bedroom and tried to ignore Bug who was staring at himself close-up in the piano mirror squeezing a pimple.

“I hear you’re good with this thing,” Bug said, and then raised the keyboard lid and played a couple of random keys: treble c and the a-flat below it. I knew the sounds of all of the keys, and could name them without looking. To everyone’s annoyance, I had begun to name the pitches of various car horns and telephones.

I quickly moved from the closet to the piano and closed the lid of the keys.

“Close it. You have to keep it closed.”

It was easy to see how Bug had gotten his nickname, his eyes wide open like he was holding a magnifying glass in front of his face. Together with his long skinny arms and legs, he looked like a grasshopper.

Bug suddenly moved behind me and reached around to place both hands on the closed lid encircling me. He began to rub himself against my back.

“You know what they say about boys who play the piano,” Bug said. “The same as playing with dolls.”

I felt the hardness in Bug's pants as he pushed himself against the top of my back, the sharp edge of the keyboard cutting into my stomach.

Bug pulled back at the sound of the screen door closing. He suddenly reached over and grabbed the front of my pants.

"I knew it," Bug said when he felt the rise in my pants. "Keep it fucking quiet, you little queer-head."

I moved back to the closet, kneeled down on the floor and began to pull out the scattered shoes and broken shoeboxes. I could feel my flushed face and the hardness against my leg as I squeezed my knees closer together. I didn't understand what had happened. I was certain part of me wanted it, but also sure something Bug had seen in me had caused it, likely the same as the name calling at school by the other boys: the shoving, the grabbing.

"You're going to have to move out of the way, Kym," Dad said as they began to push the piano towards the door.

At first I didn't see him, only the tall older man moving back and forth from the open hood of the car to the driver's side window. When the boy finally stepped out of the car, I guessed we were close in age, but very different in size and coloring. He was dark-haired and already tall, and even from his distance, I could see their eyes: they reminded me of Bug.

Although it had darkened over the years, my hair was still blonde, my eyelashes barely visible and my skin completely hairless. I had watched Mother do it enough times,

and finally got brave enough to apply her mascara on myself. It shocked me how I looked: just like Mother.

After closing the hood, they began to wash it. I began to see this was not just washing a car with a couple of rags and then rinsing it with a garden hose. There was planning and details. There was order, and each of them had specific role to play in it. The boy began by sitting in front of each tire, each with a white circle around the outside, and would scrub until the black of the tire got darker and the white ring got whiter. The boy's father was stretched out flat on his back using some kind of small brush (I thought it could be a toothbrush) digging away at the chrome trim that was everywhere. He began with the back bumper and scooted his way around slowly.

I went back to the piano and took the music for the Chopin out of the bench and placed it in front of the Clementi. I wasn't supposed to be practicing the waltz since it was "too mature," but I loved the feel of it, the rocking motion of the left-hand accompaniment against the falling line of the melody. I began with the left first, letting my upper body slightly tilt on the downbeat of one, finally starting over with the single note in the right. Mrs. Currier said the music was "melancholy," not meant for eleven-year old boys. I shook my head in agreement, embarrassed I didn't know the meaning of the word, but asked if I could borrow the sheet music anyway, just until the last lesson. After her student Missy played it at their last group recital, I couldn't stop hearing it in my head. Mrs. Currier insisted I keep it, saying if the music speaks to you, it now belongs to you. She handed the music over to me with both hands, as if it were an alter plate passed around at Mount Olive, and told me "the music now owns a piece of you as well."

It had almost felt like a warning, especially after I searched the word in the World Book Encyclopedia:

Melancholy: a sadness and depression of spirits; a tendency to be sad, gloomy, or depressed.

They were still at it, but had driven the car back onto the carport and were now sweeping and rinsing the driveway. The boy looked almost angry, attacking the concrete with the broom, mostly in a harsh sweep, a few times lifting it and then poking at a stubborn stain in a jabbing motion. I noticed he had taken his shirt off and that his stomach was completely flat, unlike my own which had taken on a roundness and softness that, when feeling testy, Lou would sneak up while I was practicing and suddenly pinch an inch or two between her fingers. I overheard Lou saying to Burt yesterday as they tossed their last baskets together that she was planning to join the girl's basketball team at school. I watched from my bedroom window as Lou did her own dance around the Harrison's driveway, dribbling a circle around Burt's wheelchair teasing him, daring him to take the ball, then would run around him to the goal and throw the ball up. I guessed she made it in the basket half the time: Burt never missed.

Lou would squeeze and proclaim I was being "too serious." To come outside, toss the ball with her. How could I explain that a space had started to grow between us, how we reacted to things, especially her anger and my quietness: she hated the music, I breathed it.

The boy's father suddenly put down the hose, the water causing it to wiggle around like a snake on the ground, walked over and pushed the boy hard enough that he

fell onto the grass. The man started dancing around from one foot to the next, his arms and hands punching the air, like a boxer, a big grin on his face. After a minute or so of no engagement from the boy, he picked up the broom and began sweeping the concrete himself, laughing and shaking his head.

The boy, now sitting up, was still looking at the ground, one hand brushing the hair off his face.

I felt even more connected to him by what Steve did next: he just sat there.

Atlanta

Jude is about to lose his patience with me.

"Tell Betty I'll be in in a minute," I said, again, and lit another cigarette.

"You're twenty minutes behind, already," Jude said, again, and started tapping those long skinny fingers of his up and down on the steering wheel. I told him once I didn't think I was ever THAT thin, except for maybe half a year in fifth grade. His body looks like the lead of a pencil, his clothes encased around him like the yellow wooden part. (Now I understand, somewhat, this excitement to do with technical advances, especially with my background in electronics and computers, but with all these new mechanical pencils and electronic sharpeners, something has been lost when you don't get

to raise your hand in the class and tell the teacher you NEED to sharpen your pencil, and with permission, you start walking down the hall, beside yourself, and for a moment or a bit longer, that deed becomes the most significant thing of the day, because you alone did it, and now, well, let's just say, that certain things have been lost).

"Just *tell* her, Jude. I need one more minute just to sit here."

It always takes me a while longer to get out of the house than I expect, especially since my hair is still thick and takes time to get fully dry, even with a hair-dryer. Jude always gets mad wondering why I *waste*, and that is his word, time when I am going to get my hair fixed anyway, and I tell him every time, that this is just the way it is. He hits the top of the steering wheel once with force and starts that sighing business, loud enough so I can hear him, then finally relents and goes to report to Betty.

I've always been uncomfortable coming here, even though Betty has been doing my hair for about six years now. I don't like the way those other girls stare like I have some disease they might catch. Now, most people don't understand MS, and I know it's complicated, but I tell myself this is what it's about rather than the other thing, that thing that Sherry and I had together: our *relationship*. I figure that "snotty-looking teased-up root manufacturer Roxanne" (and yes, I have to admit, I named her this) still waits for me to show up to talk about the things women do together and laugh and get all disgusted. Once Roxanne started talking about sex toys with a client, purposely loud enough so I could hear her saying that dildos were more useful for certain types of women, "if you know what I mean." I don't care so much, not really, especially now that things aren't like

they used to be. People do seem to be more accepting. And I do believe this, though the trouble with Jude a couple of weeks back has left me wondering.

Jude leans inside the car door window and says it's all right, Betty's running a bit late anyway.

"I'm going to the diner," he says, and waits for me to say something condemning, but I just nod so he walks off towards the restaurant where he often waits for me. I know he's in there getting a beer or two, but I don't care one bit, but I can't tell him that. I could use one myself.

I figure part of Jude's anger at me lately is from the big fight we had in the Metropolitan Church parking lot. He called me racist for not going back with him to *his* church, and I said that *they* were the ones who were racist "staring at me because I was the only white woman in the room," which was all the church was: a sterile white room with no windows in it since they couldn't afford no real church building yet, and so they rented storage space.

"Besides, people should stick to their own kind, show some support for the community," I had said, and slammed the car door as I walked towards another white room in another storage space rented by the Metropolitan Church of Atlanta.

"It's not the same," Jude shouted out the car window. "Comparing blacks and dykes."

I had looked around, hoping no one had heard, and walked straight back to the car and got in, slamming the door a second time.

“You didn’t just shout that faggot-lingo at me in front of this church. Out of respect, and because I am a decent person, I have NEVER used the N. word with you.”

Jude turned in his seat and began to shake his skinny pointer finger back and forth, as if I had just told a big lie.

“You don’t know.”

“I know.”

“You *don’t* know, Miss Lou.”

I turned and looked out the window of the passenger door, and watched as the people, my people, began to arrive for the morning service.

“I can see that church isn’t what it used to be,” I said, and once again left Jude in the car.

I could hear Jude yelling that church did NOT meet on Saturdays.

"What's *wrong* with you people?"

FOUR

Pasadena

The decision to run again made sense. Kym always ran in the mornings, usually four or five miles, but a second time couldn't hurt, he said to Larry. Larry clumsily hopped his way down the hall, following him towards the front door already open, one leg still covered in shaving cream.

“What is this about, Kym?”

The smell of the densely planted eucalyptus along the path would invade his nostrils and cleanse him, Kym said. No, maybe not that. Perhaps it would keep away this invasion of memories, of Lou and her relentless pursuit of the past that had always felt like shadows moving behind textured glass, glass now starting to crack around the edges. What was she doing?

“No, what are *you* doing?” Larry asked, waving his razor towards Kym's bare feet.

One of the benefits of staying over with Larry in Pasadena were these morning runs in the Arroyo, the dramatic embankments covered in exotic plant life, some of the California Oaks clinging to the sides of the dry, crumbling hillside at a forty-five degree angle, their roots holding onto the last possible hope of survival, reaching for the last vestiges of water, some form of nourishment. But at what point did they say enough, and let it all go? The canyon depth also provided an unexpected city quiet, a stark contrast to his loft in downtown LA. As well, this had become their routine since Larry claimed he couldn't sleep at Kym's place: too much dust and car exhaust. That's what he got for living IN the city, in a warehouse, Larry said (his place only nine miles away), "and there are trees in Pasadena. Lots of Oak, Eucalyptus, and aged Palms." Did Palm trees count? Kym would ask. Did they actively *contribute* to the air quality in Southern California?

He grabbed a few Kleenex and put them in the pocket of his shorts. The evening fiber supplement had helped get his bowels in control, but he still felt nauseated, the gurgling in his intestines ominous. He certainly didn't want another accident. Last week, he kept stopping every five minutes to slow the spasms, but finally had to step behind a hedge and relieve himself. Fortunately, there are few people in the Arroyo at six in the morning, but he was embarrassed anyway as he tried to step back unnoticed.

It has been getting worse the last few years. Initially, he would laugh and tell himself *they* were his periods, his solidarity with women and their monthly cycle. (Actually, his blood and the mess he made the night of the LA riots had saved him, Corvette's friend having a weak stomach) For most of the last year, Kym has managed to stop having anal sex with Larry, afraid of the afterwards, not sure Larry would forgive

him the debris. Larry is passionate about few things in the home, but pressed *clean* sheets are fundamental. The last couple of months, he has stopped asking Kym. Kym knows the desire is still in him, he can see it when they get to that inevitable point where the acknowledgement takes action: Kym insists on Larry's release, and then rolls over and pretends to be satisfied, but really, what he hears repeatedly accompanying the sound of Larry's breathing machine is that Kym can't give him this, and what are they going to do to fix it.

It didn't make any sense. It was crazy making, Lou finding the piano. Sold to help pay for college, Mother had said. It was *necessary*. In his naiveté (desperation to escape), he had believed it, but the truth is, the instrument would have yielded very little. The action was practically non-existent, the original hammers worn in with deep grooves, the mahogany finish faded along with the nicks and scratches, including the deep grooves on the right side where Lou had carved her initials with the edge of her metal comb. So, it was old, the ivories were still intact, he always touted, and the mirror was pristine: not a fade or crack in it.

The blare of the horn forced him to stop when he reached the Colorado Bridge, the guy in the Explorer gesturing, his hands in the air, WHAT THE FUCK! FAGGOT! Kym gestured back; the same declaration with raised hands, but tilted his head and raised his shoulders for an apology. Explorer still flipped him off.

Deidre having it was suspicious: Lou going after it, unbelievable. He couldn't understand it. Perhaps Lou had made a mistake.

Deidre. At first, she would lean against the doorway near Steve's bedroom as he left, asking would Kym like a drink, or worse, if everything was all right, and he would glance guiltily, quickly with a stern nod of NO and YES (both lies). Steve said she was a bit crazy, not "right" in the head. When he asked, Mother said she was modestly *challenged*, but not to judge her. Her "intentions" were good, she said.

But her smell. He can still remember a sweetness, an orange that never got picked, reaching that final stage of over ripeness, rottenness, a fragrance that now led to nausea and, at worst, vomiting. A certain perfume spoke of it, sprayed on too heavily by a woman in a restaurant or theater, anywhere, and suddenly there she was, taking his hand.

Atlanta

"You *have* to stop moving, or I'm going to botch this up."

I turned back around and faced the mirror on the wall. I couldn't stand it. The blasted thing covered the whole space so that one could see *everything* of themselves all at once.

"I don't like them staring and laughing like that."

Betty pulled her own head back as if offended, aghast, a smirk on her lips more than a smile.

“Hon, they are not talking about you,” Betty said, and divided another segment of my hair with the comb, lifted it up, and put a clip in it.

“And even if they are, it’s just to say how pretty you are.”

Right, I said, shaking my head. I could see Betty’s in the mirror, well, whatever one might call that mishmash on top of her head, yet she always seemed to make some construction of it that made sense, even with all the teased out bits.

“Be still.”

“Betty, you are real good with hair, I admit that, but one thing you are not, is a good liar.”

Betty stopped combing and stamped her right foot. I quickly raised my right hand and pointed at her in the mirror.

“Believe me, I know all about lying,” I said, “and trust me with this, you don’t.”

I heard another laugh across the room that sounded more like a cackle. I turned and glared at them.

“Well, my husband would not agree.”

“Your husband is a man.”

Betty laughed, looked straight into the mirror, and winked.

Sherry had once winked at me like that, though she had stopped caring what happened to me by then.

“You can sit in your shit for two weeks for all I care,” Sherry had said, and pushed the washcloth wrapped around her finger inside of my right ear. She grabbed my other ear with her left hand and pulled sharply down. “And don’t move again or I will yank it off.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, but wasn’t. Not the least bit. I had called her a lazy ass bitch because she hadn’t given me a bath in over a week and now I was starting to smell and complaining about it. Sherry told me it didn’t matter since no one saw me or came around anymore.

“It matters to me,” I said.

It was embarrassing. Even Bullet had begun to sniff around the sheets of the bed, a couple of times acting like he was going to mark a spot between my legs before I slammed my hand down on the bed and threatened to skin him within an inch of his life.

“Ow, God damn it,” I said, and slid a ways down into the tub, freeing myself from Sherry’s grasp. She turned and looked back into my face and I saw something I understood, a hate I knew all about because I had felt it myself, and it scared me. It had only been once (when Carrie left me), but I knew the possibilities behind it.

“I’m sore, hon, so don’t rub so hard. Man, my skin is just on fire from that.”

Sherry had walked out about two months earlier, but had come back a week later without apology. She had dropped her heavy therapeutic work shoes next to the side door and proceeded directly to our bedroom upstairs leaving me in front of the TV. I stared at the ceiling and listened to her make as much racket as possible, like she was moving furniture around the place, which she was, and by the time I got up there, she had

ransacked the bed and separated the two halves of the king-size mattress apart, and placed a single nightstand in between.

I watched her move over to the bathroom sink and grab the sides of vanity. She stood there staring straight into the mirror at herself while I moved my hands back and forth slowly in the water that was starting to get cold. I couldn't help it, I had to pass the gas, and as soon as the bubbles started to make their way to the surface, I glanced over and could see that Sherry was still facing straight into the mirror, but her eyes had moved to look at me. I thought for a moment I saw a tear in Sherry's left eye, a brief moment of hope, but then Sherry took the wet washcloth and wiped the smudge off the glass.

"You're smothering me, woman." Sherry said, and winked at me.

I looked down at my hands. I had been twisting and rubbing them together, now moist with sweat.

"Maybe I should get a manicure," I said, and lifted one hand to inspect the nails. "My Ma-maw always said you notice the aging in your hands and feet first."

"I know a girl, Tiffany, just down the road about a mile, she is the best," Betty said.

"No, I'm just nervous, I guess," I said, and put my hand back into my lap and covered it with the other. "And I'm not showing my damn toes to anyone."

Betty laughed, again.

"Lou, hon, what are you so nervous about? You're awful fidgety today."

I took a deep breath and asked her for a Kleenex.

“It’s this trip, tomorrow,” I said, and stuffed the Kleenex down the front of my blouse. “This darn trip to see Deidre. I must be crazy.”

Betty asked where I was going and reminded me that she could have Roxanne add a little color to hide some of the grey.

“Can you believe it? She still lives in Milton Hill,” I said, ignoring her. “Almost three hours in the car with a stranger, I must be losing my mind.”

“Jude...”

“Jude’s mad,” I interrupted and pointed at the floor. “Hand me my pouch, Betty.”

Betty bent over and picked up the small leather bag, untangling the strap from the bottom rung of the chair.

“I don’t remember you with a purse.”

“It’s not a purse, *or* a silly pocketbook, Betty,” I said, and unzipped it. “It’s a pouch, for my cigarettes and Chap stick. You know that.”

I pulled out a folded piece of newspaper and handed it to her.

“He’s been sneaking in these clippings ever since our fight about, well, about nothing right in front of my church,” I said, which was a lie.

It was about everything.

I had moved to the first chair in the very last row and sat down. I focused my stare towards my lap, hoping not to draw attention since I was still a bit worked up from my

words with Jude in the car. I could feel the heat in my face, especially behind my eyes, and interlocked my fingers together to stop the shaking. I sat and listened to the voices gather around me, finally looking up to see that there were only about twenty or thirty people in the church, most of them smiling and greeting one another from their seats. A young man, no more than thirty, had moved to the podium and began to speak about the need for community, the importance for the gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual groups to all come together, to form a coalition, because only as one, as a unit, could we begin to fight the hate and inequality still pervading our homes, our jobs, and our ability to live openly and without shame.

How refreshing to hear these words spoken aloud and by someone else with such passion and lack of fear (and in one breath), especially since I had rarely allowed myself to be with others since Sherry left. But I knew, because I felt the hate for myself for having to admit it, that with Sherry I had mostly been secretive and quiet about our life. We didn't go out much, and when we did, we often went separately to particular public places to avoid the uncomfortableness. Sherry had been married in her previous life, but fortunately, she was always proud to say, had not produced any "offspring" to have to explain the life we had. What a shame it all was, what a waste, I said, and then the fights would start up. Such ugliness. I said she was right there were no children to see her this way. "Little ones never forget your anger," I would always proclaim, and things would get nastier, her striking me in the arm with her fist over and over until she was sure I would show up with a sore bruise the next morning and I would reach over and pinch

with my nails as hard as I could, making sure blood would come out, until the time trying to hold my own became pointless, humiliating.

I was surprised by how calm the young man was, nothing like the pastor at Jude's church, or what I used to hear and see at Mount Olive Baptist with Kym. I was a spot of crazy then, I can see that now, and don't need to remember or think about that, though Kym did say I helped run him out of the church with that devil's serpent, and I hold myself responsible for that, and I tell myself Kym will find his way back to the church at some point, though Ma-maw used to say that about Momma too, and I can assure you, that never happened.

The young man stepped away from the podium and a middle-aged woman stood up from the group and moved to take his place. She began speaking about her experiences at work, and after her, another person came forward, and another, and I began to see their service was more like an AA meeting, though I had never been to one since mostly I don't believe in it, talking about one's private burdens in public and then everybody clapping about it. At least, that's what I'd seen on TV.

The young man moved back to the podium and said that there was a visitor, and would she like to come forward and speak, when I realized he was talking about me and that everyone had turned around to face the back of the room.

That was when I saw him.

There was no mistaking it. It was him: Tom Watson, Steve and Deidre's father. The man I had accused.

Even sitting down, his tallness was obvious since he carried an unbalanced amount of his height in his upper torso. His hair was almost gone, but the long, ghoulish face was the same, the contrast of his eyes that looked pinned open in a permanent startled surprise, now looking even more like a praying mantis.

I raised my hands in front of my face and shook them back and forth to let the congregation know. No. There was no way I was going up there, hobbling up like some crippled old lesbian thing.

It didn't make any sense. What was he doing here, in Atlanta, ok, but what was he doing at THIS church? I knew he didn't recognize me: the largeness I had become, the extra weight and bloatedness, all of that, especially the more than twenty years since I had seen him.

God. It was a mess, this.

I couldn't or didn't want to recall all of it, but I do remember a concrete fence between our houses, Randy's too (Kym's friend and loopy stalker boy), the one other house between ours across the street, suddenly became off-limits, Kym's friendships suddenly over. We moved within a few months.

The group began to disassemble and move towards the back entrance. I decided to wait.

"Thank you for joining us," the lead speaker said as he stuck out his hand for me to shake. "I'm Douglas, by the way."

I told him my name, and when asked, I said yes, I would definitely consider coming back.

Tom began to make his way back while in conversation with another man about his age, early 60's, one hand touching the man's back as they walked slowly together.

"Mr. Watson," I said, and stood up as he approached my row. "Tom Watson, from Milton Hill? Near Chattanooga."

"Yes," Tom said, and looked straight at me, his eyebrows lifted.

"Lou. Lou Doherty."

Tom's mouth opened slightly, a sudden intake of air as he brought his right hand up to his open lips and began to squeeze the bottom one. He quickly turned into that frightened figure from some famous painting I had seen somewhere about a dozen times too many.

"I know I must look awful different to you, now," I said, and began to brush my hair with my fingers.

"No, no I..."

"Yes. Just too many pills is all. My MS," I said, and began to pat my stomach. "Got me a pump in a few months back, though."

"I'm sorry," Tom said.

"No need for that," I said, and turned to look straight at the man with him. He was probably half a foot shorter than Tom. Tom had to be about six-five if he was an inch.

"Sorry, this is Charles Ledbetter. Charlie," Tom said, and Charlie smiled and stuck his hand over.

"A pleasure, Mam," Charlie said, his drawl thicker than mine.

“What are you doing here?” I asked Tom, and waved a hand in the air to acknowledge the place.

“Charlie and I live not too far from here, in Buckhead.”

I nodded.

And waited.

“Oh, you mean here,” Tom said as he pointed at the floor.

I looked right at that same spot in front of his feet, and just kept staring, the silence awkward.

Charlie asked if I would like to join them for brunch.

“They make a mean Huevos Mexico. Plus, they have unlimited sparkling wine,” Charlie said, and smiled again.

I said I wasn’t allowed, and patted my stomach again. “Meds and boozing,” I said, shaking my head side to side. “But thanks for asking.”

“People change, Lou” Tom suddenly said. “After Steve died...”

“What? I didn’t know,” I interrupted, and knew it wasn’t proper to ask, but I couldn’t help myself.

Tom began to look around the room, a look I know because I had experience: he was looking for a way out.

“There was an accident,” Charlie finally said, and Tom looked at him to say, that was enough.

“I hope we will see you again?” Tom asked. “It’s a friendly group. Non-judgmental, I’m sure you could tell.”

I nodded and watched them make their way to the door.

Tom was waiting for me outside. He was standing next to a patio of tables that had been set up at the Chinese take-out next door. I could smell the grease and peanut oil from the wontons and fried rice.

He walked over and stood next to me, wringing his hands as if ready to shoot a basket. *Wring someone's neck.*

“Deidre’s still living in the house, the house in Milton Hill,” Tom said.

I looked toward the ground and began to lift my toes, first the right, then the left, right, left: I had always done this when nervous like that, the anticipating.

“I’m sorry, Tom. For what happened,” I said quietly.

“Yes, I’m sorry about all of it,” Tom said, and began to walk towards the parking lot waving to Charlie who was waiting by their car. I didn’t know all the reasons behind it, but knew Tom’s apology was important, revealing of an unsaid I couldn’t put my finger on. Why was he apologizing to me? I wanted to say something of myself and what I had done, but what?

Before getting into the passenger side, he turned again and raised his hand, his long pointer finger raised in the air.

“By the way, Deidre has Kym’s piano,” he said. “I thought you’d want to know.”

Betty managed to slide her comb into the back zippered pocket of her spandex leggings, just barely, and then unfolded it.

“He even snuck one under my pillow a couple of nights ago,” I said with disgust. “I practically scared Bullet to death when I hit the bed, I was so mad.”

We had never had nasty things between us before. I figured maybe pressures from home, maybe that ill-suited wife of his who kept begging to take her to the ocean, to help her escape her *depression*, was talking Florida this, palm trees that, as if some damn tree that offered zero shade would fix her life, and I knew all about this, hoping some object would somehow put right all the wreckage of things in your life when all it’s doing is covering it up. Hiding it in the mind is what I say.

Black Man Fatally Dragged In a Possible Racial Killing

By CAROL MARIE CROPPER

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A black man was dragged to his death on Sunday from the back of a pickup truck in a rural section of Texas known for racist and Klan activity, and today three white men were charged with the murder.

The broken body of James Byrd Jr., 49, was discovered on Sunday morning by residents of an area just outside the East Texas town of Jasper, population 8,000. As he walked home from his parents' house on Saturday night, Mr. Byrd was apparently picked up by the men sometime after midnight and taken to woods, where he was beaten, then chained to the truck and dragged for two miles.

Betty slammed the paper against her right leg, her left hand firmly on her hip and asked what was going on.

I stuck my hands out, palms up to say I didn’t know.

“He thinks I’m a bigot, I guess,” I said, barely audible.

“I can’t believe it.”

“Well, I’ve hired a driver to take me up there.”

Betty re-folded the article and handed it back.

“Betty, I need to get me access to the Internet. Do you still have that computer of yours hooked up?”

“I do, but what do you, what...”

“I can’t tell you that,” I said, interrupting her, again. “And a printer?”

Betty said yes, after we’re done, if it doesn’t take too long.

“Who is this Deidre, anyways?”

FIVE

Pasadena

Larry had left him a fairly clean sink, only a few leg hairs still clinging along the side of the basin. On their second date, he took Kym to Santa Monica in his new Mercedes, one of those perfect April afternoons, the brilliant Southern California light pouring through the sunroof on the drive over Topanga Canyon. They walked along the beach for a good half hour before Larry decided it was too hot for his khaki pants so undid his belt and dropped them to change into shorts he had in the trunk, his immodesty definitely a turn-on. But so were his legs, muscular, also shapely, the quads well balanced to his calves and with just the right amount of hair.

Sometimes he has disturbing thoughts about how much this relationship, no, actually, any of his relationships, have been about legs and hair and jaws and feet and necks, and how much is really about loving the person who owns them. Do others think about this? Do people ever wonder that somehow they've attached themselves to images, to ideals, to actual body parts?

“And look at that. Smooth as a baby, not a hair in sight,” Larry said later that afternoon at a beachside café as he leaned across the table to rub his arm.

Kym could have told him then they were roughly the same age, Larry just a few years later in his thirties, and that Kym had convinced himself that what Larry was seeing was the product of not having moved on, of feeling trapped in an adolescent body because he still, when he let himself, remembered what had happened.

But he couldn't tell him because he needed him. He needed Larry for his normality, his ordinariness (even his name), his body's acceptance of time and gravity, his ability to blend in, his ongoing battle to hang onto a childhood that he wanted to do over and over again, because Kym couldn't imagine what that would feel like: the past he had made a lifetime's journey to avoid.

But lately, it had begun to intensify. Larry now has to have young men surrounding him: waiters, trainers, assistants for assisting, office help, gardeners (leaf blowers), hair stylists, check-out boys, massage therapists, rehearsal pianist (a freshman). Kym was beginning to think that Larry had also gotten trapped in his youth, but it had become more than just his desire to admire and discuss it (the Swedes and the Nordics of the Midwestern US, how beautiful they are, claiming pride with his Viking heritage as he informed him how they raped and pillaged the Irish, hence Kym's fair features, and that that was a fantasy of his in high-school, to be gang raped by a team of blond jocks, Kym saying he shouldn't say things like that, that he has no idea what he is talking about), it had become his obsession to preserve it. Every week there is the manicure, the pedicure, the facial, the massage, the hypnotist, the therapist, the private trainer, the body shaving,

the skin care products, the hair growth products – it seemed endless. Their relationship had become a paradox: Larry trying to recapture what Kym had been desperately trying to escape.

But he also understood it, could see the reasons for Larry's need to look since the person Larry had met, the youthful-looking pianist with a promising future, has stopped playing the big piano works of Chopin and Brahms, edging his way back playing fourteen minutes a day (having worked up one minute each day for the last two weeks, per his therapist's prescription), most of it in the slow careful repetition of the C Major scale. Now, he often thinks of Sara and how this seems to be enough for her, this endless wandering around the white keys, and it sometimes helps to keep him going, to push past the frustration and the question about this still being worth it, or worse, the question of what was going to happen if the therapy doesn't work.

He had arrived for his first appointment with Sara early, already dreading it, hating himself for saying yes since he had spent more than an hour navigating three freeways with the typical onslaught of suicidal drivers to be on time from Pasadena. He shook out his hands and slowly rubbed them back and forth across his jeans trying to ease the numbness that had settled into his fourth and fifth fingers. The physical therapist at County Hospital had said to avoid driving, as it would only aggravate the problem. He had laughed, making sure to first acknowledge the older man's obvious concern, but then

pointed out that in LA true wealth meant having others come to you, never having to move one's own car.

Kym leaned across the passenger seat and rolled down the window, still dog smudged from last week's SPCA hopeless cause. The director of volunteers had finally relented and let him take the spaniel to the beach the day before he was to be put down.

"It's against the rules," she had said. Dogs were only to be walked around the block and back in their cages within the allotted five minutes, six or seven at the most.

"You are kidding, right?" Kym had asked, and then picked up the dog and sat him on her desk. She said it was the first and last time, but he noticed a hidden smile when he lifted the dog off the desk and thanked her.

He stuck his head out the car window and looked up the hill, but it was still impossible to get a clear view of Sara's house. A six-foot tall hedge of ficus entangled by thick tendrils of ivy formed a wall of privacy from the street. He pushed the key back into the ignition and turned it one notch to continue Radu Lupu's recording of Schubert's G-flat major Impromptu. It was a reach, but he had stated emphatically, swore in a handwritten note to his teacher as well, that he would have the piece in his fingers by the spring. It was his last hope for staying in the program, his performance in a masterclass, at minimum, could prove his place in studio still worthy.

He passed away the last few minutes in the car recalling their brief phone exchange, the language between them both strained and strange. Sara's voice had been full of hesitation, his own a bit too confrontational. He was barely into this but was already questioning his usual place in this dynamic.

Feeling like an intruder, he opened the metal gate, latched it softly and followed the flagstone path that began at the edge of the embankment. Several steps later, he was surrounded by overflowing scrubs of white roses competing for space with hundreds of blooming irises. Overgrown Bird of Paradise brushed against him as he continued to move towards the house. Everything living had been contained in a planter with a sophisticated system of irrigation that left no question of nourishment, no question of survival. He couldn't say why, but the arrangement of it bothered him. The assurance and control of it all was unsettling.

Further extending the privacy, thick blankets of climbing fig had covered the walls of the house and draped around the windows while various shades of showy bougainvillea had managed to snake their way up to the rooftop and were spilling down both sides of the chimney. Unable to find a doorbell, he decided to knock when the door opened.

“Mr. Doherty.” Sara reached out to shake his hand.

All of her seemed carefully prepared and mostly with success. He guessed her approaching sixty, the hair above her ears and around her face rather wispy and moving towards white, the rest pulled into a tight bun that accentuated her green eyes and the receding hairline on the right. She didn't seem to be wearing any makeup other than a hint of rouge that matched her linen blouse of the same pale rose, her navy pants pleated and freshly pressed. The only loud thing was her perfume--Chanel no.5, Kym knew, because Ma-maw had sworn her allegiance until her death. But there was something else,

too, behind her eyes, that made it seem terribly important she present herself to him in this elegantly controlled manner.

Her greeting stated, she turned and proceeded down the foyer. He was struck by the stark contrast of openness and brightness of the inside. Shutting the door behind him, he followed her past a tall hallway mirror where he noticed an envelope taped in the center with his name on it. She entered the first door to the left without any further acknowledgement of his presence.

The room was surprisingly modern with large art pieces carefully displayed. A row of soda cans were attached to the left wall with an old RC Cola poster hanging beneath. From the ceiling various playing cards dangled by pieces of thick twine, while the most prominent work, a freestanding window, stood in the center of the room. He could see the piano on the other side. Kym felt as if he, the piano, perhaps even Sara didn't belong here. He sidestepped my way around a vast collection of terra-cotta pots arranged in front of the inside window.

Sara was seated at the piano staring blankly toward an unopened piece of music. The only place for him to sit was an antique recliner.

"I've been working on this," she said, and pointed to a Sonatina by Clementi.

Kym had taught and heard this piece countless times, but was never so grateful to see these familiar notes. He even relaxed a little when he recognized the yellow cover of the classic American publisher with spirals circulating around the edges.

Not waiting for his response, Sara's hands went to the keys and began playing a mass of notes completely un-related to Clementi's music. He would later try to describe

to Larry this mixture of fragmented scales and chords that were reminiscent of his very first experience at a piano. It must have been the shock, but he didn't attempt to stop her. In his silence, he tried to conjure up some tactful response to a performance in which she had somehow managed to create appropriate music to this strange atmosphere.

Several minutes later, Sara stopped as abruptly as she had begun. Her hands went to her lap as she, once again, stared unemotionally at the music.

For lack of a better response, he asked,

“How long have you been working on this?”

“Off and on for a while,” she said.

Thirty years of lessons, including several years of pedagogy training, had not prepared him for this. He began to sift through a stack of music sitting on the piano. He came across a book of violin studies and held it up for her to see.

“My daughter studied violin,” Sara said.

“Oh, does she still play?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“Did she learn the piano, as well? I always recommend that...”

“She always hated the sound of the piano,” Sara said, interrupting him.

With her answer, he knew the subject was closed, so continued to search through her music. Luckily, he found a first-year method book and placed it in front of the Clementi.

“Perhaps we can review some of the basics,” he said in a tone sounding more like a question.

They began at the back of the book where he found markings dated March of the previous year, but quickly moved to the front when her attempts at even the easier pieces were a disaster. He discovered that she knew nothing except the location of middle C. They tried clapping simple rhythms, but her left-hand had no connection to her right. Exasperated, he decided to revert to the most basic concept of the music alphabet. He asked her to begin at the bottom of the keyboard and say the letters upward to the top.

“No, excuse me, Sara,” he said to interrupt her. “After G, you start again with A.” He felt he was talking to a child. After numerous failed attempts, he finally gave up and let her have free reign.

She would begin with her right-hand fingers at the top, and play all of the white keys to where, at some mysterious meeting place, her left-hand took over and completed the cycle to the bottom: an endless C Major scale. This process went on for some time when, in a sudden spurt of inspiration, she would burst forth a clash of dissonant chords and barbaric rhythms that defied anything reasonable he could say to her.

The last part of her lesson he said nothing. He didn't know what else to do except listen, feeling guilty when discreetly glancing at his watch. He couldn't make sense of it.

At precisely 4 o'clock, he stood up to signal his exit.

“I can show myself out if you want to keep playing.”

She didn't stop, but simply nodded without looking. He finagled his way around the window, almost tempted to raise the bottom pane and walk through it. Kym had reached the door to the hallway and opened it slowly when he heard Sara behind him.

“Goodbye, Steve.”

SIX

Milton Hill

“If you are going to smoke, the window has to be all the way down,” the driver said. He said he didn’t normally let passengers smoke, that he was making an exception for the long drive.

I told him I appreciated it, now could I could I have a tad more quiet so I could look around and think a minute. I wasn't quite ready to go in just yet, not really ready to deal with it, but I wasn't going to say that.

The place wasn’t quite what I had remembered, a bit run down, in fact. An egg-yolk colored building, only one side of the roof round, as if someone had made a mistake and tried to fix it, to make it more interesting. The gutters, barely hanging on, were facing out, as if hoping the rain would blow in from the right or the left. The window at the entrance had at least two-dozen panes, all with some kind of marbled texture, making it impossible to see inside, and the sign that extended outwards above the window was turned off or the lights burned out. *The Court Café*.

“We could be in France,” I said, trying to lighten things up a bit, and heard the driver slowly blow air like he had been holding his breath, waiting for some signal to release it.

I knew Deidre was inside working her regular shift. In fact, I had called and said I was an old friend, hadn’t seen Deidre in years, and was coming up from Georgia. I made sure they knew I wanted my visit to be a surprise.

Surprise. That was what I had written on the envelope I left for Jude this morning, along with the article I had printed at Betty’s salon. I tossed the cigarette out the window, and reached inside my pouch to pull out my copy. I had managed to read it once during our one stop at the Cracker Barrel in Calhoun. I told the driver my bladder couldn’t make it, and tried to explain to him about my meds, but I could tell he wasn’t all that interested, which was fine by me since I do hope I have finally gotten to a place where I don’t need to be explaining myself every last minute, but I also wanted to look around the gift shop, find a present to give Deidre, a trinket, not too fancy. A buffer. But everything seemed so silly, so Southern: *How to Speak Southern*, *Grandma’s Best Southern Recipes*, *The History of*, and such. I knew these wouldn’t do, and finally just settled on a box of Mountain Salt-Water Taffy and an apron with a famous biscuit recipe stitched into it, but then I just couldn’t bring myself to pay for that nonsense since everyone I know in the South has someone in their family who makes a *famous* biscuit recipe, so told the clerk just to give me the candy.

Gay Man Beaten and Left for Dead

Shortly after midnight on October 7, 1998, Matthew Shepard met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson at the Fireside Lounge in Laramie, Wyoming. McKinney and Henderson offered Shepard a ride in their car. After admitting he was gay, Shepard was robbed, pistol whipped, tortured, tied to a fence in a remote, rural area, and left to die. McKinney and Henderson also discovered his address and intended to burglarize his home. Still tied to the fence, Shepard was discovered 18 hours later by Aaron Kreifels, who initially mistook Shepard for a scarecrow. At the time of discovery, Shepard was still alive in a coma. Shepard suffered fractures to the back of his head and in front of his right ear. He had severe brain stem damage, which affected his body's ability to regulate heart rate, body temperature and other vital functions. There were also about a dozen small lacerations around his head, face and neck. His injuries were deemed too severe for doctors to operate.

“God, what a mess. Where do these monsters come from?” I said, waving the paper in front of my face.

I could see the driver was watching me in his rearview mirror, shaking his own head, but he didn't say a word. He'd better not. It was foolish, this thing with Jude. I didn't have time for it, but I couldn't let him win, either. No, it wasn't really about the winning. It was something more urgent than that. And it scared me just a bit.

I reached into my pouch and took out the Chap Stick. I asked the driver if he had a mirror, a hand-held one. He pushed at the rear-view with one hand and twisted around to look at me. He looked as if I had asked for a gun.

"Never mind. Just lower that one," I said, pointing towards the passenger side visor and leaned forward.

If nothing else, I would say I looked determined, my steel blue eyes a smidgen cloudy, but focused, the rest of me swelled up from the medications, the monthly injections into my stomach pump for the pain in my legs, but there was nothing I could do about that. I opened my compact and dabbed a dose of powder on each cheek. The last time I had worn make-up was Mother's funeral.

Those damn three seats, as if I had needed reminding. Kym had come over and stood next to me. He looked at the chairs and didn't sit either. It was craziness. Why did we need to sit down? Jessy had stepped out from the group handing her baby over to that waste of a husband, what's his name, who left and came back, unashamed, as if this was the natural way of things, and I couldn't think of his god-awful name, Bryant, or Brynann, or something ridiculous (just like the rest of us). Mother and her cleverness, stuffing mistakes and unknowns into our names like some damn jigsaw puzzle, as if this might rid herself of her failures. What had she been thinking? I can still see the cardboard box with Mother in it surrounded by white lilies and mixed floral arrangements, the attached notes saying: "I am sorry for your loss;" "Your Mother will be missed."

We couldn't even agree on that, the cost and shape, Kym finally screaming what the fuck does it matter and Jessy claiming the arguing embarrassed her. Well, this is not the time to get ashamed, or worrying what others think, I told her. Maybe I shouldn't have raised my voice, but I hadn't been clear-headed. How could anyone be sane and proper picking out urns for your Mother's incinerated remains, stuffing a life inside a foot long box and walking away? That's it, honey. That's fifty-eight years right there, almost pushing the box off the table because you point and scream and don't know what the hell you're supposed to do with the onslaught of feelings about to cut off your windpipe and suffocate you. Actually, I had hoped they would kill me so I didn't have to go through the nightmare with everyone watching me fall apart. But I didn't. Some crazy sick part of me held it together just so I could go through it.

Jessy walked over and put her left arm around my shoulder and squeezed, putting a crease in my starched white shirt, saying how sorry she was. I noticed everyone noticing us. Of course they were. You are Fay Doherty's fucked up children, a crippled dyke, a faggot slash artistic type son who ran off to the fruit and nut state of California, and one *normal* daughter who was supposed to rescue the marriage you said...

The pastor walked over and said he was going to start, would we take our seats, waving his hands towards the three chairs, as if we had some choice in it. One, two, three...

I made clear to Kym, to Jessy, what it was was everything wrong with everything. Mother detested the whole religion thing. That's what she called it, her and Rupert laughing, him more so as he went on, too far, explaining Mother's ritual with a Habit, the creative uses of ritual and confession in the bedroom. "Just ask a priest," Rupert would say, all with a secret smile. I sensed this in the beginning of them, the sick mind of him. "That one, he isn't right," I said, when I had to acknowledge him, and would stick a finger down my throat.

I'm still convinced Rupert had everything to do with it, the bump on Mother's head, a result of hitting it against the nightstand corner as she fell out of her bed, him right there in the next room. And they expect me to believe this, they, who were THEY, and how do they know these things? It's easier, less messy: accidents don't need explaining.

A distant cousin was suddenly standing next to Mother's box and singing *Amazing Grace*, me suddenly sure I *was* going to puke. I didn't need to put two fingers down my throat, or mix a bit of mustard with warm water, a sure fire way of getting it to come up.

This hymn always brought to mind Grace. I can see her waving her arms, swaying to the message only she heard, Kym watching nervously. He wasn't watching now. He had his head down inspecting his nails, probably thinking about some piano piece I could never understand, maybe that French one he used to mention repeatedly, explaining a respect for structure, like Mozart, music with dignity, respect for constraints, whatever the hell that meant, perhaps it meant the choking feeling I couldn't seem to swallow.

Jessy touched my left arm and said it was time to stand up and pray, Jessy who, by sheer luck of arriving late into the family, managed to avoid the early Sunday tirades at church, sorry, Ma-maw, if you are listening, but even you would admit there was craziness going on, people's need to believe any avenue acceptable to get to the promised land where, I am most dead certain, Mother is not.

“Lou has decided today is going to be THE day.”

I looked up from Ma-maw’s formica kitchen table, the metal rim around the edge loose from years of Lou and I digging into the seams with forks and knives.

“What was that?” I asked, and turned to watch Ma-maw stir the green beans we would have for lunch after church. She always left them on to slowly cook for several hours, usually with a ham bone or thick piece of fat.

“It’s a surprise,” Lou said as she took the other seat at the table and used both hands to carefully place her bible to the side of the plate in front of her.

Ever since last week’s sermon on the Ten Commandments, Lou had been carrying around, no – marching around with her bible open barking off the list as if I had never heard them before.

THOU SHALT NOT STEAL

THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY

I didn’t even know what some of them meant but was fairly sure Lou didn’t either, but that didn’t seem to matter. Every day she focused on two or three and repeated them incessantly.

It did matter to Mother. At first I noticed her sighing or raising her eyebrows and pointing at Lou to say Stop, I’ve had enough, but by the middle of the week, I could see she had reached her limit when she reached across the sofa and pinched Lou’s upper arm.

“Thou shalt not kill...one’s children.”

The three of us were sitting together facing the television, Mother already angry for Dad not showing up again for dinner and another week of hating her new work at a dentist's office. Dad's decision to breakout and start his own construction business (Dad), had left us with barely enough (Mother). I thought she looked beautiful in her white dress and white hose and white shoes. Dad seemed to agree, often reaching out to grab at her as she walked past him.

"I want me some of that."

I would feel this rise inside, ugly and loud, and would later discover I had bitten down hard on my lower lip, a bit of dried blood caked on my bottom teeth.

And so Lou figured she would just write them down. When I opened my music to practice the following afternoon, a folded piece of paper fell out with my name written on the front of it to make sure I knew it was intended for me.

THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME

"I'm not hungry," Lou said, and picked up her plate and carried it to the sink.

I had noticed that she was letting her hair be more natural, straight without the nightly routine of serious washing and pink rollers that Mother always insisted upon. It had become more difficult to see her eyes, to see what she was thinking now that her hair often fell across the front of her face. She would leave it there, letting it create a temporary wall.

Both Ma-maw and I turned to look at her as she turned and waved at the two of us, a "you'll see" smile on her lips, before leaving the kitchen.

The guest preacher man had been screaming and struggling to catch his breath for a while before I pulled out the Church Hymnal and began to entice Lou into our weekly game of distraction. The beginning was official when one of us opened the hymnal to a favorite title, discreetly shown to the other to get the giggles started, then the other would do the same. I had favorites: "Gathering Buds," and "Where is my Boy Tonight?" It had always worked. The message from the pulpit would get louder and more dangerous, with Satan and the Devil becoming favorite words (for the longest time, I thought they were different angels), and the game would always help lighten things up. But Lou would have nothing of it. She kept pushing the book back into my hands and rearranging her hair with her fingers.

And there was this buzzing. At first, I sensed it behind me and turned around to see Grace had stood up and was moving towards the end of her aisle, her arms already straight into the air, her hands waving. Then it was everywhere. The congregation seemed to be alive, crawling with this energy, a low-grade hum that began to get louder and with more vibration.

I quickly turned back around and saw that the preacher had set out a black box that looked close in size to a breadbox, but was shiny and had a clasp on the front. He started to move his hands across the top of it, and then actually began to rub the top,

sliding his hands across back and forth as if Jesus H. Christ (Mother's name for Him) were going to pop out of it.

"Come home, Siiiiinnner," the preacher began to shout louder, almost singing the word, stretching it out as he began to point his fingers around the room. "I know the Devil is holding you back!"

It looked as if the preacher were pointing straight at me. I turned to see Mamaw's eyes were closed, and that she, too, had begun to hum and rock her head forward and back like a rocking chair.

Then I saw her, Lou, going down the aisle. She was crying, but not out of control. She seemed sure of herself, more purposeful. Glancing back once at the preacher, she began to make her way back up the aisle and stood at the end of our pew, both hands outstretched, waiting for me. I knew she would wait long enough for me to stand up and walk down with her, because, eventually, that was what I always did: go with her. I slid across the polished wooden bench, and grabbed one of her hands and asked loud enough so that only she could hear me: "What are you doing?"

Something was strange. Usually by now, Mrs. Frank had begun playing the piano, the hymnals pulled from the pew holders, and people had begun to sing softly. But there was no piano, no hymn singing, only a clash of voices as people began to speak with strange unfamiliar words and some began to shuffle their feet back and forth, as if dancing, no, more aggressive, like stomping.

Lou leaned forward and whispered into my ear.

"It's time, Kym," she said. "You have to give it up."

I jerked my hands back and turned around to see Ma-maw still had her eyes shut, but she had stopped moving. I sensed she didn't want to be seen by me, didn't want to acknowledge what was happening.

Lou reached over and tapped me hard on the side of my head.

"You'll be forgiven. I asked. You just have to give some up."

I looked straight at her.

"What are you talking about?"

"The statues, the records, the music books. There has to be sacrifice," she said, spreading out the last word and raising her eyelids to show the whites of her eyes. "Your music, Kym. You love it more than HIM, that's what I told the preacher, and this is what you have to do."

Lou grabbed my left hand and tugged on it as she tilted her head to the side to say, please, do it for me.

The congregation got quieter, more hushed, as Lou led me down the aisle to the front. The preacher stopped talking as they moved to the front of the pulpit. Lou waited until the preacher stepped down and then gave him my hand.

"The Devil takes many forms," the preacher said, and pulled me close to the box and opened it.

He reached in and pulled out a snake. It was fully curled up and solid black like the darkness of HIM. He reached inside his jacket pocket and I heard myself whimper aloud, shocked to see him hold up one of my composer statues. It was Schubert. I heard the congregation moan, as if they were surprised, but also pleased by it.

I stepped back from the box and looked around to find Lou was standing just a few feet away, her left leg jiggling, her hands beginning to clap in rhythm to the collective pulse. I could hear words being spoken, but couldn't make sense of them. The room and the people I thought I knew had become something else, a living thing that was waiting for some resolution to their big question.

The preacher turned towards me and lifted the snake into the air, saying the demons were struggling, that "Beelzebub" takes many forms, and were fighting against the power of the Lord.

I couldn't help it. I started to get choked up, my breath labored as I tried to keep my fear inside. The last time I had seen a snake some boys from school had surprisingly shown up in the woods behind our house one afternoon and, as they began to run after me, I suddenly felt this wet ropy thing attaching itself to my neck, the boys having found one dead (I later found out it had been beaten to death with a tree branch) and thrown it to where it landed like a scarf. I had screamed and continued running as the snake fell off.

"Come here, boy," the preacher said to me, and held out his arms indicating that I should take it from him.

"Don't be afraid, young man," he said.

And then it bit him; the preacher, and I took off running up the aisle, passing by Grace whose attention was still focused on the ceiling.

As I passed her, Lou tried to reach out and grab me, but I slapped her hands away. She had betrayed me and the music.

Deidre had always been the kind of beauty with road danger signs written all over her: *Dangerous curves ahead. Slippery when wet.* But people hadn't associated with her in school, Deidre the same year as Kym, despite her age. They looked, but couldn't accept that a *retard* should be given this gift from nature: pale cream skin without a pore or blemish, and thick blonde hair falling with the weight of a hundred coins, moving across her back as she walked through the halls amongst pimples and scars, Kym taking it personally, his disgust overriding the *faggot* remarks, as he would walk along side her.

"Why don't you come in?" I asked the driver.

"What? Why?" he asked me, looking horrified.

I tried to look back at him with a similar level of surprise.

"Because I'm paying you to wait," I said. "Might as well eat."

The driver sighed as he pushed the lock that released all of the doors. He was maybe mid-twenties, but I could see he was already frustrated with things in his life, and didn't blame him for that. Just living is a mused up business, and finding a comfortable place in it for oneself, or with someone else, was about the hardest of things. He wasn't bad looking, clean-shaven and nice short hair, mousy brown, kind of like mine, but I'd always believed men with blonde hair were prettier, like my brother. I wanted to tell him that one of the best things in life was meeting interesting people and hearing about all their experiences, but I suspected he wasn't all that interested in what I had to say. But

one would be awfully disappointed if they knew what they had missed by not giving someone their proper say.

"I haven't told you why I'm here."

I opened my door and pushed the cane over to the other seat. I was not going in with that.

"Mam, I don't need to know your business," the driver said, and stepped out of the car, leaving his door open.

I carefully placed my legs on the gravel, and pushed myself up and out, gripping the door in various places for balance. Like a blind person would, or a lame person, or a sick...

"That I am."

The driver turned to look back at me.

He thinks I'm crazy, talking to myself. Maybe I am, I thought, and pushed the door closed and leaned against it for a moment.

"I think I'll have a beer," I said, and moved away from the car.

Deidre didn't seem to mind our needs: make-up, Randy's mother's clothes, our ongoing fascination to re-create and become Barbara Eden and Elizabeth Montgomery. She wanted to be part of it, but then she didn't.

She would pull me aside after I was fully dressed in one of Ruby's skirts, his mother's hose bunched up around my ankles and spilling out of too large dress shoes, and put me "more together."

"You really are beautiful," she often said so only I could hear, and would proceed to tidy me up, realigning the zipper of the back so the skirt would sit properly on my hips, and then roughly rub her index fingers under my eyebrows to even-out the powder, sometimes by adding a touch of spit. She claimed I shouldn't wear earthy tones, and would remove the browns and gold and reapply blues and whites, "for highlighting." She seemed to enjoy inspecting me, making sure I was put together right, unexpectedly slapping my butt as I walked away.

And then, there he suddenly was. Steve. A prophet, of sorts.

He knocked on Randy's door to tell Deidre that Tom wanted her home.

"Now."

I was wearing a blue cotton sweater over a pale white blouse, the buttons uneven, Ruby's bra crooked and poking out the top of one corner. Fortunately, the deep red lipstick I had chosen matched the color of my blood as I bit down and bowed my head, later just wadding the blouse into the garbage behind Randy's house having stained it from wiping my lip.

"Well," Steve said, looking at me, and then at Randy who had stepped into the room still pulling on a pair of polyester dress slacks and nothing else. He often couldn't decide and ran around half-naked after I was fully dressed.

I had never thought about what Randy and I had been doing since we had transitioned to it so naturally. I had accepted Randy's invitation to come over, Randy insisting on performing a piece on his piano, showing me the various music books, careful to point out the stickers his teacher had stamped onto the pages: a blue pom-pom: Hooray! A brown and white stuffed animal with its arm stuck in the air: Way to Go! One book had black and white stick figures in various positions of exercise, but Randy had carefully colored on hair, clothing, sometimes adding a necessary accessory such as a hat or pocketbook.

"Follow me," Randy had said after seeing my surprise, and proceeded down the hall to stand before Ruby's closet doors, fully covered in mirrors, as if he was about to unleash his own Jeannie from a bottle.

I had never seen so many Maxi dresses and trouser suits, all loosely draped with multi-colored scarves tied around the tops of the hangars. Randy said the law office where Ruby worked in downtown Chattanooga had strict dress codes and proceeded to grab the formal dresses and push them to one side to reveal the freer styles of bell-bottoms and halter tops. Initially, I would watch as Randy undressed and slipped on paisley patterned Granny dresses or hot pants with an outrageous halter-top the color of Pepto-Bismol, listening as he phoned Deidre to say he was ready for his make-up.

"You might as well," Deidre would say, as she unpacked the powders and lipsticks she brought from home. "It's just make-believe."

"Deidre was right," Steve said, and moved back towards the door.

I looked nervously over at Randy who was tugging with the side zipper on the polyester pants while fumbling around the corner stereo trying to turn down Carly Simon coming in from all corners:

"I bet you think this song is about you, don't you, don't you?"

Randy's father had recently been promoted at TVA and celebrated with the latest Quadrophonic Sound System, the four speakers dangling from the corners of the room like open mouths. Randy gave up and finally just yanked out the 8-track tape.

"What did you say," I asked as Steve was about to close the screen door.

"That you boys were pretty."

SEVEN

Los Angeles

He was going to be late. The traffic report said to expect a thirty-minute delay and that meant even more. He could call ahead and make an apology, perhaps try and estimate some arrival time, but it was Sara's lesson at three so it probably wouldn't matter. She would wait because she could, because she had little else, no schedule, no looming appointments.

At least it had seemed that way. Today's lesson would complete her first month and Kym knew even less about her. Her exterior life announced one of privilege: a sprawling Mediterranean estate behind a secured gate in Bel-Air, a music room with a Steinway grand, walls and floors decorated with valuable contemporary art, and the most enticing part of her wealth: enough land and space around her that allowed a protected separateness and silence. But this was also part of her mystery: she ignored his presence more and more as he tried to make suggestions or asked questions about the music on the page, her saying less and less, and yet, he sensed a need in her, a need to recognize their time together as important.

Sara's husband had been the one to call and ask some of the initial questions. What was the rate, would he teach an adult, would he travel? Kym was not at the place in his career where he could be the one asking the questions, or better yet, stating that she would have to audition. He wouldn't normally answer the phone during lessons, but Jill had somehow, even after the last six weeks of him correcting her over and over again, managed to find a fourth beat in each bar of the Chopin Waltz. He could still hear her, at the other end of the hallway, adding the extra pulse, even with the metronome ticking alongside her. He had thought about yanking her up off the bench and waltzing with her, showing her the movements, the slight dip on the first count, the subtle grace in the modest turns, the fantasy of accidentally dropping her, when the phone rang, saving him from a likely lawsuit of abuse, touching and *dancing*, with a teenage girl with intent (his intent to get her away from the piano not relevant).

Her husband had also wanted to know how long he could spend with her. Was it possible to go longer than one hour?

Sometimes he felt the typical artist guilt about subjecting his passion to dollars and cents, but other times he felt guilty for complaining about it. He knew the decision to stay in LA, to make things work with Larry, required sacrifices especially now that the school had taken away his graduate stipend. A year and a half after a right-arm injury, he still wasn't performing *as was expected* of performance majors. *I am sorry Kym, but scholarships are for those who are giving back to the school*, the dean had said. The existence of one-handed piano repertoire didn't include music to accompany singers and cellists so his duties in chamber music had gone unfulfilled. His own teacher had said it

could perhaps pacify the school for a while longer to know that he was really trying to be pro-active about his right hand. He had recommended Rolfing, a deep tissue reconstructive therapy that had the reputation of being painful but often got unexpected results. Kym asked him what he meant by unexpected. He said that people often had other things going on, “sometimes things you can’t see can be the source of a problem.”

By now, he usually understood why a student had come to him, if it was a sincere interest in the music, or something else, perhaps a search of some kind (an escape), a way to find fulfillment or, as it was for several of his other adult students, a means to some level of companionship. Part of him was envious of Sara's freedom, what looked like a life of leisure to pursue one's interests, without restriction, to not be tied-up. But it also frightened him.

He had always needed change, some kind of movement to believe things were happening, that he was still growing, becoming a more accomplished musician and established teacher. Stagnation had always felt like some kind of finish, a giving up of sorts, so he had built his life around motion, driving to his students homes (and to Larry's townhome) in a town where people would pay more for the convenience of not moving.

Music was like these cars on the freeway: it needed movement. Flow. He told his students this, sometimes wrote it in comments when asked to judge a piano competition or festival. Too much *rubato* in the passage, or too much slowing down in a transition, and the music would lose momentum, or worse, lose its power to stir and keep one interested. It was all about the right amount. "Balance is the secret," he would often find himself saying or writing. At a recent Bach Festival in early November, one of his

colleagues reached over and forcefully grabbed his arm after he had continually crossed his legs, tapping his pencil up and down in midair, trying to stay seated at the judge's table when one of the contestants kept pausing at every single beautiful moment in a Prelude and Fugue. It felt like she was gagging the music, or like she was preaching to her audience with 'here's another one, and here's another one' while lifting her elbows in some butterfly-like gesture. He wanted to tell her that she would never experience an orgasm with such hesitance and lingering. She would stay a virgin and deserved it.

He continued to grow angrier and more frustrated with every quarter of a mile the cars moved. He always listened to traffic updates just in case he needed to circumvent a different route. Getting from Larry's place in Pasadena to Bel-Air by three was, at a minimum, two freeways, several side streets, and fifty-five minutes. But now, when everything came to a full stop, when everyone on both sides were forced to wait, he would glance around, at some of the focused and determined faces, at others that looked stunned and questioning, trying not to ask themselves how much longer can they take this, this stalling of life and time wasted with strangers insulated from one another behind glass and metal, and start to feel this fatigue, an overdue tiredness that brought with it nagging questions about what he was doing, about the validity and importance of it all.

Lately, he had been slowing down and this also scared him. His friends loved to joke every time he announced it was time for another move, a fresh place to fix up. They had actually made a list one time and it turned out to be eleven places in nine years. It had been in his instinct, when something didn't feel right, to try a different part of the city. This was one of the perks of LA, this endless ability to reinvent. The catchall phrases "try

and start over," "begin anew," felt right. Finding the perfect spot for things as he unpacked, choosing the best colors for the walls, gave him the distraction away from a home space that had become displaced, a place that had lost its safety. So far, this focus of energy into new beginnings had gotten him through.

But now, at thirty-eight, Kym has begun to question and wonder about his right to art, to ask if he's really good enough. Is he *worthy*? He knew he wouldn't be here without it. The music had always been his ticket out. Out of the family, out of the South, out of the past. Part of him knows he is good, that he did his time. And unlike some, he was happy to spend the time alone: it was time that made sense. It was necessary. It was essential. The part that he that he hasn't been good at is having to compete, to play the politics and expose himself to the scrutiny. All art has to do this, and "society is cruel," Larry said. It sets it up, like a sport, and demands it. Says there is only so much room and not everyone is good enough or strong enough to have a place. At times his anger about this would reach a point that he would close the lid and walk by its place in his home, in his life. He would pretend not to see it there. Inevitably, he begins to feel an anxiousness, a sadness stemming from the absence, so he goes back. At first reluctantly, knowing the level of responsibility, but there is, finally, always, the relief. The joy of the sound. The satisfaction of the touch under his fingers, the digital movement of scales and clarity and trying to achieve perfection. Ultimately, the escape. The reward of forgetting for a time while everything else. (Just play louder)

But the passion that created the music, that had driven the need to disappear into countless hours of focused practice and performance, has been getting further away. The

music inside has gotten so quiet it is almost silent now. His need for it has changed, has faded as the images of the past have gotten blurry, some almost forgotten.

Neither of us said anything. I labored with trying to breathe and not make a sound, keeping my body perfectly still. I could feel the right side of Steve's body against mine, knowing if one of us turned over to the side the connection would end.

Everything was wet and sticky, even the night air, still as it was. Steve had unzipped the two small openings on the sides of the tent, the front flap secured with snaps. I only allowed myself to move my eyes.

Nothingness.

I had never thought of the night as a black one couldn't see, yet still alive. A lightening bug hovered for a moment.

In its relentlessness, an insect was ticking like my metronome.

So far, I had managed to bring half the scales to speed. It was the minimum, Maxwell said, and would slide the metal weight down from 120 to 148: this was a good scale. 160: the goal.

The lessons worked, but I didn't feel the closeness to the instrument. I produced and I practiced, even the elaborate hymn arrangements and "Take Five" by Brubeck, since Maxwell claimed the complex rhythms would help prepare me for the Gershwin Rhapsody. I had watched Mother dance to the music, somehow her blonde fall not falling

off, as she dipped her head forward over her knees, one leg stretched out with a pointed toe, moving with Gene Kelly in "An American in Paris," the music filling our crowded den, the sofa barely three feet away from the TV against the opposite wall, I nervously watched the door waiting for Dad to show up and turn it all off. But somehow it didn't matter. Something had happened that night as I listened to the music build and reach the final climax, slightly embarrassed as I fought back the tears so Mother wouldn't see, watching her sway and raise her arms as she moved across the room: the music said the two of us didn't belong here, in this house, in this town: none of it.

It had been Steve's idea, the camping out in his back yard. After our first encounter, Steve began to appear unexpectedly, as if waiting for me. Once, he stepped out from a hedge of side bushes that separated his yard from Randy's as I was heading back home, the suddenness creepy: neither of us spoke, but something was said. A few days later, as Mother and I passed in front of Steve's house on our way home from her latest, and now frequent doctor's appointments, the driver's side door of his Dad's parked car flung open and Steve stepped out to notice me. Neither of us waved. It was as if Steve could sense me, know where I was going to be.

Steve said his parents didn't want him outside all night, alone. I had walked out to the mailbox, and then, there he was, asking.

I needed to wipe my nose, one side starting to leak onto my lip, when I felt Steve reach into his sleeping bag and grab my left-hand. He continued to hold on as he moved our hands into his own sleeping bag. At some point, Steve had pushed down his shorts,

and now I was touching another boy. Steve slid his hand back into my bag and began to touch me over my clothes.

The rest of the night went this way. Enough time would pass, and it would all happen again. And after each time, I would feel a form of hate for myself for doing this. But then I would forget when Steve would start us again.

I never removed my clothes.

Neither of us said anything.

Milton Hill

I could see the years had decided to leave Deidre out of their relentless ways of tattooing themselves all over a person, images sagging and re-structuring into strange unrecognizable creations of getting older. Her hair was darker, and shorter, only just touching the tops of her shoulders, but still thick and freshly combed. Other than her thick-soled work shoes and apron, I was looking at Deidre at sixteen. When she turned to look at the sound of the door opening, I was relieved to know she saw only an older fat woman coming in with an attractive young man, but for a moment (and it sickens me to admit it), I had this tinge of self-pity: the years have not been so gentle with me.

I motioned for the driver to go and sit at the counter where Deidre was busy clearing away an older man's dishes. I took the first open booth and slid in, the seat sticky, the black vinyl worn down from age, and in a few places, the rust-colored foam was spilling out trying to escape, but at least there was a black plastic ashtray on the table, nasty as it was.

"Thank God for that." I slid it closer.

The place wasn't bad, better than the outside. It was always after dark and Mother would drive around to the back to see if Dad's truck was here, Kym and I in the backseat. He left it in the back hoping Mother would drive past, only glancing from the street.

Mother never went inside, and would turn around and ask us if Ron thought she was an idiot, and would drive us home and wait. I always tried to stay in my room, *Deep Purple* blasting through my headphones to block out his coming back and the afterwards. I knew Kym always stayed right with her, the earlier times of being taken away when we were kids had made him defiant about not leaving her alone. I would hear Kym stumbling down the hallway to his room, Dad pushing him, saying to stay out of it. I knew Kym would eventually put on his own headphones and escape to different places, often with a book in his hands. Once I snuck into his room to see what he had been listening to, and couldn't make sense out of it, the words in a foreign language, but I never forgot the album cover: a landscape of large trees with mountains in the distance, a purple and pink haze fighting with the clouds in the sky, and the name Wagner. I never understood that business with the trees.

There were six or seven vacant tables in the middle, and several more booths lining the walls: I heard low voices coming from one. The older man at the counter had moved to the end of it to pay, which left the one occupied booth, plus her driver. Not so busy that Deidre might have a moment to chat with me.

I had been thinking about how to propose the question of the piano, and figured I may even have to lie about things, which I had no problem with, but what I didn't understand was how Deidre had ended up with it. Kym told me that Mother sold it to help pay for some of his college, that a couple moving to one of the Carolina's had wanted it. And I'm just certain that Tom unleashed this suspiciously owned secret of his because he knew it was supposed to be Kym's, or at the very least mine, but there was still this

pestering nagging nuisance, like one of those no-see-um bugs that keeps buzzing around my ears at night when I sit outside on my deck, me swatting them away, and not two seconds later, they come back.

Deidre reached inside her apron and took out the pen and bill pad, not looking directly at me, but I could see her eyes staring at my hand on the table. I hadn't noticed the rattling of the ashtray from my hand shaking and knocking up against it, the ashes from my lit cigarette falling on the table. Deidre reached back inside her apron and took out a dishcloth.

"Sorry, I'll get it, " I said.

"It's ok," Deidre said, and began to brush the ashes off the edge of the table on to the pad. She reached over to dump them back into the ashtray, and I quickly dropped the lit cigarette into it and grabbed the corner of the pad before Deidre pulled back.

"You don't recognize me," I said, and let go of the pad.

Deidre pulled it up to her chest, shaking her head as she looked straight at me.

"I'm sorry, Deidre, I didn't mean to scare you."

Deidre had become even more beautiful, her skin still smooth as a rubbing stone, but now there was this edge in her, a heaviness in her space that said she had carried things, burdensome things alongside her life.

"It's Lou, Deidre," I said, and pointed my fingers to my chest. "Lou Doherty."

I wouldn't think it was possible, but Deidre's fully globed eyes expanded further open, like raising the blinds in a darkened room.

"Lou," Deidre said, and covered her lips with one hand.

I could see the tears began to build quickly, forming small puddles about to spill over if she didn't blink.

"Oh, gosh, Deidre," I said, and moved to get up from the booth.

"No, don't get up," Deidre said, and quickly sat down across from me.

Neither of us said anything, but I could feel the space between us filling up with questions, and lost years, and my brother.

Mother didn't want to have another baby. Not with him. Things could be done, "legal things," since the start of the year.

I imagined Ma-maw's responses from Mother's long pauses and constant shifting of the phone from one ear to the other, as I kept nervously glancing at the back door waiting for Dad to arrive. Mother was saying this was it, she couldn't wait any longer. She didn't have this choice the first time.

"Let her in, Kym," Mother said, waving to the slider door to the back yard. She had brought the black and brown mutt home a few weeks earlier. In her defense against Dad's yelling, she claimed she saw the pick-up pull over and put the dog out on the side and drive off. From the first, she called her Esther, after some Hollywood swimmer.

"Come on, Est," I said, sliding the door open.

I walked to the front set of windows facing the street and pulled the drapes fully open, the outside light just starting to fade and it almost nine-o'clock.

Steve's driveway was vacant, his Dad having pulled their car into the garage for the night. The outdoor lights at Eileen's were already on. I could see Lou's bike leaning against the front steps, Eileen not caring it was only a couple of houses away, she said it would be dark when Lou left to come home.

Having not seen Steve since our night in the tent, now almost a week, I finally asked Deidre who said he was always in his room, "living like a bat: sleeping all day, rummaging around at night." I asked what that was supposed to mean.

Deidre said, "It sounds like he is building things."

During the day, I convinced myself it hadn't happened, answering to Mother's chores, whatever yard work Dad managed to think up, and going to the piano in several stretches, always scales first. Maxwell had been right: now that I had hit my stride with the metronome, I was not only enjoying the challenges to be accurate and increase the speed, but was starting to feel I had a new level of control. The passagework in the elaborate hymn arrangements began to flow smoothly, the passing of my thumbs no longer clumsy.

But the last several mornings, I had woken from the same dream with a corner of the pillow stuffed into my mouth, the sheets underneath me soaked with sweat. In the dream, someone had organized a neighborhood competition in which the fathers and sons had to prove themselves before the women and their daughters. The setting was the juncture of two streets that formed the shape of a cross and enclosed with large tables arranged in a half circle. There was a long train of red carpet leading to a freestanding stage in the middle where the mothers and daughters were seated, each with a gavel placed in front of them. The men were standing in a straight line that began at the outer edge of the carpet and continued down a street where I was standing at the end.

Suddenly it was my turn. I stepped onto the stage and stood next to a small cage filled with newborn puppies, a butcher-block table in front of me with a knife stabbed in the center.

There was something wrong with them. One was missing an ear; another couldn't stand up fully because he was without both back legs. There was also a solid white one, one eye closed shut, but then I realized there was no eye.

"DEATH, OR SELF-EXPOSURE."

The voice came from somewhere off to my left.

"DEATH, OR SELF-EXPOSURE."

I had no idea what the voice wanted. My legs began to shake, sweat running down my forehead onto my eyelids, into my eyes.

My hesitation triggered the booming sound of gavels before I finally woke up.

EIGHT

Milton Hill

I told her I didn't want to get her into trouble for sitting down on the job, and Deidre turned and looked over at the counter, my driver the only customer.

"It's ok," she said. I noticed she was picking at the skin around one of her nails. She had bitten around the rest, her nails almost gone.

"Maybe I should order something," I said, and mentioned I might like to have a beer. I had been in the car for almost three hours, that I lived outside of Atlanta now, and then I remembered the silly gift still in the car.

"The owner lost his license," Deidre said, "for serving minors." They hadn't served beer or wine for several months, hence the few customers. She said people liked to drink around here.

"I'm not supposed to drink anyways," I said. "Not with all my pills," and went on to tell her about the MS, my accident at work when I lifted a small computer monitor from a worker's desk and suddenly lost my grip, both me and the screen going to the

floor, the glass shattering all around me. Shortly afterwards, another fall at home. I explained how I used to be able to patch up most anything to do with electronics. Now I just stare at the TV and look every now and then at the phone, wondering if maybe I missed a call while out like a light.

"The meds do that," I said. "I think the doctor's plan it that way, since it's easier for them."

"I'm sorry," Deidre said, rubbing her fingers across one eyebrow, and began to comb her hair with her fingers.

"Tom lives in Atlanta," Deidre suddenly said.

I nodded, and said yes, I had seen him.

Deidre said she'd be back, and stood up. I watched her move to the booth a few tables over and begin to stack the dishes onto her arm.

I told the driver to pull in the driveway behind Deidre's car, but he hesitated anyway, saying he could park on the street.

"It's fine, she told me to," I said, and waved my arm to signal, drive in.

I took a deep breath and rolled down the window, letting the air out slowly as I turned to stare at Eileen's place next door. Someone had painted it a forest green with bright white shutters, the scrubs alongside the front steps now tall enough to hide them.

They would have been enough to hide my bike, but it wouldn't have stopped him. Dad had terrified Eileen out of here, his craziness that had begun in our driveway with her records finally reached its end as he carried it over to Eileen's, standing outside, screaming and threatening with raised fists. I can still see Mike and Amy peeking out of the curtains of their living room and crying as I road my bike in circles in the street, silent but crazy for love (I was sure of it), as I begged and waited for him to stop. I knew then why Mother was always so afraid of him.

But he didn't stop me from seeing her. I still don't think it's wrong how I felt about her, even though Eileen was ten years older, me only thirteen. I can see some people might wave their arms around, screaming *that's rape, that's abuse*, whatever else, but I knew what I was doing, and it was my choice, right from the start of it. I wonder if it is always like this, that people know themselves this early, or was it just another way that connected me with Kym, this knowledge of ourselves and our bodies, though Kym had fought hard against his nature, hoping some pretty girl might do it for him. His was more like a quiet acceptance, a lonely one, if I can say that, and I accept this now. But I do like to remember taking Kym out, parading him around and introducing him to everyone at the bar, especially the drag queens that were my favorites. Their duality just made sense to me, this desire to be beautiful, like I believed only a woman could be, plus I never judged them. How was it that Angel put it: I "embraced" their desires. But I knew Kym feared them, his own femininity an embarrassment. I kept hoping he would learn to embrace this part of himself, so once I encouraged Angel to entice him onto the stage with her, and Angel took Kym's hands and lay them onto his transitional body, his

breasts just starting to show, as he rubbed himself against Kym, the drunk audience encouraging "MORE," as he pushed Kym to the floor and put his legs around him. Kym finally pulled himself away and ran off. I found him waiting in the parking lot, staring into nothingness, our car a cloud of cigarette smoke. He said I had shamed him, that I had no right, and I remember laughing at him, saying his reaction was extreme, just downright silliness. I know. I shouldn't have laughed. I was wrong to do that. I hear this all the time now, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Before the driver could ask, I said I didn't know how long, and leaned forward to look at the dashboard clock: 1:30p.m. We had left Atlanta at seven, but I had been awake at 4:30, repeatedly pushing the TV "INFO" button on the remote for the time. I don't sleep well without Bullet, but I knew Jude was right to take him for the night. Bullet would have been all worked up with all the commotion of me leaving the house.

"A couple of hours, I guess," I said, and grabbed both the candy and my cane, then tossed the candy back onto the seat. I pushed it onto the floor with my cane.

"How funny...candy-cane," I said, and smiled at him.

As I turned away from the car, I could see Deidre holding open the front screen door, staring at her feet. Of course. She's nervous, I could sense it at the cafe as I tried to keep my own hidden from her.

This was dark, this stuff before us, and somehow we both knew it.

We were standing on top of Randy's bed, each of us with a corner of the antique lace tablecloth held against the wall that Ruby was going to throw out for its yellowishness, when I heard the screaming.

"What's going on," Randy asked, as I dropped my end of the lace and rushed to the window.

"Please, STOP!" Lou was screaming at Dad who was kneeling over a stack of record albums in our driveway slamming them with a hammer. Lou kept reaching over to grab at his arms trying to stop him.

"Oh, God," I said, and looked at Randy. "I have to go."

"Make him stop!" Lou yelled, again, as I approached.

Dad stopped for a moment to point at me with the hammer. He told me to get in the fucking house, to stay out of it.

"Fucking queers."

I could feel the heat rush to my face, but when I looked over at Lou, I realized I had misunderstood. She was shaking her head no at me, her face a mixture of emotions: from the tears I could see her hopelessness, but also her anger. She waved for me to go, which was when I noticed her shirt was torn on one side and hanging from her shoulder. There were several marks on her neck, and Lou quickly raised one hand to cover them.

"Now, Kym," Dad said.

I started to walk towards our house when I saw Mother watching from the den window, one hand holding back the drapes, the other covering her mouth. Doing nothing.

Milton Hill

I watched the driver leave, following him down the street as he passed between my house and Randy's. I had to remember to ask Deidre about him. What a nut, he must be in the nuthouse. Actually, it was all kind of sad, that.

I could see they had taken down the basketball goal from our driveway. Why would anyone do that?

I was surprised by the nothing I felt looking at the old place. But then, I really lived so much of those years in other homes (other beds).

"Stop it, now." I turned back to look at Deidre.

Actually, if I'm honest with myself, I know it's because, from the beginning, that house was a big lie, a set-up for Mother to have Jessy, to push Kym and I further apart.

"I'm coming," I said, and moved towards the front door. I don't understand how Deidre can stand it, stuck in this place.

"I have Michelob, that's all I got," Deidre said, and pushed the door further open.

I told her it was my favorite, and stepped into her living room.

Perhaps I had noticed it before, but never like this. The similarity between our houses was a mirror, the living room windows on the right side, ours on the left. Now that I thought about it, Randy's house was the same: a flat non-descript ranch that extended the length of the yard, with two double windows for the living room and den, singles for

the two front facing bedrooms. Deidre had put in new carpet, ours had been covered with brown shag and a corner brick fireplace, but Deidre's re-constructed stone mantel and white vinyl blinds did nothing to mask the kinship. We had all lived as The Stepford Wives. Both Mother and Kym had hated that book. The conversations they had about it made no sense, but I could see it. We had all tried to blend in in a sense, hide among the sameness, the mowed lawns, the blah colors on our houses, the fitted drapes around the windows, a man and woman in the house running it, thinking they were in control of everything around them, and yet, their kids...

"The place looks nice, Deidre," I said.

"It's OK," she said, stepping around me after closing and latching the lock on the door. She noticed me watching her, and said she did it against the Bible salesmen. She had one of them push his way into her house with her still holding the door open.

"They still sell Bibles? At your door?"

Deidre shook her head.

"No, Lou. They sell what's in them."

I said I needed to sit down.

"Your beer," Deidre said.

I followed her into the kitchen, wondering how she did it: her slim figure was like a TV star.

"Here, sit here," Deidre said, and pulled the middle chair back from a table that was pushed against the wall, a framed poster of some flowers hanging above. There were also hands in it.

"Picasso," Deidre said, as she place two bottled beers and two glasses on the table. "I like the colors."

"I don't know nothing about art," I said. "That's Kym's department."

Deidre paused in front of her chair, her hands holding the back of it. I realized I had finally managed to get us to the real reason we were here.

"He's in trouble," I quickly added.

Deidre pulled the chair away from the table and sat down. She turned and looked towards the kitchen window.

"Where is he?"

"LA, but I think he wants to come home."

I picked up the bottle and drank two quick gulps. My hands began to shake as I placed it back onto the table. I dropped the cane in my left hand and brought it around to my right for support.

"Damn it."

"Here, let me help."

"No, no, I'm fine," I said, embarrassed, and quickly moved both hands onto my lap. I lost my train of thought. "It's what happens."

We both stare at the bottle like it was some sort of talisman.

"Actually, I haven't seen him in a while," I finally said, adding it was more like a year and a half, since our Mother's funeral.

"I heard," Deidre said.

I asked her how in the world, with Mother living in Nebraska at the time.

Deidre went to the fridge and stood in front of it.

"I didn't want to say anything," she said. "Didn't know if you knew."

I hesitated, not sure what was so mysterious, but admitted I didn't know.

"The woman next door," Deidre said, pointing towards Eileen's house. "She sees Ron. They come to the restaurant."

Los Angeles

The container garden in front of Sara's house was littered with various pieces of stone: the overflowing pots of white roses and irises had been pushed off to the sides. Through squinted eyes and right-hand placed above his brow, Kym saw three men. One was anchored on a ladder, his left-foot balancing one side of him on the next to highest step, the other foot pushing against the stone fireplace. He was slamming a chisel into the upper part of the chimney. Another man was standing next to the ladder balancing a wheelbarrow in his hands, tilting it to the right then the left, pulling back then forward, seriously trying to catch the falling pieces. The third one, shirtless and with a newly-lit cigarette dangling from his lips, was cutting and tossing the mangled pieces of bougainvillea into a second wheelbarrow. He looked up and nodded as Kym approached.

“There’s a break somewhere, maybe last earthquake. We have to tear it down, rebuild it,” the third man responded to Kym’s inquiry. The other two exchanged a few words in Spanish and smiled.

He could hear Sara “practicing,” so he let himself in and took his place next to her. She didn’t stop playing for his arrival, but he eventually placed some new sheet music on the music rack and tried again to engage with her on learning to read the notes. At first she was agreeable, but then, frustrated, she would suddenly lapse back into her own composition, finding some kind of comfort in her familiar repetition of monotonous white-key scales, this freedom of expression.

“Let me show you some chords you could put with that,” Kym said as he moved onto the bench with her. He improvised some progressions, simple C, G, and F chords, but she seemed to get a bit undone by it all, pushing her hands through her hair and then finally pushing his hands away from the keys. He noticed that her hair was down this week, not so carefully arranged.

“It’s OK, she said, and then continued on, offering a hint of a smile before continuing on with her solo playing.

She did not seem to need him, other than to be there, to simply acknowledge that this was real; she was playing the piano, and this moment was happening. This was enough for her. Kym finally gave in to her. This surprised him a little, but even more the decision not to question his acquiescence; it just felt like the right thing to do. He listened to Sara and continued to watch the men deconstruct the damaged chimney through the window behind the piano.

“I wish it were that easy,” he said. “Hammer it away, the diseased part, the rot, and there you have it, the answer.”

Sara stopped playing, her hands still touching the keys, and turned to look at him.

Kym moved forward in the chair and lowered his head to stare at the space between his feet.

“Larry hates me for this,” he said, and made a declarative sweep with his hands to acknowledge his body.

Sara began playing again, more softly, but not before she gave him a simple nod.

“I’m really trying, but it isn’t that easy,” Kym said. “I can’t do it, anymore. Be intimate.”

He continued on, hesitantly at first, but then couldn’t stop. He talked while she played. He told her about his first date with Larry, that he couldn’t help looking at his hands, “the sturdiness of them: his veins reminded me of the unpredictable paths of streams. And his nails were so clean and neatly trimmed. I could even see the subtle pink underneath.” He told her about the day of the injury, the day he had to stop playing during Larry’s lesson, how he had almost made it to the end of the development section, but the fatigue that had been hovering in his shoulder finally moved down his arm and into the fingers.

“I could barely lift them a half an inch off the key,” he said, and raised his index finger slowly off his knee to demonstrate. Larry’s teacher had been appalled at his inability to just keep accompanying the Elgar Cello Concerto, to continue playing around the pain.

“The man was a monster. He actually once threw up on his own instrument during a lesson from alcohol poisoning.”

Sara stopped performing for this.

“I’m not kidding,” Kym said, and held his right hand out, fingers pressed tightly together. “I swear on the Bible,” he said, though he had sopped believing years before.

Sara kept playing. No pauses.

He would stop and listen to her for a while. She continued to listen to him. He couldn’t help it. Something had broken open in him.

“Sara, do you remember the night of the riots?”

Steve had waited for me. After I closed Randy's side door, Steve stepped out from behind the hedge that separated the yards and signaled for me to follow him.

It was the last week of August, the final days before we returned to school, and the first time I had been near him in over a month. I had seen him sitting in his Dad's car, or driving it slowly into the garage for the night, but Steve had stopped noticing me, our camp night obviously a mistake.

Steve led me around the backside of his house across the freshly mowed lawn, clumps of wet grass sticking to my shoes. I didn't remember Steve's yard being both large and empty: there wasn't a single tree, just a long clothesline on one side with one blue sheet hanging motionless.

I followed Steve into his garage by way of a side door. As soon as it closed, the darkness consumed the space around us. The car was gone, but I could smell the gasoline and exhaust from it being recently started. Steve took hold of my right hand and pulled me a few steps further in.

I could hear him rubbing and tapping his hand against a wall before he found a light switch. The dullness of the light came from a small lamp with a dark green shade that was sitting on top of a worktable. The area was enclosed by two plywood walls, against one, stacks of boxes, the other lined with a large white freezer that looked similar to the one my parents had recently bought.

I watched as Steve undid the buckle on his belt, but leaving the belt on as he turned away and laid his hands flat on top of the freezer.

"Inspect me."

Surprised by an unfamiliar fear, I felt something had to be wrong, that, perhaps, I had somehow encouraged this, when I realized, I had, in fact, been waiting for it.

"I've been bad," Steve said, and reached over to the table and turned off the lamp.

A few times the meetings were spontaneous, but Steve planned most of them. Most would occur in his bedroom with his Mother just down the hall. There were minute variations, but always with the same theme that began with dialogue.

"You know why you are in trouble?"

"I think so," I would respond, and Steve would push on my head, forcing me to kneel down, shoving me between his thighs and squeezing just to the point that I needed to breathe. He would do it again, at least once more, before finally spreading his legs a few feet apart, his waiting stance, and signal for me to move my hands slowly up his legs, eventually telling me to use my mouth. I would try to hold my breath because of the smell, something in the soap or deodorant, or just that leaked from his skin that was distinct. Not right, not fresh, and then a lump would form in my throat, and I would keep it down by swallowing a lot.

At first, touching Steve's body felt aberrant, but then it began to fascinate me, partly being the same sex and age and how differently we were aging, but also from the pleasure in watching him get satisfied. Everything around my life had taught me this thing with Steve was wrong, but there was a right about it somewhere inside of me, and I didn't understand that, either. It was different than knowing the music was right. Whenever I thought about us getting caught, especially recalling Dad's violent reaction to Lou, I would swear off him, telling Steve it was the last time. A few times, I knew I couldn't make it back home in time and had to step behind the hedge that separated Steve's lawn from Randy's with the drive heaves.

Steve's body had already begun to cover with hair, especially on his legs. There were thicker patches, particularly on his lower legs, and on the insides of his thighs. But a feature of Steve's hands bothered me. Not so much when Steve touched me, but more when he gestured or described something I was supposed to do. They were larger than mine, the fingers long and thin, and not very distinctive except for the nails that had ridges across in an even pattern. Whenever I got the chance, I would glance at Steve's Mother's hands, or Deidre's, wondering if they had the same bumpiness. Perhaps Tom had them, but he hadn't started to come around, yet. So I believed they were unique to Steve, like his fingerprints.

NINE

Milton Hill

I had to know what Ron looked like. Had he gotten fat? Bald? Still madder than a hornet?

"He looks ok, I guess," Deidre said, and placed two more beers on the table along with a bowl of water crackers and a wedge of bright orange cheese on a small plate. It looked rubbery, the kind that moves like a sponge when you cut into it.

I hadn't seen Ron since Mother's funeral when he stood a good distance away from me and Kym, mostly just staring down at his feet. Every now and then he would take a couple of steps forward, then move back to the same spot. I watched him pull Jessy aside afterwards and asked if he could hold her baby, groveling over it like a beam of light from the heavens had come down and lit up this child's life. He'd been the same way about Jessy, and it used to make me about to burst open with hate.

"I don't want to talk about him," I said, but then asked for the woman's name.

Deidre stepped out the side door of the kitchen and dropped the empty bottles into a container.

"Suzanne, but she goes by Susie."

"Well, I don't want to talk about her, either," I said, and asked Deidre would she mind handing me my cane before she sat back down.

"Men," I said, shaking my head.

"What?"

Of course, I really should clarify and say straight men, and realized this was it: the solution to this thing with Jude. It had nothing to do with black or white, straight or queer, it was simply Straight Men. Yes, straight man's appetite to possess and control everything, especially women. Just look at the politicians, the lawyers, the doctors, the jocks...they ALL had to win. (You like to win, too) To control. And if they didn't, you get the O.J.'s of the world, scrambling to hold to what they feel is theirs, because they tell themselves they own it.

"Not this time," I said, and noticed Deidre had flipped one hand over, her eyebrows raised.

"Don't think I'm crazy, Deidre," I said, and asked if she had the internet, and Deidre said no, but a cafe with it had just gone in at the old Shake Shoppe. Did I remember it? I laughed.

"Of course."

It was the only place within walking distance to the neighborhood. It was a convenience store for a time, then something else, maybe a fruit stand. Deidre recalled

when she, Kym, and Randy would go on weekends and share one order of fries, Kym disgusted by the mayo Randy spread on his third.

"Whatever happened to your friend," I asked, pointing in the direction of Randy's house.

"I don't know. They moved just before you did, don't you remember?"

Obviously not, I said, but was realizing how strange memories were, especially from childhood. How was it possible to ever get to the truth?

"Is the truth just what each of us remembers, the things we tell ourselves over and over?"

Deidre said she didn't know, but she didn't think Randy ever got over it.

"Got over what?"

"I know he never forgave me," Deidre said. "He figured I was part of taking Kym away."

"Away? Away from what?"

Deidre looked down at her hands, which she had been tapping up and down on the table to some song in her head I was sure I could never appreciate, and then put her fingertips together as if she were getting ready to pray.

"Away from him," Deidre said. She said she understood that Randy's reaction to it was because he didn't understand, and how could he? How could any of us make sense out of what was happening when we were just kids?

"And don't forget, I was supposed crazy then," she said.

I suddenly had this need to stand up and walk around a bit.

"Lord, what a mess," I said, and didn't mean to get too personal, but I asked could she explain what she meant by this supposed crazy business.

"Mind you, people have been telling me I'm crazy, for years," I said.

I know this sounds crazy, but I used to think about having a baby. What it would feel like to smell and hold that life force next to mine. What it might be like to finally do the right thing by another life.

But. But what kind of life could I offer, what with the world and people the way they are.

I once held the newborn of one of my girlfriends, he was not more than four months old, and I almost panicked from the gentleness of it, the softness and looseness of its body.

I cannot imagine what she must have been thinking, my own Mother, when she used to walk away from my crying, my fear when I sensed she didn't love me enough. I knew it, but it got worse because I knew it and she knew I knew it.

She had lied about it for so long, I think she actually believed the truth they had created for us, Kym and me, so that the truth of what had happened to her would be the lie.

Kym told me he found a box of pictures in the top of the closet once, and there they were, getting married, Mother in a long soft blue skirt and white blouse, Ron in a

white shirt and no tie, and they were kissing, and everything seemed to be just right by everyone. Kym said there were a few pictures that had the corners cut off, neatly, as if someone were trying to cut the damaged parts out of the picture. That something turned out to be me, in all of my eight months glory, already standing apparently, and about to run into the scene that had been carefully orchestrated so that I was not there.

This girl's baby was kind of sick at the time, and was gagging a bit on its air. I kept pounding lightly on its back thinking it needed to clear some snot from its throat, but the girl said that he had been sick from the beginning, to just leave him be. There was a moment when I was tempted to nestle him closer in his blanket and run from her house straight to the hospital, even though I didn't know where the nearest one was. To tell the truth, I was thinking of myself, as selfish as that sounds, and what I would have wanted if I were that child and realized, if I were that child, I wanted nothing more than that Mother I already had. As sick as she was, she would do just fine.

"I want to show you something," Deidre said, and opened the side door into the garage. She said there was easy access to the outdoors if I wanted to walk around the neighborhood. I just needed to get some blood in my legs, I said, and followed her.

The concrete floor looked as if someone had scrubbed it by hand and then spread on a thick coat of wax. There were four separate florescent light beams hanging over it, but only two were working. Deidre moved to one corner, a make shift room or storage space of sorts, and began to lift and re-stack some of the boxes to one side.

"Jesus, God, who are all of them?" I asked, pointing to the wood pieces hanging on the walls. There had to be at least a dozen, all the size of an eight by ten photograph, and all men's faces. I moved closer to one and saw the image had been carved from a single piece of wood, the colors in the hair and eyes painted on.

"You don't recognize them?" Deidre asked, and set a box on top of a small work desk. They all had weird hair and strange smiles, like ancient scholars. I asked her where she got them.

"I'm guessing Steve created them. They came to me with the rest of his things."

I told her I was mighty impressed, especially seeing they were made by hand, but I still didn't know who they were.

Deidre picked up the box from the desk, and said we could better see these other things better back inside the house.

We were going back for Lou's repeat performance, her "Lo-lee-tah," she would say every few minutes, curling her body together and hugging herself, tilting her neck back so she could glance over the seat and smile. I had no idea what she was talking about.

Her friend Ryan was driving us in his brother's Mustang, the driver's window down so that he could rest his left hand on the small mirror to keep the cigarette smoke outside the car.

"Stop saying that, you crazy bitch," Ryan would say, but would turn and smile at her, shaking his head to acknowledge Lou's craziness. I could tell he loved it, all of Lou's Louness, the stuff Mother and Ron yelled at her for.

I couldn't get past the physicalness of him. Every time Ryan turned to look at her, I would see the line of his jaw, the tiny nick below his sideburn and the spot of dried blood where he had cut himself that I wanted to reach over and rub off with my spit. I kept reaching under my shirt to put my hand against my belly, convinced it was Ryan's driving that was making me sick since being around Ryan always made me a little sick.

Lou knew it. She would see my response and encourage it. A couple of times she left me alone with him in her room, creating excuses to leave.

"Who is this, Lo-lee-tah, and what are we doing," I asked.

Lou turned to face me, grabbing the top of her seat with both hands and blinking her eyes rapidly.

"I am, you fool."

"Leave him alone, Lou," Ryan said, and pushed against Lou's shoulder. "Turn around and leave him."

Mother's decision to have the baby, which in the last couple of weeks she insisted was going to come any minute, had brought a temporary relief into our lives, as well as certain privileges. Ron had become a different husband, less angry and more present, but also willing to accommodate Mother's desire to get out of the house, even for just a couple of hours. Lou's response was to match them and go out as well.

Lou's decision to come out had been like everything else she did, boldly and without apology. She was proud of her discovery, and couldn't believe Mother and Dad were furious: it was just another way of Lou getting attention, Mother kept insisting, telling Ron it would pass. The episode with Eileen had left a mark, a defiant scar that became an endless battle, and since Lou was determined to win, she began to date Ryan. Though older and with a car, I could see the hope it gave them.

Last night, Mother and Ron had come in late, Mother all worked up, surprised the movie people were allowed to put images like that on the screen. Dad reminded her that the controversy was the reason they had wanted to see it. I waited until they had gone to bed to search yesterday's paper and discovered The Exorcist was one of the books on the shelves in the dining room. Mother had joined a book club the previous summer and the shelves, once lined with Church Hymnals and a few Reader's Digest Condensed Books, began to fill: Once is Not Enough, The Stepford Wives, Jonathan Livingston Seagull. I read everything that came into the house. After school, I lived between the bench and the bed, the music and the novels. Waiting.

Activities across the street with Steve had become unpredictable. I would go to the window and wait for a signal, usually just a guessing game for the two of us. Steve would stand outside the car, lean against the driver's door, and wait. If all was clear, meaning everyone was gone or removed from sight, I was to make my way over and step into the kitchen side door through the garage. More lately, I had discovered Randy staring back across the street at me from his bedroom window, as if Randy could sense me now, watching to see what I was going to do. Our friendship had gotten more strained, the appearance of Steve had changed things between us, but I never spoke of it, even to Deidre. I didn't know how, not just because I didn't even know what it was, but more I had already learned to be silent about so many things.

And now that I had worked his way through Gershwin's Rhapsody, Maxwell was suggesting yet another teacher: my talents at the piano had gotten beyond where he could take me.

"You need Louise O'Connor, and she needs you," Maxwell said, and I immediately resisted, saying this wasn't a good time at home to make another change, and couldn't admit the kinship to Lou's name bothered me.

"She's my way out," Lou said, and went on to talk about how Eileen would often let her have a beer.

"Give me a cigarette, Ryan," she said, pushing against his shoulder.

Lou said they were planning to raise her two kids together.

The lighting reminded me of school, with long overhead bars that made all of us look sick. There was one overblown glass chandelier with fake candles and plastic wicks that suggested a drip, and I kept staring at it to avoid the floor littered with various articles of clothing and overturned Hotwheels with remnants of carpet spun around the tires. I had noticed one was a Porsche, another a Chevrolet, something I wouldn't know except for Steve.

"You can't imagine the mess I live with," Eileen said, and moved to sit next to Lou on the sofa. She went on to explain how much time she spends just picking things up. And laundry: endless, especially without Lou around to help. I looked over at Ryan, and could see he agreed that she also didn't know when to stop talking.

"No, Mam, I can't imagine," Ryan said, and Lou asked if the kids were finally asleep. Mike and Amy had performed non-stop since we had arrived, even throughout the dinner. Eileen kept apologizing for the Salisbury Steak TV dinners, all of us saying how good it was. I made sure to eat all of it as I watched Ryan mix his peas with the still frozen potatoes asking would she mind if he smoked at the table.

Deidre had been right when she said Steve had been building things. Model cars, some from kits, others from pieces of wood. And shelves. Several rows attached to one wall next to his bed. Steve explained there was a hierarchy, "an order to things that make sense when put together in the right place." I said it sounded a lot like the Bach

Inventions I had been practicing. Steve agreed, and decided it was time to tie me to the bed.

Eileen said that she needed some time, some "adult time," and toasted Lou's beer. She placed her wine glass on the sofa table and took Lou's free hand into her own and began to stroke Lou's fingertips.

"I need a moment, boys," Eileen said.

Lou began to gesture with raised eyebrows.

Ryan nodded and walked over to the front of my chair, saying we would wait in the car.

TEN

Deidre reached inside the box and took out a folder of newspaper clippings, a few smaller ones falling onto the kitchen table. I reached over and picked up a small square no bigger than a cracker.

Local Pianists Win State Competition

Published June 1, 1979

Several area musicians from the area are richer today in terms of recognition of their efforts and talents by the Tennessee Music Teachers Association. Top honors go to Kym Doherty of Milton Hill, student of Louise O'Connor, who will represent the state in the high school regional division.

"Where'd you get this?"

Deidre didn't answer me, just took some other clippings and arranged them in a collage facing my place at the table. I picked up another one.

Milton Hill Grad Wins Scholarship

Another.

UT Music Student to Perform Recital

I held it up and waited.

"They were in the box with the rest of Steve's things."

I put the clipping back onto the table.

"I don't understand."

"I know," Deidre said. "I didn't know he was collecting them, either."

I knew it wasn't proper to ask, but I had to know what had happened to Steve.

Deidre ignored me and said Steve had moved somewhere outside of Atlanta after his marriage, but she had never been down there, had never been invited. . As I had discovered, Tom was also in Atlanta, but they didn't talk anymore. As far as Deidre knew, Steve had stopped talking to Tom years before.

"Tom and you, was it true?"

Deidre had decided to go there. I knew we had to.

"Listen, Deidre," I started.

Before I could go on, Deidre waved her hand to say, forget it, and asked wasn't it strange, and not to mean anything by it, how many on our small street ended up being, you know, homosexual. Was that the right word these days? And what were the odds of that?

There was formality in her speech of it: *homosexual*. No. That wasn't it. There was something else behind it. Someone had accused me of speaking to them at work this way once, and I had to come home and look it up and what I found I wasn't too happy about since there was likely some truth in it since I didn't much like this person. *Vitriolic*.

"Me and Kym," I said, ignoring her question. "OK, and now we know about Tom, but that's about right." Wasn't it ten percent? I suggested we add up everyone, do the math. Because I couldn't help myself, I did say, trying to refer to this in a general way,

that as far as the right word, it didn't matter which one a person used, it was what was behind it. People didn't need to say anything because you could see it on them, like fancy clothes that didn't wear right on a person. Besides, just add up all the words men use to describe women, especially when they are angry.

"But do it your head, because I don't want to hear them," I said.

"You forgot Randy."

I asked her, was she speculating, or did she know this for sure?

"Eileen."

Oh dear. I mumbled something about a mistake, that I hadn't told the whole truth on that one, hoping to leave it at that. I had never told Kym the whole of it, either, but now wondered if that had been the right thing. At the time, I believed it was all I had, this power that had arrived inside me after I had announced my sex, especially after I attached it to this woman, not just another teenager. I can still hear Eileen saying how flattered she was, but that I was just a girl, that I should save myself by loving myself more first, that I should know this was who I was, that this was the kind of life that I wanted. On and on. I didn't see her after that. Not until I had met Ryan, and needed to re-establish myself.

"And, Steve," Deidre said.

"Wait," I said, holding my hand in the air. "I thought he was married. You said. A serious, really pretty girl from the high school."

Deidre gathered up the clippings and put them back inside the folder, and carried the empty plates and cheese over to the sink.

"It. Doesn't. Mean. Anything," Deidre said, and started to sit back down, but instead pushed the top of the chair hard and began to comb her fingers through her hair. Her eyes began to fill up, but I decided to wait.

"I'll be right back," Deidre said, and opened the door next to the living room.

I waited until I heard her footsteps move further away, and then moved to the open doorway and leaned in. I had figured right: it was the den, with a slider door that faced the backyard. The vertical blinds across the slider were open, the reflection from the afternoon sun creating shadow slats on everything. I immediately liked it, a nice place to sit and think, smoke a cigarette, the diffusion of the sunlight just right for a nap. God, wouldn't a Winston be nice right about now. But I didn't want to push things. Things were happening, but still, no sign of it, which left only the bedrooms on the other end. Most people didn't keep pianos in their bedroom. (Kym did).

I walked over to the slider and pulled back one of the blinds. Deidre's yard looked a lot like her garage: neat, and with nothing in it. The grass reminded me of the green velvet blanket I keep on my bed for Bullet to nestle and dig around in.

Green here in Tennessee was different, coming from the rich soil clay, the same color as a dark red brick. I remembered Ron explaining this soil business as we planted the first and only garden in the back yard the summer before Jessy was born. Kym complained the whole time about getting the wet mud under his fingernails, stopping ever so often to dig it out, Ron laughing at his *prissybutt*: I hated when he called him that. The sweet corn shot up like a house of fire with all of the mid-afternoon thunderstorms that arrived with a menace and then left a stickiness in the air that felt like cotton balls stuck

on the skin. Every two or three days, I would go out and pick a fresh tomato straight off the vine and eat it, just like some do an apple or a pear. Now Jude brings them home from Kroger, and they look like deformed substitutions or worse, waxed to extend their life in the produce aisles. I do wish they could find a wax for my body.

I had never wanted to move from Tennessee, the trip to Georgia was supposed to be temporary, something I had done because I couldn't follow Kym again, especially all the way to California. I figured he knew that, and had always wondered whether that was part of his decision, after my life in Cleveland had failed having followed him with Donna in tow, all of mine and her stuff stuffed into the back of my Plymouth Arrow, to surprise me that he was not in support of it. I convinced myself he would be thrilled to arrive home from his new music school to find me and Donna in his bed, waiting. But this is what he said. He announced, standing at the foot of his bed, his eyes looking at the ceiling, one hand extended out like he was in some ridiculous play, that "Lou's ballast to her life, him (and here he pointed at himself), had moved on, that he was no longer available to her." I did finally admit defeat when Ma-maw suddenly died and I took advantage of the loss to say I needed to return to Milton Hill to offer support and what not to the family. I left Donna in Cleveland.

Los Angeles: I could never be that far from the South, I told Kym, though I've always hated the way Southerners could be about certain things, most especially have never understood the hate for gay people. Yes, I was always out with myself, and proud of it, but there are complex reasons for this, (no, only one: Mother) and I can see this now about myself. But people's reaction has always been unbelievable, their shock and

disgust, it's as if I wear my vagina in the middle of my head. Jesus. Well, yes, He was part of it, too, which I have also never understood, seeing as me and Kym were saved and baptized just like the best of them, right there in the muddy lake with the nasty water.

I never blamed Ma-maw, either. I knew it wasn't her decision, but something changed between us the Sunday she said it would be best for me and Kym to find another church, one closer to home that would be easier for our Momma. I finally pressured Mother enough to admit Ma-maw's prayer group had voted on it, unanimous except for one. They didn't think it appropriate, especially with me so talkative about my *inclinations*. They claimed the preacher had approached them first, who had prayed about it, and that God decided he had no forgiveness for something so unnatural.

I stepped away from the glass and turned around to let my eyes adjust. Deidre was standing at the door that led to the hallway, her hair now pulled away from her face with a couple of barrettes.

"There was nothing wrong with me," Deidre said, and told me to sit down, pointing towards a red armchair draped with a gold throw facing the outdoors. She reached next to it and pulled a wooden stool with a round needlepoint top further into the room and sat down.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said.

No, Deidre said her doctor recommended it for strengthening her lower back. The years at the diner had done quite a number on her, she said.

"They thought it was my mind, all those years. Somehow, they missed it. Early hypothyroidism. Largely, because I wasn't heavy or bloated," Deidre explained.

"Like me," I said, and waved my hand in the air to say forget it.

Deidre thought that part of it was the embarrassment, that people didn't know how to address problems of the mind. But it was more than that.

"Tom was always suspicious of doctors, didn't believe in them. He thought everything could be fixed with prayer." Intense prayer, Deidre said. "It was easy, he would say, you just had to believe, and force Steve and I down on our knees." The hours they had spent kneeling are some of what she remembered most, she said. "Now, they just give me a pill."

I held my hand up, again.

"Believe me, I know. People take pills for everything, and look surprised if you don't." That was the one part of me that was still working fine, my mind, I said, and I didn't need any doctor medicating it, not like Mother who had taken pills for everything.

"But I don't want to talk about her."

"Why not?" Deidre asked.

Still, nothing.

I moved closer to the door and leaned in to put my ear against it.

Silent as a stone sleeping, except Mother had been quiet since going to bed at eight. It was now ten in the morning and I hadn't heard so much as a peep. I worried she had taken one too many pills. And we did finish the bottle of red.

I had finally convinced her to come and visit, to stay awhile, but to tell the truth, I didn't know the shape she was in. She had been to see Jessy, ended up seeing Kym as well, in Milton Hill no less, and told her I didn't want to know that there Kym was, next door to the north just a ways and not telling me that, so I explained to her it was best not to tell me anymore about it, so then she finally brought herself down here, but in all my years, I had never seen her this bad.

And yes, I had *admonished* her. Her fancy word, not mine. I lost control of my mouth there at the end and said some things. Threw my wine glass. Well.

I tapped four times, counting along, and leaned in again: A clearing of the throat. At least she is still there, and moving. (Alive).

It was the name thing. After all this time, why now, I asked, but still wanted to know. Mother said she was tired of holding it in, that she was worn out, and I said, unfortunately, she was a selfish bitch, and that I had to tell Kym, that it was the right thing to do, and she said...

"Hey."

I turned at the sound of Sherry's voice. She was leaving for work.

"She's ok," I said, pointing at Mother's room door.

"I don't care," Sherry said, and walked away.

Mother's thoughts of Sherry were mutual, but then, she had never liked any of my *friends*: she tolerated them, and this was only because I put them right in front of her, often at a meal or unannounced, otherwise Mother would always have an excuse.

And wasn't that it: there had been some pathetic blame for everything. Mother: because your Dad's a drunk, because we were young, consider where we grew up, the ignorance, the religion, no money, both high-school drop outs, too many pills, early pregnancy, jealousy, embarrassment, especially around the educated, fear of being found out, bile from the gut, in your mouth and in the toilet from the fear of not being free of it, choking and swallowing the fear back down.

"His name is Louis," Mother had said, the night before. "And before you ask, I don't know where he is. The last was somewhere in northern Virginia, working for the government."

I dropped my head down and stared at my hands that I seemed to have no control over: they were trembling against each other as I clasped them together trying to make sense of things.

"There is no shame in this family," I said, and stood up.

"I thought you wanted to know. You want to know everything," Mother said, and began to follow me towards the kitchen.

"So that was your way of still having him, marking me."

Mother wanted another glass of wine. Just one more, she said.

"I know it must seem silly, now."

I told her to sit down, pointing at the kitchen table, that she was making me nervous standing right next to me.

"I want to see him."

"I was young and stupid. And no, Lou, you can't see him."

"Why not?"

"Are you that crazy, Lou? He has another family now."

"So."

Mother reached across the table and poured the rest of the wine into her glass. I noticed her lips were trembling like my hands.

"He doesn't want to see you," Mother said in a soft voice. "I'm sorry."

I moved over to the table and slammed both hands down on top of it at the same time.

"How can you say that? It's nothing for you, is it?" I said, raising my voice.

"That's not true," Mother said, and pushed her chair back from the table. She began to stare at her own hands, now.

"It's just, it wouldn't be easy, for any of us."

I pulled a chair back from the table and sat down. It was all starting to make sense, Ron's parents, their exclusion of me. A muffled clicking sound began to make its way into me, and then I realized it was Bullet pacing around on the living room floors: his toenails needed to be cut.

"There's more, isn't there?"

Mother said there was a gift, yes.

"Oh, god," I said.

She said it stayed with her brother's in-laws while he was in the service. Her mother wouldn't allow the piano in their house.

"But listen to me, Lou. You need to understand this, and this is the truth. Ron has always believed the piano was a gift from my brother."

I looked at her, trying again to make sense of it, this mess of Mother's and all of the deceit.

"Kym should know," I said, and started laughing. I couldn't help myself, the insanity.

"He should, too. He is NAMED after it, for God's sake," I said and threw my glass onto the floor.

"Lou, what the hell is going on in there?" Sherry shouted down from the top of the stairs.

"No, Lou. No he shouldn't," Mother said, trying to keep her voice down. "The piano is gone. You have to leave it, all of it. Lou, are you listening to me?"

Dad's response this time: because Lou needs to stay home and help your Mother pack.

“Now, hold this,” Dad said, and placed a tackle box on my lap. “And stop asking me that.”

These trips to see my other family, Granny Doherty and Frank, were always with without Lou, and there was always a reason for her not to go.

I spread my legs further apart to balance the box without my hands and reached over and rolled the window down a few inches so the smells of grass and horses could fill the truck. This was one of the highlights of the trip, which actually always surprised me since I had never had an interest in the outdoors, especially now that at school it meant recess and being around boys who wanted to push me into corners or against out of sight walls, poking and stabbing with their fingers. They knew.

After only about ten minutes of carefully named subdivisions, the roads narrowed to two lanes that led mostly through farmland, horse stables, and a few big-name dairies, one I had seen on the milk Mother bought. The closer we got to GD's (I assumed this was her nickname since her husband Frank used it in every sentence, as in Goddamn, GD), the houses got smaller, the yards filled with more junk: used tires lying next to rotting pieces of wood furniture, empty mason jars and cement blocks stacked in random piles with tall grasses growing up around them as if they were now part of the root system.

Even though the drive was only about half an hour, I knew our grandparents were separated by something else unspoken but agreed upon, because never did they meet or move across those few miles to change the situation. We always had separate holidays,

but the bulk of time was spent with Ma-maw, her church, and her house that Lou and I referred to as our haven during the escapes, the place we opened Christmas presents and ate huge amounts of food at Thanksgiving.

The box was like everything else in his Dad's truck: sticky and spotted with grease. I edged forward on the seat to pull out the metal bar sticking into my back and then lay it next to a hammer, a crumpled potato chip bag, and what looked like a turd but was a chunk of dried mud. I wanted to ask about the metal bar, but didn't. These trips were quiet: no questions, no talking. The truck smelled of stale cigarette ashes and sweat. I kept swallowing every few seconds hoping to not throw up. This was my only time with Dad, and I realized we had nothing to say, nothing to talk about, not even the strangeness and separateness, the absence of Lou and Mother in what we were doing.

"Looks a lot like his mother."

I could hear Frank and Dad in the living room. The house was crooked, one side lower and leaning towards the railroad tracks that ran alongside about twelve feet from the edge of the house. There was a sleeping porch on the front of it, enclosed with screens, but no one went out there. It was stacked with what nots, the holes in the screen stuffed with wadded up newspapers to keep the mosquitoes out.

“He’s pretty like her, too.”

“Yeah, Frank,” Dad said. “I hear what you’re saying, but enough.”

Granny D. handed me a tall water glass filled with vanilla ice cream.

“Now let me get you a Co-cola to go with it,” she said, and stepped down the grey stairs onto the enclosed back porch that served as an extended pantry with an old wooden table covered with fresh garden tomatoes and various colored bell peppers waiting for ripeness. Because the stairs were once outside, they had been painted grey many times, the peeling paint now exposing only more grey paint and pieces of embedded grit: flecks of dirt and broken up pieces of gravel.

I squeezed my legs tighter together knowing I needed to go to the bathroom, but didn’t want to use the only one in the corner next to the refrigerator. The door didn’t fit right and wouldn’t close all the way. When someone was using it, anyone in the kitchen could hear everything. I had noticed Granny D. always talking louder and faster to try and hide the sounds coming from in there.

“What about the other one? Luke, is it?”

“We’re moving, Frank. I found us a bigger place.”

Granny D. brought a coffee cup along with the cola and sat down next to me. She poured herself a splash of RC-Cola and then grabbed my left-hand. The roughness of her skin surprised me. I looked down to see her right-hand curling around mine, her palm feeling a touch like the sandpaper Mother had used to remove the blood stains in front of Lou’s room when Snow-White had died earlier in the year. We had just arrived home from school, Lou pissed as ever that she had to deal with the boy-trash on the bus, to find

Mother lying curled up on the floor next to Snow-White. Mother raised her head and pointed at Lou's bedroom door. She was with you at the end, too, she had said. I realized later that she was trying to tell Lou something, but the loss only gave Lou a new beginning to establish her place in the family: she was different, she was mad, and was going to make every one feel that.

Granny D. nudged a folded bill into my hand.

"Granny..."

"No, don't say nothing," she said, motioning with her hand waving back and forth for me to be quiet.

"Frank doesn't know," she said, and moved over to the sink.

I knew Frank had lost his job at the power plant for stumbling into work, "reeking," now Granny's job at the IGA all they had.

"Goddamn, GD, bring us a cold drink in here," Frank said, raising his voice.

"It'll help pay for your music," Granny D whispered as she cracked open an ice tray.

I opened my hand underneath the table and found the ten-dollar bill. My lessons were two-fifty each week, so it would give Mother a month off. And with only three more, I would have another full row of stars, enough to collect the next statue of the great composers. So far I had Beethoven, Mozart, and J.S.Bach and kept them lined up in front of the mirror on top of the piano. I had had my eye on the Tchaikovsky, but another of Mrs. Currier's students had gotten to it first, but was fairly certain she had replaced it by now in the closed cabinet next to her front door. Tchaikovsky had become the most

important to me. Mother had a record of a famous American pianist who had won a contest playing the composer's music in his home country and had later been celebrated with a parade once he returned home. I couldn't imagine being rewarded and cheered for something "selfish" and "fancy...uppity": words Dad had used when Mother wooed and swooned as the music played on the record player. I would sit right in front of the speakers and listen to sounds and emotions I didn't yet understand, but I knew this was what was essential to my survival. There was a sadness in this man's music, but also triumphant, powerful enough to pull me out of my life, and this scared me. Lou's marching around the house, accidentally dropping things and slamming doors, did nothing to interfere with this. Mother's only brother had been sent to Germany for the army and was now training other men for a place called Vietnam. He sent the stereo, a German brand named Grundig, as a gift. Dad said Mother looked like she was having sex with the music.

"I asked about the other one, Luke or Lee, or..."

"It's Lou, Frank," Dad interrupted. "You know her name is Lou."

"Well, funny ass names, Lou, Kym, don't you think?"

"Fay wanted them," Dad said. "Said they were important to her. You know how she is."

"She's pretty, Ron. Fucking pretty."

Deidre said she didn't think she would ever be ready to talk about Steve.

I leaned forward on the edge of the chair and looked down my feet. I said I hadn't been fully honest with her about my reasons for coming, and I needed to tell her, to clear the air.

"I already know," Deidre said. Her smile said it was ok, but there was also a sadness in it. She walked over and stood in front of me, and offered her hand.

"I want to show you something else," Deidre said, and continued to hold my hand as we walked to the doorway.

Early September, the hot and humid evenings of East Tennessee were still holding on, impregnating the air with the aromas of freshly mown grass and sweet pepper bush, and I was hoping both would mask the smell of Steve dried onto to my neck and underneath my chin. Mother and Ron were waiting when I came in, Jessy in Ron's arms, the two about to leave for the farm. Mother needed me "to help get things out the door," but first, there was to be dinner together, all of us. One of my teacher's had recently commented on the importance of the family meal, an "essential component in maintaining healthy bonds," and I had unfortunately mentioned it. I didn't ask about exchanges that

were more confrontational, the kind that took a small chunk out of the kitchen table and left an impression of a parent's steak knife. Always when setting it, I would try to hide this earmark underneath a plate or paper napkin.

"Tell Lou to get in here," Mother said.

Somehow, it had just happened, this 'farm' of Dad's. Ron had made some money, bought some land, and then built a garage onto it. Now the garage had a fireplace, a kitchenette, and a place to sleep for him and Jessy, which was supposed to be OK with all of us. It wasn't. We all knew it wasn't, but it had happened, and now Mother wanted me to find Jessy's lavender sleeping jumper that had "walked out of the laundry basket into the unknown." The plan was to watch the Miss America pageant, one of the contestants to perform her own music written for the piano and it was just a matter of getting things in order: Dad out the door, Lou encouraged back into her room for the night. This was for the best, since this had become the way of things.

I knocked on Lou's locked door, walked quickly through Jessy's room, my parent's former bedroom, and into the small pink bathroom attached to it. I unrolled a few pieces of toilet paper, wet them under the faucet, and began to dab at Steve's dried semen. I put the damp wad into my pant's pocket and leaned closer into the mirror to make sure my eyes weren't splotched from crying. I hadn't meant to, but when Steve unexpectedly slapped the side of my face and then covered my mouth with his hand, I had panicked. "What are you doing?" I had tried asking him, but Steve held on, saying to not say anything, this was our next step.

There had come a point when I had started to need it. I couldn't say I enjoyed what had been happening between us, especially now that Steve had gotten more aggressive in his need to control me, pushing things further, using cut-up t-shirts or towels to tie my hands or sometimes my legs to the bed. Once secured, he would maybe or not get me sexually aroused, but that had also become part of this thing between us. He loved to tease, to get me close to orgasm, and then leave me aching for release while finishing off himself. Something began to change in him: he wanted me, then he didn't.

I took my place, Lou next to me, which faced the den window and Randy's house directly across the street. Dad pulled Jessy's highchair closer to the table, and asked Lou, who was facing him, how things were with BigBoy, Dad's supposed clever name for Ryan after a favorite local restaurant that we never went to. I nervously turned to look at her as she continued to smile and stare at Ron. She reached over and pinched my leg and said she was madly in love. It was exactly what Dad had been hoping for, so that was it: he resumed his attention to Jessy's needs, tying on her bib, rubbing his thumb down the side of one cheek, waiting for her to acknowledge him. I could see the blackness from the tar embedded into his skin and under his nails, and looked over to the door to confirm his shoes were sitting there. Mother didn't care they were the reason we had food and our own roof. Often, she made him take his pants off as well, or shirt if he had not changed it.

At first, Jessy's arrival seemed only to distract Mother's attention further away from Lou, but it became clear that she had been the primary reason for the move. I had heard Mother discussing it with Becky, one of her former office friends who still liked to stop by and have a Coke and smoke Mother's Winstons (she was always "just freshly

out"). Mother was hoping that, now that she had given Ron a member of the family he could finally love, he would back off and give her some room to carve part of her old self back. She wanted to wear bathing suits without Ron insisting she lie at the one corner of the backyard where no one could see her because the storage shed blocked any street view. "Who is going to see me here?" Mother would ask. Apparently, Dad also didn't like her wearing color on her nails or lips if she was going out.

In addition to the farm, Jessy also brought the addition of a larger bedroom for Mother and Ron (though Dad rarely slept there), the space where I began to conduct Beethoven's "Eroica," Gershwin's "Concerto in F," and one of my goals, the Rachmaninoff Second Piano Concerto, a piece I swore to Miss O'Connor I would perform. Mother's brother, stationed somewhere "over there" had sent her the German stereo, and because it was at the back of the house behind Jessy's room, I was able to turn the volume high enough to feel the low bass notes in the piano coming through the carpet. After cueing the violins on the left, the cellos on the right through the opening movement of the Beethoven, I would lie on my back, close my eyes, and for as long as I could, not see or feel Steve controlling me. I wanted to be surrounded by the members of the orchestra, their role to support the piano, but also engage with me. This was the battle I wanted to have.

No one had said anything in several minutes, but I could hear Mother sighing every time Lou released the end of her spoon against her bowl of macaroni and cheese. She wasn't eating, just moving the food around which she knew would get a reaction.

"Your friend, Kym," Lou said, pointing her spoon towards the den window.

Across the street, Randy was facing our house from his bedroom window. He had to be standing on a chair, or his bed if he had moved it, and was wearing only his underwear.

"What the hell is he doing?" Mother asked.

Feeling the question was for me, I looked at Mother, but when I looked back, Randy was gone.

Mother wanted to know when I had seen him last, but Dad interrupted to say leave it, it was nothing but a boy being a boy.

"All the boys I know talk about doing it," Lou said.

"Lou."

I heard the tone in Mother's voice and knew Lou was getting the rise she had been aiming for.

Lou started pointing her spoon at the window again, this time with a rapid arm motion.

"Did you see that?"

Now Randy was outside without underwear and darting from bush to bush in front of his house. Each time he moved, he would wave in my direction.

"I'll be damn, that's the most confound it thing," Dad said, trying not to laugh.

"It isn't funny, Ron." Mother said, pointing towards the window. "Close them."

Randy had taped a note to my bedroom window a day earlier with an arrow pointing towards the ground. He didn't sign it, but I knew after I went outside and found Randy's small vinyl suitcase that he used to store Ruby's used compacts and empty perfume bottles. Inside, I found a single pair of briefs Randy had used to clean himself multiple times.

ELEVEN

Milton Hill

The piano was to the right of the window, the same wall in Steve's bedroom as it had been in Kym's: the lid to the keyboard was closed.

I had forgotten about the mirror across the top, but then remembered Kym never would look into it, was almost superstitious about not seeing himself in it. I also recollect it as being larger, having more of a presence in the room. I let go of Deidre's hand and moved over to stand next to it and raised the lid. The keys seemed more yellow-colored, but all there and not chipped. When he was older and understood better what he had, Kym would brag about the ivory keys, how newer pianos no longer had them. I could still see him when it first came into our house, him sitting in front of it, and running the tips of his small hands up and down the keys without pushing them down. I touched the name pasted above the keys, for a moment thinking they might speak, but closed the lid and held the fallboard closed with my hand.

"I forgot how beautiful it was," I said.

Deidre nodded, the same complicated smile still on her, and handed me a small statue.

I immediately recognized the face from the wood picture in the garage, a name was etched at the base: Chopin.

"The last time I saw one was on top of the piano in Kym's room," Deidre said, and handed me another one: Schubert. The statues were all carefully lined up on a shelf, with six or seven more shelves built onto the same wall, the rest lined with model cars.

"They arrived with Steve's things, like everything else," she said, and nodded at the piano.

I put the statue back, and asked about the rest of the furniture. Where was Steve's bed, his clothes chest? This was stupid, complete nonsense asking this, but I could feel something in this room wasn't right, when it came to me: it was like a museum.

Deidre walked over and shut the bedroom door.

"Wait a minute," I said.

Deidre started to pace in front of the bedroom door, and suddenly began talking about "that day." She kept saying it over and over: "that day, " that "first time." She said it again and again, like a Baptist preacher screaming, and I started to think that maybe she was crazy, but then she switched and started speaking about Tom, saying he said it was the right thing to do, that he had prayed hard about it, and then she opened the bedroom door she had just closed and, for a moment, I was half expecting someone might walk in. She had never spoken of it, Deidre said, had never planned to, believing that it would only have to be the one time. She had hoped she would forget and just get on with her life, but then the piano had arrived, and she had not been able to stop remembering. She thought putting it in here and closing the door the piano would eventually become just

another object in the house, something left over. For a while, it was a blur, and then it wasn't. Tom had talked about *the necessity*, she said, that he had made all of the necessary arrangements.

"I'm so sorry," Deidre said, and went on to say she didn't fully understand at the time.

"See," she said, almost pleading, she truly believed they were all doing the right thing, the "God-fearing cure," as Tom called it.

"But it all backfired, you see. Hell House," Deidre abruptly said, and moved closer to me, pointing. "Do you know what that is?"

What in the hell was she talking about, I said, and pushed her hand away. At some point, I just stopped listening. I moved back to the piano and sat on the bench. I turned to face the front of it, and though there was no music open, I could see Kym's early lesson books, the different colors, red, green, and the repeated faded yellow ones: he always had the most of them. I had tried guitar, perhaps a half a year, but it wasn't for me since I didn't have the discipline for it. I'm not sure how long I sat looking at that ghostly music, but then I realized how quiet it was. I was so tempted to push down a couple of keys, but honestly, I thought the whole thing might explode what with the stuff I was feeling inside. I thought I heard Deidre maybe moving around the kitchen, maybe not, but I was relieved she had finally left me in peace. I walked over to the shelves to look at the other statues. Wagner. Mozart. Mendelssohn. After I went through all fourteen of them, picking them up, touching their carved out faces and carefully prepared hairpieces, I began to study the model cars. None had names, but I recognized a few of the more

obvious: Mustang, Corvette, Dodge Dart, though a different style than the burnt orange one Kym and I had inherited from Mother. That was the problem with the Dart, I remembered telling Carrie: the seat was big enough for us both to lie down side by side. And I was right. That's why we got caught.

I could sense Steve's Mother on the other side of the door, almost feel the leaning of her face closer to hear something, anything, so that she could give herself permission to knock or say something to stop it. But she never did.

Not wanting to be discovered helps one master the art of being quiet. Worse was when Tom was there, since he tended to make as much noise as he could, either with loud talking or militaristic style marching through the house as if to build a sound baffle for what was going on behind the closed door.

At some point, Steve decided he wanted to give me a gift: an offering. Before I could leave, Steve would suddenly be behind me, tapping his fingers fast and hard on my back, saying to take this, shoving it into my hands. The first was a plastic model replica of his Dad's classic dream car, a red Ford Galaxie Skyliner from 1962, and small enough to fit underneath my shirt. As I walked home, my eyes darted around the street: I felt like I had stolen it.

Later, the cars became torn out pages of adult magazines, cartoon-like in the layout, with squares of ten to twelve images per page telling a story. The women were dressed in mostly white and black lingerie, almost always facing away from the man in the captions, backsides suggesting a need for discipline. By the last frame, the women would be tied up to a bed or on the floor with various pieces of furniture providing the anchors for the rope. In one, the front legs of a grand piano became the extension of the woman's own, her hands tied to the back leg together, her mouth gagged with a rag.

Los Angeles

He told Sara it was revenge, his going out that night payback, that it was all Larry's fault Kimball had been put down. The vet had said, "to sleep," but he wasn't going to wake up in a couple of hours, or the next day.

Kym had been dating Larry for about six months when he got the call from Mother saying Rupert had taken a job in Nebraska and that she was going with him. She had been seeing Rupert for about a month longer than he and Larry. Mother said there was not going to be enough room for Kimball, so Kym was going to have to take him back.

"Kimball's the name of a piano," Sara suddenly said.

"Yes, but it was the name of my dog, too," Kym said.

Sara nodded and resumed playing. Kym could see the name recognition was important to her, but he had to keep going.

"We can't do it," Larry said when I asked him. "Besides, I have allergies."

"What is this we? I don't have much choice."

Larry had asked me to move into his condo starting the next month.

"The invitation was for you, Kym, not you and a dog."

I informed him I was going to east Tennessee next week, that Kimball was already there waiting. Mother had left him with Jessy.

“For God’s sake, I can’t abandon him there.”

Larry said that my Mother had already done that, and if I came back with Kimball, to cancel the moving van. He needed to be my priority right now.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Larry had said, waving his hands into a circle at the space in front of the windshield. We were driving back from a concert at the Music Center, Larry’s teacher from the university having just played a concert with the LA Phil. Larry was often taking two or more lessons a week to prepare for an audition that was still several years off.

“You’re wasting your time with these, I don’t know, abused animals, when you could be practicing.”

I had continued to spend a couple of afternoons a week at the downtown SPCA walking dogs, a few times taking them for a drive to the beach before they were to be put down.

“And look at this crap,” Larry said, pointing at the smudge marks on the passenger side window left from last week’s hopeless cause.

I shrugged, but really just wanted to push Larry out of the car.

Larry suggested I may have my priorities out of order, the music obviously not so prevalent.

Music had always seemed to be what connected us, especially in the beginning. But lately, the silences had started to become longer and more awkward. I had noticed that since Larry’s decision to “re-ignite” his music career, he thought nothing else of equal importance. (Except the sex).

I spent the entire plane trip from California making lists, how to make it work, why it wouldn't. I called Mother from Tennessee and begged her to reconsider.

"I will drive him to you in Nebraska, hand delivered."

Rupert had told her if she brought Kimball into their "new life," that she could go back to Tennessee, to her pee-stained oriental rugs and permanently soiled mattress. She said it was my turn now, that she was sorry if it ended my relationship with Larry, but she didn't like him anyway from what she had heard me say about him. I could do better in LA, surely.

"I don't see you have much choice," Jessy said, her arms crossed, her gaze purposely on her six month old son who was sound asleep in a playpen several feet away. I could see her trying not to notice Kimball who was sitting on my lap looking straight at her.

"Mother always said it was good to raise kids around dogs, you know that. God, we must have had four or five strays at one time in the back yard."

"That was before I was born, Kym, and then Dad put an end to that," Jessy said. "Besides, Kimball is almost ten anyway. He doesn't have much life left in him."

I lifted him up and carried him over to the baby's pen and put him in alongside Joseph.

"Mother's right, Kym. This is the best thing for everyone. You will get used to it."

I sat down on the floor next to the playpen, my legs feeling suddenly weak, and stuck a couple of my fingers into the netting. Kimball started licking them.

“So this is what we do now, is it? How did this become the fucking solution?” I shouted, waking up Joe, and watched as Kimball began to lick the crying baby’s face.

I had spent about an hour sitting at the bar nursing a glass of wine and then had four more before finally leaving, the bartender new and shaking his head as I almost fell onto the floor while pushing the barstool back. I was obviously too drunk to pick someone up and then try to have revenge-fulfilling sex on top of it.

I had driven about two blocks down Colorado Boulevard when I saw numerous flashing lights through the rearview mirror. A Pasadena police car drove quickly in front of me and slowed down so I eventually had to stop in the lane since there were cars parked to the right side. The policewoman wanted to know why I was out so late, didn’t I know what was going on. A curfew had been in place for the last several hours since the riots had erupted. A black man had been beaten by several police and the city of LA was alive with fires and hate. I heard one of her partners saying something about a fucking nigger, not a black man, and she quickly changed the topic to getting me home. Would I like an escort? I knew they could smell the liquor on me, but figured their work for the night was much bigger than some drunken gay boy. I said I would be fine to get home, I only lived a few miles from there.

I had stopped two blocks later when the Corvette pulled up along side of me. The guy smiled and began to nod as he looked back and forth to his lap and then eventually rolled down his window and asked me to follow him.

I wasn’t initially that shocked when the man realized that I was not some hot girl that had followed him home. I had let my hair get long, largely because I knew Larry

hated it, and had discovered that my full lips and round face without a lot of facial hair could afford me both humiliating and extremely erotic experiences. But this guy was freaking out; he kept saying he didn't know what the fuck to do.

"No problem, I can just leave," I said, holding my hands in the air getting more nervous. "It never happened, nothing happened, so no worries," I said holding on to the arm of the sofa as I stood up too fast and got a bit dizzy.

The guy said fuck no, to sit the fuck down. He was going to call his roommate, get some advice. I asked for a glass of water and the guy said I had had enough to drink, period, now shut the hell up. I sat kicking my leg back and forth watching the clock above the fireplace mantel. I finally uncrossed them and put both feet firmly on the floor to steady myself. For at least fifteen minutes I would have sworn there were two clocks. Plus, I needed to be ready, for what, I wasn't sure. A half hour later the guy's roommate arrived complaining about the roadblocks set up all over. By this point, I was hating Larry less and myself more, convinced I deserved this mess I was in. But maybe it could turn out be fun. Kinky. I had never had a three-way before, had always been judgmental of the idea. I always told Larry I didn't want to share him when he asked.

First they tied me up on the bed using some twine Corvette found in his home office. I wondered what he did, but didn't ask. The second guy was a lawyer for Universal, kept saying he had an early meeting with a client, "another fucking star problem," he said while holding my right leg down so Corvette could tie it to the post.

I started to relax as I listened to Lawyer talk, and then started to wonder if I could later convince them to pay me and chuckled quietly; convince a lawyer to pay me. Hah. The booze had me thinking crazy shit.

They hit me several times with a belt before Corvette got bored and said he wanted the real thing. Lawyer was going to have to untie my legs but hold them back over my head. The faggot wanted to have sex, real fucking, then he was going to give me a real cunt to fuck with. Lawyer said, "use your fingers first so he doesn't bleed too much." Corvette said he wasn't sticking his hand up a shithole and told Lawyer to get his hammer, the one with the rubber handle. Lawyer asked him what the hell was he doing and he said to just get it.

I tried to focus on something, anything, remembered that Mother had once knocked out Dad with a hammer when he came home drunk and made the mistake of trying his hell raising with her. When Dad woke up several hours later, he used it to knock several large holes in the living room plaster. I could still feel the chalky inside of the wall as I stuck my hand into one, Mother yelling at me to get my hand out of there.

I felt the guy shoving it in and my skin tearing apart. I could feel something that had been inside of me running slowly down the backs of my legs toward the bed.

"Damn, Stop! There's not enough room in him!" Lawyer shouted, but Corvette kept pushing until I felt hot liquid erupt from my throat.

Using the palms of her hands, Sara began to forcefully slam down clusters of keys all over the keyboard. She finally stopped, but continued to hold down a group with one hand. The sound continued to ring in the space around them when he saw himself there,

sitting at the old upright, again, banging away to block the noises from the kitchen, his parent's bedroom, wherever they were coming from. Sara finally put her left hand onto her lap and began to rub her leg slowly, forward and back. Kym wondered if he should apologize, perhaps he had said too much, revealed personal things that were better left unsaid, but Sara moved her left hand back to keys and began to play white key thirds, C and E, D and F, E and G, and continued upward quietly. Kym sat back further in the chair and began to nod, began to listen.

At first, it was nothing, just two notes together. But yet, they worked. They didn't fight each other. There was a sense of peace, this resolution without the dissonance. He looked at Sara's profile and could see the calm acceptance: she had somehow found a way to manage all of it, what he had said, but also what was in her. He was to respect that by letting her discover the music her own way.

By the end of her lesson, they had each found an audience. They had entered an unspoken pact.

TWELVE

Dalton, Georgia

Racial differences

Cochran's jury summation compared Fuhrman to Adolf Hitler, a technique that was later criticized by Robert Shapiro and by at least one juror. Cochran called Fuhrman "a genocidal racist, a perjurer, America's worst nightmare and the personification of evil."

Fears grew that race riots would erupt all over Los Angeles if Simpson was convicted of the murders, similar to the 1992 riots following the acquittal of four police officers for beating black motorist Rodney King. As a result, police officers were put on 12-hour shifts, and a line of over 100 police officers on horseback surrounded the L.A. county courthouse on the day of the verdict, in case of rioting by the predominantly African American crowd.

Verdict

At 10:07 a.m. on October 3, 1995, after only four hours of deliberation the previous day, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty.

Evidence

- DNA showed that blood found at the scene of Brown's murder was O.J. Simpson's. The odds it could have come from anyone but Simpson were reported, incorrectly, to be about one in 170 million. The actual odds of the blood being from someone other than Simpson were much lower, and statistically negligible.
- DNA analysis of blood found on a pair of Simpson's socks found in his bedroom identified it as Nicole Brown's. The blood had DNA characteristics matched by approximately only one in 9.7 billion, with odds rising to one out of 21 billion when compiling results of testing done at the two separate DNA laboratories. Each sock had about 20 stains of blood.

After the third time reading it, I asked the driver to pull over. I had hesitated earlier, not wanting to get him upset after insisting he stop at the Shake Shoppe so I could

take care of this other business with Jude. But really, it was because I needed something else to think about and had now gone through almost half of the box of taffy barely an hour into the drive. The driver said he would stop at the next rest area, in about twenty minutes. I leaned my head toward my knees, and took a deep breath. I could hold this thing, I just had to stop thinking.

Both of us standing with one foot on either side of the front door, I had finally asked, and wasn't surprised by Deidre's no. Nothing else. No explanation, nothing. But I didn't need it. I knew we had both invested a piece of ourselves into the piano, this object that didn't belong to either one of us, but I would swear on my life, and may the Lord strike me down here on this spot if Deidre didn't sense it as well, but something was emanating from it: a false hope, or a possibility, perhaps, that neither of us could have: peace with the past, or better, a re-construction of it.

“Here, Lou, I hope this can explain things better for you,” Deidre said, and slid the folded pages between my hand and my cane.

“How desperate we all got,” she added, and walked away, leaving me to close her front door.

I took the pages from the pocket attached to the back of the passenger seat, and unfolded them.

Hell Houses:

A type of haunted house made up of a sequence of staged scenarios created to create terror and provoke a response from the paying individual, the final scene typically a portrayal of heaven. It is here that the visitor is asked to repent their sins, to trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to accept his salvation.

Hell Houses are often disguised to resemble a conventional secular haunted house, the customer only realizing the religious theme after they have experienced several scenes.

Hell Houses were created as a type of evangelistic technique, primarily used by hundreds of fundamentalist and other evangelical churches in North America, partly to proselytize the public and to spread particular conservative Christian beliefs, such as:

- *Abortion kills human persons.

- *Sexual orientation is a matter of choice, is changeable, and that God despises same-sex behavior.

- *Everyone not saved will go to Hell and will be eternally tortured without hope or mercy of release.

Some of the regular scenarios include:

- *A person being sacrificed during a Satanic ritual.

- *A woman undergoing a late-term abortion, with screaming and lots of blood.

- *Gays and lesbians being tortured in hell for eternity because of their same-sex behavior.

Hell Houses became more popular in the 1970's with the enthusiastic support of Reverend Jerry Fallwell, and was carried forward by others such as Keenan Roberts who began to sell "Hell House Outreach" kits to other churches. A few excerpts from the manual include:

- *"Pieces of meat placed in a glass bowl to look like pieces of a baby...purchase a meat product that closely resembles pieces of a baby."

- *"Theatrical blood. Because a large amount of blood is used in this scene and in others, someone should be responsible for mixing a vat of it each evening..."

"Pull over. I can't make it."

The driver succeeded in getting us onto the shoulder, the car almost stopped, when I got the door open and began to vomit onto the roadside gravel.

"Damn. Mam, are you all right?"

I patted around and found my cane. I tried to keep my head leaning outside, and put the cane on the floor in front of the seat and pushed my body further out the door. I managed to get both feet on to the gravel but knew better than to stand up. I asked the

driver if he had a tissue I could borrow. Holding one hand up in front of my mouth hoping he wouldn't see. I could feel wet running down one side.

The driver came around from the outside and held out a box of Kleenex. I pulled out one, then another, and wiped off my chin and lips. I wadded the tissues into my hand and tried to stand up, but was too weak. I asked him if he had any water. The driver nodded, removed the keys from his front pocket, and pushed the button to release the trunk. After a moment, he came back untwisting the top of a plastic bottle, and handed it to me. I took a small sip and handed it back.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't mention it," he said, and asked me if I was cold. I could feel my body shaking. I needed to get control over myself.

I said I was ok.

"I just want to be still a few minutes."

The driver nodded and walked to the back and closed the trunk.

No, the blue oxford shirt wasn't really enough, especially with the jeans. I could feel the dampness on my skin, and that particular something in the air, there was a movement in it that said it was going to rain.

But I had had Jude iron them, wanting to look more put together and classy, with classic clothing.

But, how silly. How disastrous, really. Deidre wouldn't have noticed had I worn an orange shirt and black pants. Honestly, I could have worn a petticoat: Deidre didn't notice herself.

I turned and pushed the cane back into the floor, got myself situated to face the front of the car, picked up the photocopies, and began to tear them up. I folded them, tore again, and continued until I my hands started aching. It was all around me. Then it started happening again, this thing inside of me wanting to come up, so I raised both hands and placed my fingertips over my eyelids.

"Oh, God."

Steve and Kym. Right in front of me, me next door at Eileen's believing I was more of a grown woman than I was, reaching out to a grown woman so I could. So you could what? Prove yourself. Wasn't that it? Prove yourself worthy. What would my life have been like had I known?

"Liar."

I put the nail of my right thumb into my mouth and ripped it across with my front teeth.

"Liar."

The driver leaned his head inside the front of the car. "Mam?"

I explained to the driver I had known about them. See? Well, not exactly, ok, I did not no everything, but I had known *something*. See, I had done what I did afterwards as a kind of distraction.

I pointed at the driver.

"Besides, Tom had deserved it."

The driver got back in the car and turned to face me. I could see him looking at the jumble of papers, but thankfully, he didn't say anything. He reached across the seat and handed me a black vinyl bag, the kind that hangs from a dashboard button, and asked if we could resume the drive back.

The light in the sky was almost gone, the thick wall of pine trees lining the highway had begun to have this different life in them, a dark presence I dreaded, but didn't know why. I told the driver to hurry. Suddenly, this anxiousness about getting home, about coddling Bullet, and lying on my bed with the weight of old quilts layered on top of me holding me still began to move through me, pushing up against this other smothering thing.

I began to pick up the papers and put them in the bag, glancing at the flashes of light from oncoming cars. I asked the driver to turn up the heat, and crossed my arms, rubbing my hands up and down the tops of them, my body still shivering. I noticed a red streak on my left arm sleeve, likely the blood from my torn up fingernail, and put my hand over it. I could tell my meds were beginning to wear off since my legs were tingling.

I leaned forward and asked how much longer. He said at least another hour, maybe more if we came upon some traffic in Atlanta.

I managed to get a layer of ChapStick onto my bottom lip, and then put my hands back into my lap to try and calm down the shaking.

My lips. Kym's lips: the same, he would say, especially as the two of us aged and they fixed into Mother's identical pout.

Mother hadn't really been a part of that, but why would Deidre lie about such things?

I could see myself lying about it.

But.

The problem. ("Fay knew Tom was taking them.")

The problem was Ron loved Mother enough to kill her instead of losing her.

The problem was Ron's fear made him crazy and turned their love into hate and fear of what he might do to her. That was what Mother had told herself. This was what she had told me. Ron hated her because she was beautiful, because of her love for the beautiful, for art and music, and for dance. He couldn't understand it, it made no sense to him he was so blinded by his jealousy of it, and Kym's identification with the music further ate away at him, another loss he just wouldn't be able to find the energy to fight against,

"...especially after, you know. Your need to be so *yourself*, Lou."

But that's not what happened, is it? What ended up happening, Mother, is that Kym ended up believing he wasn't worth it, but he could serve the art, because, as you always told him, one could never be good enough, perfect enough like the art itself. Like beauty itself. One could always be better, or, someone *different*, someone not normal, could hide in it, so it at least it could give him his life, something he could work for until the end.

The bigger problem, Mother said, was finding someone to love that much that you're willing to kill them, or at least kill what's in them to protect them.

“To protect yourself.”

I began to slap my hands on the back of the driver's seat. I couldn't make it.