

Ghost

by

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PART ONE

Ghost in the Valley

"Tell it again, Wardell."

Kayla stood beside Wardell, watching him wave his flashlight in and out of drawers, over and around the tops and sides of furniture in the otherwise pitch black room. Cobwebs clung to every object, every surface covered in dust. Even though they found those pills, Kayla was bored. This was the third house they'd looted tonight, and she'd already found the one thing of value in the place. A silver ring she slipped on her finger without Wardell noticing. The house was cold. No electricity, no lights and no heat. She didn't care to rob the place. She wasn't after the loot, like with the other places. All she wanted was to hear about the ghost.

"Come on, Wardell. Quit fussing and tell me how it happened."

The pills they took still tasted funky on her tongue. They didn't have water to wash them down with. She ran her tongue against her teeth and watched Wardell kept moving his flashlights over objects like a spotlight.

"You've heard it before," he said. "Why you need to hear it again?"

"Because you only ever tell me parts. Never the whole thing. You get going, then you flip channels when the shit gets good."

"Quiet down."

"When you tell me."

"Enough," Wardell said, brushing her hand off his shoulder.

Kayla hung back while Wardell dug through the desk drawers. He found a little box filled with worn and faded Buffalo nickels. He pocketed the coins, then opened and closed the rest of the drawers. He thumbed through some jewelry in an old wooden box on top, but Kayla'd already nabbed the ring. Wardell pocketed an expensive-looking pen from the desktop. He dropped the

jewelry box into the bag he carried, where he'd already stuffed a few choice albums, a small table-lamp, and a handful of glass figurines.

"Start with the part about the girl," Kayla said. "How she fell in love, but her parents took her away. Then the accident. And the man who disappeared."

Kayla pushed in close beside Wardell, invading his space like she knew he hated. Her head barely reached his armpit. Wardell brushed her off with a sharp elbow.

"You know the story by heart."

"I don't know all of it," Kayla said, steadying herself. "Nothing but the gist."

"You know enough."

"Not about the ghost."

Wardell shone his flashlight around the room, hunting for something he might have overlooked. Something worth more than a couple dollars at the pawn shop. Kayla, ignoring the dull sensation where he'd struck her in the chest, poked Wardell in the back. She wormed her fingers up and down his ribcage.

"Come on, old man," she said. "Can't you stop thinking about money long enough to please your whore?"

Wardell knocked her away, harder this time, turning his back as he walked around the desk. Kayla fell against the desktop, smiling despite the pain. She knew she was testing his limits. Wardell liked to shut up and focus on something simple when he was jonesing. Kayla liked to talk. But Kayla, more than anything, hated being kept in the dark.

"It ain't fair to keep things from me, Wardell. I don't keep nothing from you."

Kayla moved the tip of her flashlight across Wardell's back, spelling out her name between his broad shoulders. He walked to the far wall and started browsing the bookshelves there, beginning with the Z's and working his way backward. She followed him, first with her flashlight, then with her

body. She slid beneath one of his arms, noisily fingering the books Wardell decided to leave on the shelf. The books he chose landed on the desk with a thump.

“You gonna read all those, Wardell?”

“Gonna sell em,” he said.

Kayla stopped touching all the books he didn't take, and picked up a book he'd chosen. She flipped through it quick, scanning her flashlight across its many pages, then set it back on the desk. She glanced over the covers of the other books, all brown and black with no pictures.

“How you know which are worth something?”

“By the way they look,” Wardell said.

They didn't look like much to her. She hopped around to the other side of Wardell and started looking at the books ahead of him. She pulled one at random from the shelf and shone her flashlight on the cover. It was brown and smooth, except for a central image engraved in the faded cloth. She couldn't make out the design, but she felt against her fingertips several raised lines woven around each other to form some sort of spiral. She held the book up for Wardell to see.

“How about this one?” she asked.

Wardell took the book from her. He shone his flashlight on the spine, then flipped to the title page. He shrugged, then handed the book back to her.

“Put it on the desk,” he said.

Kayla started flipping through the book instead. She sat on the edge of the desk, brushing aside the other volumes. A few fell on the floor, and with each thud Wardell shook his head. Kayla sat with her legs spread apart, her bare knees poking out from beneath her skirt like two ends of a pair of tongs. She put her nose to the spine and inhaled.

"It smells funny."

Wardell didn't pay attention. So she leaned back and stretched a leg in front of her, slid a foot up the back of Wardell's calf. He tried to ignore her, but his knee buckled slightly when she rubbed her foot behind it.

"Can you tell about a book the way you can tell about a whore?" she asked him.

He ignored her, even with her foot rising higher up his leg.

"Tell me about the ghost, Wardell. I mean it."

Wardell was running out of patience. She could see it in the way his shoulders tensed. He reached behind and smacked her foot away.

"Damn, K!" he said. "Can't you see I'm concentrating?"

Then he smacked his hip. The sound of the buffalo nickels that jingled in his pocket reminded her of the snap of a dog's leash. Kayla watched his fingers twitch.

"When you first saw me," she continued, sliding her foot back between his thighs, "Did you say, now there's a book worth reading? Did you want to thumb through me, stick your nose inside?"

Wardell set the flashlight on a shelf and clenched one hand into a fist. The muscles in his forearms quivered, but after a few seconds he stretched his fingers out, long and smooth, and slid them in his pocket. She heard him playing with the coins.

"I wish we had more dope," Kayla said.

Wardell threw a few more dusty hardcovers onto the desk beside her, then grabbed the flashlight and continued to judge the titles of the books. Kayla moved her foot this way and that between his thighs. She opened and closed to different sections of *Walden*. Every page was dense with words. Big words, too. Words she recognized but couldn't tell the meaning of. She flipped to the title page.

"*Walden; or, Life in the Woods*," she said. "Ha! Walden. That's almost like Wardell!"

With one shoe wedged between his thighs, Kayla kicked her other toe against Wardell's bottom. His once round and muscular buttocks were flat and weak, like two half gallons of milk.

She'd once seen him squat and toss a 150 pound dog over the fence like it were nothing more than a rolled up sleeping back. He still had strength left, but it was dwindling.

"What do you say, Wardell? Wanna move in here with me, have our own little life in the woods? Cut down trees and hunt bears and shit? Let me read this book to you, maybe it'll tell us how."

She noticed next to the title page a blank page where someone had written a list of names, each in different colored ink. Some of the writing was in cursive, but the names were printed in capital letters. She read aloud to bother Wardell as much as possible.

"‘JAMES JOHN FENIMORE WEBB.’" she said, skipping along. "Something or other ‘JAMES JOSEPH FENNIMORE WEBB.’"

She slid her foot closer to Wardell's crotch. His leg began to quiver, shaking faster with every word she read. He still refused to acknowledge her. She spoke louder.

"Something or other ‘JAMES JOHN JACKSON WEBB.’" she continued. "Something or other ‘JAMES JACKSON JOHN WEBB.’" Something or other -- "

She stopped when she got to the end of the list.

"There's one crossed off," she said, dropping her foot from Wardell's ass and jumping off the desk. "Try and see if you can read it for me."

She shoved the book in front of Wardell, pressing it so close to his face that she knocked his thick purple glasses off the bridge of his nose. Wardell snarled as he turned around, grabbed the book she held and threw it over the desk where it flew through the doorway and disappeared into the darkness of the next room. Kayla heard it skid to a halt somewhere in the distance. She tried not to laugh as Wardell took her by the hair.

"Damn it, K," he snarled. "First you smoke my dope. Then you beg me to come all the way out her, in the middle of nowhere. But that ain't enough for you. You gotta keep on pushing buttons, asking question after question, wanting more and never satisfied with what you got."

Wardell clenched his fists inside Kayla's long blonde curls until her skin pulled tight, stung along the back of her neck. Wardell squeezed her until her eyes started to water, and when she finally looked away from him, he released. She was still smiling, and he sighed into her face. She closed her eyes and exposed the tan underside of her neck. She waited, but Wardell pulled his fingers from her hair and turned away. He pushed her aside and headed for the door. She opened her eyes again and tossed the beam of her flashlight on his back. Then he was gone.

Kayla watched the back glow of Wardell's flashlight lessen in the doorway, until he'd gone too far down the hall for his light to reach her. She turned her own flashlight off and stood in total darkness. She listened to the rain, heard it patter on the roof like a dog's nails on linoleum. She sat back on the desk for a few minutes, switching her flashlight on and off, watching the caps of her Portobello knees appear and disappear. She felt much colder by herself, and noticed her legs were goosepimpled. She wished Wardell hadn't made her wear this skirt. He always wanted her to be prepared, show some skin. Her skin was white as soap. Dry, too. She scratched the chewed up nails of her hand along the inside of her thigh, and watched as the red streaks slowly turned to pink.

Thunder clapped outside. She shrugged, then hopped off the desk, following the light of her flashlight toward the room where Wardell had tossed the book. But as soon as she stepped into the hall, someone grabbed her from behind, heavy arms wrapping around her own and lifting her off the ground. She swatted at her chest, stifling a scream that rose in her throat like a hiccup.

"Hands off my tits, Wardell!"

She shined her flashlight on the arms that wrapped around her. She was right, it was Wardell. She could tell by the color of his hands, the pink markings on his otherwise oil-black exterior.

"Put me down, Wardell. Don't fool with me."

"Hush," he whispered in her ear.

He held her in the air and dragged her back inside the study, with less effort than it took him to move the carcass of a dog. She felt like a stamp to his body's envelope. Once inside the room, he

set her on her feet again. She spun to face him, about to shout, but he put a finger to his lips. His nose was running, and a bead of snot hovered just above the point of his fingernail. It shimmered in the light of the flashlight, dangling there for a moment like the jewel on the ring she stole, before it spread out across his nail when he moved his lips.

“Shush,” Wardell said to her. “I just saw a Ghost.”

He put a hand on her shoulder, but she brushed him off with a shrug.

“You getting high already? Shit, some addict you are. Seeing extraordinary shit after taking a few lousy pills.”

She had to admit, though, that things were getting a bit dreamlike for her, as well. She didn't want Wardell to know, so she tried to leave the room before she started acting loopy. But Wardell lassoed an arm around her waist and drew her back. He covered her mouth with the sweaty palm of his free hand.

Kayla chewed at his clasped fingers, "Lemme go!"

She struggled for a moment until her teeth found his thumb. He let go of her face, but kept hold around her waist. When she pushed against his arms, his biceps hardened like inflating basketballs. Sometimes she forgot how strong he really was. She stopped struggling.

“What’s happening, Wardell?” she whispered.

His looked pale in her flashlight, like someone had thrown a handful of dust in his face.

“I told you,” he said. "A ghost."

The corners of the room grew darker. The objects in the room were happy to know her.

"A ghost, or *the* ghost?" she blinked. "The one from the story?"

"Don't talk so loud. Look."

He poked his head around the corner and pointed toward an open door at the opposite end of the hall. Kayla peeked around the corner, resting her head beneath the helmet of his armpit. She noticed for the first time what they'd failed to notice upon entering the house. A dim light emanating

from the room at the end of the hall. She looked up at Wardell, who was looking down at her, watching to see what reaction she would have. She frowned.

"You're pranking me, ain't you?"

She slid out from beneath his shoulder and slipped into the hall. Wardell reached for her but missed. She moved quick, like when she needed to out-manuever a dog. But the hall was long and dark and the floor felt uneven, so by the time she reached the other end, just before the lit-up door, Wardell had caught up to her. She felt his breath on the back of her neck. He put a hand on her shoulder,

"I wanna see for myself," she said. "Don't hold me back or I'll scream."

He let her go. She turned the corner and peered into the room. What she saw there surprised her. A ghost, like Wardell said, sitting on a chair behind the kitchen table. The ghost's head was bowed in front of a candle, his face invisible behind great lengths of matted hair. The ghost sat motionless, illuminated by the eerie glow of the candle. A beard, as long or longer than his hair, stretched beneath the ghost's neck like a length of tangled fishing wire.

Kayla felt funny. The pills she'd found in the living room were kicking in. Still, the closer she got to the ghost, the less she believed it *was* a ghost. A ghost should float around and act menacing. This thing just slumped at the table without moving. It couldn't be a ghost.

"Nice try, Wardell," she said.

She stepped into the kitchen and walked toward the table. She walked across the kitchen and stood beside the thing, glancing back at Wardell, whose face poked around the doorframe, his eyes as white and wide as marshmallows.

"You find that in a cupboard, Wardell?" she pointed to the candle, laughing. "Thinking you could trick me. Ha! A ghost my ass."

Wardell ducked into the hall. Kayla observed the thing in front of her. It was filthy. Wet, too, dank like a dog who'd gotten loose and come back smelling of the street. She ran her fingertips

over the edge of its head. Human hair, no doubt about it. Rough as tree bark, maybe, matted into dreadlocks. But human hair nonetheless.

“I thought you said this house was empty,” she whispered toward the doorway.

Wardell poked his head into the room.

“Sheriff said so,” he said. “Except for the ghosts.”

Kayla shook her head.

“This ain’t a ghost,” she said. “It’s a man.”

Wardell shook his head.

“I told you what it is. Damn if you don’t believe me.”

Kayla rolled her eyes at him. She wasn’t sure what to do. So she poked the ghost man in the head. Wardell gasped from his place in the doorway. Kayla poked hard enough to tilt the ghost man’s head. It dipped to the side, then tilted back. The man woke up with a huff, and Wardell cried out.

“You’ve angered the spirit!” he ran down the hall, the loose soles of his sneakers flapping.

Kayla took a step back from the table, covering her mouth with her palm to keep from giggling. She watched as the man righted himself and looked around the room. She couldn’t see his face in full. Long, dirty hair and a scraggly beard covered his facial features. His hair was mangy like a dog’s, and in the pale moonlight he seemed gray and brown and crusty, like a tin can someone left out in the rain too long. What she could see of his face made her sad. Scars. Gray and purple. Around the eyes and across each cheek. The man was hideous.

“I know you ain’t a ghost,” she said. “But you sure look like one.”

The man showed no signs of surprise when he turned to find her standing beside him. Kayla saw him head on now, knowing she should be afraid, but not feeling afraid. True, she was in a strange house, in the middle of the valley near the woods. But standing beside this ghost of a man, even as he looked up at her with his half-veiled face, she felt safe. There was something about his

eyes, something kind. She felt comforted by his ugliness. She couldn't describe the feeling if she tried.

The ghost said something she couldn't understand. His voice was deeply timbered, soft but scratchy like an old wool scarf. It wrapped itself around Kayla's ears and made her itch. She scratched her ear holes with her thumbs.

"Let me get a closer look at you," she said.

The man's beard had overgrown in places to mask the spots where no hair grew, spots that were covered in hideous black and purple scars, scars that scrawled across his entire face, not just around his eyes, but over his cheeks and down into his beard, in a thatched pattern, unevenly strewn like broken latticework. The man's scars could almost have been mistaken for tattoos, except for the puffy texture that spread across his face like hives. She reached for his face, and he didn't stop her. She ran her fingers up and down his ruined skin. Each individual scar felt like a worm beneath her fingertips. When she ran her fingers through his beard it felt like she were parting a cluster of fish-hooks. The ring on her middle finger snagged, and she had to rip some of his hairs to get it free.

He didn't wince. He just stared at Kayla, down where she knelt beneath him with her wide eyes. She smiled up at him and his bottom lip raised slightly on one edge, a sign of contact. She noticed the flexing of his hips, the slight adjustment in his pants. She knew the signs, recognized them instantly for what they were. She threw her head to the side, tossing her long, curly hair over her shoulder. In doing so, her shirt fell off her shoulder, revealing the tops of her breasts like two pats of butter. The man looked down into her cleavage.

"Jesus," Kayla laughed. "Even a ghost has his priorities. Looky here now."

She tilted the man's chin toward hers. Her ring caught again in the Brillo of his beard, and this time she had to take it off to unsnare it. She held the ring above the candle so it sparkled like a star. She spoke loudly, hoping her words would cut like scissors through his awful face.

"My name is Kayla James," she said. "I stole this from your desk."

She spun the silver ring around her fingertips, enjoying the way it glistened in the candlelight, as if it were wet. She slid it back on her ring finger and watched the man's expression change. He smiled. She did, too, and felt the familiar dimple punctuate her skin, the center of which funneled into her cheek like water down a drain. The ghost man reached for the dimple like every other man, brushing his thumb across the edge of Kayla's lips. The friction made her neck and shoulders goosepimple.

It was then Wardell came running down the hall. Kayla turned in time to see him charging into the room with a shotgun shaking in his hands. When he saw the man leaning over Kayla, he flexed his arms and puffed out his chest. With a burst of fervor, he stepped forward and cocked the gun. For the moment, standing tall in the moonlight, he looked like a younger, healthier version of himself,

"Get back, K-doll," Wardell said.

He motioned with the tip of the gun, swinging the barrel around in front of him like it were the end of an uncontrollable firehose. Kayla ducked between the ghost man's legs and crawled beneath the chair he sat on.

"Damn, Wardell," she cried out, "I told you don't point guns near me! Get a grip, fool!"

She hit the leg of the table with her foot, and the sudden motion knocked the candle to the floor. The light went out in a splash of wax, and the room went dark. Kayla turned her flashlight on in time to see Wardell raising the gun in the direction of the Ghost, his chest puffed out in anger.

"Forgive us, Lord!" Wardell cried.

Kayla plugged her ears. But nothing happened. No echoing gunfire, no blood trickling down the chair and spilling onto the backs of her bare legs. She poked her head out from beneath the chair and saw Wardell standing in the middle of the room, trying over and over again to pull the trigger. Above her, the man in the chair finally spoke.

"Chamber's empty," he said.

Kayla saw Wardell's bulk deflate at the sound of the man's voice. The muscles on his arms went limp, like he'd just shot a dose of heroin. He cocked the barrel one last time, pulling the trigger to no avail. No explosion, just a clacking sound like snapping teeth. Wardell dropped the gun on the floor, turned, and ran out of the room in a panic. Kayla listened to his footsteps as they echoed down the hall. She heard the front door slam.

Slowly, she crawled out from beneath the table, her palms spread across the spilled wax on the cold linoleum, a texture that felt similar to the man's face.

"Wardell's not himself of late," Kayla said. "I think he's depressed or something. Been acting real strange the last couple months. Don't blame him for trying to kill you. He's protecting me, is all. I've been with him since I was a kid."

She brought herself to her knees and wedged between his legs, pressing her belly against his groin. She leaned in close enough to smell his breath.

"I don't even know your name," she said.

His breath smelled foul, but she didn't pull away. He cleared his throat and spoke.

"*"

Outside, a car horn honked. Kayla jolted upright, pulling away from the ghost man.

"Shit," she said. "Wardell's gonna leave without me. He's done it before, you know!"

She ran to the door, pausing long enough to turn her flashlight on the man once more. He sat motionless, watching her leave.

"Sorry, Ghost," she said. "Some other time."

She winked, blew him a kiss, then turned her flashlight off. She ran down the hall and out the front door, chasing after the car Wardell had already started to pull down the driveway.

A minute passed, a long minute that trickled down his spine like maple syrup. Then, in the distance, Ghost heard a car door slam. He heard the sound of tires squealing. He heard the gravel

kicking up against the side of the house as the car sped off. Another minute later and the car was out of earshot, around the bend in the driveway and heading toward the main road. The house fell silent. The only thing Ghost heard now was the sound of his own breath above the ticking of the clock the girl had brought to life again inside his chest.

*

Ghost went out on the ice to prove a point to Susan Lee. To prove he was brave enough to be her boyfriend. He was 8 years old at the time. He'd been afraid of deep water since forever, and Susan knew it. So she dared him to cross the frozen swim hole. He did, and in the middle ice cracked, and a white line formed around his feet, a perfect circle like with a compass in math class. He tried to step off the broken circle but the disc gave way. His feet sunk into the water and his body followed, up to the neck. He rode the disc of broken ice beneath him like a surfboard. Then the disc slipped and his head submerged.

The last thing he heard was Susan screaming, then the lingering sound of cracking ice. He went underwater. His breath froze in his lungs, the sharp taste of cold water. His body screamed in the cold. Water soaked through his pants, his coat, his boots. There was pain, then sudden numbness. His senses quickly dulled. Everything was muted, silent: his eyes were open, but all he saw was a thick gray veil of cold water. The only sound he heard was the beating of his heart, like a small drum pounding in a closed room. He groped with his hands above his head, but only felt the slick bottom of the ice.

For the first time in his life he realized breathing wasn't just an option. He was drowning in that hole.

And then he felt a pressure on his hand, a dull touch because his hand was numb. Then he felt himself rising. His head bumped the bottom of the ice. Then it scraped along the bottom of the ice and was pulled through the opening of the hole. His cheek sliced open beneath his right eye. When he surfaced and opened his eyes and mouth to the air again, he tasted metal on his tongue. Then he saw his sister, laying on her belly on the ice, stretched across it like a bridge. She wrestled him as best she could from the water. Her snow-white cheeks were cherry red, flushed with danger and with fear. He pulled against her weight, and his body slid from the water like an eel. She dragged his body over the ice. When they reached the shore, his legs were cold and numb and he

could hardly walk. He looked around but Susan was gone, run off because she was afraid. His sister pulled him to his feet, throwing his arm over her shoulder. She ran through the woods with him, holding him up, carrying him when his legs stopped moving. Ghost heard nothing, smelled nothing, and recalled only the sight of his sister's boots kicking through the snow. His eyes closed, then opened, then closed again. His head felt buried inside itself.

Everything slowed down, like the world was running out of batteries.

By the time his sister collapsed with him on the porch, his body was covered in blood from the cut on his cheek. His sister screamed and his father ran onto the porch, hoisted Ghost into his arms and carried him to the bathroom where his mother drew a warm bath. They plunged him into the water and it hurt, tingled like his entire body was asleep. They made him dunk his head and he screamed. The water turned cherry red with blood, like his sister's cheeks in the cold by the creek. He didn't remember anything after that.

He was in bed for a week. His sister stayed with him as often as she could. She made jokes about laying flowers on his grave, referring to the creek by the bridge where the hole had frozen over with new ice. They kept a running joke about the grave for years, with Susan joining in, until eventually the joke wore off and the creek became just a creek again. The only sign to remind them of that day was the thin white scar that ran horizontally across Ghost's cheek, a sign that he was brave enough to risk everything for Susan, that he was worthy of her love. Above all, a sign that she, with her beautiful red hair and her dimpled cheek, belonged to him.

Bridge

A long time ago in this valley General Washington ordered the construction of a road. The road cut between the northern convergence of the Western and the Eastern Mountains, now an area of the National Forest. At the time, the road was the only direct access to the valley. General Washington planned to use the valley as a fort, naturally fortified on all sides by the convergence of three mountains at the head of the Massaneutten mountain range. It was planned, strategically, as a last resort, a worst case scenario hold-out meant to serve as the General's last stand. But the fort was never needed, and over the next two centuries the valley became the agricultural center of the wider region. Eventually, only three families remained as the largest land owners in the valley: the Haydens, the Lees, and, between the two, Ghost's family.

Two hundred and thirty some years after the Valley was founded, Ghost drove a rusted Saab hatchback across the state line, heading south on 81, then turning East on Route 66. The sun had begun to set over the Appalachian mountains in the West, brilliant pinks and purples in his rearview mirror. Ahead of him, dark clouds moved Westward from the East. When he reached the River, a few miles out of the nearest city, he turned right onto Washington's Pass, entering the Valley from the North, with National Forests on either side of the road. When he came through the slit between the mountains, the world was gray. The clouds drew across the Valley like a tarp. Only a sliver of sunset remained above the Western Mountain. Rain sprinkled the windshield of his car, and a dense fog that had formed above the peaks of the mountain range began to descend down each slope, sliding toward the center of the Valley like a phantom avalanche.

Ghost drove south on Washington's Pass, winding alongside the river that split the Valley down the middle. He knew this road, this place, by heart. The river to his left, one mile of farmland on either side of it, until the forests sloped into the bordering mountains. The road ran twenty miles south until it slipped around the southern mountain and filtered out of the Valley into Luray. Nothing

appeared to have changed since Ghost was gone. He passed the Barlow farm, acres upon acre of pastureland partially-covered with unmelted February snow, and in the distance he saw the familiar gangs of cattle in the fields, huddled together for warmth. The air was warm but the rain was cold, and the confused earth steamed beneath the cows' thick flanks. Ghost observed what looked like spectral blankets wrapping the animals' legs.

The fog rose quickly, consuming the Valley in a matter of minutes. Ghost pushed on through the thick of it, navigating the curves of the road by rote. The Saab floated through the cotton air. Ghost turned his high beams on, then off, as more light proved useless. It only reflected the fog right back at him, white on white.

Ghost slowed to a near halt as he reached the edge of the Barlow farm, where he turned down the old dirt access road and entered Hayden territory. The access road, once crossing the bridge, led directly east to Nat Hayden's farm, then south to Ghost's property. Then further south to the Lees. The road was the only route connecting the three properties to the rest of the Valley and beyond, the bridge the only passage over the river. As Ghost turned, he disappeared beneath a canopy of overhanging trees, surrounded on all sides by fog and shadowed from above by barren tree limbs. In a matter of moments, Ghost reached the edge of the bridge and stopped the car. There were no railings on the bridge. The precipitation joined with the fog and Ghost could hardly see where the bridge left off and the water began. He couldn't see the river, but he could hear it rushing northward beneath the bridge.

Ghost stared across the narrow strip of concrete, unable to cross. He kept his foot on the clutch, his hand hovering readily above the stick shift. His hands were shaking. The sound of the river brought back memories. The sight of the bridge, though barely visible in the fog, caused his heart to skip like the stones he and his sister used to skip across the water. Memories stuck in his throat like gunpowder packed into shells. He reached into the glove box, removed a plastic bottle

filled with pills, and swallowed three small capsules dry. The process of taking the pills was usually enough to calm his nerves. But not this time. He couldn't bring himself to put the car in gear.

Rain tapped the hood of his car like impatient fingers. He thought of his sister, his parents. He thought of Susan Lee. All of it. The night his parents died. The briefcase filled with cash. The gunshot. Everything was just as vivid as the night he left, seven years ago. He could picture all their faces, hear the sounds of their voice, remember what they said as if he'd written the script. He remembered the final argument with his father like it had happened yesterday. He could smell his mother's bread in the oven, see her face turn to him as he stormed out the door. He could hear his sister's voice as she said his name one final time. No matter how hard he tried to escape, no matter where he went or what he did, this place and all that happened here followed, haunting him like a ghost.

Enough. He held his breath and shoved the car in gear. He pressed the gas as hard as he could without skidding off the road. The fog distorted everything, flouing the world in whiteout. He drove through it like he used to walk through fresh linens hung on his mother's clothesline. The fog enveloped him. He slid across the bridge as through a cloud.

But then, in the middle of the bridge, a large brown object broke the veil.

Ghost hit the brakes hard and the car jerked to a halt. The object rose in front of him. A ghost, perhaps, of his naked hirsute father, or his mother wrapped in Nana's brown afghan. A river goddess come to claim him like she'd done his parents. But no.

The object was a fat brown cow. It stared at him through the windshield, blocking his path. Ghost honked the horn. But the animal did not move. He tried inching the car forward, flashing his lights, but the cow wouldn't budge. Ghost weighed his options, but there were none. The bridge wasn't wide enough to drive around the cow, and it was too foggy to safely run the car in reverse. He was stuck in the middle of the bridge.

Though he couldn't see it, Ghost could hear the river rushing beneath him. Bad memories crept up his spine like spiders. He dropped another handful of pills down his throat, swallowing hard. He let go of the leg and cranked the emergency brake. There was no other way around this. So he kicked open the door and stepped onto the surface of the bridge. The pavement was slick. Cold rain slapped his forehead. Bits of sleet collected in his hair and beard. The bridge was so narrow his car door swung over the edge, and he held onto it to be sure he wouldn't slip and fall into the river. He closed the door, and with his fingertips clinging to the slippery roof of the Saab he slowly inched his way forward, until he was able to slide in front of the car. He sat back on the hood for a moment, collecting himself. The cow was a few feet ahead of him, breathing heavily. Ghost took a deep breath and stepped into the whiteness.

As he came closer to the beast, Ghost couldn't help but recall a story his sister told him when he was a child, how if you lifted the ear of a cow and peered inside, you'd see a spirit. With everything so eerie white around him, Ghost felt like he was living inside the ear of a cow. That if he lifted the flap on this cow and peered inside, he'd only see himself, lost inside the madness of the aleph's skull. But that was nonsense, and he knew it. He lifted a hand to the animal's snout. It acknowledged his being there with a loud huff, and a nervous resettling of its weight. Ghost touched the animal's cold, wet chin from underneath, stroking it for reassurance. The cow huffed again, raising and lowering its head. But it didn't move, not even a hoof. Ghost had seen this before. The animal was lost in the fog.

Ghost could hear the river plunging beneath them through the culverts, sloshing at the edges of the concrete slabs that raised the bridge above the water. Despite or because of the pills he'd taken, a mild vertigo took hold. He reached out into the gray abyss for something he could grasp to gain his balance. The cow's head, wet and slick, was the only thing to hold, and Ghost had to wrap his entire arms around the skull to catch hold without slipping off its slick skin. The vertigo grew worse, and he clung to the beast as to the edge of a cliff. He grabbed too hard, and the cow spooked.

The animal mooed and swung its head from side to side, kicked a hoof into the air and started moving forward. It rammed into Ghost before he could step aside, a step that might have landed him in the river. The cow pushed him a few feet backward, his heels scudding the pavement to keep from falling backward. He rode the cow's head backward, until it knocked him against the hood of his car. Ghost lifted his feet before the cow could crush them against the bumper.

When the cow bumped the car, it turned hard to the right. The Saab wobbled on its hinges, and Ghost let go of the cow's head. As it stepped toward the bridge's edge, the beast turned a black eye to Ghost, then toppled over the edge. With a mewl and a splash, the cow was gone.

Everything went white again. The tireless sound of the river. The coldness of the rain.

Ghost fell to his knees and remained there, his hands pressed against the pavement. He felt beneath him the struggles of the cow as it sloshed around beneath the bridge, struggling, he imagined, to keep its head above the water. He could faintly here the scrape of hoofs on cement, the cows legs scuffing the inside of the culvert as it thrashed about in search of a foothold it wasn't going to get. Every few seconds Ghost felt a pounding like a drum against his palms. It was either the beating of his heart, or the hoofs of the cow beneath him. But it was too late now. The cow would drown, and here was nothing he could do about it. So he stood and wobbled his way back along the edge of the Saab, teetering on the edge of the abyss once more before swinging his car door open and collapsing inside.

He was sopping wet. His jeans and overcoat were drenched, and the tee-shirt he wore underneath was damp. He was shivering, his body quaking with adrenaline. He couldn't stop his hands from shaking enough to open his pill container, so he left it on the seat beside him and put the car in gear. He drove the rest of the way across the bridge with the emergency brake on, and failed to realize until he'd reached the other side that the awful squealing was the car itself, and not the final bellows of the drowning cow.

When he reached his parents' house at the edge of the woods, he pulled the car beside his mother's in the carport and killed the engine. He closed his eyes and breathed. He'd felt a shadow follow him the entire way across the Valley, since crossing the bridge. He checked the mirrors, scanned the vicinity outside his car. There was nothing there. There were no phantoms there, no lantern-like specters. No floating ghosts of departed kin, lighting up the night like bloated fireflies.

There was only the fog.

He carried Odis George's body to the porch and tried his key in the lock. The door opened with a creak. He left the corpse outside, too exhausted from his travels to deal with it now. He went inside and stripped, hung his wet clothes from hooks above the mantle. He unstuffed his pockets, setting the bottle of pills on the coffee table beside an old and weathered, unopened envelope. He hadn't energy to make a fire, so he took the afghan off the couch and wrapped it around his body. He found and lit a candle, brought it to the kitchen where he set the candle on the table and pulled up a chair. He sat back and closed his eyes. There he slept like a dead man until he was woken by two strange figures in the night, the black man and his redheaded, dimple-cheeked prostitute.

*

Darkness, out of which came sudden light. A shock from heaven, a white bolt like a sword slung across the sky. A jagged line that disappeared in the woods, nearby over by the creek. Ghost was home from school, staring out his window across the darkening Valley. He could see the Lee land passed the trees on the side of his daddy's yard. No more grass in the meadow, no more sounds of crickets. The fields were mud and had been now for weeks. His daddy said the Lees were switching crops. No more pastureland. No more cattle. The Lee's were wine folk now. Gonna plant the vines when the rains stop.

The rain dumped hard into the Valley. The river and the creek had been flooding for days. There was no crossing the bridge when the river flooded, so Ghost and his sister were home from school. So was Susan Lee. Ghost knew she'd be sitting at her window, watching the same spot he did, watching for signs of fire from the tree, eyeing the darkness for rising smoke, what would be barely perceptible against the mountain to the east.

More lightning. Ghost counted, one, two, buckle-my-shoe. *Strike*. Three-four, knock-on-the. *Strike*. The storm was over them. Another strike, and the woods lit up like a firefly. He'd seen the marks, the charred scars on the trunk. The oak'd been hit before, a dozen times or more. But he'd never seen it struck until tonight. When it happened, the hairs on his arms and legs went fuzzy like a peach.

He ran downstairs to the phone and called Susan's house. Her mother answered. She hesitated, then let Susan talk to him.

Was it the tree? Was it?

It was the tree, he said.

I saw fire.

No you didn't.

I saw a lightning.

It hit the tree. But you're too far away to see. I saw it.

I saw the fire but I couldn't see the tree.

No you didn't.

But I saw the lightning.

Me too, he said. Meet me there tomorrow. I'll bet it split in half.

Ghost heard her father, Ames Lee on the other end of the phone. Then the line went dead. Ghost hung up and went back to his room. He sat on his bed, staring out the window. Lightning flashed across the sky again and again, thunder roaring in his ears. But no more flashes from the woods, no more fire.

The tree was still standing the next day. Blackened branches, a fallen limb. Soot running down the bark like the tree'd been rubbed by charcoal. The creek rushed by in the distance. He and Susan stood on the Sawmill Bridge, the water spilling over the planks and wetting their shoes. They held hands and watched another limb fall from the tree, plunge into the water and rush beneath them, tumbling against the underside of the boards they stood on, until it surfaced on the other side of them and sped down creek, a mile to where it would spill into the river, rushing faster now, until it exited the Valley through the mouth between the mountains to the North.

Trick

Kayla was feeding the dogs out back when the Sheriff arrived. She knew it was the Sheriff even before Wardell called out to her, telling her to get into the kitchen. She knew because the dogs went into a frenzy before she even heard the sound of the car in the driveway out front. Dodgy, her favorite mutt, a pit mix with one brown and one white eye, nearly leaped the fence in his fury. The dogs barked at any visitor, but they especially got their hackles up when the Sheriff came around. They had good sense about them.

Kayla waited a few minutes before she crossed the muddy yard, tugging her skirt toward her knees before she walked through the back door into the kitchen. The Sheriff was there, sitting across the table from Wardell. She hopped up onto the counter, beside the sink, and The Sheriff leered at her pale white knees. His gaze slid like a tongue up her body until it reached her face. When he saw her frowning at him, he grinned.

"Looking pale today, Miss Kayla."

His voice stuck to his tongue, struggling with the remnants of antacid, spiked coffee, and nicotine. The sound of her name on his tongue disgusted Kayla. When he spoke, she couldn't help but picture the broken skin around a dog's throat, the gnashing of teeth. Knowing she'd have to taste that mouth made her sick in the gut. She looked out the windows toward where the dogs circled inside their cages, listening as the two men continued their conversation.

"You said there weren't nothing valuable inside that house," Wardell said. "But there was tons of shit inside."

"I said not to bother with that house," the Sheriff said. "That's all."

Wardell leaned back in his chair, shaking his head.

"Why the hell not? The books alone are worth a couple hundred bucks. There's money to be made inside that house."

The Sheriff stifled a grin. His left eye twitched. Wardell didn't notice, but Kayla did. She'd seen the twitch before. When he said it wouldn't hurt, when he promised to give her drugs. She knew better than to trust the Sheriff, but she had to trust Wardell. Wardell was bound to the Sheriff in a way she couldn't understand. The Sheriff laughed at Wardell.

"You're worrying about shit you don't need to worry about, Wardell. I'm glad you told me about the man in the house. I brought you a little reward for that." He patted his breast pocket. "But now you're over-thinking things when all you need is to keep doing what you're told. Don't you remember what happens when you start thinking for yourself, Wardell?"

Wardell covered his stomach with his hand. He tried to pass it off as an itch, but Kayla knew better. He looked down at the ground when he addressed the Sheriff.

"I just don't get why. Why we're robbing all them houses if you ain't concerned with cash."

"That's cause you don't need to know," the Sheriff said. "All you got to know is what I ask you to do, and what I'll pay you to do it."

The Sheriff pulled a bag of powder from his pocket. He dropped it on the table in front of Wardell.

"Now do you want to know why you're robbing houses, Wardell? Or do you want to sit on that couch in the living room I pay for and get high?"

Wardell looked to Kayla, who looked away again. The dogs were settling down inside their cages.

"See, Wardell," the Sheriff said. "Thinking gets you all tied up I'm here to think for you. To lessen your responsibilities. I'm here to protect you. Remember D.C. Think back to Winchester. I'm always saving your ass. Cause when you get to thinking, Wardell, plans turn to shit. And when that happens, it's only a matter of time before the shit hits the fan."

Wardell reached for the bag of drugs, but the Sheriff pulled the bag back before he could touch it. The Sheriff leaned over the table like a boulder teetering on the edge of a cliff.

"Thing is," he said. "You're not the only one standing in front of the fan here, Wardell."

The Sheriff looked over at Kayla, who sat with her knees crossed on the countertop beside the sink. She looked away, but she could feel his smile on her legs. The raised corners of his lips pulled at the inside of her knees, spreading them apart. She felt exposed. The Sheriff's nose whistled as he breathed. He thrust his hips against the table, forcing the edge of the tabletop against Wardell's ribcage. The Sheriff winked at Kayla before turning back to face Wardell.

"You understanding me, Wardell?"

Wardell looked at the bag that sat beneath the Sheriff's protruding belly, pressed between his groin and his pistol. The table creaked under the Sheriff's weight.

"Yeah, boss," Wardell said. "I understand just fine."

The Sheriff's shadow masked Wardell, like a tarp hung over a statue in a museum. Wardell looked old, feeble. His stature was defeated by whatever power the Sheriff held over him. It was only when the Sheriff stood tall again, and the light from the windows shone on Wardell's body, that Kayla saw again the lines of muscle in his arms, the tight, diamond-shaped cornrows that lined his skull like barbed wire. Kayla wondered what the Sheriff had that frightened Wardell so much. It must be something else, besides the drugs. Something Wardell wouldn't tell her. Something Wardell cared even more about than getting high.

The Sheriff snickered at Kayla, then slid the bag across the table again. Wardell caught it in his hands.

"Now scram," the Sheriff said, adjusting his belt. "I've got business with your whore."

Wardell got high in the living room while the Sheriff fucked her. It was an ugly fuck. The Sheriff never made it easy. He was brutal, blunt, smothering her beneath his weight, drawing every moment to its raw conclusion. His face pressed against hers like a dirty sponge. His nose was big and soft like a pincushion, stuck with dozens of black-headed pins. She smelled his morning biscuits

and gravy on his sweat. Every one of his excretions felt and smelled like grease. She felt saturated by him even being next to her. When he was through, she wiped him off her body with the bed sheets. His mucus coated her skin like an algae. It hardly phased her now. She was used to it by now, like a nurse who doesn't vomit at the site of blood, the smell of stool.

"Damn, if I ain't the best you ever had," he said, lighting a cigarette. "You should be paying me. You spoiled bitch."

He smacked her on the ass. Then he rubbed his groin and smelled his fingertips.

"You better shower before I come over next, or I'll drown you in that fucking tub I pay for."

He pinched her nipple and she cringed.

"I didn't know you were coming over," she said.

"Assume next time. I don't want my dick to rot."

"I ain't diseased," she said. "I don't fuck without a condom."

The Sheriff grinned. He pulled her to him by the arm, grabbing her chin with his other hand.

"Just you," she whispered.

"That's right," he said. "Cause I own your sweet ass."

He blew smoke in her face, then let her go. She hugged her knees on the edge of the bed, rubbing the bruise on her arm. The Sheriff put his arms behind his head and sighed.

"Now listen close, cause I'm telling you once. I didn't come here to fuck you. I came cause I got work for you. And it's work I don't want Wardell to know about."

He grabbed her by the arm again.

"You hear me? I find out you told Wardell and I'll snap that chicken neck of yours."

She nodded.

"Say it," he said.

"I swear."

"You promise."

"I promise."

He spun her around to face him. He pulled her against his fat body and spread her legs with one hand. He reached under her and held her while he explained what he wanted her to do. He slid his fingers in and out, and she could hardly concentrate on what he was telling her. But she heard enough of it. He wanted her to trick the ghost man. To get close to him, seduce him. To make him believe she wanted him to help her. Help her get clean, help her get away from Wardell. Do whatever it takes to make him feel for her. Make him fall in love, if possible. Make herself an asset, irreplaceable. Just do it, and don't ask questions why.

"And don't you tell him anything. Him or Wardell."

"But Wardell's good to me," she said.

The Sheriff dug harder with his fingertips. She'd learned by now to pretend it felt good to her. He'd only stop if he thought she'd come. She groaned, closing her eyes to force back tears.

"Fuck Wardell," the Sheriff said. "I run the show around here."

She faked an orgasm. When she opened her eyes, the Sheriff was touching himself, the cigarette dangling loosely from his lips. He removed his hand and she closed her legs.

"Now all you gotta do," he said, "is use that god-given cunt of yours. Just like always. No need to complicate. Do what you know how to do, and let me take care of the rest. Cause if you don't, I'll bury you *and* that nigger pimp of yours. I don't need to tell you what kind of loads of evidence I have on the two of you. Fuck with me and I'll throw you both in jail."

She felt she had no choice. But the prospect of seducing the ghost man made her sick. Not because he was ugly, and not because of the sex. This was her job, the only thing she knew how to do. She was good at it. But something about the ghost-man made her sad. Alone in his house. Bearded over like an untrimmed bush. She felt for the man. She wished she knew what Wardell knew, all the things he wouldn't tell her, so she could figure if the Sheriff was bluffing or not. She didn't want to risk her and Wardell's safety. Still, her instinct told her not to go along this time. She

sensed the Sheriff was up to something behind her and Wardell's back, and that her getting involved would only cause more trouble. But when she asked to know more about the situation, the Sheriff's eyes went black as a shark's. Something glimmered in the deep of his pupil. Kayla closed her eyes in anticipation.

"Little bunny," the Sheriff said.

He grabbed her by the hair, hard, and pulled her toward him. She bounced against his trampoline belly, squeezing her own neck to keep it from breaking.

"You only think you got a choice. But let me tell you, unless the words are *yes fucking sir*, you'd best keep that mouth of yours closed."

He dragged her body over his and forced her face into his armpit. He held her there. Hot, wet and rancid. She tried not to breathe, but she knew he wouldn't let her up until he felt the signs of struggle. So she pretended to gag, shook her body like she were choking for air. He held her another few seconds then released her. He kept his fingers clenched in her hair, forcing her wet face close to his.

"Pretty thing," he whispered.

The Sheriff opened his wide mouth and licked his own sweat off Kayla's face. Then he snorted from his throat and spit in her face.

"Let this be a lesson in obedience," he said.

When it was over, snot dripped from her nose, and her eyes were red from crying. She opened her eyes to see the Sheriff's flabby chest hanging over her, sweat dripping on her from each of his breasts. He stared down at her and raised his eyebrows. He nodded his head, and she nodded in return.

"Good girl," he said.

He licked her face, worming his tongue inside her eyelids, then sucked the snot out of her nose. He slowly let it dribble out of his mouth, a trail of mucus bridging the gap between his open mouth and her closed lips. He hiccupped, and the smell of bile steamed through his nostrils.

Kayla held her breath, shut her eyes. She heard a phone ring in the house next door. Outside, the sound of dogs.

*

He didn't like it when his sister swam through the sunken wheel beneath the Sawmill bridge. But she did anyway. He knew she did because she stayed under longer than it should have taken to cross beneath the bridge. He stood on the shore, and counted the seconds she was underwater. He held his breath with her. When she came up on the other side of the bridge, he yelled at her.

Don't do it again, he said.

Grow up, she said. It's fun.

He held his breath with her since he first learned to count. When she would crawl on her belly in the shallow parts of the creek with her head under water, her back skimming the surface like a fish. Ghost could never hold his breath as long as her. He kept counting, though, even after he was forced to breathe. 30 seconds, 60 seconds, 120 seconds. Even before she turned ten, she could stay under for three minutes before she finally rolled over in the water and breathed deeply. When she came up after holding her breath that long, her breathing sounded guttural, like the hungry cows in pasture. Or like Nana when she woke in the middle of the night with her throat closed up.

Years later Ghost held his breath for her when she joined the team at school. She won, every race, and after she won he'd wait for her outside the locker room and walk her to the car where their parents were waiting. She showed him off to her friends, his curly blonde hair and cherub face. She told her friends his scar was because he got hit by lightning, and he smiled because he liked to think he was as tough as the tree, the Lightning Tree.

I breathed with you, he said when she'd left her friends. The whole time.

The whole time? she asked.

The whole whole time. Could you feel it?

Sure I could, she said. How else do you think I won?

Ghost beamed.

I helped you win? he asked.

You always do, she said.

She tossed the towel on his head. When he removed it, she was gone. Then she was older. Angry. Because of her knee, because she couldn't swim. And because she met a boy, and their father didn't like him. Ghost felt closed out of her life. She wouldn't talk to anyone. He heard her footsteps running down stairs at home, his father's voice raised like a lion's roar. This happened once or twice a week, then more often. Ghost heard her leave the house, again and again, in the middle of the night. He heard her footsteps, heard the creaking of the staircase. He held his breath, counting the hours until she returned. The hours drew longer the older she got, the arguments with their father more severe. Then one night she didn't return. She was gone the next day, too. And the next. Ghost couldn't hold his breath any longer. He slept and chased her footsteps down the hall, across the Valley, North on the road that opened like a mouth between the mountains, and out into the world where only God knew where she'd gone.

Sheriff

Ghost woke the next morning to the distant sound of car scraping underbelly on its way up the gravel drive. He was still seated on the chair in front of the table, wrapped in the afghan blanket. At first Ghost thought a garbage truck was causing ruckus in the distance; he dreamed he was in Chicago, living in the loft with Chad and Sara, West of the Loop. But as the noise neared, Ghost came to consciousness and realized he was sitting in his parents' old kitchen. He'd forgotten how he came to be here, forgot about Nomi, Odis George, the long, overnight journey from Iowa. He forgot, too, about last night's visitors, the black man and the white girl, until he saw the fallen candle on the floor, broken away from its candlestick like a shattered icicle. The sight of spilled wax caused everything to flood back to him, and he groaned.

He took a deep breath and stood, legs stiff from sitting upright all night. He picked the shotgun off the floor, where the man had dropped it, then made his way to the living room to find his pills. But they were gone, not on the coffee table where he'd left them the night before. He adjusted the blanket and sat on the couch with the gun on his lap. He surveyed the room. He saw the dust-lined impression where the shotgun had rested these seven years, before the black man grabbed it and turned it on Ghost last night. He saw the buckshot strewn across the hardwood floor, the pockmarked damage to the brick hearth. The room was exactly as he'd left it the night he left, seven years ago. Three days after his parents' funeral.

The image of the girl from last night swum inside his head. If it wasn't for the misplaced gun and the fallen candle, he might have sworn it was a dream. He wondered who she was and what she and the man were doing in his house. But he didn't have long to think about it. The car outside drew nearer. A siren blipped.

Ghost stood, hung the shotgun on its hooks above the hearth and walked outside. A patrol car pulled in front of the porch and the Sheriff climbed out. When he stood from the car, the driver's side

raised a good foot, balancing the suspension. Ghost traced the path of the car back down the driveway, and noticed a shallow rut on one side of the road, the side the Sheriff sat on while the car drove through the rain moistened dirt. The Sheriff easily weighed half as much as a Jersey cow. Ghost didn't recognize the man beneath the blubber until the Sheriff sauntered up to the bottom step and tipped his hat off his forehead. The Sheriff was Lisle Lee, Susan's uncle.

The Sheriff looked Ghost up and down, but didn't seem to recognize the man behind the scars. He took his sunglasses off, folded them carefully, then slid them into his shirt pocket. He squinted up at Ghost, even though the sun was hid high above the fog.

"You aware, son," the Sheriff said with an exaggerated drawl, scratching the bridge of his nose and lighting a cigarette he pulled from the other shirt pocket, "That this is private property?"

He didn't wait for Ghost to answer.

" No trespassing. "

The Sheriff pointed to the "No Solicitors" sign Ghost's mother had posted on one of the posts for the carport.

"No room for vagrants or squatters," he continued. "Not in my Valley. My standing here in front of you means there's a big No Vacancy sign hanging in the sky. Maybe you just ain't seen it in all the fog."

The Sheriff hiccupped, then swallowed with a grimace. He adjusted his girth, lifting one bison leg onto the first step. The board creaked beneath his weight. He hitched his belt, flashing his silver pistol as he wriggled the belt back and forth, hiking his pants high around his belly. When he was through, he put the lighter in his pants pocket and retrieved a roll of antacids. He popped one in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed, all while the cigarette still dangled from his bottom lip. He snorted, then spit to the side of the porch. He looked in the distance, toward where, on clearer day, the Lee farm could be seen, no more than a hundred yards south of where they stood. Ghost followed

the Sheriff's gaze, but saw nothing but the tops of the trees that lined the property fence, nothing beyond but fog.

The Sheriff turned to Ghost again, his hand massaging the leather holster on his hip.

"You ain't deaf," the Sheriff said. "Come down from there."

The Sheriff stepped back to give Ghost room to descend the stairs. But Ghost remained standing on the porch. The air was cold, a slight breeze. He wrapped the blanket tighter around his shoulders and shook his head.

"I got a right to be here," he said.

The Sheriff laughed. He hitched his belt higher, unlatched his holster and took a long drag from his cigarette. He pointed from Ghost to the ground in front of him.

"When I say get, I expect you to get," the Sheriff said. "Down, now."

Ghost saw the Sheriff's fingers waggle against the handle of his gun. The Sheriff looked directly in his eyes. Ghost thought he saw a hint of recognition, but the Sheriff didn't back down. He curled his fingers around his gun.

"Boy," he said, "Don't try my patience."

Ghost saw a familiar glint in the Sheriff's eye, a deep-set anger. He'd seen it before, when he was younger. It was usually followed by violence.

"I live here," Ghost said. "And you're fatter than I remember."

The Sheriff leaned back on his haunches, looking Ghost over, head to toe. Then he dropped his hand from the pistol. He let out a big sigh.

"Shit," he said. "So it is you. I thought, maybe. But then I seen your face. Said to myself, now here's a psychopath. Better safe than sorry."

He spat on the ground, shaking his head at Ghost while puffing on his cigarette.

"You sure as hell don't look the way I remember you."

The Sheriff's cigarette fouled the air.

"I lost weight," Ghost said.

The Sheriff grinned.

"More than I can say for myself."

The Sheriff took a long drag from his cigarette, then climbed the first step, then another. Each plank cracked beneath his weight. He held the railing and it swayed with the swinging of his hips.

"You'll have to excuse me for the third degree," the Sheriff said. "Been getting a lot of robberies in the Valley lately. Prolly just some no good niggers from D.C. or Winchester, maybe Roanoke."

Ghost thought of the man from last night. He thought of the girl, Kayla, and his pulse quickened. He tried to hide his reaction. But the Sheriff, who kept his eye on Ghost, seemed to notice. He pursed his lips, nodding. He stared Ghost in the eye, all the while creaking his way up the steps

"That's right," the Sheriff grinned. "Lotta theft and vandalism. Prostitution, too. Not in the Valley, per se. But down in Harrisonburg, Staunton. Got calls from neighborhood folks, left and right. Bad seeds come to germinate."

The Sheriff reached the top of the steps, panting, with sweat on his brow. Ghost was forced to step aside to accommodate the Sheriff's massive frame. The floorboards bowed beneath the Sheriff, until he reached the porch swing and plopped down. The chains pulled taut, rigid as a metal pole.

"Balboa's spitting image," the Sheriff huffed, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbing it across his face and neck. "Don't suppose you got any beer inside?"

Sheriff rocked the swing back and forth. The bar-frame shook, and the hinges squealed. Ghost didn't answer.

"Forget it," the Sheriff said. "Suppose I can abide a sober morning, It being the Lord's Day and all."

The Sheriff flopped an arm onto the table beside the swing. He noticed the blanket and the lump beneath. He uncovered Odis George and raised his eyebrows.

"Hell," he said, plugging his nose. "That's one dead dog."

Ghost crossed his arms. He looked toward the Western Mountain, but saw only the fog haunting its way across the driveway. He heard thunder in the distance.

"Been dead a couple days now," Ghost said.

"What's it doing on your porch?"

"Come to bury him. In the cemetery."

The Sheriff covered the dog again with the blanket. He curled his nose and shook his head.

"Best get him in the ground before the storm hits. Forecast calls for rain all week. You know how it is this time of year in the Valley."

"Yeah," Ghost said. "I remember."

The Sheriff shook his head at the corpse beneath the blanket.

"It's funny, you know. You leave by funeral," he said, "then you return by it. Death just suits you, don't it, son?"

Ghost curled his fist.

"It don't suit me," he said. "And I'm not your son."

Ghost stood in the middle of the porch, his arms at his sides. The blanket had fallen off his shoulders, revealing his chest and some of his stomach. The Sheriff smoked his cigarette and laughed.

"What in the hell *happened* to you, boy? You're skin and bones. Except for all that hair."

Ghost covered himself again with the blanket and turned his back on the Sheriff. He looked out across the yard, past the patrol car. Whiteness, every which way. The fog engulfed the patrol car like plumes of smoke.

"Don't get touchy now," the Sheriff said. "Yours always was a sensitive bunch. I'm just trying to figure out where the hell you've been. Seven years ain't exactly a vacation."

"What's it matter?" Ghost said.

"It matters cause I'm curious. How old are you?"

Ghost felt tired. His muscles were sore from sleeping on the chair all night. His head hurt without his pills.

"Older than I was," he said.

The Sheriff rolled his eyes, flicked his cigarette off the porch and lit another one.

"You're still a smart ass, that much hasn't changed. How old in years?"

Ghost didn't answer.

"Your folks died not too long after you got back from college. You were what, twenty-two?"

Ghost turned to face the Sheriff, leaning back against the porch railing.

"Hell, you were younger. Am I right? You jumped them grades to be with my niece. Thought she'd have you if played catch-up."

Ghost tried not to show signs of emotion. He knew the way Lyle worked, conniving like his older brother, the Judge. Not as smart or successful, but just as mean. Slipping the knife in where it hurt and twisted slow. The Sheriff wanted something, Ghost was sure of it, and he figured what it was. Seven years and nothing had changed. He was after Ghost's father's land.

"If you don't mind," Ghost said, "I've got a dog to bury."

The Sheriff showed no signs of moving. He swung to and fro, his knees bending, his heels rising and falling. He sucked on his cigarette and smiled.

"My bet is you went on a spending spree. Took your daddy's money, bought your way around the world. But now you're broke again, and you come back cause you need cash. And you ain't got no other means. Just this property, those bullshit cows."

The Sheriff flicked his cigarette off the porch in the direction of the pasture. The fields were hidden by the fog. The Sheriff burped, swallowed, and popped another antacid in his mouth. He struggled out of the swing, latching his holster once he stood straight.

"I'm a means to your end," he said. "I always was. Cause there ain't nothing left here, son. Not for you. This home ain't nothing but a house now. Empty, not a thing worth fighting for. Even your sister knew better than to stick around."

The Sheriff's left eye twitched. He stared at Ghost, but Ghost broke eye contact. The mention of his sister caused his chest to constrict, and he crossed his arms to keep himself from shaking. He looked down at the floorboards.

"You need some cash?" the Sheriff asked.

Ghost heard him flip open a wallet. He looked up to see him counting hundred dollar bills.

"I ain't here for trouble," the Sheriff said. "I'm here to help. A good Samaritan."

Ghost turned his back to the man.

"Come on, now," the Sheriff laughed. "You need to eat. Get yourself a shave. Maybe get yourself one of them whores I mentioned."

Ghost closed his eyes. He tried to ignore the Sheriff, to block out his voice.

"I got plenty of cash since I sold the vineyard," the Sheriff continued. "So don't worry about me. I got charity to go around."

The Sheriff reached his fat arm over Ghost's shoulder and held a few folded one hundred dollar bills in front of Ghost.

"It ain't no inheritance," the Sheriff said, "But it's a bit of what you got coming to you. All you need to offer in return is your signature."

Ghost didn't move a muscle. The Sheriff waved the money in his face, then removed his arm and backed away. He felt the vibration of the Sheriff's heavy footsteps as the man trudged away from him.

"You think it over."

He stopped before descending the stairs, and Ghost turned again to look at him. The Sheriff pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. He held it up for Ghost to see.

"Almost forgot. These are two of the low lives we're looking for in connection with the thefts in the Valley," he said. "Take a good look, and if you see em around, call."

The piece of paper was a police sketch. Ghost recognized the man and woman in the picture. Kayla, Wardell. Kayla looked older in the sketch, darker, and Wardell looked younger, more menacing than he'd seemed the night before. Ghost tried to hide his recognition from the Sheriff, but the Sheriff's eyes were trained on him like an eagle's. Ghost turned away from the picture.

"Haven't seen em," he said.

The Sheriff grinned.

"In case you do," he said.

He held the picture out for Ghost. Ghost didn't take it. So the Sheriff folded it, creaking back across the porch to where he opened the porch door slightly, enough to pin the folded sketch between the frame. He clunked down the steps. The bottom plank broke before he reached the ground. The Sheriff nearly toppled over.

"Shoddy fucking workmanship," he said, pausing beside his patrol car to look back at Ghost. "Your family never was much good at anything but raising cattle. Could've done so much more with these pastures. What a waste. Your kind never had ambition. But there's still time. Just turn your land over. Watch the better use a Lee can make of it."

The Sheriff lit another cigarette. He pulled his sunglasses from his pocket. Before he slipped them on, he winked at Ghost.

"By the way," he said. "Nice tattoo."

The Sheriff wedged himself behind the steering wheel, started the engine, and drove off.

*

The lightning bugs in the grass made sparks like the kind that happened when you drew a piece of flint across a stone. He brushed through the final briars of the woods and came to the clearing beside where the creek flowed. Susan was there, beside the Lightning Tree. She hung topsy turvys from one of the lower branches.

You're on the ceiling of the universe, she said.

He stretched his arms above him, reaching toward her.

I'm crawling down to you, he said.

His hands grabbed hers and he pulled until she slipped from the branch and slid along his body. Her body was wet beneath her clothes.

You've been swimming, he said.

The water's warm, she said.

They sat beside each other on the bank, their flanks touching.

The crickets sound like Krispies, he said and she smiled.

She leaned in quick and kissed him on the lips.. Then she kissed the scar on his cheek. He kissed her on the dimple beside her mouth.

Let's do blood, she said.

I don't know, he said.

Cut and spit, she said. It'll be easy.

She palmed through the water for a rock with a sharp edge. She came back to the shore and he gave her his hand. They stood in the shade beneath the branches of the tree.

It'll hurt, she said.

She poked and he bled, in the center of his palm.

Ouch, he said. – You won't like it.

I don't need to like it, she said.

She gave him the stone

Give me your hand, he said.

She did and he poked it. She winced. He cupped his own bleeding hand beneath hers. The sight of her red blood excited him.

I wanna lick it, he said.

No, she said. – That's gross.

But I want to.

It doesn't matter if you want to, she said.

She cupped her hand so blood pooled in her palm.

Here, she said. – Spit and shake.

She spat into her hand, a foamy dribble. He did the same, quick and liquid.

Forever, she said.

Forever.

They shook hands and it was painful. But the pressure of her wound plugging his felt good. They clasped fingertips and she giggled.

Stand up, she said.

They stood beside each other and pressed their bloody, spit-filled hands against the tree. On the spot where they'd already peeled away the bark and carved their names into the tree. An indented circle swirled around their names, and they ran their palms over that, too. Their blood mixed with sap from the tree and when they pulled away they each had dirt and grime and blood smudging the flesh of their hands. Susan showed her hand to Ghost and he made a face.

Still wanna lick it? she asked.

She made for the water and he followed. She waded knee deep and turned to catch him looking at her from behind.

Your hair, he said.

They squatted beside each other and rubbed their hands against the stony riverbed to clean the dirt, then waded deeper where the bottom sunk beneath them and they walked around the creek together, hand in hand, while the water washed away their blood but not the sap that sealed their skin.

Playhouse

Kayla tossed the ball around the yard with Dopehound. Dopehound had never been in a fight, which gave him something in common with Kayla. Kayla never watched the fights. She tended to the dogs when they got back, but never went to the ring with them. She fed them, stitched them up, cleaned their cages. Mostly she just played with the ones that wanted that sort of attention. Wardell never played with the dogs. And he hated the softer ones. He treated them worse than the others. He said it was to toughen them. He said it was for their own good. Cause if a dog didn't fight well, Wardell had to use it to bait the new dogs. Or he killed it and dumped the body over the fence into the trash bin. A pussy dog wasn't worth the price of food.

Dopehound, the mix breed with one lazy eye, was one of the dogs Wardell planned to bait the next time he got a new group. Dopehound wasn't born to fight. Kayla pleaded with Wardell to let her keep him, but Wardell didn't care. She knew it was only a matter of time, so she treated Dopehound extra nice. She loved him like she would a pet.

Just before sunset, Wardell came out back and yelled at her.

"That dog's sis enough! Get in here. It's time to go."

When Dopehound heard Wardell's voice coming from the back door, he cowered. He slinked to the door of his cage and kept his head down until Kayla opened the gate and let him in. She followed the dog down the short aisle, where the other dogs nipped through their fences at his ears and feet. She opened the inner gate and let him in his pen. She kissed him on the head, then locked the gates on her way out.

"You kiss em, too. What's a whore worth if she got disease on her mouth?"

Wardell stood in the middle of the yard, his hands jangling around in his pockets, causing a nervous ruckus. Kayla threw the ball at him as hard as she could. He caught it easily.

"Even dogs need love," she said. "Their lives ain't worth much otherwise."

"They're worth enough to me," Wardell said.

He threw the ball hard at Kayla and it bounced off her hip.

"Unless they're soft like the one you're pampering."

Kayla rubbed her hip.

"Damn, Wardell! Don't hurt me."

Wardell sneered at her. He shook his head.

"Sheriff hurt you well enough, huh? You and him real good lovers now. Brung you a special gift, just for you."

Wardell held up a small bag of cocaine. Kayla'd kept it hidden in her room. The Sheriff usually paid Kayla her drugs by giving them to Wardell, and letting him divvy out to her. But this time the Sheriff left her drugs as incentive to follow through with Ghost, and to keep quiet to Wardell. He said there was plenty more to come. He'd give it all straight to her.

"I was gonna split that with you, Wardell," Kayla lied. "You was doped out when he left it. I was gonna show you later."

"Bullshit," Wardell said.

"It's true, I swear. Why'd you wanna snort some coke after you just shot up? I was saving it for later, to surprise you."

Wardell turned his back on her and walked back toward the house. Two of the dogs attacked each other through the fence. The fight caused the other dogs to whimper, bark. Kayla heard the snap and growl in the cages behind her, but she didn't turn. She chased after Wardell, rubbing her bruised leg.

"Don't be like that, Wardell. I'm sorry."

She tugged on his shoulder, but he brushed her off.

"Where are we going?" she asked to change the subject.

"Downtown," Wardell said. "The theatre house."

Kayla slowed him down by tugging at his shoulders, his pants. He kept brushing her away, heading for the back door.

"Why there?"

"That's where the Sheriff said."

"You talked to him?"

"On the phone."

"When?"

"Just now."

"Did he say about the man?"

"What man?"

"The Ghost man?"

Wardell paused at the door. He inhaled quick, then held it in his lungs.

"Sheriff said you knew," he gritted his teeth. "Said it wasn't none of my business."

He reached for the door, but Kayla hung on his arm.

"Don't be mad, Wardell. It ain't my choice."

Wardell turned, looking past Kayla toward the dogs. He wet his lips, squinting toward the sunset. His eyes were bloodshot, his nose runny. He hadn't fully come out of his all-day high.

"That's between you and your pimp," Wardell said.

He tossed the bag of coke at her. She caught it, then reached to touch his face.

"You're my pimp, Wardell."

Wardell turned his back on her. He opened the screen door and left her in the yard, shutting the door in her face.

It was cold in the alley. She stood out there alone while Wardell waited in the car. The plan was, he'd signal her when the Ghost man walked out of the playhouse. She asked to wait in the car with him, but he told her otherwise.

He'd said, "If you're old enough to have your secrets, then you're old enough to walk alone."

So she waited, leaning against the cold brick, longing for a cigarette. After a bit, she walked across the street to the car. She tapped the window until Wardell rolled it down a crack.

"Why can't I smoke at least?"

Wardell wouldn't look at her.

"How you gonna ask him for a smoke if you already got one?"

"I'll smoke it before he comes out."

Wardell shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, you know when he's gonna come out? Hell then, no use in my being here."

Wardell started the car and made as if he were going to drive off. Kayla reached her fingers through the open slit and grabbed the window. She stuck her face against the glass.

"Don't be like that, Wardell. I didn't do nothing wrong."

She wondered what the Sheriff had said to him. When he'd phoned the house. Was the Sheriff playing them off each other? She wished for once Wardell would tell her something. Anything.

"Why are you mad at me?" she shook his arm. "Did the Sheriff tell you something I oughta know?"

Wardell shut the engine off again.

"He didn't tell me nothing. He just said to mind my own business. Said to let you call the shots."

Kayla felt brief pride in being put in charge. Then she remembered the Sheriff was the one controlling the situation, not her. Then she felt bad for Wardell.

"Wardell, I ain't doing this to hurt you. I swear. I don't got a choice."

Wardell said nothing.

"The Sheriff said he'd put us both in jail. I ain't even supposed to tell you that. You gotta trust me."

Wardell shook his head. Kayla let go of the window.

"I'm afraid to tell you more," she said. "And I don't really know more, anyway. Just what the Sheriff said, which wasn't much. Don't be mad at me."

Wardell sighed, but he still wouldn't look at her.

"I ain't mad at you," he said, rolling up the window. "Now get back in the alley."

She stood for a moment beside the closed window. Wardell turned on the radio, keeping his eyes on the playhouse. Kayla walked back across the street and resumed her post in the alley, between the playhouse and the coffee shop next door. She hugged her arms. It was cold, and her skin goosepimpled.

"Fuck," she said.

She paced around for an hour, maybe more, before the play let out. People started passing by the alley. Some noticed her and gave her strange looks. They wore trench coats and winter jackets, expensive leather boots. Kayla wore a mini-skirt in March. She ignored the people and watched Wardell for a signal. But more people kept passing. They looked warm and happy, walking hand in hand with wives and daughters. The men were tall and wore black clothing, had trimmed gray beards and smiling faces. These weren't the types of men she knew. She wondered would they be the same as the others, if you took away their looks and all their expensive stuff. She felt cold and angry. She felt like shouting, causing a scene. Then Wardell flashed his lights at her, and she stepped onto the sidewalk. She turned toward the playhouse, scanned the crowd for the ghost man.

There were only a few people milling outside the playhouse. Some wore heavy make-up and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes. She took these to be the actors. They were beautiful, tall, loud. A

strange sexuality infused every one of their gestures, every word. They were like whores but different. Classier, having sex that was just as dirty, but seemed cleaner cause their skin was soft and white, their hands and faces manicured. She decided she hated them.

There was the ghost, standing on the edge the small crowd of actors. How they didn't notice him, with his messed up face and his Werewolf beard, she couldn't understand. They were caught up in their own conversation, caught up in each other and themselves. Ghost's purple and gray demeanor stood out among the brightly colored posters that shone beneath the fluorescent lights on the underside of the marquee. He looked different. His head was shaved, but his beard was just as long and scraggly as the other night. She walked near him, and noticed dried bits of blood on his ears and neck.

Before she could reach him, the ghost touched one of the female actors on the arm. The woman was blonde with long legs, spreading in imitation of something or someone. Her friends laughed. Her wingspan was brilliant, her back poised in a long, subtle arch. The ghost man said something to her and everyone in the group turned to look at him. They stopped laughing.

Kayla hung back, waiting for a moment alone with the ghost man. She watched and listened from a distance, but she couldn't hear the conversation because a fire truck rolled by, filling the street with sound even without its sirens. She watched it turn into the station down the road. Just then, the girl smiled and handed something to the ghost man. He looked down at whatever she gave him and frowned. The girl and her friends quickly turned away from him and returned to the playhouse. A man in a uniform locked the doors behind them.

Wardell flashed his lights again, and Kayla flipped him off. She gave him the one second sign. She could see him shaking his head through the windshield of the car. She looked back at Ghost. He looked dejected, tired. He looked sad.

Kayla waited for Ghost to walk toward her, but he didn't. He just stood in front of the playhouse doors and looked inside. He looked sad, and she decided she should go to him. It might

feel staged, but hell, this was the right place for it. It was a stupid plan to begin with. She felt wrong about it. But she had no choice. The Sheriff said so, and Wardell agreed. So she walked up to Ghost and touched his sleeve.

"Hey, mister," she said. "You got a smoke?"

She realized just how stupid that sounded. The plan felt so contrived. She wondered if the Sheriff was full of shit. She waited to see Ghost's reaction. There was a long pause. He searched her face. Then he smiled.

"Hello, Kayla," he said and she knew he was hooked.

She smiled. Only a few people were left outside the playhouse. One was talking on his cell phone. The others were listening to Ghost and Kayla but trying to hide the fact. They turned and left for their cars when Kayla sneered at them. When she turned back to face Ghost, she smiled again. She didn't know why she smiled. Here was something different. Something hideous, something broke. But she liked him. He was soft inside, like Dopehound. He had kind eyes.

"Nice hair-cut," she said and the marquee lights went out.

They were on their way to the car before she knew it, crossing the street, her arm tucked behind his elbow. She fell into he familiar routine.

"You gotta work it out with Wardell," she said. "Or nothing happens."

"Work what out?"

She rolled her eyes at him.

"The price, silly."

"The price for what?"

She knew he knew. He was playing a game with her. Most of them did. They liked to flirt. To pretend it wasn't what it really was. Others just came out with it. They were blunt. They usually fucked blunt, too, like the sheriff. She preferred the other kind, the kind like Ghost.

"The price for me," Kayla interlocked her fingers with his. "Don't be silly."

When they reached the car, Kayla tapped against the window while Wardell was rolling it down. She saw his look of annoyance, which quickly switched to the squint-eyed expression he used when he wanted to look like a thug.

"What can I do for you, hoss?" Wardell nodded toward Ghost, tilting his head to look out the window.

Ghost surveyed the area. The car was parked on a side street, just in the shadows. All remaining bystanders had driven off. Both the side street and the main street were empty. Kayla squeezed his hand for reassurance. A light snow began to fall, flashing like glass in the lamplight.

"I don't know," Ghost answered.

Kayla squatted down beside the car, looking up at Ghost with her dimpled smile. She reached out and tugged at Ghost's pant leg. Then she turned to Wardell.

"He wants me," she said.

Ghost nodded.

"You got cash?" Wardell asked.

Ghost nodded, said yes.

"How much?"

"Enough," Ghost said.

"Show me."

Ghost pulled a short roll of hundred dollar bills from his pocket. Wardell's eyes scanned the money like a hungry animal. Kayla figured this was why the Sheriff wanted her to scam the man. Ghost or not, he appeared to be well off.

"Damn," Kayla said. "You can have three of me for half that much."

Wardell flashed her an angry look. Kayla shrugged.

"It's true," she said.

Wardell turned to Ghost and forced a smile.

"Get in," he said.

But Ghost didn't move. He put his money back in his pocket.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Kayla stood up and put her arms around him. She pulled him toward the car.

"It's ok," she said. "We got a place."

But Ghost looked unsure. He looked at Kayla's face, but didn't seem to see her. Not where she was, here on the street. He was somewhere else in his head, she could tell. She'd seen plenty of men with this look before.

"Sorry," Ghost said. "I made a mistake."

Wardell flashed irritation. He concealed it by attempting to bargain.

"Like she said, it won't cost you all of it," he said. "She ain't that expensive."

Kayla slapped Wardell's arm, which he'd draped over the side of the open window to get a better look at Ghost.

"I know I said it first," she said. "But hell, you ain't need to repeat it."

Ghost slid away from her. He walked away.

"Goodnight," he said.

Wardell threw his hands up in the air. He shook his head at Kayla, and she saw that he was shaking. He'd need a fix soon or he'd start getting real nervous. She ran after Ghost, catching him before he reached the main street. She held his arm.

"Please," she said.

He stopped walking. He looked at her and she batted her eyelashes as best she could. She smiled, and she saw him staring at her dimple. She tossed her long red curls and put both arms around his waist.

"I need you," she lied. "Or else I gotta walk around more in this cold."

Ghost stopped her again before they reached Wardell's car.

"On one condition," he said.

He looked her straight in the face. He didn't smile.

"I don't fuck you," he said. "And you don't ask me to."

She reached up and touched his face.

"Oh, Ghost," she said, "Whatever gets you off."

*

This ain't your property, son, the Deputy said. Get back to where you come from.

Ghost never liked Susan's uncle, Lisle Lee. The man was big and mean, with a truckbed of chips on his shoulder. But Ghost wouldn't back down.

I want to see her, he said. I won't leave until you send her out.

The Deputy sat inside his pick-up. Ghost stood in front of the truck, half way up the Lee's driveway. He saw a shotgun hung in the cab behind the Deputy's head. Behind the gun, he saw the red and blue flag painted on the rear window of the truck.

Don't get smart with me, her uncle put a plump arm out the window, reddened from the sun. Mouth off and I'll haul you into jail for trespassing.

But Ghost didn't go. Instead, he walked around the truck, heading up the driveway toward the house.

The Deputy flung the car door opened, his feet landing on the gravel with a thud.

Damnit, son, he said. We got enough trouble with daughters around here. Don't need you fucking with the other one. She ain't knocked up like her sister yet, and I don't plan to let that happen. And hell no, definitely not with a Webb.

He didn't wait for Ghost to turn around. The Deputy's hand smacked against the side of Ghost's face. Ghost fell to the ground, scrambling to his knees. His mouth was bleeding.

The Deputy stood over him. He reached into his breast pocket and lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke down into Ghost's face. Ghost looked up at the man, bearing his bloody teeth.

I got a right, he said. You don't own her.

The Deputy grinned. The sun caught his eye, a glimmer in the pupil. He lifted Ghost by the collar, drawing him to his feet. He dusted off his shoulders, looked Ghost directly in the eye. Then he pulled his lighter from his pocket, a gold Zippo that smelled of kerosene. He flicked the switch and the flame lit up. He held it close to Ghost's cheek. Ghost felt the heat on his scar.

Look around you son, the Sheriff said.

He motioned with his lighter toward the Valley that surrounded them. He sucked on his cigarette, blowing smoke out his nostrils.

There's nothing in this Valley that I don't own, he said. Nothing that ain't mine to burn if I so fucking desire. You just wait and see, and don't your forget it.

The Deputy pocketed his Zippo and left Ghost standing in the middle of the driveway, climbed back in his truck and drove on toward the house, flicking his cigarette at Ghost on his way past. Ghost watched the plumes of dust rise and dissipate, tracing the truck's journey up the long drive. Ghost saw the house in the distance, where that night Susan's sister, Rachel, would go into labor

Secrets

When the Sheriff drove off, disappearing into the fog, Ghost stood for quite some time on the porch. He looked out over the driveway. The gravel had all but washed away. Seven years without maintenance had allowed the road to turn to dirt. Ghost remembered how he and his father used to comb loose pebbles from the grass and ditch beside the road, every year after the rainy season. His father let him ride in the bed of the truck, strewn on top of the gravel they'd collected from the highway department in Front Royal. Ghost loved those times. The blue sky above. The trees passing overhead like strange fingertips. A good memory. One that clung to him like honey to a spoon. Something to brighten the dark past.

The Sheriff's car was out of earshot now. Ghost let out a long sigh, then left the porch and walked to the shed not far off in the distance, where he retrieved a spade. He came back to the house and picked Odis George up off the table on the porch. He carried the dog to the edge of the wood, then turned once more to look back at the house. He held Odis George' against his chest. The carcass had begun to smell.

"Say goodbye now," he said. "Good boy."

He carried Odis George on his shoulder through the woods. He walked the same path as seven years ago, when he carried his parents' ashes, in separate mason jars, to the family cemetery. There was a law disallowing the burial of bodies on private land, so Ghost had resorted to burying his parents' ashes beside the bones of their kin. He'd fitted headstones out of limestone rocks hauled from the creek, and sunk the mason jars beneath the earth he dug himself with a spade. The ground was still frozen beneath the topsoil. He could only dig up a few feet. He used no gloves and when he was through his hands bled. His handprint stained the mason jars as he tossed them down into the hole.

This was seven years ago.

The path Ghost walked forked a half-mile in the woods. He went North, to where the cemetery sat lined by shrubs on the near side of the creek. He dug a hole for Odis George beside his folks. He buried him there and left the spade, stabbed into the earth, as a grave marker.

Ghost walked back to the fork in the road and went the other direction, South-East until he reached a small clearing where a thick oak tree stood beside a small wooden bridge. This bridge was on the spot where his great great granddaddy set to work cutting trees for the house. This is why his family called it Sawmill Bridge, even though no sign of a saw or a mill remained.

Beneath the bridge ran Passage Creek, where on a westward bend it formed a deep pool. The creek ran east and West across the Valley, serving to mark the border between the Lee land and Ghost's property. There was a fence that marked the real property lines, but the creek was what they went by. Here, where the deep pool formed, marked the spot where the Lee land, the Webb land, and the National Forest, which climbed eastward up the mountain range, converged.

Ghost stood in the center of the Sawmill Bridge, looking over the edge into the cold water below. When he was 12 years old, he fell through the ice in this spot in winter. He nearly drowned. His sister pulled him out. She saved his life.

There was no ice on the water now. He stood on the edge of the bridge looking down. The water beneath him, he knew, sank six feet deep, the deepest spot in all the creek. He could touch the bottom now and the tip of his head would remain at water level. If it were colder, he could freeze himself in the pool as if in a frame.

The sun broke through a hole in the clouds. The water glistened, and for a moment Ghost saw rippling beneath him a mirror image of his face. Hideous, scarred. Ugly. This was the face that he deserved. The face of betrayal. The face of guilt.

He left the bridge. He walked back to the house and climbed the steps to the porch. When he opened the door to the house, the sheet of paper the Sheriff had folded inside the door fell to the ground. The money the Sheriff had tried to give Ghost fell out, where the Sheriff had stuck it

without Ghost noticing. Ghost brought the sheet of paper and the money into the house and sat on the couch. He looked at the photograph, recognizing the similarities in Kayla's face, even though it was just a sketch. He took some old logs from a stack opposite the fireplace and used the police sketch to start a fire. He sat on the couch and started counting the hundred dollar bills the Sheriff left for him. There was more than he'd imagined.

He stopped counting when he saw the book lying beside the hearth. He hadn't noticed it earlier. It was his father's copy of *Walden*, a first edition that was passed down through all the first born Webb sons. He dropped the money on the coffee table and picked the book up off the floor. He retrieved two items from the one bag he'd brought with him from the Midwest. An unopened envelope and a torn sheet of notebook paper. He placed both inside the book and closed the cover. Then left the room and climbed the stairs.

There were golf balls on his sister's bed. There was broken glass, too, from where the first ball had shattered the windows above her bed. Ghost looked outside, through the open window, but couldn't see into the distance. The fog was thick, and the farthest he could see was the edge of the driveway. In the distance the Lee land waited, hidden by the weather.

Ghost found what he was looking for in a plastic bag beneath the bed. He had to move the bed away from the wall to reach them. When he moved the bed away, he noticed something strange in the corner. The wheel of the bed frame had run against a raised plank, popping it up from the others by about an inch. It was the plank closest to the wall. Ghost knelt and ran his finger beneath the plank, which easily dislodged. He lifted and removed the plank. There was a hole beneath the wall, an extension of the space beneath the floor. He tried the other planks but none came loose. He reached his arm inside the hole and felt around.

His fingers brushed against the flat sides of objects. One by one he removed them. A dozen altogether. Black composition notebooks. His sister's journals.

He removed the top sheet off the bed, shaking glass shards and golf balls to the floor. One rolled out the bedroom door and clacked it's way down the staircase. Ghost sat on the bed beside the journals and looked over the dates. There was one for each year of her life since she was fifteen. He put the oldest on his lap. His sister was in high school when she wrote it. He was eight at the time. He turned to the first entry.

I will write in here for once a month until I'm dead.

He flipped through several others.

I love swimming more than life.

I hate my father.

No one could ever understand.

He skipped around, reading cursorily. He picked up the last journal. He turned to its first entry, dated a year before she left the house the final time. A year and three weeks before the night of the accident, the night his parents died. He read the entry in full. It wasn't typical. It sounded different in tone than the others. More urgent, filled with talk of change and new beginnings. He wasn't sure what to make of it. It held no answers. It provided him with no real insights about his sister and her state of mind during the year before the accident. The year she came and went, tearing the family apart in the process. He read the final sentence of the entry one more time.

Everything I know is these journals.

He tore the line out from the rest, folded the torn paper, and put it in his pocket. He flipped through the rest of the journal, but found that the second half was torn out. The last six months of his sister's life was missing. He searched the hiding place again, but found nothing else inside the hole. The final pages of his sister's journal were gone, torn imperfectly from the spine of the notebook. Only one line remained, barely legible, on the edge of a torn page.

the truth about Rebecca

Ghost didn't know what to make of it. The rest of the words were gone, on the pages that were torn from the journal. His sister and Rebecca had been close at one point in their lives. She could have been talking about anything. Still, he thought of the baby. The night Rebecca and her child died in labor. He'd never understand the note. It would never make sense. Only his sister knew what it meant, and she was gone. Ghost could only do his best to guess, and he was tired. He didn't have the energy to think. His head hurt, and his back was sore, just above his tattoo. He massaged his neck, closing his eyes.

After a minute or so he stacked the journals on the bed and went through his sister's bag of prescriptions. There were too many pills to count, pills she'd kept from old prescriptions. She'd had dozens of prescriptions over the years, often playing two psychiatrists one off the other. Ghost felt like he was robbing a pharmacy. He thought of Nomi in Chicago. He didn't like to think of Nomi. He went through the pills quickly, and found what he was looking for. He took the bottle out and threw the bag, with all the other pills, on the bed. He put a few pills in his hand and was about to toss them down his throat. Then he saw the photograph. On a shelf beside the dresser. A color photograph of his sister and him in the woods, riding the trees that curled out from the edge of a steep incline, the trees that hung over the walking path with dips like in a camel's back. His father called them Llama trees.

They were young in the photograph, children. Both smiling. Both with bright skin and white teeth. They were happy.

Something turned inside of him. He made a decision on the spot. He returned the pills to their bottle, then tossed the bottle into the bag with the rest of his sister's stash. He hesitated for a moment. Even a final decision could be second guessed. He waited, feeling the itch inside himself. He took a deep breath. Then he shook his head, took the journals in his arm, and walked out of the room. He left the bag on the bed.

He went back downstairs. He set the journals on the coffee table beside the copy of *Walden*. He opened the back cover of the book and slipped the piece of torn paper he'd taken from his sister's journal inside. He closed the book again. Then he walked toward the kitchen to retrieve the candle. It was getting dark outside. He nearly tripped on the golf ball that had fallen down the stairs. It had come to a stop in the middle of the living room. He kicked the ball beneath the couch. On his way into the kitchen he noticed, across the hall, a large cardboard box sitting on the study floor. He retrieved the candle and the matches he'd left on the countertop and went into the study.

The box was packed with records, a few lamps, one of his father's corporate pens, his mother's sand-cast figurines, and other knickknacks. Ghost saw select books piled on the desk. Some of these books were lying on the floor. The empty space in the bookshelf stared back at him like missing teeth. He walked over to the desk and saw several more golf balls on the floor behind the desk. The window was shattered like the one upstairs. He noticed something mixed with the broken glass on the dust-covered floor.

A single Buffalo nickel in mint condition.

He tossed the coin into the garbage bin, then blew the dust off his fingertips. He looked out the window in the direction of the Lee land. He couldn't see beyond his property. What he did see was the figure of a man walking toward him. He heard the sound of barking dogs. He couldn't see through the fog. A moment later and the man materialized from the whiteness. Ghost recognized him. The first thing he noticed was the straw hat.

It was Nat Hayden.

*

He only heard the rumors. Rachel's labor, mother and child dead, Susan locked away for weeks afterward. The private burial. Doctor Stern coming and going at all hours in the night. The Deputy the only other one to leave the farm. The house sealed up like a coffin.

Then, in the middle of the night, Susan throwing rocks at his window. He snuck out his sister's window, climbing down the awning of the porch. Susan took his hand, saying nothing, and led him to the woods. She was wearing a blue skirt, a white blouse. Her long red hair was pulled back in braids.

She led him through the woods, to the creek. She brought him to the tree where she laid him down. Her eyes were silver in the moonlight. There were tears. She took off her blouse. She took off his pajamas. He lay naked on the ground, his head resting on a root of the tree. She spread her legs over him, her skirt fanning out across her hips. She wasn't wearing underwear. He felt her legs, her thighs. He ran his fingers up and down her peach fuzz skin. She lowered down on him. She closed her eyes and winced. He held her waist.

They made love like that, silently, beneath the shadow of the tree. It wasn't smooth and it wasn't rough. He slipped in and out of her while she let her hair down, slowly unfurling the long strands that fell in curls around her shoulders, covering what breasts she had. She closed her eyes, but his were stuck on her like the poles of the earth. He whispered her name, but she said nothing.

It wasn't long before he came and as they kissed and saw reflections of each other in each other's eyes, their fluid combined and spilled from her, congealing with the dirt of the earth beneath them. She squatted over him and spilled onto his stomach, into his belly button. Then she stood and he saw more blood on her thighs, turning black in the moonlight.

I'm yours, she said.

He stood and pulled her close to him, brought his hand to touch her dimple, to caress the rose blossom on her cheek. He kissed her face, her forehead. Her eyes were moist and salty.

You're mine, he said.

He kissed her lips. He pulled her down on top of him. They slept like that, belly to belly, stuck together with his semen and her blood.

Chateau

They called their place the Chateau. They laughed when they said the name. They lived in a small two story house on a dead-end street at the edge of town. There were only a few other houses on the block, each one of them equally run down. This was the country suburban form of row housing. The small town projects. The lights were off in most of the houses. A few men and women stood or sat on porches. The houses were filled with the poor or unemployed, or else they were empty.

Wardell pulled the car into a driveway at the end of the street. The Chateau was the last house on the block, set a good ways from the other houses on the back of a cul-de-sac. The house was dark. Kayla got out of the back seat with Ghost, took his hand and led him around the side of the house. She saw him flinch at the sound of the dogs out back.

"Don't worry," she said. "They only bite if you make em."

Their place was small and barely furnished. Kayla saw Ghost recognize the fact. A table and a few chairs in the kitchen, a couch in the living room. There was a TV, but no cable hook-up. A VCR on top and dozens of VHS tapes lying on the floor. There were empty bottles everywhere. Ashtrays. The smell of stale cigarettes.

She led Ghost straight into the bedroom. She sat him down on the bed and told him to wait while she took care of Wardell. She said she needed to give Wardell some cash up front. Ghost handed her all of his money.

"Shit," she said, "I'll take it. But I ain't got no place to hide it." She ran her hands up and down, her skirt and her bra-less shirt. "I don't want Wardell to take it all."

She took one of the hundreds from him and laid the rest in his palm, curled his fingertips into a fist around the bills. She left the room, closing the bedroom door behind her. When she entered the kitchen, Wardell's back was to her. He pulled a few plastic baggies filled with heroin from the coffee

tin he kept on the kitchen counter. Right out in the open. She laughed at herself. She never did see him drink any coffee.

She ducked into the hall and waited a minute, so he wouldn't catch her knowing where he kept his stash. Then she walked into the room again, but he was gone. She walked around to the living room and saw him sitting on the couch, spoon and baggie on his lap, laying out a lighter, a needle, and a rubber tube on the wooden chest they used as a coffee table.

"I'll be a while now, Wardell," she said. "You get nice and high. I'll wake you in the morning, give you more of this."

She crumpled up the hundred dollar bill and tossed it on his lap. He pocketed it, then resumed his procedure. She didn't like the way his eyes looked when he cooked dope. They went blank, his pupils large and vacant, like he was possessed. She hoped she didn't look the same when she got high.

"I hope you ain't still mad at me," she said.

She paused, looking down at him as he portioned the dope out on the spoon. She knew, if the night went as planned, that he'd wake up tomorrow morning and she'd be gone. No explanation, no clue. She wanted to leave him a note, but she was afraid what the Sheriff might do if he found out. If he talked to Wardell and Wardell slipped, which he was like to do when the Sheriff got him nervous, especially when he was high. She shouldn't feel guilty, because she had no choice. But she did feel guilty. Wardell had taken care of her for all these years. Now she was about to bail on him. Even though it was only temporary, it felt wrong.

"I'm sorry," she said to Wardell. "I really am."

He ignored her and she left him to his business. She returned to the bedroom, where Ghost was still waiting, fully clothed where she'd left him. She laughed.

"You're a strange one," she said.

She lit a candle on the nightstand. Lavender vanilla.

"Are you putting me to sleep?" Ghost asked.

Beside the candle on the nightstand there were crumpled packs of cigarettes, full ashtrays, and a few empty bottles of vodka. Kayla used the candle flame to light a cigarette.

"Huh?" she said behind a cloud of smoke.

"Lavender," he said. "It's a sleep aid."

"I don't know what that means."

She folded back the sheet that lay on top of her bed. It was a twin queen mattress, with no box spring. She took off her top and lay on the bed beside Ghost.

"Come here," she said.

He stood up and stepped back from the bed. He stared at her. She plucked her nipples with her fingertips, and laughed as they rose like exclamation marks.

"Come on," she said. "Take your pants off."

She pulled her hair into a ponytail, secured it with a tie she kept on her wrist. She leaned back on her elbows and ran her fingers down her chest, her stomach. She slipped her thumb inside the waist of her skirt, hooking the band of her underwear on her thumbs, then letting the elastic slap against her belly. She bit her lip

"Don't be shy," she said.

Ghost took a deep breath.

"I'm not shy," he said. "We had an agreement."

Kayla rolled her eyes at him.

"What's with you men, always making agreements. You always break em, so what's the point? Why make em in the first place?"

Ghost shrugged.

"Equilibrium," he said. "We say things to balance out the things we do."

Kayla laughed again. She smiled and felt her dimple float to the surface of her cheek like an air bubble in water. She saw Ghost clench his fist.

"You're funny when you talk," she said. "I hear your accent, even though you try to hide it. Do you always use big words?"

"Most of the time," he said. "I don't know how else to speak."

"Just talk normal," she said. "Like anyone else."

"I'm not anyone else," he said.

She took off her skirt. She threw it at him and he caught it in his hands.

"Who are you then?"

He looked down at the skirt. He folded it, then tossed it onto the edge of the bed.

"I don't know," he said. "Not anymore."

Kayla swung her legs around so that she sat on the edge of the bed, facing Ghost. She spread her legs and tossed her head to one side.

"But you knew once?"

"I thought I did," he said, avoiding her breasts with his eyes. "Then I changed."

"What happened? What happened that made you change?"

She ran her fingers down her thighs, toward her underwear. She could see him through his jeans, hard like the stick Wardell used to beat the dogs. She motioned for him to come toward her, and he did.

"My parents --" he said but stopped.

Kayla took his hand in hers, brought it to her face.

"Your parents happened?"

She held his hand against her cheek, waiting for him to clarify. He waited a long time before finishing.

"They died," he said. "They drowned."

Kayla nodded, like she already knew and he was telling her for the dozenth time. She led his hand down her neck, over her shoulder.

"Sorry," she said. "That sucks. When'd that happen?"

She maintained eye contact. She could barely see his scars when she focused on his eyes. Only his deep blue irises, while the rest of him faded into background. She slid his hand over her chest. He stopped her.

"Seven years ago," he said, removing his hand from her skin. "The anniversary is a few months away."

He backed up and knelt on the floor in front of her, far enough away so that she couldn't touch him without moving. He couldn't reach her either.

"That's about when I met Wardell," she leaned backward instead of forward. "Seven years. How many months is that?"

She waited while he did the math.

"84 months," he said. "More than 2000 days."

She slid her panties off and kicked them into the corner of the room.

"You're smart," she said.

Kayla leaned back on her elbows, letting her head fall back. She spread her legs, revealing herself to him eye level to where he knelt on the floor in front of her. She moved her head from side to side so that her long red curls spread behind her shoulders like the backdrop to a play.

"I like your voice," she said. "It's very soft, gentle. Nothing like your face."

She tilted her head forward again. He was looking straight between her legs.

"How'd you get to be so smart?" she asked.

He blinked. His hands were at his sides. Occasionally his shoulder muscles twitched.

"I was in school," he said. "I was supposed to go to more school, advanced school. But I quit. I never went. After the accident, I didn't care about it anymore."

Kayla drew her legs up to her chest and spread herself using her fingertips. She couldn't see him anymore, but she felt his eyes on her. His eyes were warm, comforting, nothing like the Sheriff's gaze.

"Were you gonna be a teacher?" she asked.

"No," he said. "A writer."

"Of books?"

"That was the plan."

She was getting aroused. It happened from time to time. Usually with the more reluctant ones, or the ones who somehow had some skill. With Ghost, it was his refusal. A part of her wanted to win out, to make him break their pact. What apparently was a very big deal to him was a game to her. She couldn't help but get excited as she flaunted her body in front of him. She liked that he wanted her. And she couldn't help but admit, she wanted him, too. She couldn't explain it. But she liked him, however perverse the attraction.

"Why don't you write a book now?" she asked.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

He sighed. She heard him stand.

"I just can't," he said.

He walked between her legs, to where he could see her face behind her knees. She ran her tongue over her teeth. She puckered her lips like an animal. Then she smiled.

"I like you, Ghost," she said. "You make good company."

She spread her legs until they formed a straight line, parallel with the edge of the bed. She was moist, clean because she'd showered before they left for the playhouse, and fully naked. Any other man, no matter how righteous, would have fucked her. But not Ghost. Instead, he lay beside her on the bed, fully clothed, and stroked her hair. She took his hand in hers. He was still holding

the hundred dollar bills she'd returned to him. The money had sweated through. She laughed and dropped the bills between them on the bed. She smelled his fingertips. They smelled like cash. She reached over and touched his scars.

"You might be the only man I met whose more fucked up than me."

They talked for a while more, then she went into the living room. Wardell was unconscious. She took a spoonful of his dope and came back to the bedroom. She cooked it over the candle, then sat beside Ghost on the bed.

"Stay close," she said. "I don't like the needle prick."

He stayed by her side. He watched her. He held her hair back.

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"I don't gotta," she said. "But I'm gonna."

She stuck herself. He stayed by her side. Soon she floated, drifting. He spoke to her, but she was gone.

"You look like someone I knew once," he said.

"You look like a fucked up Woolly Willy," she said.

She didn't remember falling asleep. When she woke, he touched her cheek. A serious look lowered his brow.

"I've made a decision," he said.

She waited, blinking sleep out of her eyes.

"I want to take you away from here," he said. "Back to my place."

The Sheriff was right. She tried not to smile. She'd done a good job after all.

"That'll cost you," she said.

"I'll pay," he said. "But we leave tonight. We leave now."

She pretended like she was considering. She bit her lip, trying to look innocent. Then she looked at the crumpled money that lay between them on the bed.

"I'll pack," she said.

*

When he woke Susan was already gone. She'd gone in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye. All that remained of her was a note she'd left for him. The note was folded twice and tucked behind an exposed strip of bark.

Don't be angry. I couldn't say goodbye in person. I wanted to save you from the truth, until it was too late. So I wouldn't have to see the sadness in your eyes, so our last night together wouldn't be spoiled by your knowing I'd be gone in the morning. I love you. We're going away. I don't know where. I don't know when I'll be back, or if I ever will.

A single strand of Susan's hair was stuck where she'd placed the note on the tree. Ghost tugged the hair free and let it fall away from him, watched it disappear in the morning breeze. Then he read what she had written on the back of the note.

My love for you is stronger than the Lightning Tree. Yours always, Susan.

*

Contracts

The two men walked side by side in the direction of the Lee land. Nat's dogs ran off in the fog, returning every so often to brush past their owner. Their black coats looked oil slick as they ran in front of Ghost. He saw them moving in and out of sight in the distance, chasing after scents.

"Good dogs now, *hya!*" Nat called when they strayed too far. "They'll run off for days if I don't keep watch. Hard to keep a dog at home in the Valley. There's too much calling them away. Sights and smells. The woods are full of surprises."

They neared the edge of Ghost's property. Every dozen steps or so Ghost stepped on a small bump. He picked one up. Golf balls. They reached the wooden fence that bordered the two properties. Nat rested his elbows on the fence and spat the shell of a sunflower seed over the property line. He pulled a bag of sunflowers from his pocket and offered some to Ghost. Ghost shook his head.

"Suit yourself," Nat spat a few more shells over the fence. He tossed another handful into his mouth. "I like the salt this time of day. Keeps me sharp."

Ghost could see more clearly into the distance now. He saw the dogs. They'd crossed beneath the fence. They were running circles around each other, playing on the short grass of a golf course green. Nat kept talking.

"Salt now makes me thirsty later. Doctors say I need to drink more water. I used to go for hours without drinking anything. Now I need it to keep my chemicals balanced. Gotta drink to keep the body lubricated. Like oiling an old machine."

Ghost felt like he was in a dream. A gentle wind blew the fog around. It covered and uncovered the golf course in the distance, and Ghost could make out rolling fairways where he remembered trees. He saw rough and sand traps where he remembered grapevines. He imagined he

was standing seven years ago, looking into the future in a crystal ball. But the future was here. He'd only missed the seven years it took between his past and now.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

"After my stroke," Nat said, misunderstanding. "They gave me a new diet, too. Not much taste to it. Real basic."

"No," Ghost said. "When did Lyle sell the farm? And when did they build the golf course?"

"Lyle?" Nat laughed. "You mean fat old Carp? They *is* that son of a bitch. He didn't sell the farm. He developed it. The golf course was his idea."

Ghost thought of the Sheriff's massive belly. He remembered the way he looked this morning on the porch. The ripples in his chin fat, his laughter moving across his stomach in waves. Ghost pictured the Sheriff sitting at a banquet table. The Valley sat on a plate in the middle, and the Sheriff gorged himself until his belly burst.

"What about the winery?" Ghost asked.

"It's still there. They just moved it across the road."

"Across the road? The Hanovers bought the business?"

Nat fired another round of seeds across the fence. He shook his head, smiling at Ghost. There wasn't much humor in his smile.

"You been gone a long time."

Nat ducked under the top rung of the fence. He walked away from Ghost. Ghost hopped the fence and followed. When he caught up to Nat, the older man explained what had happened in the Valley after Ghost left.

"First thing you need to know is, I've been looking after your daddy's farm. Had a battle with Carp about it. Had to pull in lawyers and everything. Cost a fortune, but I won the right to finish out my contract. Cost a fortune more to get it in writing that after my contract was up, so long as you were still MIA, the title would transfer to my name."

Ghost knew little about the contract his father had with Nat. All he knew was that it was for ten years, and his father signed the papers when Ghost was still in college.

"That's right," Nat said, watching Ghost's reaction. "The contract ends this summer."

Nat stopped walking. He looked at Ghost with a stern face.

"Come June, I don't have a say in what happens to your daddy's land. Since you're back, the title's yours. Was always yours, even when you were gone. Once my contract runs out, the land is fully yours."

"How come the Sheriff hasn't had you killed? Cut you out from the middle? Void the contract."

"Too public. I've been making stinks in the paper since you left. Me dying would cause too much of a stir."

Nat smiled.

"Question you should be asking is why the Sheriff don't kill *you*, now that you're back."

"I hadn't thought about it."

Nat laughed.

"I guarantee *he* has. Thing is, there's clause in the contract, one I had to fight to get included. You turn up dead, or word of your death reaches the Valley, before my ten years are up, and I retain possession of your land. To be more accurate, your land turns over to the Land Trust."

Nat spit a few seeds onto the ground between the two men. He kept his eyes on Ghost. Ghost looked over Nat's shoulder and stared back in the direction of the land they were talking about. It was invisible behind the fog.

"I know you're wondering what that is. Listen. I put a lot of time and money into keeping your daddy's farm. Not just in legal fees, but to work the land, keep the cattle looked after, make repairs. And since my stroke, I can't do much for myself. I had to hire out. Paid loads of Mexicans over the years. They're cheap, but they ain't cheaper by the dozen."

Nat resumed walking. Ghost kept pace beside him.

"I'll pay you back," Ghost said. "Whatever's fair."

"That ain't the point," Nat eyed Ghost's tattered clothing with a raised brow. "Besides, I ain't looking to get paid back. I made enough money off your daddy's cows. And I got plenty of my own. All I'm saying is I got an interest in what you do with the property. I got more sweat and blood in this Valley than anyone else. The Haydens' been here the longest. My kinfolk owned every acre in the Valley at one point in time. My great greats were landlords to your greats before anyone you'd recognize was even born."

Ghost knew the history of the land. How Nat's ancestors had, at one point in time, owned nearly all the land in the Valley. Over the years, when things got bad for the Haydens in several outside interests, they leased off portions of the land to young and eager immigrants. Eventually, when things got worse for the Hayden's financially, they took to selling off portions of the land to wealthy land-owners from other regions. The Lee's moved in, and the Webb's, who'd at one time been poor Welsh immigrants leasing the land, bought as sizeable a portion of the Hayden's property as the Lee's did. Since then, the different families in the Valley bought what they could and sold small lots to private homeowners when they had to, but the overall ratio of landowners remained. A quarter Hayden, a quarter Webb, and a quarter Lee. The other quarter was a hodgepodge of small farms and residential lots.

"So what I did was start a Trust, a preservation. While the Sheriff's been buying land up left and right, and I been busy going round asking folks to donate their land. To preserve the Valley the way it is, and not let Carp get hold of enough land to push his Resort Deal through. Folk can live where they live, but they gotta sign a contract not to sell, and not to build. See, I'm working on the side of history, son, like your daddy would, too, if he were alive. Like he did when Carp tried to buy him out, time and time again. Men like your daddy and me, we understand what it means to have heritage. What it means to own land in this country."

Nat looked long and hard at Ghost. In the distance, one of his dogs howled. Then the other. Nat whistled and the howling stopped. The men kept walking.

"After you left, that's when Carp --" Nat cleared his throat, "that's when *Lisle* really started buying up whatever land he could, using his brother's political influence to push people out when he could. Other times he just bought of up land for crazy prices, tossing money to different folk until the money was enough for them to leave. Couldn't tell you for sure where he got all that money, a dumb hick like Carp. Rumor is he made some friends in high places. Some DC politicians, maybe help him follow in his brother's footsteps. Help him win the election."

"He's running for office?"

"County position."

"Will he win?"

"He might."

"Who's running against him?"

Nat tipped his straw hat. The look in his eyes bespoke a certain arrogance. Ghost chalked it up to country pride, a trademark in the Hayden family.

"Good luck," Ghost said.

"I'll need it. Carp's got friends on either side of the fence. The political side, and the dirt bag side. I'm not sure what he's up to, and I couldn't prove nothing if I had to, but he's fixing something for the campaign that ain't exactly above-board. Far as I can tell, he's been knee deep in the seedy side of business since Ames bought out of the family business."

Ghost's pulse quickened at the mention of Ames' name. Ames Lee was the youngest Lee. The Sheriff's brother. He lived on and tended to the land, the property next to the Webb's. Until the family way of life became too much for him. Ames wasn't like his brothers. He wasn't interested in politics. He was a farmer, a husband and a father. He moved to get away from his family. Took his

wife and his daughter. Susan Lee. This was when Ghost was fourteen years old. The summer he and Susan first made love.

"I can't tell you what kinda loads of cash I been offered over the years," Nat said. "They've tried everything to get me to sell. Bribes, threats, coercion. You name it. Thing is, I'm squeaky clean when it comes to moral and civic behavior. I knew even back when, before the campaign, that his threats toward me were idle. He gave up trying to get me to sell a couple years ago. He found a way to do what he wanted to do in the Valley without needing my land. He only needs a little more than half to push his contract through. To turn the Valley into the Wal-Mart of Shenandoah."

They'd walked the entire way across the golf course. A large white building stood in front of them, its arched terrace merging with the fog so that the two large black doors at the entrance looked like an open mouth. Ghost walked up the front steps and turned to look back across the golf course. In the distance, through the fog, his house waited, empty. Nat finished with his history.

"Now it's the Sheriff and his brother Judge against the rest of us. The question is, whose side are you on?"

Ghost tested one of the white pillars with his hands, pressing against it with all his weight. It was solid as a rock.

"The real question is," Ghost said. "If I turn up dead and you get my land, how come you don't kill me? You know the Valley inch by inch. Must be plenty of burial places you could use that no one would ever find."

Nat laughed. His laughter resounded beneath the Clubhouse awning. His dogs howled at the sound.

"My name's Hayden, son," Nat said. "Not Lee."

Nat returned to the house with Ghost. The dogs followed in the distance. In the distance a fox barked and Nat called his dogs. His whistle echoed through the Valley like a bell. Ghost thought of his father. His father and Nat traded birdcalls. Ghost never learned to whistle.

"Last time they run off, Rags came back with quills in her snout."

Nat walked with Ghost all the way to the bottom of the porch steps. Nat put one foot on the bottom step like the Sheriff had done. The boards didn't squeal under Nat's weight.

"I'll stop by again. I've got about seven years of mail for you. I'll bring it. I could use the extra storage space. For when I'm in office. All them fan letters I'm bound to get."

The old man smiled.

"Hate mail, too, I suppose."

Ghost felt tired. But he had one more question for Nat.

"I never really understood," he said, "Why you all call Lisle Carp."

Nat laughed.

"It's his nickname from when he was a state football champ. Carp. The big old fish that hangs out on the bottom of the pile. Feeds on whatever he can fit inside his sucker lips. Lisle was the biggest center in the state. Ruthless, too. Used to bite the fingers of the other boys when they were down in the mud with him. Do whatever it took to win. Guess not much has change in thirty years."

With that, he called his dogs and left. Down the driveway, cutting north across the fields. Ghost watched his straw hat merge with the fog and disappear.

Ghost went inside and found an empty fireplace. He stirred the ashes, but there were no embers. It felt cold, and when he stepped onto the porch his skin tightened. He started another fire, then wrapped himself in a blanket. He sat on the couch and noticed something Nat had left for him on the coffee table. It was a flier from the local newspaper, announcing a town council meeting regarding Nat's proposed Valley Land Preserve. On the back of the pamphlet he found an ad for the

local church group's cultural outing. The group was attending a play in Staunton, at the Blackfriars Theatre. There was another, small poster-ad for the play itself. Ghost recognized one of the women in the poster.

The woman was Susan Lee. She was older, with blonde hair now. But it was her.

There was a show tonight. Ghost knew he had to attend. Nat's pamphlet was as sure a sign as any. He tried not to think too much about it. Just to do it. Still, he couldn't help but think about the way he looked. She hadn't seen him in over seven years. She had no idea about the hair, the beard. The scars. He wanted to look decent. As decent as he could manage. He decided he needed, at least, to trim his hair.

He went into the study and retrieved a pair of scissors. He went into kitchen to find a knife. It was then he found the briefcase full of money. On the kitchen table. A briefcase like the one he'd packed his parents' inheritance money in seven years ago. For a moment, he thought he was dreaming. He nearly cut his arm with the scissors to be sure. Then he noticed the briefcase was smaller than the other one. Newer, too. He opened it and found a copy of the Sheriff's land deal contract. This money was meant as a down payment. Incentive.

He took the contract out and closed the briefcase. He brought the briefcase upstairs and stowed it in his sister's hiding spot. He replaced the plank and moved the bed back to cover the wall. He eyed her pills once more, then turned his back on the room and went downstairs. He used the contract to start a new fire. Then he took the scissors and a knife he pulled from a kitchen drawer and went outside.

He followed a set of fresh animal tracks down the path to a point where they veered off toward the Lee property. He kept walking down the path until he reached the bridge. The lightning tree stood tall and barren in the center of the clearing. It's bare limbs looked like a coat rack devoid of cloth, or a bony hand reaching upwards, devoid of skin, muscle, and tissue. The tree reminded Ghost of himself.

He approached the tree, and for the first time since he'd returned he stood close enough to touch it. He saw, engraved in a bald spot where the bark had been stripped away, his and Susan's names surrounded by a circle. He looked at the letters for a long long time, then ran his fingertips against the grain and closed his eyes, like he was reading Braille. He ran zigzags back and forth across the letters, then opened his eyes and looked away. He walked over to the creek and kneeled at the edge of the water.

He used the scissors to cut the long, tangled hair from his head. It was like cutting through electrical wire. The thickness of his hair caused him to cut erratically. When he'd finished, he was bleeding in places. He pulled the kitchen knife from his pocket and sharpened the blade on a rock as best he could. Then he shaved his head. When he was finished, he cleaned the knife and washed his hands. He dipped his bare scalp in the icy water. The cold stopped the bleeding.

He left the creek and returned home. He put on one of his old sports jackets. It hung as loose as a parachute. He was thin. He was very, very thin.

*

And then they were gone, moved away somewhere and wouldn't tell a soul. Lyle moved into the farmhouse, taking over operations on the farm. If he knew where Ames Lee had taken the family, he didn't say. Ghost asked his parents why they left, where they'd gone. They said they didn't know, that no one knew. That sometimes tragedy can cause a family to crumble. That's why Ames left, to run away from all that happened in the Valley, to be done with it for good.

Ghost's sister showed up for a weekend not long after Susan disappeared. She had more tattoos. She looked tired, thin. She'd heard about Rachel's death. She'd come to see the grave.

Her uncle lives there now, Ghost said. He'll see you crossing the yard.

Fuck him, she said. I'll sneak there after dark.

He asked her where she'd been but she wouldn't say. So he asked her if she knew the reasons why the Lees took off. If she knew where they'd they have gone to?

Who knows, she said.

Dad says they're grieving.

Ashamed is more like it, she said.

Because Rachel wasn't married?

His sister looked at him long and hard.

It's cause she fucked a black boy, she said.

Ghost didn't know what to say. He hadn't known. He asked her why it made a difference what color the father was. She shook her head at him, frowning.

Look around, she said. Things aren't as pure here as you think. There's darkness everywhere. You need to open your eyes. You need to grow up.

She hung around until she got a chance to go to Rachel's grave, on the Lee family plot. Then she left again. This time she was gone for a year, the longest yet. The Valley felt empty. Everyone

was gone. It was just Ghost and his parents, alone in the house. And Lisle living next door, making changes to the Lee farm faster than Ghost could blink.

Escape

She did like the Sheriff told her. She ran to all corners of the room, opening and closing the few drawers of the less than few dressers they had, and rummaging through different parts of the cluttered closet. She slipped jewelry boxes filled with drugs and pills she'd hid from Wardell into her suitcase without Ghost noticing. She stuffed clothes on top so he wouldn't catch a glimpse. She packed the knife Wardell had given her, a long time ago. The knife meant for her to use if a John every got too rough, too close to killing her. She'd never had to use the knife. When she was finished, she grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the nightstand. She looked back at the single bed in the corner and wondered when she would sleep in it again. Then she turned and followed Ghost out of the room.

They passed Wardell, who was sitting on the couch in the living room. His jaw was slack. His eyes half-closed. The television was on, but nothing was playing. The screen was black, but glowing. Wardell mumbled something from the couch that Kayla didn't understand. He motioned toward the television set. He popped his lips open and closed, then licked his lips. He slowly raised his arm to scratch an itch on his face, then took his thick purple glasses off and wiped them on his shirt. When he put them back on his face they were more smudged than they had been. The light of a dim lamp set atop an end table in the corner of the room reflected off the grease of Wardell's glasses. His eyes were hid behind the smeared lenses, which shone like the television screen.

Kayla waited in the doorway while Ghost walked over to the television. He pushed play on the VCR, and an adult copyright symbol displayed on the screen. The tape Wardell had been watching had come to an end, automatically rewinding itself. Kayla shook her head.

"Wardell, you pervert."

Ghost let the tape play from the beginning. The sound was off. They left the room before the film began. Wardell watched them leave with half-glazed eyes.

They crossed the kitchen and were about to leave the house when Kayla stopped. She stood in the doorway, smacking her forehead.

"Shit," she said. "What about Dopehound?"

Ghost thought she meant Wardell.

"He's asleep. Let's go."

"I can't leave him behind," Kayla put her gym bag down.

"Yes," Ghost said. "You can. That's the point. You're better off without him."

"He needs me. I've been protecting him."

"He'll be fine on his own."

"No he won't," Kayla said, getting emotional. "Wardell's gonna put him back in the ring if I'm not here to stop it. We need to take him with us."

Ghost looked confused. He rubbed his temples with his fingertips, breathing deeply. Then they heard a dog bark in the backyard. Then another. In the distance, a few more dogs barked from somewhere in the city. Ghost looked up, his eyebrows raised.

"Your dog," he said.

"That's what I've been saying!"

Kayla ran across the kitchen and opened the back door. She disappeared into the night. She ran across the yard, leaving Ghost alone in the house. She undid the outer cage, then ran past the snarling dogs to Dopehound's pen in the back. She undid the leash, slipped a collar around his neck and clipped the leash on, then lead him out of the pen. The other dogs attacked the fence, barking wildly as they passed. She latched the outer fence again and ran across the yard.

When she returned to the house, Ghost had her bag slung over his shoulder. He met her outside, pulling the door shut behind her. Kayla was suspicious.

"Gimme my bag," she said.

He did. It weighed the same, was just as full. She handed it back to Ghost.

"Lock the door," she said.

"What? Why?"

"Lock it. Wardell likes it that way. He gets afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"He's got people he's pissed off."

Ghost opened the door, reached inside, and locked it. He shut it and tried the handle.

"It's locked," he said.

They walked around the back of the house. He carried her bag and she followed him around the side of the house to the driveway. Dopehound dragged behind her on the leash, limping.

"He'd gonna bleed in your car," she said. "His cuts are fresh."

"It's an old car," he said.

It was then he realized his mistake. She saw it on his face, a sudden frown. They had no car. They'd left his car parked downtown, by the playhouse. The three of them drove here together in Wardell's Buick. The Buick was locked.

"Do you know where Wardell keeps his keys?"

"In his pocket," Kayla said.

"You sure?"

"All the time. He's paranoid."

"Paranoid of what?"

"Of everything!" Kayla said. "It's Wardell we're talking about."

Ghost set her bag on the ground. He ran his hand over his scalp. Kayla stood with Dopehound on the leash.

"You locked the door, you know."

Ghost groaned. He ran his hands over and over his freshly shaven head.

"I don't know what to do, Kayla."

She looked at him. She laughed. She scratched the dog on its head.

"You're not much of a Prince Valium, are you?"

"We'll have to walk," he said.

Kayla laughed again.

"I ain't walking three miles in these."

She waggled her foot in the air. She was wearing slippers. They were too big for her. She took them from Wardell. She liked the way the extra room felt on her toes.

"Where can you hide while I go get the car?"

"Hide with Dopehound? Nowhere. He can't keep his mouth shut. He'll bark at something."

"You'll have to make due."

"Damn, Ghost," she said. "I can make better than that."

Kayla cut across the center of the cul-de-sac. Ghost followed, trailing behind the tottering dog. She walked to the nearest neighbor's driveway, opened the door to the car parked there, and ushered Dopehound inside. She reached under the driver's side mat and tossed Ghost a silver key. She walked around the back of the car, slapping him on the butt as she passed.

"You drive," she said. "Me and Dope are dog tired."

Her neighbors kept the car unlocked with the key inside in case they had to make off quick. They were low level meth producers. They were also addicted to the stuff, and didn't trust they'd be able to find their keys in a hurry. They wouldn't report the car stolen, she told Ghost, because they didn't want cops around. Ghost drove fast anyway, running stop lights where he could, ignoring stop signs.

When they reached the playhouse, he parked on the street behind his car and the three of them got out.

"Damn," Kayla said. "You drive worse than Wardell."

They got the dog in the back of Ghost's Saab, in the hatch, and they drove off. It was 3:30 in the morning by the time they reached the Valley. Kayla could see the fog rising toward them as they descended the slope from the South. Before they reached the fog, she pointed to a sign and laughed.

"I lived here half my life," she said, "And I ain't ever been to Luray."

"It's pronounced *Loo-ray*," Ghost said.

Kayla shrugged.

"Whatever," Kayla said as the car slid into the fog, "It's the same place, no matter what you call it."

Everything went white.

When they got to the house, Ghost said he didn't have the energy to give her a tour. He handed her her bag from the hatch. They walked up the steps and Dopehound relieved himself on the porch. Kayla yelled at him, but Ghost said it didn't matter. He held the door for her and the dog. All three of them walked inside.

Kayla couldn't move in the dark. She couldn't see. The dog stood by her while Ghost lit the fireplace. He put an extra blanket on the couch. He said goodnight. Then he went into the master bedroom and laid down on the floor. Kayla followed him.

"It's dark in here," she said.

"That's why I put you by the fireplace."

"It's cold, too," she said. "Come sleep with me."

"No."

"I'm scared."

"You've got the dog. And I'm right here."

"I thought we'd be together."

"We will be," he said, "in the morning. I need sleep."

She left the room. She opened her bag and saw he'd taken out all her drugs, replaced the jewelry boxes with items from the kitchen. Stuff to keep the weight and shape the same, so she didn't notice the difference at the house. Metal spoons and mugs, an empty bottle of vodka. Then, there, in the bottom, the coffee tin Wardell stored his dope inside. She hid the coffee tin beneath the couch. Still, she was pissed.

"Where are my drugs?" she stormed into the bedroom

Ghost didn't answer her. He was lying on his back, his eyes closed.

"Don't play me," she said. "What did you do with them?"

"I left them for Wardell."

"They were my drugs."

"Now they're his drugs."

"They weren't yours to give"

"You can't get high here," he said.

"I can do what I want."

"If you get high, I'll kick you out and you can never come back. End of story."

Kayla huffed. She kicked the doorframe with her foot. She crossed her arms and thought about Wardell, thought about what the Sheriff told her, the threats he made if she didn't follow through with his orders. She looked at Ghost lying on the bed and she sighed.

"I don't like you as much as I thought I did," she said.

Ghost opened his eyes in time to see her long red curls trail behind her as she left the room. He listened to her stomp about the house. Her footsteps were familiar. The slow creak in the darkness. He was reminded of all the times his sister snuck in and out of the house. Then he thought of all the time he did the same. His parents must have known. He could hear everything, from anywhere in the house, where he was on their bedroom floor.

Kayla paced for a good long time. The sound of her footsteps lulled him. He was on the verge of passing out. She may have come into the room a few more times, but he couldn't tell if he was dreaming. He answered her, but he wasn't sure what he was saying. He wasn't sure if she was real.

Sometime during the night he heard her yell, "There's no running water?"

He heard barking. He smelled cigarettes. He fell into a deep, dark sleep.

*

The first year without Susan passed like sap. Then time picked up again. Seasons passed like highway lane dividers. Blink after blink the years hummed, and before long there were no more summers left. Ghost went off to college.

In college, for the first time, he made love to other women. No one compared. He made friends, but few lasted. He spent a lot of weekends home, helping with the farm. He did well in school. But he felt numb inside. He felt empty.

He spent most of the nights he was home driving alone in and out of back holler roads and up and down the maintenance roads that took him over the different mountain ranges. He drove with the windows down and the radio off, listened to the night sounds of the valley, the pips of crickets and the zap of dragonflies. He spent hours in the dark with the engine idling, parked in the center of the bridge that crossed the river to the three properties, staring off into the distance, listening to the river, smelling the manure, and watching the moonlight shimmer on the water like a silver fish. Sometimes he walked to the Sawmill bridge and looked at the Lightning Tree, the sole statue rising from the bank beside the creek, its limbs spread like a rake against the sky, collecting leaves like stars from all across the galaxy.

The tree had always been for him an oasis from an otherwise insipid life: it's limbs a canopy beneath which he and Susan sat or lay or wrestled in the sometimes muddy earth. But now, from time and distance, he saw loneliness exuding from the tree, and felt the pain of every dozen lightning bolt that had ever shocked its core, saw the black scars across its body. He thought about the letter he'd gotten from his sister, delivered to his address at school. A letter congratulating him on his upcoming graduation. A letter written on the back of an unpaid utility bill, with an address he didn't recognize, somewhere in DC, and a man's name he didn't know. He thought about his parents and the nights he heard them pacing in the house, their footsteps and the sounds of sadness. His mother's wrinkling eyes and his father's graying beard.

He stared at the tree and thought of all the branches that had fallen into the creek over the years. He thought of all the waste, the ruin, all the water and all the time it took to mold the present moment from the past. He thought of all the books he read in school, of all he'd learned about literature, the theory and the art, and felt useless, he felt empty, full of knowledge but devoid of heart. He thought about Susan and all the girls he knew at school. He looked down into the creek and remembered nearly drowning, nearly buried in that watery grave. He thought about the Valley, and how it had changed since Lisle became the Sheriff. He thought about the shaggy dog his parents adopted when he left for college, how it was already old when they got him, old and gray, abused and weathered like the Lightning Tree. Ghost thought about it all. It made him feel alone.

He was dead without her. He had been since she'd gone. No matter what he did, he felt like a living corpse, a waking dream. Nothing was the same. It could never be the same.

He fell asleep each night with her long red hair caught in his throat, her memory running through his veins like a drug.

PART TWO

Ghost

For a long time there was no one.

Then there was Heidi. He met her on the subway down in Hyde Park. she had cancer. He stayed with her awhile, then he left.

He met Chloe in Savannah. She was an artist. She liked to paint him in her bedroom. She liked to paint his body, too. This was in the summer. His sweat slowed the drying time. He got it everywhere. On the walls. On the bed sheets. On her. She said it looked beautiful, like chaos. To him it looked like blood. He couldn't sleep at night.

He met Meagan in a hospital in Seattle. She took him for walks. He opened up to her. She told him about her love of rain, how she liked to touch the fruit at the farmers market but never buys. They talked about God.

He met Kristen in a shelter in Des Moines. She said he had a perfect cock. She said her hair was made of weeds. She disappeared after three nights and he left Des Moines.

Then he moved into the loft. Because he met Sara. He met her at a shelter where she volunteered. She liked him. She made arrangements. Her boyfriend didn't care. He was a musician. He said so long as Ghost didn't steal his instruments.

Everyone in the loft did drugs. Ghost watched them snort and swallow things. He envied their willingness to disengage with reality. He sought to avoid the world in a similar way. But he

refused to numb his pain through artificial means. Instead he knelt in front of windows and starved himself and slept with women when they'd offer. He was surprised by how many women would sleep with him, despite his awful looks. His hair, his beard, his scars. The worse he got, the more and more the women in the loft were willing take their clothes off in front of him and slip beside him in his bed. The women were thin and tattooed. They were strange and they were beautiful. They were screwed in the head.

Misty rolled away from him and snorted coke off the mirror beside the bed through an old receipt she rolled into a straw. She turned back over with wide and bloodshot eyes and kissed Ghost on the mouth.

“You taste like death,” she said and slid on top of him again.

Diamond pinned Ghost against the sink with her hips.

“God damn,” she said.

She straddled him and kissed his neck and licked his scars. She clawed at his back in the mirror and she pressed down hard on him. She pinched his scars. She said it felt good to her, like popping pimples on a child. She said he made her feel alive and real.

“God damn,” she said again. “God damn!”

All the women. All their pain. His fingers slid over their bodies like probes. He checked them inside and out. None of them had what he was looking for.

Not even Nomi, who appeared to him like sight from black-out. She was a licensed psychiatrist. She came to parties at the loft to trade prescriptions for sex. She had early stage uterine cancer.

She was the only one who didn't do a double take when she met him.

"You're an ugly one," she said straight out. "Fuck me and I'll write you a script for Valium."

She always wore a necklace, even while naked. She wouldn't tell him why. She never asked about his scars or his tattoo, so he figured they were even.

"You don't fuck right," she said after the first few times.

He lay prone beside her on the bed. He watched the smoke from her cigarette whirl toward the ceiling like a stringless kite.

"I mean," she said, "your cock is right. The way you *fuck* me is right. But you're not right. It isn't like with other men. You're not just absent, you're not, you know, somewhere else. You're just, I don't know. You're here, but you're not. You're somewhere else. It's almost like you're dead."

She caressed the scars on his neck with her palm. She kissed his cheek where the hair didn't grow, where the skin was taut and rind-like. She ran her finger across the bridge of his nose and he closed his eyes.

"It's like fucking a ghost," she said.

"Why sex?" she asked him. "Why not drugs or money? Why not muscles or philosophy? Why not build little ships inside glass bottles?"

Ghost stopped licking her. He looked up her long white body and met her eyes. He thought for a moment.

"Should I stop what I'm doing and knit you a sweater?" he asked.

"Good point," she said and pushed his face between her legs.

She waited to speak again until after she came.

"But seriously," she said. "Why not crossword puzzles?"

She wrote him different scripts. He started taking them. The pills made him feel like he was living in a dream. But he trusted her. They tried out different medications. The sensations were subtle at first, but as the weeks progressed and she upped his dosage, he felt really good or really bad. Mostly bad. But then, *magic*. The pain was gone. The world removed itself from his shoulders and he could breathe again. His memories remained, but he could manage them. He felt the ground beneath him for the first time in six and a half years. There was balance. There was hope.

Then Odis George went blind. They took him to a vet and the vet took out his eyes.

Nomi had her hysterectomy a week later. She spent the day before the operation in bed with Ghost.

"Make me cum as many times as humanly possible," she said.

After the last of her orgasms, she took the necklace off her neck and slipped it into Ghost's palm.

"Hang on to this for me. It was my mother's. She wore it while she was pregnant with me."

Ghost opened the locket and saw a small painting inside.

"St. Gerard," she said. "Patron Saint of Expectant Mothers."

Ghost closed his fist around the locket. Nomi cried. He held her.

He never had a chance to return the locket. After the operation, Nomi stopped coming to the loft. Ghost didn't hear a word from her. He checked her office but she wasn't there. The receptionist said she'd quit her job months ago, sold her house. She left no note, no forwarding address.

She was gone.

Ghost stayed in the loft a few more weeks. He fucked the other women again. Strippers, models, prostitutes. He took his prescription. His head felt clearer every day. But he felt hollow inside. The women felt like mannequins. The loft was a movie set. The entire city made of cardboard.

Ghost remembered a man from Des Moines. A retired psychologist who volunteered at a shelter Ghost had stopped in years ago. The man was a Buddhist. He remembered the name of a city. He left the loft and hitchhiked with Odis George, like he had for the last seven years. The only difference was, Odis George was blind.

Ghost stayed three months at the monastery. The monks didn't make him participate, though they encouraged him. There were no women there. There were no distractions. The monks left Ghost and Odis George alone. They fed and clothed him, offered conversation here and there. Ghost started meditating. He learned to sit the proper way, but he preferred to kneel. He tried to forget Nomi, but the more he tried, the more he remembered her. The same with his parents, his sister, his home. Eventually he just stopped trying not to think, and soon he found himself in brief but frequent states of peace. He learned to like it in the monastery. He felt like he could live here, like he'd finally found a place to call home.

Then Odis George died. The Master offered burial. But Ghost declined. He knew what he had to do. So he wrapped Odis George in a blanket and walked to the road. The Master asked him who would pick up a scar-face hitchhiker with a dead dog. The Master gave him a used car kept at the monastery for emergencies. Ghost tried to refuse, but the Master insisted. Some of the monks filled the car with food.

Ghost had no money, no possessions. So he gave them the only thing he had of value. The necklace Nomi gave him in the loft. The only thing he had to remember her by.

Then he left. Twenty hours later and Ghost was back in the Valley of his birth. His first time back in seven years.

But before all that, in the beginning. Before the others there was Susan. Susan Lee. For fifteen years he courted her. Then he had her. Then she left. Then seven years went by and she was returned to him. Then his parents died. His sister. His accident.

After that, seven years and all the cities all the women all the pain.

And now, Kayla. Here, back in this house again. His parents' house. Four walls to hold the ceiling up. Walls for safety, walls for warmth. Walls inside of which, he knew, he'd fall in love with her. He knew because he'd seen her face, her hair. Her dimple.

He knew because it couldn't happen any other way.

Kayla

*

Knead

When he woke, the house was quiet. No sound from the other room. He walked into the hall. From there he could hear Kayla's nose whistle while she breathed. He walked into the living room and stood beside where she and Dopehound lay. Kayla murmured something in her sleep. Dopehound growled when Ghost drew near.

He stood in front of the fireplace, watching her sleep. Then he knelt beside her. He didn't touch her hand again. He just watched her, steadily, until she woke. She raised her eyebrows in her sleep. She pursed her lips, licking the inside of them between her teeth. Then she opened her eyes and saw him looking down at her. She blinked her eyes, rubbed one with her thumb. She swallowed and her throat made a gurgling sound.

"You wanna fuck?" she asked.

Ghost shook his head. Kayla closed her eyes again, turning over to hug the dog.

"Wake me when you do," she yawned.

Ghost showed her where the water was. He showed her where the blankets were. He showed her where the edible food was. He told her why the faucets didn't run. He told her not to open the fridge. He showed her where the candles were. He gave her a flashlight and matches. He showed her how to start a fire.

At the end of the tour she stood beside Dopehound, her fingers gently stroking his head.

"Even a real, honest to God ghost would have a VCR, " she said.

Later that morning she found him in the kitchen. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were wide.

"I need running water," she said. "Or I need drugs. One or the other."

That afternoon she interrupted him while he was kneeling on the porch.

"If I'm staying here --" she poked him in the ear.

She spouted off a list of her demands. She demanded that he call the electric company. Demanded that he clean the fridge and stock it with milk. She wanted Cocoa Puffs. She said to trim his beard because it was too wizard-like. He did nothing. He just waited, watching her and offering her food. She demanded that he call the cable company. She didn't eat.

"I'm leaving then," she said, but never did.

When she was lucid, she was pissed off. But sometimes she was lucid and calm. Ghost liked those times.

When she wasn't lucid, Ghost felt like someone was pulling guitar strings from his brain. When she was bad off it reminded him about the pain he felt. He was coming off his pills. His head was fuzzy. His thinking wasn't straight. He kneeled and remained as quiet and as still as possible. Otherwise, he felt like he might shake right out of his skin. If he moved too fast, he might fall off the earth.

She drummed her fingertips against the windowpane. She was shaking.

"I'm bored," she said through the broken window.

He shrugged from where he was kneeling on the porch.

"It's raining," he said. "Even God is bored."

She made a face at him, but he couldn't see. She lay her head down on the windowsill. He knelt there, doing nothing. He looked straight ahead of him, at nothing.

"What's there to do around here if we can't even fuck?" she asked him.

She walked to the couch and curled up beside Dopehound. She sighed as loud as she could, then closed her eyes. Eventually she fell asleep.

When she woke she found a blanket draped across her shoulders.

Ghost left her in the house to detox while he walked alone in the woods with Dopehound. He was a nervous dog, without much instinct. He stayed close to Ghost, but when he stooped to pet him, the dog cowered. He came to Ghost when he whistled, but he wouldn't be touched. Sometimes Ghost waited, with his palm turned upward, thinking the dog would open up to him. But the dog just sat there. He waited, he watched. But he wouldn't trust.

"I know how you feel," Ghost said.

They walked the rest of the way and stood in front of Odis George's grave. Ghost had rushed the burial. He didn't dig deep enough, and now there was a hole where Odis George had been a week ago. Ghost looked down at the new dog and shook his head.

"I was gonna say 'this is the alternative.' But I guess O.G. found a loophole in the Law."

Ghost knelt, his knees in the mud. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Behind him, Dopehound sniffed his bare feet. It tickled, and Ghost tried not to smile. The dog licked his toes and he laughed aloud.

One night she climbed into bed with Ghost. She was acting less chaotic lately. She was coming out of detox. She didn't try to touch him, just laid their hoping he would touch her. But he didn't. They slept the entire night and he didn't make a move.

In the morning she woke to find him watching her. She rolled her eyes, groggily.

"Don't you fall for me," she rolled out of bed. "I fuck for money. But I don't accept Pitycard."

"I said don't fall in love with me," she said again that afternoon. "That shit ain't on the menu. You wanna fuck or something, fine. But more than that and you've got the wrong girl. I ain't in the mood to love. "

Ghost shrugged. He closed his eyes and meditated. Whatever. She gave him the middle finger and she left the room.

They didn't speak for the rest of the day. Kayla fussed in the bathroom and walked in circles around the house. She smoked the last of her cigarettes. Ghost alternately kneeled and sorted through his parents' things. Sometimes he watched Kayla walk past an open window and she felt strange in the stomach. In the evening, Ghost fixed supper and waited until Kayla sat across from him to eat. He scooped a pile of rice and potatoes onto her plate and ate his own. She stared at her food for ten minutes, then she stomped her foot on the floor and frowned.

"Fuck," she pushed her plate away. "I ain't in the mood to eat, neither."

She got up from the table and left Ghost to eat alone again.

"You're shaking," Ghost said.

"It's refrigerated here," Kayla said, resting her head on his chest.

He sat on the floor in front of the fireplace. Kayla stormed into the room and stood in front of him. Her hair was drawn tight behind her neck.

"You're fucked up, ok?" she said. "Seriously."

Ghost said nothing. He looked at her and made his eyes soft, open.

"Nah," she waved a hand at him. "Don't even start with me."

Kayla put her hands on her hips. She sucked air in through her nose and cocked her head. Then she counted off on her fingers.

“You lay with me, but you don’t fuck. I throw your food on the floor, you make me more. I walk out on you and you just wait until I walk back in.”

She smacked her counting hand against her forehead.

“What the fuck do you *want* from me? Who am I supposed to *be* for you?”

She paced nervously around the room for a minute. Then she kneeled on the floor in front of him.

"Where'd you put those drugs, Ghost? I need something. You're driving me crazy."

Ghost said nothing. He just stared at her, and she could see his shoulders wanting to shrug, his head want to shake. But he held his pose, just watching. She crawled up close to him, right in front of his face and stared into his eyes like they were magnifying glasses. She wanted reasons. She wanted an excuse, at least. She stared at him, searching. But she didn’t understand.

“Yeah," she said. "Yeah?"

She knelt there for a moment more. Then she broke eye contact and stood up. She threw her arms in the air and walked away.

“*Yeah,*" she said.

These first few days were difficult. Ghost felt out of rhythm. Kayla was disruptive. When he woke early in the morning to pray, she came on the porch and smoked her cigarettes; when he sat patiently at midday, she stumbled in the background, breaking things in search of his hidden car keys. When they sat for dinner, she could not eat: she cried a lot and sometimes yelled and all the while he tried to meditate and keep his head on straight. He tried to focus on her getting well. On his getting well.

She vomited. She shook. She hallucinated and she wet the bed. Ghost cleaned up after her. He held her like a child when she cried; he listened to her patiently when she screamed and yelled and

begged for him to take her back to Staunton. He did not oblige, nor did he try to change or convince her otherwise. For the most part, he just let her be, and went about his business as close to usual as possible. He woke before dawn. He bathed. He meditated on the porch in the cold. He ate whatever the monks had rationed for him. He left her breakfast on the table, even though he knew she wouldn't eat. Then he went about the house sorting through things, dusting things off and boxing things up, or he worked to touch up some cosmetic aspect of the place. A squeaky hinge on a kitchen cabinet, a broken window in need of boarding over. Sometimes Kayla watched him work. But more often than not she slept or paced around the place like an animal. Sometimes she broke things.

He had a terrible dream about Nomi. Perhaps a memory. Something she said to him toward the end. Words that haunted him.

“I see the way you look at them. The way you look at me. You only think I'm different. But I'm not. Or you believe that you're different. With me. But you're not. It's the same dilemma. Your intentions and your dick are criss-crossed. And there you hang, martyred on yourself like some holy thing. But you're not. You're just a messed up kid, that's all. And you're not even messed up in all that messed up a way. You want to love, and you think that fucking will get you there. And you want to fuck, but you don't want to use anyone, so you think that throwing love into the mix will cure your guilt. You're lying to yourself in both directions. You need to be alone, but you're too scared to be alone. You want to run, cause you know you should. But you're terrified of what might happen if you leave. I mean if you really leave. If you turn off everything but yourself and see what it is you're made of, way down deep where no one else can see inside. That's where you need to go, but you don't to risk the trip. Instead you hide inside these girls and you try to stay inside them but you can't because they're not your mother. So all you do is waste them and like you waste yourself. You're overflowing with pain and you can't help but lighten your load on the rest of us. The worst

part is. You're not living. You're re-living. You need to give it up. Put your dick back on the shelf. Open your heart. Open your *self*. Let it go. Let it all go."

Ghost and Kayla started talking for longer in the afternoons. He asked the questions and he listened while she told him stories of her past. They drank tea and sometimes they baked bread. When they baked bread their hands worked the dough together and sometimes the sides of their fingers touched, and sometimes their fingers looped and someone briefly held the others hand. She giggled when this happened and she smiled at him but he looked down at the dough. He asked more questions and she answered. After a few weeks, she looked up from her teacup and frowned.

"What about you?" she said. "I know nothing about you."

"What would you like to know?" he asked.

She thought about it for a moment. She shrugged.

"How big's your dick?"

He listened while she talked about herself. She liked to talk. He seemed to like to listen. It passed the time.

He asked her when she met Wardell.

He asked her when she became addicted to drugs.

He asked her did she miss Wardell.

He asked her did she want some tea. She said yes.

Then he asked her why she came with him. Here. To his house in the Valley.

"It's something new," she said. "New is better than the same."

From time to time, Kayla crossed a threshold, slipping out of sight like a floater in Ghost's field of vision. Sometimes he imagined it. When he knew she wasn't there. His breathing shallowed.

His pulse quickened. It didn't matter. Real or not, she shot through him like an X-ray. There was nothing he could hide. There was nothing he wanted to.

"I won't eat this," she said.

Ghost stopped eating and looked at Kayla's untouched plate. Plain rice with a side pickles. Food he brought with him from the monastery. He had no other food, and nothing to say.

"Seriously," Kayla said and left the table.

He watched her while she slept. He wasn't sure what he was doing here. But that never stopped him before. With the others. In Chicago. In Seattle. All those other strange places. All those other unknown actions. Those strange decisions. Times he didn't know why he did what he did. Times when things just happened as if he were living in a dream.

"Soap," she said. "I need it."

Ghost followed her into the bathroom. She waved a hand in front of the tub and around the room. Ghost looked at the open, empty cabinets. He looked at Kayla's towel, which was tightly wound around her breasts.

"Soap," she repeated. "Please."

He'd thrown it out. All of it. The week after his parents died. He couldn't stand to think about their toiletries. The things that touched their naked bodies. The things they used when they were under water. He trashed every cosmetic, down to the hand soap. All there was on the edge of the tub was a bar of glycerin he brought with him from the Midwest. He took it in his cupped hands and offered it to Kayla as if it were a baby bird. She looked at the bar, then picked it up, opened the window, and threw the brick outside. Her towel fell down around her waist, and Ghost looked away.

"Real soap," she said, tugging on his beard on her way out of the bathroom.

There wasn't much to eat. Rice, quinoa, millet. Bags of flour, too, and several jars of pickles. Everything in the fridge was molded over, a world of its own. The pantry had been raided by rodents and insects, and what was left, even the jars and cans, had spoiled years ago. The only substantial thing Ghost had in his car was pickled herring.

Kayla wasn't happy.

"I'm no dog," she said. "I need real food. Human food."

"This is human food," Ghost said.

"What kind of human do you know eats this shit?"

"I know plenty. I've known plenty."

"Well I'm not one of em."

Ghost shrugged.

"It's all I have."

"Then find something different," Kayla said. "Shit, use that gun of yours to hunt me a deer for all I care. I'm leaving unless I eat something normal."

But he didn't go shopping, and she didn't leave. She didn't eat at first. But then she grew hungry, especially when the drugs were fully out of her system. He caught her eating scraps he'd left on the table.

"It's not so bad, is it?"

She ate. But she didn't answer him. She didn't want to admit that, yeah, except for the pickles, it tasted ok.

Later that night when they were sitting by the fire, she asked him what the grain was called again.

"Quinoa," he said.

He spelled it.

"Don't spell things to me."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It makes me feel stupid."

"I don't think you're stupid."

"You don't know a thing about me."

He looked at her empty plate.

"I know you like quinoa," he said.

She huffed and stood up.

"Have you ever heard of a grocery store?" she stomped out of the room.

"Tell me more about yourself," he said.

She thought for a moment.

"What you see is what you get."

He smiled.

"Ha, so I do know something about you. You said I didn't know anything at all."

Kayla shook her head, rubbed his prickly head like a puppy.

"You only know what you see," she said. "That's what you get. But it ain't all there is."

More days went by. Ghost tried his best to accommodate her appetite with what he had. He went to the store. He bought butter. He added salt and pepper. He tried spices from the pantry. He used unopened sugar from the pantry to make her cookies.

"They're ok," she said. "But they ain't like Pop Tarts."

She tried her best to like the things he liked, and to live the way he lived. She really did make an effort. But it was difficult for her.

“You're hollow inside,” she said.

He was splitting firewood outside. He paused and looked at her, saw she was not smiling. She stood with her arms crossed. He shook his head. He faked a smile. Then he set another log on the block. He lifted the ax, swung.

“But only cause you want to be,” she said, observing the crooked arc of his spine. “It makes me sad.”

He bought her Pop Tarts. And he bought her flowers. He put them in a vase on the kitchen table. She liked zinnias the best, and favored white over red, yellow above all else. He liked to smell the flowers before they ate and smile. While they ate, he looked at her and she rearranged the flowers in the vase so that they framed his face. At night before she slept she put a flower in his beard and said she prayed for him. He asked her why and she said because no one else would pray for him and he accepted that and they fell asleep under separate bedding, hers thickly layered and his a single afghan blanket.

“You don't pay me compliments,” she said. “Most johns pay me compliments.”

Ghost paused, but did not look away from the window he was washing. He thought for a moment, then reached over and took her hand in his. His fingers were wet from the rag.

“You make the flowers look ugly,” he said.

He let go of her hand and moved on to the next window. She used a towel to dry behind him. They skipped the broken windows.

She prepared an extra pop tart in the morning, warming it over the embers in the fireplace, and set it on his plate beside his cold rice and pickles. He ate his food but left the tart untouched, and she took his plate to the sink and turned her back to him.

“I try everything you ask me to,” she said.

She opened the window and threw the pop tart onto the lawn. She turned the sink on to fill the dish basin, but left the kitchen with her hand blocking her face and the water overflowed. Ghost sat at the table and watched the water flowing across the countertop and spilling on the floor. He waited a minute or two then turned the faucet off and mopped the water up with a towel. Afterward he washed the dishes and set them on a rack to dry.

Kayla did not show herself the rest of the morning. In the afternoon while he was working through his mother’s records, he saw her walking from the house toward the trail behind the shed. He watched her through the dirt-marred window. It had just begun to snow and the snow caught on the fibers of her sweater. When she was gone behind the trees he returned to the house and stoked the flames inside the woodstove, added another log. Then he went into the kitchen.

He mixed and rolled out a thin sweet dough and spread preserves and sugar in the center, then he folded the dough over and pressed the edges together to form a tart. He put the dough on a rack in a cast-iron pot on top of the woodstove and whipped butter and sugar to form a simple frosting. When the tart was finished cooking he set the rack on the counter and when the tart was cooled he spread the frosting on its top and in the middle of the tart he pressed his thumb and twisted it to make a smudge. He set the tart on a plate and set the plate on the table beside the vase.

Kayla returned that evening and he made a dinner of rice and beans. She said nothing about the tart, though he served her dinner on the same plate. She ate the rice and beans but left the tart untouched, and when he cleared the table he opened the window and threw the pastry onto the lawn. He turned to see her reaction but she had left the table and he washed the dishes on his own.

That night she placed no flower in his beard.

The next morning Kayla woke to the smell of sugar. Ghost sat beside her on the bed, looking out the window at the rising sun and nibbling on a pop tart. Crumbs caught in his beard and some fell

on his lap. Beside him on a plate was another pop tart and she rolled to her side and broke a piece off the corner. She put it in her mouth and smiled and she touched his thigh and he continued to look out the window so she kissed him on the leg and rolled over again and fell back asleep.

Nat came by a few time, but Ghost kept him at bay. As far as Ghost knew, Nat didn't know about Kayla. Ghost thought about the police sketch the Sheriff had shown him. He wanted to keep it that way. To keep Kayla a secret.

He bought yeast to make her bread. He showed her, but she didn't like the smell of fermentation. Not at first. He told her what it was, but she didn't care.

“I don't want to eat an infection,” she said.

He taught her how to bake a loaf of bread, taught her the proper way to knead. He showed her how to foam the yeast, to do it all from scratch like his mother had shown him when he was a child. Like his mother showed him how to brew tea, and make all things natural and good the way they could be made without modern advances. Ghost and Kayla stood beside each other in the kitchen, hip to hip, and she observed him while he measured out the water and the yeast, the flour and the sugar and the salt. She asked him the difference between baking soda and baking powder. He did not know, so he let her taste them and she said, I see. That was good enough, and they mixed the dough and worked it on the countertop. He showed her with his hands on hers, how to knead the bread in quarter turns, and how to use the palms and upper arms and let her body's motion do the work. She tired and he rubbed her forearms, held her wrists. He showed her again and soon she learned to hold the wrists and elbows firm, and to use the weight of her shoulders rather than the muscles in her hands. When the dough was ready they set it in a bowl to rise, covered with a warm, damp cloth.

"I'm tired now," she said.

She took his hands in hers and smelled his fingertips. She closed her eyes. She brought her body close to his and wrapped his arms around her neck. They stood like that in silence while she slept and he kept wide awake.

When she woke again and they baked the bread in a cast iron pot hung above the fire. It didn't cook evenly, but it tasted good enough. They sat on the floor in front of the hearth and ripped pieces from bread with their fingers.

She looked through his mother's cookbooks. She gave him a list of ingredients, but wouldn't tell him what for. He came back with the groceries and she made him leave the kitchen. He called Dopehound for a walk, but with Kayla in the kitchen the dog stuck around for hand-outs. So Ghost went into the woods by himself, alone again for the first time in more than two weeks.

He walked through fog and thought about Susan. His parents. His sister. His past. He failed to pay attention to the trees. The smells. The sounds. He was distracted, because he recognized within himself the same desire as before. Had anything changed? His body, yes, it had changed; his daily way of living, his chores, his speech, his appetite. But his heart. Was it open? Did it matter? Was there really such a thing as change?

The woods surrounding him were a pale brown. The sky was gray, and between the treetops Ghost saw crooked windows full of faded light. He heard the sounds of animals, but they were distant, far-off rustling in the deep forest.

He walked for hours. The sun set. The earth was covered in a red pall.

He wondered how he ever let himself forget the circumstance. He was hideous. And she was a whore. It couldn't work. He'd take her back. He'd apologize to Wardell. He'd pay them both, use the money the Sheriff left for the Land Deal. He'd return it all to normal. Like it never happened. A clean break.

He missed his pills more than ever before. He missed his mother. His father. His dog.

He wondered why the Sheriff hadn't stopped by again. Why he hadn't come to follow up on the bribe. To pressure him about the land. Ghost feared the Sheriff's return, feared him finding out about Kayla and recognizing her from the police sketch. But that day never came, and it seemed odd to him that it didn't.

The evening grew dark. Ghost felt exhausted, and sick to his stomach. He didn't want to break the news to Kayla. They'd come so far. Things seemed so real.

When he returned, Kayla stood on the porch waiting and he saw her red hair in the darkness and he almost did not recognize her. His eyes were playing tricks on him. She'd braided her long red hair in pigtails. He felt sad and frightened and he walked to her slowly. He couldn't bring himself to speak. He just stared at her, unsure of who she was and when he was, unsure of everything. She took his hand on the porch and led him inside and he saw that she had made his mother's favorite dish. It felt like too much without his pills. But he let her lead him to the table. They sat together, side by side, and ate.

The dinner was awful, nearly inedible. It was burned and tasted like metal. Ghost noticed the tears crowning in Kayla's eyes. She'd made a real effort. She'd *been* making real efforts. Ghost felt sorry for doubting her, for doubting them. He forgot everything he decided in the woods. It didn't matter, none of it. He put his foot on hers beneath the table. He leaned over and he kissed her on the lips.

"It's beautiful," he said and helped himself to more.

The next morning, Ghost woke to Kayla sitting next to him. She was drawing tiny circles on his arm with her mascara.

"What're you doing?" he asked, still half asleep.

She made marks in different patterns on his skin. She drew a treble on his left arm, and a bass clef on his right. She drew circles and lines.

"I'm making you less ugly," she said.

"So what's your tattoo mean," she asked while he was mixing dough.

"It's a reminder," he said.

"What's it meant to remind you of?"

Ghost turned the dough out onto the floured countertop. Kayla took over, kneading with her palms the way he showed her.

"It means selfish," he said. "And it reminds me not to be."

From then on, they fell into a rhythm. Ghost woke before she did. He started the fire, hung a pot of water in the fireplace. He made breakfast, a simple one, and left enough for her on the kitchen table, covering her plate with his when he was finished. She woke an hour or two after him and didn't disturb him as he knelt on the porch. She took the water off the flame when it had cooled enough. She brewed tea for both of them, like he'd shown her. She brought him his cup of tea and set it beside him in silence. She held the door open while Dopehound ran to the trees to do his business. Then she and the dog went inside and ate the breakfast he'd left for her. She fed the dog cold rice and beans from the night before. She washed the dishes, set them on the counter to dry. Then she curled up on the couch with Dopehound and read. She listened for when Ghost stood up. When she heard the porch steps creaking, she put her book down, called Dopehound, and followed Ghost into the woods. The three of them walked in silence for an hour or so, taking a different route each time, but always coming back across the small bridge near where the ugly tree stood, the one with the blackened limbs and scribbles all over it. She didn't like that tree. It made her feel jealous when he told her about his childhood, about the other girl, the one from long ago. They did chores together, fixed whatever

broken part of the house needed fixing, then prepared for dinner. It was then they talked, and once they'd started they did not stop until they'd fallen asleep on the master bed, side by side, except for Dopehound sprawled vertically between them.

"You don't mind," she said, "that I've been wearing this?"

She spun his Nana's ring around her finger, the one she took the night she and Wardell broke into the house.

"It's just a ring," he said.

She looked at it curiously. She rubbed an itch on her nose.

"I suppose so," she said, laying her head back on his stomach and listening the pops and gurgles she heard inside.

"Say it plain," she said.

"A thickening agent is something you add to the soup to make it thicken."

"Why can't you just say it like that?"

"I just did. Now pay attention."

He measured out the flour and the butter, then combined them in a bowl. He talked her through it, told her the ratio, showed her how to do it right.

"And that's how you thicken a soup. Next time you'll try."

"Nah," she said. "Thanks. But I like my soups thin, like you and me."

She poked him in the ribs as he tried not to smile.

When they talked, they talked for real. They talked about anything, but mostly just the things that mattered. Their pasts. Their present.

They talked openly. Ghost never lied. Neither did Kayla. She just never told Ghost the truth, about the Sheriff and about Wardell. About why she was here in the first place. She didn't tell him because she wanted him to trust her. He *could* trust her. She wasn't going to play the Sheriff's game. She was here on her own now. It was her decision and she was good with it.

Ghost never asked because he never had a clue. He'd no reason to make the connection. He thought they were falling in love without bounds. Without chains. He thought they were beginning from a real beginning. A smooth break from their individual lives. A clean slate. The only tangle their own. The one that was happening between their hearts.

"That's some history," she said. "I don't have much history."

"Let me hear it anyway."

She thought it over, scratching her arm.

"I was born. I lived some. Here I am."

Ghost faked a laugh.

"Is that everything?"

"Oh," she said, "Right. I fucked a lot, too."

"How old are you, anyway?" he asked.

"Old enough."

"Sure, but how old in years?"

"Can't buy booze," she said.

"Cigarettes?"

"Of course! How young do I look?"

"Not quite old enough to do what you do."

He pushed her hair out of her face.

"Shit. Doesn't take much to do what I do. Even before I *was* old enough, I was a pro."

"Did someone teach you?"

"No. There ain't much education in the whoring business. I suppose sex just comes naturally to some."

She smiled her smile at him. Her dimple.

"I'm one of the some."

"Were you close to your sister?" she asked, lying beside him on the bed.

"Close enough."

"But not always."

"No, not always. Not toward the end."

"What happened?"

"She changed," he said. "She got injured, couldn't swim anymore. Then she got fat, lost her self esteem. My father was real hard on her. He had hope she's swim in college. She started taking off, running away from home. Then she quit school. She got into drugs. And it all went downhill from there."

Kayla nodded.

"So it was her fault that you grew apart?"

Ghost sighed. He shook his head, caressing the sides of her belly.

"No. I changed, too. I guess we both changed."

Kayla frowned.

"What's that like?"

"What's what like?"

"Change," she said. "I don't think I know what it's like to change."

He rubbed circles on her stomach with his palm.

"It's not so hot," he said. "It sucks sometimes."

"Yeah," she said, adjusting so her head was on his lap, looking up to see his face. "Well I've been me all my life. Same old Kayla. That sucks, too."

Dopehound kept them busy. He was always barking. At the sound of squirrels in the attic. At the noises in the woods at night. At Ghost each time Kayla got too close to him.

"He's protective of you," Ghost said.

"I'm all he's got."

"He's a good dog."

Kayla patted Dopehound on the head.

"The best. "

She turned to Ghost. She didn't try to touch him this near to the animal.

"You ever had a dog?"

"Once."

"When was that?"

"I dunno," Ghost said. "It feels like it was longer ago than it really was. Feels a little like a different life."

"I get that feeling sometimes," Kayla said. "About my own life. Sometimes it feels like I'm dreaming someone else's dream about myself. Like this ain't real, but since I'm just a person in a dream, I don't know anything different."

"You don't have a point of reference."

"I don't what?"

"A point of reference. Something outside of your own experience to judge it against."

"That's stupid. How can anyone experience something they ain't experienced?"

"That's not what I mean."

"You're not very good at saying what you mean. No wonder you never became a writer."

Ghost didn't want to, but he smiled. Then she crossed a road he didn't expect so soon.

"Tell me about the night your parents died."

What he expected less than that question was his answer. He told her everything. Not just about that night. But about what led up to it. And about what happened afterwards.

He told her about Susan. About her sister and the dead child.

He told her about his parents, and his anger. The arguments he had concerning his graduate education.

He told her about his own sister. About her swimming career, then her injury. He told her about the drugs, the boyfriend, the accident.

But stopped when he got to the part about the night he got his scars. The night he saw his sister materialize in the doorway like a Ghost. The night he turned the shotgun on her and pulled the trigger. It was light outside now, morning. He told her he'd had enough of his past for one night.

"But what about your scars?" she asked. "How'd you get em?"

"Karma," he said and didn't speak again until the morning.

Eventually he told her the full story, from beginning to end. He told her it was the first time he'd ever spoken honestly about his parents, about the night they died. Only a few select people knew what happened. But until now, nobody knew the whole story, all the different parts of it, but Ghost. Now Kayla knew. She'd been given inside information. This thrilled her. She was satisfied. She let him sleep.

He slept for three hours. She lay behind him. She couldn't sleep herself. Eventually he rolled over and opened his eyes. He looked up at her and she stroked his face. Dopehound was asleep on the foot of the bed. She touched his chin. She touched his neck, too, then put her hand on his chest.

"Promise that you'll never lie to me," she said.

He blinked, looking up at her like he was trying to place her face, like he might suddenly ask her what her name was. A moment later and she saw the recognition in his eyes.

"What will you promise in return?"

"I'll do anything you want," she said, reaching out and touching his leg.

"We've been over that. I don't want that sort of thing with you. No sex."

Kayla frowned. She wasn't sure what else she had to offer. Then it dawned on her. She could use this promise as an opportunity. A chance to change her life in obligation to a pact with Ghost. She sat up taller on the bed.

"I'll never do drugs again," she said.

The words felt strange coming out of her mouth. They were unexpected. They felt like lies. But what was more unexpected was that they weren't. She meant what she said. She was done being a whore.

"And what about the prostitution?" Ghost asked.

Kayla laughed.

"One step at a time," she said.

They went on like this. They got along. Things were good and only getting better.

A week or so after she shaved his beard, he turned to her. They were in the kitchen making breakfast. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"What are we going to do?"

She shrugged.

"Since you never buy me bacon, my guess is gruel again."

He reached around her from behind. It was the first time he'd put his arms on her like this. The first time they made intimate contact. She leaned into his embrace.

"I mean what are we going to do about us?" he asked.

"Why do anything? Nothing's wrong?"

"Do you want to stay here?"

"It ain't as bad as it seemed at first. I've gotten used to worse."

"There might be trouble with the Sheriff."

Her heart skipped a beat. Did he know? Had he known all along?

"He's been trying to buy my land. I figure he might try to run me out before too long. It's not just business. He's got a grudge against my family."

He didn't know. This was something different. This was something that had nothing to do with Kayla, at least not that she could see.

"It could get ugly," he said.

She turned around in his arms. He hands found her back, and she pushed them down to her backside. His erection stood vertically between them, like Dopehound in bed. She pressed against him, putting both hands on his face.

"I don't mind ugly," she said and kissed him on the lips.

She showed him the coffee tin filled with Wardell's heroin. She swore she stopped using, that her detox was real. She only kept it as an option. But now she was ready to commit. She handed it over to him.

They burned it in the fire, Ghost holding the tin and Kayla tossing the baggies one by one into the flames.

"Don't breathe the smoke," she said. "It'll feel good. But it ain't."

In return, Ghost showed her the money he'd kept hidden in his sister's room. Her eyes lit up at the sight of all that cash. He told her they would use it to leave. To build a new life somewhere else, away from Wardell and the Sheriff. Away from the Valley. Away from both of their pasts. In a place where they could have a second chance.

He told her about the police sketch he'd seen of her and Wardell. She pretended to be surprised, acted like she was scared of getting arrested. He told her he would keep her safe. She didn't tell him about the Sheriff. She could have, right then and there. But she decided to save him from the truth. She kept it secret. She didn't want him to realize how she'd betrayed him earlier, to feel the pain of knowing. Not after all this time together had passed. Not after she decided maybe she could trust him. That from now on maybe he could trust her, too.

She felt embarrassed, but she couldn't help it. Ghost held her and stroked her hair.

"I don't know," she cried. "That fucker's fed me, you know? Wardell ain't all that bad. And he doesn't have a soul in the world but me."

Kayla was trembling. Ghost held her close, kissed her on the top of the head. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

"You *know*?" she said.

She wondered why the Sheriff hadn't come. She felt like there was more to it, something she couldn't comprehend. Maybe he'd only wanted her to leave Wardell. Could that be it? Was he setting her free?

No, that couldn't be it. But she wouldn't be around long enough to find out. There was money. Lots of it. She'd be out before the Sheriff could dick his way back into her life.

Soon enough. Soon enough and she'd be gone.

She walked with him to the creek. She sharpened the knife Wardell had given her against a rock. She used the scissors first, then she lathered his face with soap. He lay on the ground beside the creek and she shaved his face. She stood over him when she was through. She was speechless.

"Am I hideous?" he said. "Worse than you'd imagined?"

She couldn't even bring herself to smile. She cried for him.

"You're the most beautiful ugly I've ever seen," she said.

"A few more days," he said. "Then we leave."

"Why not now?" she asked. "What's keeping us here?"

"There's something I have to do," he said. "Someone I have to see before I go."

Kayla looked him in the eye. She frowned.

"You don't gotta," she said.

Ghost took a deep breath. He touched her face, her dimple. He smiled as reassuring a smile as he could muster

"You're right," he said. "I don't gotta. But I'm gonna."

She took his hand in hers.

"Then I'll wait," she said. "I'll wait."

Over the next few days, he resisted making love to her. They lay together, touching now, but they kept their clothes on. It was strange at first. Old habits die hard, for the both of them. But after a while, it felt nice. It felt right. They kissed, and they touched. Mostly they touched the skin that wasn't outright sexual. Foreheads, shoulders, forearms, knees. He held her feet. She kissed his spine. After a day or so they started taking off their clothes. They touched more parts. They kissed more skin. And then they were naked. Both of them, lying beside each other on the bed. Dopehound

was closed out the room. He scratched at the door and whined at first, then he settled down. The room was theirs alone.

Ghost was adamant, though, that they couldn't have sex. He had his reasons, some of which he shared with her. His past. Her past. A clean slate, doing things differently. For love and not for sex. But, of course, it happened anyway. There was no getting around it. They fell into one another as easily as a tired person falls into sleep. They were in need of it. In need of each other. It happened, and it was alright. It was tender, slow. Both resisted old forms of sexuality, the familiar positions and rhythms they'd used with other people. They were careful to make love to one another, and not to someone, or something, else. It was good. It was beautiful.

But then they made love in front of the mirror. It happened spontaneously, while Kayla was brushing her teeth. She'd just rinsed her mouth with the bottle of water by the sink, when Ghost came up to her from behind. They were naked, like they'd been for the past few days. He hugged her from behind, and before either had a choice they were making love. It was ok to a point. But then Ghost looked into the mirror. A single candle from the bedside table in the adjacent room illuminated their bodies. The room was black around their amber-colored skin, the mirror distorting everything so that it looked like a faded photograph. Ghost could barely see his scars in the mirror. He mistook his face for his old face, the one from years ago. He stared at himself in the mirror, terrified and aroused at the same time. He started pushing faster and harder. Kayla made noises, both pleasure and pain. He held her tightly by the hips. She threw her hair out of her face and looked at herself in the mirror. She was enjoying this. She smiled at herself, bit her lip. Then she looked at Ghost's reflection. Her mouth opened slightly. She wet her lips with her tongue.

In the light of the mirror, Ghost saw her differently than ever before. Her hair, the skin, the dimple on her cheek. Kayla had disappeared. She was gone.

He didn't know her at all. Not the real her, not the her inside of her. He only knew what he wanted to know. He only knew the resemblance, the packaging. She was Kayla only in his imagination. Kayla only in his dreams. He realized now. In the mirror, she was Susan, Nomi, and all the other women that he'd ever fucked, ever loved. Kayla was a figment. Nothing about her was real. Her love of dogs. Her desire to redeem herself. Her love of Pop Tarts. Everything. Meaningless. Imagined only by Ghost in his delusions. She was a whore. The shell of a whore. Her body was empty. Hollow. Inside, she was phantom. A memory.

He wasn't fucking Kayla. He was fucking a ghost.

PART THREE

*

When Ghost was a child, his father showed him how to use the gun. They walked deep in the woods behind their house, and when they'd reached a small clearing beside the creek his father stopped and unslung the shotgun from over his shoulder. Ghost ran off to the edge of the clearing, took the tin cans from his sack and set them on top of a fallen tree. Then he ran back to where his father sat on the ground. His father told him the names of all the parts and showed him the function of each. He took the thing apart and showed him all the insides, too. Then he put the gun back together again and asked Ghost to disassemble it and name the parts. Ghost did as he was told without flaw. Stock, barrel, receiver, loading and ejection port. Then he reassembled the gun and his father stood up and Ghost stood behind him.

This was your grandfather's gun, his father said, taking the shotgun from the boy.

Is it a war gun? Ghost asked.

Your grandfather was never in a war.

Susan's uncle was in a war, Ghost said.

The Lee's are war folk, his father said. The Webbs aren't.

Ghost tried to ask more questions but his father cut him off.

Watch close, his father said.

Ghost pressed against his father's arms and felt the muscles twitch with the opening of the chamber. His father pulled a shell from his chest pocket.

Goes in like this, he said.

He slid the cartridge in its slot. Then he pulled a second shell from his pocket and loaded it in the chamber. He took aim and Ghost stepped away.

Now stay back but close, his father said, where you can see.

Ghost watched his father cock the gun. He put his hands near his head.

Will it be loud? Ghost asked.

But the gun went off before he covered his ears, and his head rang as he watched the cans in the distance flip to the ground.

Years later, when Ghost was capable of handling the shotgun by himself, his father brought him into the woods with their beagle on a leash. The sky was overcast, with pockets of cloudless blue where the sun shone. It was humid, and his father breathed deeply.

It's going to rain tonight, he said.

When they were deep in the woods, his father released the dog. After ten minutes of his coming and his going, his sniffing and his rooting through the shrubs, they heard him bark, then howl. They ran to the source of the dog's first cry, and listened as he ran off westward through the woods. Ghost's father pointed to a row of trees at the edge of a small clearing.

There, he said and they walked and stood in the shade of the trees.

They waited. They listened as the beagle circled behind them, his howl tracing the arc of the rabbit's run. His father pointed toward the edge of the clearing.

He'll come from out those trees, his father said.

Ghost readied himself, and disengaged the safety on the gun.

Aim ahead of him, his father said and stepped behind his son.

The dog howled directly to the east, and Ghost brought the gun to his shoulder. He inhaled deeply, but couldn't get enough oxygen. A moment later and the rabbit scurried into the clearing from the trees where his father had said it would. He felt the cold metal of the gun. He aimed ahead of the rabbit and pulled the trigger. His heart stood still.

When the rabbit fell, something inside of him fell, too. A tin can flipping over. A book toppling off a shelf. An overflowing kettle. He felt a resonance with something he didn't understand, something old and primal. It made him afraid, but it also made him feel alive. It was the same feeling he got whenever he was covered with his Nana's afghan blanket. The same feeling he got when he saw Susan walking through the soy fields with her skirt blowing in the wind.

Quick now, his father said and slapped the boy on his back. Or else the dog will get it.

Ghost put the safety on the gun and slung it over his shoulder. He ran after his father, who had chased the squirming rabbit and pinned it beneath his boot. He waited for Ghost at the top of a small hill, which led to a brook at the bottom.

Take its legs, his father said. Be firm.

Ghost grasped the rabbit by its legs, careful not to lose his grip and get scratched by the critter's sharp claws. The animal squirmed, kicking and thrashing about. Ghost was nervous. He wanted to stop, but didn't want to look like a coward. He grabbed harder, and when he had it good and tight, he nodded and his father lifted his boot. Ghost lifted the shaking rabbit in his hands, and saw the blood and the holes where the buckshot pierced the flesh. The eye of the rabbit was deep and black.

You know what to do, his father said.

I don't want to, Ghost said, his forearms shaking.

His father put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

Do you want to let it suffer?

Reluctantly, Ghost did like he'd seen his father do before. He stepped beside a tree and swung the rabbit by its hind legs, cracking its skull against the tree trunk. The neck broke. The rabbit stopped quivering. Ghost felt like Novocain had rushed up his spine.

The dog howled in the distance, closer now. Ghost's father pulled a knife from his pocket and readied the blade. Ghost lay the rabbit on a flat rock and his father cut it open, removed the guts and hung them on a branch of a tree, so the dog wouldn't get at them. Ghost and his father carefully lowered themselves down the hill and washed rabbit in the creek, then washed their hands. The beagle stopped howling when he reached the site of the rabbit's death. He came fast down the hill and plunged into the shallow creek. Ghost's father caught him by the collar and clipped the leash on

him. Ghost let the dog smell the rabbit, then praised and petted him. He put the rabbit in the sack hung over his father's shoulder and the two men and the dog walked home.

Susan

On the night of the first performance of the week, Ghost left the house while Kayla was asleep. She was napping with Dopehound on the couch when he snuck out the door and started the car. The fog had lifted, and the night was silent, clear. The sound of the engine turning over echoed in the night. The engine must have woken Kayla. Ghost could see her in the rearview mirror as he pulled away down the drive. He was far enough away that he couldn't see her face. He wasn't sure what expression she had, but he assumed she was curious. He didn't tell her where he was going. He left a note beside her on the bed. *Be back by morning. I promise.* Now on the porch he saw her watching him. He turned around a curve in the driveway and she disappeared.

The drive seemed shorter than usual. He tried to plan what he was going to say. He was having trouble thinking straight. He was nervous. Nervous about Kayla, and where he would take her. Nervous about Wardell and if he'd try and track them down. But mostly he was nervous about seeing Susan one last time. About what he'd say to her. About what she'd do when she finally recognized him. About it all.

He hadn't prepared a single word by the time he pulled to a stop in front of the playhouse..

He waited in his car until he saw her leave the playhouse. Her long red hair was pulled back in a ponytail. The top of it reached the small of her back. A young man accompanied her to her car, then he walked to his and drove off. Ghost was at Susan's window before she had a chance to pull away. He knocked on the glass with his knuckle. Susan jumped in her seat. She hit the gas by accident and the engine revved. The car wasn't in gear.

Ghost stepped back from the car and held his hands up, to show that he was not a threat. Still, he knew the way he looked. He kept his hands up and said her name. She rolled the window down a crack and he said her name again. The sight of her -- the very sight of her in the flesh -- was enough to raise his voice by half an octave. He saw she had her phone flipped open on her lap.

"What do you want," she said.

She didn't appear to recognize him. Not from the other night, and certainly not from seven years ago. He said her name again but she didn't understand the point he was trying to make. She didn't recognize his voice. He didn't blame her. He barely recognized her the other night. When she was still done up in stage make-up, with her hair braided like a * century queen. If she were to try and match up her image of him seven years ago and this image of him now, she might swear he too was wearing a costume. But her. Here in the car. She was just the way her remembered her. Out of costume, without make-up. Her face had hardly changed. Aged, for sure. But still. Even though her hair was dyed blonde, not the same fire red he knew back when, she was still the same old Susan. She was as beautiful as the night she left him. The last time they made love.

The night his parents died.

"I'm going to call the police unless you get out of the way," she raised the phone to show him.

He was blocking her from pulling out of the parallel parking space. He didn't move. This time he said his name, his real name. He said it again. Then a third time. It felt like a word in an alien language. It made his lips feel thick, like he were drunk. He kept repeating it until he saw a hint of recognition in her eyes. Then he stopped saying it and turned his palms up again, imploring her. Her jaw dropped so wide open it looked like it fell off its hinges. She rolled the window down the rest of the way.

"My God," Susan said. "*My God.*"

She looked up at him with a look of incredulity on her face. She didn't seem to want to believe what she knew to be true. She shook her head and did not stop.

"You look terrible," she said.

They sat in the corner of the coffee shop. The place was empty except for one or two small groups of people that shuffled in and out, the groups remaining but with different people. The barista stole glances over the espresso machine. Susan pulled a cell phone from her purse.

"Are you sure you're comfortable being in here?" she asked Ghost.

"With you I am," he faked a smile. "Besides, I'm used to how I look."

That was almost true. He was used to getting stares because of his face, but he wasn't quite comfortable without his beard. It was bad enough when he cut his hair, but now he had nothing left to hide behind. He tried to remember what Kayla said to him after she'd finished shaving his face. He focused on the words. He tried to hear her voice inside his head.

"I need to make a quick call," Susan said. "I'm sorry. Would you like me to do it outside?"

Ghost shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm fine."

Susan used speed dial and put the phone to her ear. A moment later and Ghost heard the sound of a man's voice on the other line. Ghost wished he could ignore the conversation, but he couldn't. He should have asked her to talk outside. But he wanted to seem strong, to seem indifferent. He wasn't sure why he'd bother, after all these years. With all the history they shared.

The barista stared at him as she walked Susan's drink to the table. Ghost tried to ignore Susan's phone call, but he couldn't help overhearing parts. "...met an old friend...put him to bed...be home soon." Ghost thanked the barista and she smiled nervously, still staring at his face. She was young. Green and red tattoos lined her forearms.

"You're a Christmas tree," Ghost said.

The barista tried to laugh. Ghost felt foolish.

Susan hung up the phone, and put it in her purse. As she did, Ghost noticed the ring on her finger. He hadn't thought to look until now.

"Your husband," he said.

Susan blushed. She adjusted her ponytail.

"Yes," she said. "His name is Kevin."

She smiled. Her dimple dented her cheek like sand slipping through an hourglass. Ghost was surprised by the name she gave him.

"Did you and Brian get a divorce?"

His voice felt like sand on his tongue. Susan bit the inside of her lip. She looked down at her hand, then out the window.

"We never got married," she said. "I changed my --"

She laughed. She shook her head and looked at Ghost. She waved her hand in front of her face, forcing a smile.

"Let's not talk about this. Tell me about yourself. Where have you been? I--"

She paused. She picked up a creamer, then another. She fumbled with them between her fingertips. Then she opened them and used a spoon to stir her coffee.

"It's just been so long. You never called. You never wrote. I thought you were dead."

She set her spoon down on the tabletop. It was wet with coffee, and a puddle formed around its silver edge. Susan lifted her mug but didn't sip from it.

"You left without saying goodbye. I--"

She paused again. Her eyes became wet, but she didn't cry. She took a sip of coffee, averting her eyes for a moment. Then she regained her composure and looked at him.

"There were things I wanted to tell you. Things I didn't tell you the last time I saw you. I had time to think. Time to reconsider. And --"

She stopped. She set her mug onto the table, spilling coffee into the saucer. Her hands were trembling. A tear dropped down her cheek and she wiped it away with the palm of her hand. She opened her mouth to speak but didn't. Maybe she couldn't. Ghost reached his hand across the table.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She reached and took his hand. She squeezed it.

"So am I," she said. "For the both of us."

They avoided heavy conversation for the rest of the visit. They talked about her life, mostly. Her husband, the doctor. Her family, back in the Midwest. How she visited a few times a year, when she could. Her schedule at the playhouse allowed it. Ghost asked about her uncle, the Sheriff, but she said she never spoke with him. She didn't associate with her father's side of the family. She asked questions about his life, too, but he mostly told her lies. He tried to change the subject, or turn the conversation back on her. She picked up on this quickly, and stopped inquiring. So they talked about the Valley for a while, how little it had changed in some ways, and how much in others. The conversation came back around to the Sheriff and his proposed land deal. Susan said she didn't want to talk about it. She excused herself to the bathroom to compose herself. Ghost waited alone at the table. He looked out into the street and saw that it had begun to rain again. He thought of Kayla in his house in the Valley. He hoped she knew enough to keep the fire going. He hoped she wasn't cold without him. He thought of Dopehound. Then of Odis George. His thoughts moved backwards. To Iowa. To Chicago. To Seattle. To all the other cities. To the house again, his sister's note which he'd later tattoo on his back. Then to the hospital, the scars before they were scars, when they were still wounds. His sister. The last time he saw her. The shotgun.

He was distracted by the waitress, who went about the dining room clearing tables. It was near to closing time. She carried a plastic bin. But she didn't stop by the table where Ghost sat, even though Susan's mug was clearly empty. She walked passed him as though he weren't there. Ghost didn't blame her. At a different time in his life, he might have done the same.

When Susan was through in the bathroom, they left the restaurant and walked to Ghost's car. It was parked around the block. In the low light of the street lamps Susan's hair looked red again. He drove it around to where her car was parked. He parked behind her on the street. She got in his car

and they sat on the side of the street. She told him about her husband. About the wedding. It was difficult for him to hear, but he felt removed from it. He felt like he was in a dream. The man he was in the car wasn't the man he really was. He was a ghost of himself. It didn't matter what she said. She felt more comfortable in the car. She talked about personal things. She asked him how he coped with his parents' death. She asked about his sister. She asked about his life. He told her what he felt like telling her. The rest he lied about. He made up stories that were close to being true, but not quite. His stories were happier than the reality in which he'd lived for seven years. Then she asked him about his face.

"An accident," he said.

"I'd hope so. But how? Where?"

He wanted to tell her. He wanted to make her sad for him, to make her cry. But she was already sad for him, He could tell by the way she looked at him, the way she avoided his face, his scars, and looked straight into his eyes. Even as she talked about them, she wouldn't look directly at his scars. He felt empathy for her. He wanted to feel angry, betrayed, abandoned. But he realized now that he had abandoned her, too. She said so herself, she thought he was dead. That was revenge enough. So he lied.

"I worked in a factory in Chicago," he said. "The machine I was working on exploded."

"They couldn't do cosmetic surgery?"

Ghost searched for an answer.

"I wasn't insured yet," he said. "I was new on the job."

"That's awful."

Tears welled in her eyes again. She lifted her hand but couldn't bring herself to touch his face. She touched him on the shoulder.

"I can still make out the old scar," she said. "The one you got from falling through the ice."

She tried not to smile. She had the same old smile, that curlicue dimple on her cheek.

"I was so cruel," she said. "Daring you to cross the ice like that. It's because I knew you would. I knew you'd do it and I wanted you to. And your sister, thank God. She pulled you right out of there. I was too afraid. I ran away. I thought you'd drowned. Even after my parents said you were ok, I thought you were dead. I thought I'd killed you."

Ghost fidgeted at the mention of his sister. He shifted in his seat.

"When I saw you the next time, I thought you were a dead. I wouldn't touch you, remember? I wouldn't talk to you. Then afterward, we made a joke about it. We said your body was still down there, in the water beneath the ice. You were alive, but your body was dead. We called the water your grave."

Ghost scratched at his back. He rubbed the tattoo but the itch persisted. Susan thought he was upset about the incident.

"I shouldn't joke. I always joke. You never found it very funny. I'm sorry."

"It's nothing," he said. "Don't worry."

She reached out to him and touched his face. She gave no warning. She touched the old scar, then put her palm, gently, on his cheek. She held it there and said nothing. Neither moved another muscle, though he longed to. He wanted to touch her back. To touch her waist, her skin. He wanted to hold her. He stepped forward, but she slid her hand down onto his chest. She held him back.

"I need to go," she said. "It's later than I said I'd be home. Kevin will worry."

At the mention of her husband's name, Ghost thought of Kayla. He felt guilty, for having these emotions. For wanting to relive the past with Susan, to let his love resurface and the pain return. He was being self-indulgent. He felt like a fool. He shouldn't have come.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't worry about it. It's a ten minute drive."

"No," Ghost said. "I'm sorry about everything. About us. About me. About our sisters."

Susan's face went pale.

"My sister is dead," she said. "So is yours."

"You don't know that."

"Yes. I do. You and I both know it."

Ghost didn't know how to ask what he wanted to ask, how to make a smooth transition. So he just asked.

"What happened the night your sister died?"

Susan curled her brow. Her eyes began to water immediately.

"Why would you mention that?"

Ghost tried to explain himself. She waved him off.

"No," she said. "Just stop. We don't talk about it. It's not worth mentioning."

She shook her head.

"Let's not. Let's not do this. Can we agree to let it go? It's been so long."

Ghost shook his head.

"I'm sorry. But I can't let it go," he said. "I've tried. I can't escape it. It's stuck to me. It's like a dead skin that won't shed."

"I can't help you then."

Ghost reached out and took her hand.

"Yes you can," he said, pausing, thinking. "You have. I mean, you're happy. You're doing well. Without me."

"Without *you*?" she raised her voice.

"That's not how I meant it," he said. "There's closure, is all. Seeing you happy. That's closure for me."

Susan turned to face him straight on. A look of anger shot across her face. Then it softened into a look that was almost remorse, but not quite.

"Closure? You're looking for *closure*?"

Ghost knew he'd made a big mistake in coming here. In coming back to the Valley. In coming to see her. All the dead things in the past were coming back to life. The feelings, the tragedies, the pain. He could see it boiling over in Susan's eyes. She twisted in her seat, facing him. She clenched her fists.

"Seven years," she said. "For seven years I thought of you, not knowing if you were dead or alive. Not knowing if you'd show up at my door someday. If I'd see your face in a crowd somewhere. Not even knowing if you were safe."

"Susan, please, I --"

"Seven years! How long was I supposed to wait? You never returned my letters. Not a single one. I thought you didn't love me. I felt like a fool for breaking up with Brian. But I tried anyway, I tried because I loved *you*. I always had. Jesus. Did you even read the letter I left after the funeral?"

Ghost looked away when she said this. He hadn't read a single one. Not even the one he'd carried with him for all these years, the unopened one she left inside the screen door. He just assumed it was more of the same, more goodbyes, more never-could-be's. But he was wrong. He'd misunderstood.

"For a whole year I tried to find you," she continued. "A year of my life spent waiting. How long could you expect me to postpone my life for you?"

Then Ghost became angry. He didn't want to, but he couldn't help it. It wasn't all his fault. He knew it wasn't. He raised his voice.

"A year? Just a year to wait? I waited seven years for you to come back to the Valley! You left *me*. You left *me*. I was all alone. All alone when my parents died. All alone when my sister left. I had no one. Nothing. And you're angry because *you* had to wait?"

Susan's lips quivered. Tears welled in her eyes. She opened her mouth, then paused. She held a hand up to silence him. Then she swallowed and spoke as gently as she could given the situation.

"Yes, I was angry," she took a deep breath. "Because I was waiting to tell you that I was ready to be with you. That I wanted to *be* with you. With *you*, James."

He felt dull all over. His head felt empty. His body cold.

"Don't call me that," he said. "That's not my name."

She ignored him. She kept talking.

"I was in love with you," she said. "I tried to tell you but you weren't there. You were gone. Left without a word. No note. No goodbye. Nothing."

Ghost's heart beat like an echo inside his chest. His eyesight blurred. He tried to hold it all back.

"Stop," he said. "Please."

She looked down at her hands, then looked him directly in the eyes.

"The worst part is," she said. "When I left, I didn't have a choice."

She reached out to touch him, but he pushed her hand away. For a moment their fingers interlocked. He felt the cool sliver of her wedding band. He felt like vomiting.

"No," he said.

She let him be. She didn't try to touch him.

"You chose to leave," she said. "To run away. You could have stuck around and fought for me. You could have stepped up to the situation. But you left, like a coward. You knew what you were doing. *You* made the decision."

She looked at him for a moment but he would not face her. He looked out across the street, watching the rain. He could hear her breathing. He felt her warmth beside him, the moisture in her breath. Outside, a few rain drops turned to snow. Then more, one by one, until the street was

glowing with plump white snowflakes. The snow collected quickly on the windshield. Susan opened her car door.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Please don't see me again. Please. I can't handle --. I don't --. Please."

There were no words for what Ghost wanted to say to her. No way to exchange what it was he felt for her. No way to gift it to her without cheapening what it was, without losing what it was. So he remained silent. She waited, but he did not say a word. Then it was over.

"Goodbye," she said.

She left the car and the door slammed shut. Ghost sat for a moment. He held his breath. He counted. Twenty seconds passed. Then thirty. He thought of his sister. He felt like he was under water, drowning. After another ten seconds he gasped for air. His lungs were weak. His body was weak. He, Ghost, was weak.

He turned the windshield wipers on. The street was covered in snow. A set of tire tracks extended from the space ahead of him. Her car was gone. She was gone.

*

Ghost saw his sister in Richmond a few weekends before graduation. She showed up outside his apartment. A man waited for her in a car, parked on the street. The man's arm hung out the window. A black tattoo twisted from his shoulder to his elbow. Ghost's sister talked fast. She had bags under her eyes.

I need you to do something for me, she said.

Who is that? Ghost asked, pointing to the man behind the wheel.

Can I trust you?

He stood in the doorway. The girl he had over the night before stirred in the bedroom. It was early. He tried not to look at the rash on his sister's arms. The discoloration on her face.

Are you high? he asked. Or is it just the hepatitis? You look awful.

His sister became angry. She threw her hands in the air.

No I'm not high, she said. Everyone always thinks I'm high. Fuck. Are you even listening to me?

Ghost felt tired. Of school. Of women. And especially of this.

Go home, he said, closing the door. Wherever the hell that is.

She got a foot in the door.

I need your help, she said.

You had my help, he said. You had all our help. You were home again. They let you in, after all the times you burned them. And you just mooched on them, like you always do. Don't tell me you didn't, cause I saw you over break. All you did was bide your time. Live in the house, watch TV, write in your journal like you were at day camp. Then you left like it was nothing. Like we were nothing.

She tried to force the door open.

Please, she said. I mean it this time. This is something different.

Ghost opened the door and stepped toward his sister. He was angry. She backed down the steps. The man in the car opened the door, but didn't get out.

Don't you come here asking for my help, he said. It's because of you I can't go to grad school. It's because of how much fucking money mom and dad spent on your recovery. Loans they gave you left and right, paying for your apartments or your cars. And all you did was blow it on drugs. So don't you fucking tell me you need help. You need to leave, is what you need to do. To disappear and never come back. Do us all a fucking favor.

She was shaking. She looked him in the face. He bit his lip, trying not to scream or cry. He wasn't sure what he would do. The girl came to the door and asked if he was ok. His sister didn't look at her. She just looked Ghost in the face, her eyes red from crying or from drugs, he couldn't tell.

I'm fine, he said. This woman just needs direction. And I gave them to her.

He turned his back on his sister and put his arm around the girl's waist. He pulled her inside and shut the door. He brought her back to the bed and told her to wait for him. When he looked out the window a minute later, his sister and the car were gone.

Gone

He sat in his car until morning. Only when the sun came up over the lower Massaneutten range, above the Southern Knob, did he accept that it was time to go.

The drive back to the valley felt like it took a lifetime. Ghost longed for Kayla. To be back with her. To see her smile, her dimple. He wanted to be lost inside her a face like a child in his pillowcase. He wanted to sleep in her image. To be absorbed in her. To disappear.

His heart felt like it was filled with sand.

Ghost stopped short of the bridge. Nat's truck was pulled to a stop ahead of him. Ghost saw Nat on the other side of the bridge, corralling a group of cattle that had escaped through a hole in the fence. One of the cows stood in the center of the bridge, blocking Ghost's passage. Ghost got out of his car and tried to shoo the cow back across the bridge.

"Damn fence is falling apart," Nat said when he saw Ghost.

"There's more work to be done."

"Always is," Nat said. "You look tired."

"I'm alright. I need to talk to you."

"Good thing I'm here, then."

Nat secured the cows in the pasture, mending the hole in the fence with extra wire he'd brought with him. He walked up behind the steer that stood on the bridge. He tossed Ghost the wire.

"Put that back in my truck, will ya? Always keep a roll for on-the-go emergencies."

Ghost walked back to the truck and set the reel of wire on the passenger seat. He noticed Nat's gun hung above the seatback. There were several bundles of envelopes and loose papers in the truck bed.

"Those are for you," Nat hollered. "The mail I've been promising."

Ghost left the bundles in the truck for now and walked back to the bridge. He approached the cow with his hand palm-out.

"Will she back up?"

"Naw," Nat said. "We've got to turn her."

The bridge was barely wide enough to fit the cow, and turning her risked her falling into the river. Ghost stood back again while Nat hit the cow on its hide.

"Get now."

But the cow didn't move. It stared at Ghost with big black eyes.

"She don't like the look of you," Nat said. "We'll have to turn her here."

The two men worked together. Ghost led the cow by the head while Nat directed its rear. Soon they'd turned it around and walked it back to the fence. Nat unwound the work he'd done and they passed the cow through the fence. Nat looped the wire around the post again.

"I'll have to come back later with some tools. Secure this better."

The two men walked back across the bridge. Nat dropped the gate of his truck and they stood against it, looking up at the Western mountain range.

"Beautiful, ain't it?"

"Yeah," Ghost said. "And it's yours if you want it. I'm ready to give my land over to your trust."

Nat turned to Ghost. Then he smiled, patted the young man on his back.

"What made you come around?"

"My own reasons," Ghost said.

Nat nodded.

"That's good enough for me. It'll take me time, to get the paperwork."

"How much time?"

"A day or two."

"Make it a day."

"You going somewhere?"

"Yeah," Ghost said. "As soon as possible."

The men loaded the bundles of mail in Ghost's hatch. Nat took Ghost's hand in his.

"Your daddy would be proud," he said.

Ghost returned to the house to find it empty. Kayla was gone. Her bag was gone.

Dopehound was gone. The briefcase was gone. Ghost checked everywhere. Everything. There was no sign of her. It was like she was never there. A ghost.

He felt terrible. He hadn't slept the night before. His fingers were numb. His body and brain were empty, shutting down.

Why'd she do this to him? He thought she was different. Different than the rest. He thought she wanted him. Not something *from* him. But he was wrong. He should've never told her about the money.

The house was empty. She was gone. He stuff was gone. Her memory. All of it. Everything. His parents. His sister. Odis George and Dopehound. Susan. Kayla. Everything he'd cared about.

Ghost collapsed in the middle of the kitchen, on the floor in the spot where he'd first seen her. His eyes closed for him. He fell asleep, wishing he were dead.

Kayla didn't return the next morning. She didn't return that afternoon. Ghost waited. He knelt on the porch and he waited. The sun set. The crickets, the moon. She didn't return that evening. Ghost was hungry but he did not eat. The sun rose and still no sign of her. Another day, exactly the same. Another night. He moved only to stretch his legs. Otherwise he knelt. He waited. He listened.

She did not return. He was forced to drink. For her. To be alive when she returned. If she returned. When she returned.

He listened. He waited. He watched.

Another day went by. Another night.

Where was she? Why had she gone? What had he done?

He was thirsty so he drank. He drank because he was thirsty. All because of her.

On the fourth day he rose and did not kneel again. He went inside the house. He went into the bathroom where they'd last made love. He stared into the mirror.

No hair. No beard. No fat or muscle.

Whose body was this, living around his mind?

Ghost wasn't sure what to do. Go out looking for her? Wait and hope that she returned? Would she have gone back to Wardell? What if he missed his opportunity by waiting here. What if she'd already gone to Wardell, shown him the cash, and now they were gone? Where would they go? How long would it take? And what if while he was gone she returned, like Susan. What if he went in search of her and she came back. What if she thought he'd left her like he'd left everything else, seven years ago?

No. He couldn't risk it. He would be here for her, whether she returned or not. He promised her. He promised her he'd be her rock, her shore. He'd keep that promise. He'd wait. He'd stay in this house and he'd wait. However long it takes. He'd wait. For her.

He had no where else to be.

There was nothing to do in the house but read. He read *Walden*. He read his sister's journals. He read through the letters Nat had kept for him. Seven years worth of mail. Most of it junk. Some of it, in the early years, from people he or his parents knew. The rest of it Nat had already opened.

Stuff having to do with the land, with the cattle. Nat had made little marks on things. What he'd paid, what he'd done in response. Little notes that no one looked at in so many years. Notes that were all but useless now. Still, Ghost read them. He read every last word.

He went through everything backward, beginning with the most recently arrived mail. It didn't take him long to get back six years. The seventh year, the first one he'd been gone for, was much heavier with letters. With bills, end-service letters, magazines and newspapers. He read old headlines. He read old issues of *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Home and Garden*. He read letters from old friends. Condolence letters from his parents' friends. Letters from lawyers that Nat had responded to. Ghost felt numb to everything. Even numb to the letter sent by the girl he'd been seeing in college his senior spring. The one he left during the final week of school, so he could be a "free man" at grad school in the city. So he could focus on his writing. He'd forgotten her name until now, reading her letter for the first time. They'd only been together a few weeks when he left. It didn't feel real to him now. It felt like someone else's life. Maybe it never felt real. Just another dream.

The only letters he didn't read were the dozen Susan sent to him. There was one each month for the twelve months following the accident. Twelve letters. Plus the letter he'd kept with him all this time, her first letter. The one he found stuck inside the screen door the day he returned from the hospital, before he left the Valley seven years ago. The unopened letter that he'd placed inside the copy of *Walden* just a few weeks ago, along with the note from his sister, the torn piece of notebook paper. He read none of these. He stacked them one on top of the other on the coffee table in the living room. He put another log onto the fire. One by one he tossed Susan's letters into the fire. He counted backward from thirteen. When he'd reached the first, the original, he hesitated. He ran his fingertips over the fabric of the envelope. The paper had almost greased through. It would burn instantaneously. Then it would be gone forever. No more waiting. No more holding on.

He paused. He still had time to follow her, to hold on to her. But he didn't have to. It was no longer a necessity. Because it didn't matter. Not anymore. Not now. She'd told him what he wanted

to hear. What he had to hear. That she was happy. She was safe and secure. She was loved. She told him he'd missed his chance. It was gone. In the past. Out of reach like all the rest. His parents. His sister. His face. He could let it go, because he could let *her* go. He had to. He couldn't hold onto it if he tried. It was all moving, a river, water beneath the bridge. It was all lost, because it was gone. There was no going back, no changing the past. He could accept that now.

He let go of the envelope. It floated down into the fire like a bird landing on a branch. It was gone as soon as the first flame caught hold. He tossed his sister's note into the fire and let go of the breath he'd been holding. He waited to see what kind of reaction he would have. What emotion would rise up from the depths of his stomach and cause him pain.

But he felt nothing. Pure nothing. Nothingness. It was like a weight was lifted off his shoulders, except that he felt so light he couldn't remember there ever having been a weight there to begin with. It was a beautiful feeling. The best he'd ever felt. He wanted to feel this feeling forever. It was better than drugs. Better than sex. It was pure riddance. Emptiness. This is what he'd been trying for these seven years. All the places he went. The things he did. The people he met. And here it was, at his fingertips all along. Just letting go. Being rid of. Gone.

He wanted more. He burned the rest of the letters, the ones that didn't even matter. He burned the newspapers, the magazines, the junk advertisements with their expired coupons. He watched the pile burn, let it all fall away as he watched the pages curl and blacken. He felt his body emptying. His mind. He felt cleansed.

He wanted more. He needed to burn more.

He went into his father's study. He took the books that Wardell had set on the desk. The books Kayla had knocked on the floor. He burned them. He came back for more. All of them. His books from college. His father's books on investment and health. His mother's books on gardening. His sister's sci-fi books. He brought them all into the living room and stacked them against the wall like firewood. The fire was blazing. The house was heating up.

He stripped naked.

He went from room to room, collecting whatever would burn easily. Anything that would fit in the fireplace. He gathered photo albums. He took photographs out of their frames. He stripped the bed of sheets. Old clothes. Old files. Old shoes.

He spent an entire day and night burning objects from his past. He sweated profusely. He was forced to drink more water. The water felt good. It felt good on his lips, his throat. The liquid felt like food in his stomach. His hunger subsided. But his thirst increased. He indulged himself. He began to like the taste. He drank more than he'd ever drunk before.

Everything burned, and when the last of it was ash, he burned his Nana's afghans. He burned his clothes, his coat. He burned his shoes. The only thing that remained, beside himself, was the copy of *Walden* and his sister's journals. He burned the journals one by one. While the last one burned, he flipped through *Walden* one last time. He flipped to the title page, where the engravings were. All the name's of the first born Webb sons. With his name, the last on the list, crossed off. He felt one final pang of sadness. The old feelings of regret, of shame. Then he breathed in, breathed out, and let it go. He tossed the book into the fire.

As the book turned over in the air, the folded page he tore from his sister's journal fell out. The book crashed into the ashes, knocking the last journal to the side of the pit. It's edges were on fire.

Ghost read his sister's entry again.

My history is these journals.

And then his body went cold. Chills ran up and down his spine like the squirrels behind the walls. Something dawned on him. It hit him fast, like a slug in the chest. Which was a good thing. He had just enough time to pull the last journal from the flames. He stamped it out with his foot, burning his toes. Then he sat on the ground and flipped through it. The burning copy of *Walden* on top of all the other ash provided the light he needed to read.

Every paged or so he found what he was looking for. A grammatical error. A minor slippage, unconscious during the act of writing by hand. Something you might not even notice unless you were looking for it. He found at least half a dozen examples.

...yelled at me because I forgot to put the dishes the dishwasher...

...hate the weather July...

...he was the first boy to put his tongue my mouth...

Ghost's mouth dried up. He drank some water but it didn't help. The missing word danced in his head as he ran to the master bedroom. He grabbed the flashlight off the bedside table. The correct phrases bubbled up like soap: *dished in the dishwasher... weather in July... tongue in my mouth*. He was making strange noises in his throat by the time he reached the bathroom, uttering words he'd carried with him for seven years in silence. Words he'd never said aloud, until now.

"The money is your grave," he said.

He shone the flashlight on the mirror, turned and shone it on his back. He twisted his head to see. The words illuminated back at him in the mirror, scrawled across his back. Only the words and his skin were lit up in the darkness of the room. He added the missing word to his back with his mind. It was there all along. The answer he was looking for. Right there on his back.

He said the phrase again, this time adding the missing word.

"The money is in your grave."

It didn't make any sense. But he knew what it meant.

He turned the flashlight off. The fire blazed in front of him. He knelt on the floor in front of it and wept.

He sat on the cushionless couch and he watched the fire. The flames hadn't smoldered. The blaze was burning bright. The chimney couldn't accommodate all the smoke. Ghost was glad the windows in the house mostly broken. Ventilation. He felt ventilated himself. His face was still wet

from the tears. He hadn't cried in seven years. Not since the week his parents died. Not since the night he shot himself to bits, ruined his face. He cried before that night. But not during it. And not after, until now.

He sat there for a long time. There were so many things running through his head that in the end it all seemed like nothing. Just one gigantic wall of thought. Indistinguishable. Ubiquitous. A wash of inner sound, a cerebral conch.

Outside himself, the sound of the fire. The wind gently blowing through the screen door. The sound of air moving through his nostrils.

He sat. He waited. He breathed.

Eventually, his thoughts grew quieter. Less and less of them, disappearing one by one like uninvited guests exiting the party. His mind was quieter now, filled with fewer thoughts. And then, when his breathing was very slow, and the fire was very low, just one thought remained. Not a thought, really. An image. A vision.

Ghost saw inside his head the cold, mirrored surface of water.

He stood without thinking. He walked to the door without thinking. He left the house, crossed the yard, and disappeared into the woods. He move without thinking. Though he was aware of his surroundings. The sky, clear. The air, cool. The trail, forked. He veered right, south, toward the Sawmill Bridge. He walked without distinction. No rush, no calmness. Only walking for the sake of moving from one place to the next. He felt like he was in a dream. For the first time in his life, it felt good. He felt at home in the dream. He didn't fight it.

When he reached the bridge he saw the Lightning Tree in the distance. He remember Susan hanging from the limbs of that tree. He remembered her laughter, her mocking smile. He remembered the snow and the ice. The dare. And he remembered what they called it. His sister, Susan, and him. What they called the swimming hole after he'd nearly drowned in it.

His grave. They'd called it his grave.

*

His sister didn't show up at the house again. Ghost spent a month on the farm after graduation. They didn't hear from her. He didn't tell his parents about when he saw her last, about what he said. His mother figured she was in trouble, maybe in jail again. His father figured it was drugs.

It's the same old story, his father said. Since she left the first time. It's always about her. What she wants and to hell with the rest of us.

She left the first time because she was depressed, his mother said. Because she couldn't swim. And because you kept pressuring her to do more than she could. To train harder than she could.

Ghost heard them arguing in the kitchen from his room. He'd just read the newspaper, the one he saw his mother reading on the porch when he noticed her face turn white. The one she tried to hide from him, bury in the trash. The local section, listing the engagements. Susan Lee engaged to Brian --. His heart was glass. He bled inside his chest.

His parents kept arguing. He walked down the stairs but no one noticed him.

Don't blame this on me.

I'm not, his mother said. But just don't go telling me our daughter was a bad seed from the start. Things changed for her, and they can change again. She just needs reason to believe.

To believe what? Ghost interrupted. That she's got a chance? That she isn't a 28 year old loser? That she hasn't thrown her entire life away? Some of us still have hope. You just don't know how to invest priorities. Not waste it on infected trash like her.

His father shook his head, biting the inside of his gums.

Don't start this again, he said. You sound like someone else. Please. You know the story. We never thought you'd --

You mean you never thought I'd get into school, Ghost cut him off.

No, his mother said. That's not what your father means. He means we figured you would get funding.

Ghost laughed.

Oh, he said. So I'm the one who isn't good enough.

His mother pulled a chair out for him. But he refused to sit down. She reached for him but he stepped aside.

I just don't understand, he said. After all I've done for this family. After all I've done in school. And you blow my future on a drug addict. Like I don't even matter anymore.

She's your sister, his mother said. And she's sick.

And we didn't blow anything, his father said. We tried to help her, just like we would try to help you if you got in trouble. When we've got more disposable income again, we *will* help you out. Like we paid for school already. Or did you forget that part.

Ghost shook his head.

You could sell some land, he said.

His father crossed his arms.

We don't sell land. You know we don't sell land. What's gotten into you? Why are you so angry?

Ghost laughed again. He threw his arms up like his sister had done the last time he saw her.

Whatever, he said. I don't even care. Not anymore. This whole situation makes me sick. This fucking Valley makes me sick.

His mother held the chair for him, her eyes soft and imploring. But he turned his back on her, on the both of them.

And this family, he said. It's an embarrassment.

Then he left the room. Left the house.

*

Alone

The Sheriff pulled up to the house when Ghost was busy pulling logs from the rows that ran between the property fence and the house. Ghost didn't stop what he was doing. The Sheriff walked over to where he worked and shielded the sun from his face. His silver sunglasses concealed his eyes, reflecting the world back at Ghost.

"It's been a long time," the Sheriff said. "Hope you got all the time you needed to think things over. I ain't such a bully after all. There ain't a need to rush an obvious decision. Good things come at their own pace."

Ghost said nothing. He pulled wood from the rows and tossed them near to the stump he used for splitting. One of the logs knocked the ax over. The Sheriff walked in front of Ghost, leaning over with a groan. He picked the ax up and held it at his waist, turning it over on his palm.

"Been a long time since I chopped my own wood," he said. "Haven't held an ax in years."

Ghost tossed logs around the Sheriff's feet. The Sheriff didn't move out of the way.

"We're gonna cut down a lot of these trees when we build the championship course." He pointed the ax in the direction of the woods. "There'll be a lot of firewood then, enough to keep the log cabins heated a few winter's in advance. Already got folks lined up to buy acreage on the resort. Summer homes for the rich and political."

The Sheriff tested the blade of the ax with his finger.

"It's a little dull," he said. "you'll have to put some muscle into it."

The Sheriff held the ax and watched Ghost, until Ghost finally stopped what he was doing and made eye contact. Sweat dripped from Ghost's brow, and he had to blink to see the Sheriff straight. He saw himself distorted in the Sheriff's shades. His beardless face, the scars below the hairline. Scars he hadn't seen in seven years.

"I look around," the Sheriff said. "And I don't see no reason left for you to stick around. You ain't got no family, no friends. Hell, you ain't even got a dog. And you won't find a woman to keep you company. Not with that face of yours. And not without cash money."

Ghost thought of Kayla. His stomach turned. The Sheriff saw him grimace.

"That's right," he said. "The only person you got left is Nat. And that old coot is on his deathbed. That tumor in his brain's about the size of my fist. Growing bigger every day. He ain't long for this world. He'll be dead and buried, too."

The Sheriff lifted the ax to his shoulder. He reached into his pocket with the other hand and retrieved a cigarette, pulled the gold lighter from his hip pocket.

"What conclusions do you have for me?" the Sheriff said.

He blew smoke into the air. He twirled the ax around on his shoulder.

"Cause I know you ain't just been chopping wood and playing house these last few weeks. I know you been thinking hard. Lots of worry on your mind."

Ghost said nothing. He tried to breath evenly, to remain calm. But all he thought about was Kayla, and how he really did have nothing left.

"So tell me," the Sheriff said. "Have you come to your senses?"

Ghost's silence made the Sheriff frown. He took his sunglasses off, blowing smoke around his face that concealed his squinting in the sunlight. When the smoke cleared, Ghost saw a glimmer in the man's eyes. The Sheriff crossed the ax in front of his chest and breathed heavily through his nostrils. He threw the ax cross-wise at Ghost, who caught it before the handle smacked him in the stomach.

"You and Nat both," he hiccupped. "You're running out of time."

The Sheriff removed the cigarette from his lips and spit a wad of snot onto the stump. It smeared red across the grain of the wood. The Sheriff put his shades back on and continued smoking. Ghost held onto the ax like a railing.

"Good thing the weather's finally cleared," the Sheriff said. "Maybe now you can see things for what they really are. No more foul weather to cloud your vision."

With that, the Sheriff turned his back on Ghost.

"I'll come back tomorrow," he hollered as he walked away. "I'll want an answer. Or I'll want my fucking briefcase back."

Ghost watched him climb into his patrol car, the left side of which buckled under his weight, tilting the chassis on an angle. The Sheriff drove off, kicking up a cloud of dust. Ghost watched the cloud hover above the driveway like the fog had done these past weeks. Then it dissipated and he watched the Sheriff trail plumes of dust until he curved the bend in the distance, disappearing behind the ridge on his way to the main road.

Ghost stood for a moment holding the ax. He looked around him, scanning the Valley from its center. Green slopes, brown mountain ranges. The blue sky. Cattle in the distance. And down driveway, beyond the Sheriff's dust cloud, on the far end of Ghost's property, the bridge. The brown river flowing beneath it, nothing more than a pencil line from this distance. The bridge the line that crossed the T. The Sheriff drove across it.

Ghost resumed pulling logs for the fire. He grabbed one of the logs from a stack. He tossed it toward the others. Then he turned and noticed that he'd uncovered, beneath the log, a hive of garden snakes, coiled around one another like the cords of a battery. They were in the final days of hibernation, slowly moving about, beginning to feel the early warmth of their resurrection. The sight of the hive startled Ghost. All his peacefulness was lost. The sight of the slowly churning hive caused Ghost to vomit. Without warning, clear mucous shot from his nose and throat, like bile from the Sheriff's mouth, covering the snakes in his thick fluid.

A few of the snakes mistook the warmth of the liquid for the warmth of the environment, and they banded off from the others, slithering in different directions off the pile and disappearing into the surrounding grass. Maybe they thought the sudden warmth from Ghost's vomit was a sign that the

seasons had changed, the weather become warm enough to leave the den. Ghost felt a snake cross his bare foot, sliding between his ankles. He reeled backward, and ran in the direction of the house, scrambling up the porch steps. When he reached the porch, he realized he still held onto the log that had sat atop the snakes. He felt the latent vibrations of the hive against his palm, and he dropped the log off the edge of the porch, into the tall weeds.

He dropped to his knees on the cold planks and closed his eyes. All he saw were snakes, swirling about one another like socks in the laundry. He opened his eyes, but couldn't escape the image in his head. An image of snakes tunneling in and out of Odis George, ganged together in the empty skull of his mother, his father's hollow chest. He was filled with a sense of pure revulsion.

He stared down at the plank between his knees, trying to focus on the plank itself, the lines in the wood, the rough texture on his shins, the color grayed with age. But he became distracted by his body. He'd gone hard inside his shorts. He felt ashamed, but he also felt a surge in his groin. He was compelled to lean backward, to reach his arms behind him and bend until his back was lying on the floor. His arms stretched into the house, his head resting just inside the doorframe. The further back he leaned, the stronger his erection grew, raising higher in the air, propelled in the opposite direction off his tightening buttocks. He lay like that for a several seconds.

He tried to clear his mind, but he couldn't resist the newly formed image in his mind. Kayla, naked, crawling on all fours in front of the fireplace. Ghost tilted his head and saw, upside down, the hearth, the mild fire burning inside, the loaded shotgun above. From this angle, the gun looked like it hung beneath the fire, like the smoke from the fire were trickling down to the gun, the way fog descends down the mountains. Ghost thought of Kayla, and imagined himself coming to her from behind, pulling her toward him, mounting her in front of the fire, loving her beside the sweat of the flames like an ancient nomad, with the open sky above them, the stars the only sign of life beyond their bodies, their two bodies made one with desire.

Enraptured, Ghost reached down and stroked himself. It wasn't long until he felt the early peristalsis of an orgasm, a tightening of the anus and a tensing of the toes. Without thinking, he rose to his feet, and lumbered toward the fireplace. He felt dizzy, distant from himself as in a dream. But as he neared the fireplace, and felt its heat spread across his groin like hot wax, he was drawn back inside himself. He felt his body like he'd never felt it before, not in meditation or in prayer, not in labor or in pain. He exploded from himself like a round of buckshot, shooting semen into the fireplace the way Kayla'd tossed her drugs.

When he was through, his body finished, he collapsed to the floor, one hand pressing down against the cold wooden floor and the other grasping at his weakening cock. He lay on his side and cradled himself. His wet palm soon enveloped his shrinking penis. He focused on the fire, and soon its soft light enveloped his mind like a palm. He shrunk away to nothing, slipping into darkness. He thought he whispered Kayla's name before he fell asleep. But what he didn't realize, what he was too tired and too broken down to comprehend, was that he it wasn't her name he whispered into the darkness. It was *.

When he woke again, he was lying on his back on the floor. The fire was dim now, barely burning. His body was stiff, his hand stuck to his groin by a thin layer of glue. Kayla's name lingered in his mouth, a slightly bitter aftertaste. He rose and removed his hand, peeling his fingers away from his skin. He stood in front of the fire and he stretched. When he returned to his normal standing position, he smiled -- rather, a smile formed on his lips. He didn't notice. He was looking at the ashes of the fire, a cold gray pile on the brick. He was hungry.

He went to the kitchen and gorged himself on whatever food he could find. Leftovers from the week before. Bread he cut the mold off of. Peanut butter. Jelly. Pickles. Raw Pop Tarts. He ate and he vomited, out the kitchen window, because he hadn't eaten in so long. He kept eating, until he

was able to keep it down. Then he stumbled back to the living room and feel asleep again on the couch.

When he woke the second time he was sweating. He'd been dreaming of Kayla. He dreamed that she was making love to Dopehound, and Ghost was on the floor with a chain around his neck. Then they were in a crowded marketplace. She was slipping away from him in the crowd. He woke from the dream with Kayla's name in his mouth. A cold sweat covered his body like a shroud.

He wiped his body down with the couch cushion. He'd burned all the blankets, all the towels. When he was partially dry, he shoved the couch cushion into the fireplace. Then the other. The fire smoked. It was nearly out. The cushions probably wouldn't burn. They'd smother it. He didn't mind.

He stood, still naked, and walked outside. It was night again. A full moon shown in the southern sky. He walked in its direction.

He found himself at the fence, on the edge of his and the Lee property. He climbed to the second rung, so that he was supported with the weight against his knees. He stood like that, with his arms spread, and looked up at the moon. Then he looked down and saw the white reflection of the clubhouse in the distance. The rolling hills of the golf course looked like the curve of a woman's back in candlelight. He felt the landscape with his eyes. He looked back at the moon.

He closed his eyes. He tried to meditate.

He felt foolish. He was foolish. But he didn't mind. He missed Kayla. He needed her. He felt empty now, but he also *empty*. He longer for her in only the way that man without a past can long for a better future to stem from the void of the present. He was no longer searching. He wasn't even seeking. Kayla was being sought *by* him. He was sure of it. He could feel her out thee somewhere. She was causing him to sink. He sough her because she was. It was his only reason left to live. His only hope.

But she was gone, and he would never see her again. He was alone.

He left the fence. He walked back toward the house, tilting his head so that he could see the moon. The moon shone back at him like the light of a stethoscope. His tattoo, his scars, his heart. Everything was amplified. He felt too big to fit inside the Valley.

Above all, he felt exposed. But he didn't care, not anymore.

When he reached the house, he retrieved a bottle of wine from his father's rack. He went upstairs and gathered all his sister's old medications. He pooled them together in his mother's mortar, ignoring the expiration dates, figuring they'd be potent enough still. Then he pounded them with the pestle, crushing them into a fine powder. He had to work in several batches to accommodate all the pills. When he was finished grinding them, he used a mixing funnel to pour them into the bottle of wine, the top few inches of which he drank to give room to shake the bottle. When the last of the powder was inside the bottle, he put his thumb over the top and shook it vigorously. He tasted it, but the consistency was gritty. The sweet wine barely overshadowed the acrid taste of the ground-up pills. He shook it again, then left it on the counter, waiting for the pills to dissolve.

He was tired anyway. Too tired to kill himself. So he went out onto the porch, felt the cool breeze tickle his scars. Then he lay on his back on the cold and creaky planks, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

When he woke again it was morning. He'd lost track of time. He had no idea how many days or night had passed since Kayla left. It felt like forever. But it could have been a week. Less even. He'd lost his point of reference.

The sun had replaced the moon in the sky. Cloudless. Everything was bright and clear and warm.

He lay naked on his back on the porch for quite some time. His eyes were open but he wasn't looking at much in particular. He saw a few birds fly overhead in the distance, above the golf course.

He smelled the burnt ash of the fireplace, the soot in the chimney. He was hungry again, thirsty, but he didn't mind. What was so essentially just a short time ago seemed unessential now. He felt like he was waking from a dream. He felt no urgency to move.

Eventually, though, he did try to move, but found his body stiff. He tried to stand too fast and he fell down onto his knees, then down on his elbow. He was dizzy. He hadn't eaten in God knows how long. He knelt there for a good long time, staring at the wood planks beneath him. They looked discolored, grayer than white. It could have been his imagination. He might have been hallucinating.

Then he looked up and his heart skipped. He wondered if that feeling would ever stop. If he'd ever be free from his reactions, his impulse. He supposed it was human nature. Nothing he could fix. The most natural thing of all.

What he saw was a few feet from him, in the paneling at the bottom of the doorframe. A splintered hole.

He crawled over to the door. He ran his finger over the hole. It took him a moment. Then he recognized the hole for what it was.

A bullet hole.

The planks weren't discolored. They were stained with blood. Blood that had been washed off, but not fully. Blood that had been washed off in a hurry. He hadn't noticed it until now, in the daylight. He hadn't had reason to look for it. He'd figured she left on her own. Left him.

But now, he thought different. He knew different. It wasn't that he needed her. She needed *him*. She was in danger, if she wasn't dead already. He had to find her.

He tried to stand, but the blood rushed to his head. He became dizzy. He lost his balance, falling forward. He tried to right himself but couldn't. He was too weak. He went down hard, hitting his head on the doorframe. He blacked out.

When he came to, it was early in the evening, an hour or so away from sundown. The skyline above the Western mountain had just begun to shine pink and purple, with brilliant white clouds in the mix. Ghost crawled inside the house and drank a glass of water. He ate a little bit and felt stronger. He stumbled into the living room and sat for a while on the couch, until he'd cleared his head. When he felt able to move again, he walked outside and got into his car. He gripped the steering wheel like he'd held the cow's head his first night back in the Valley, his knuckles were white with anger and with fear.

He drove South until he'd reached the Chateau. He parked behind Wardell's rusted car. He walked around back, pushing through the gate in the fence. The sun was setting, and the sky was painting itself into darkness. Ghost saw Wardell hunched over in the middle of the yard. He was tethering a snarling dog to a stake in the ground. There was blood on Wardell's clothing. A knife in his hand.

*

What is this? his father asked

It's my diploma, Ghost said on his way through the kitchen.

His father walked beside him, carrying the paper in his hands.

What's the matter with you? Why'd you do this?

The name on the diploma was crossed over, scribbled over in black permanent marker. Ghost grabbed his keys off the mantle and thrust them into his pocket.

Cause I don't need you anymore" he said. That name means nothing. I'll do it on my own.

His father reached out and grabbed his arm. He was breathing heavily.

Don't do this. Please, not now. We have to go get your sister. I need you to come with us.

A car pulled up outside. His father looked out the window, and Ghost used the opportunity to pull away from him. Ghost rushed out of the house. His father followed. The new Sheriff met them at the porch, smiling.

This is not the time, Carp, Ghost's father said. I mean it. We've got a matter at hand. Don't you dare talk money with me now.

The Sheriff raised his arms in defense.

Hey now. I'm a messenger, he said. I'm not the villain. Just know the golf course is on its way. No matter if you like it or you don't. It's a fact. The only thing open to debate is whether it's gonna be an 18 or 36 hole course.

Ghost's father glared at Lyle.

Get off my porch, he said.

The Sheriff backed off the steps. Ghost's mother came out of the house, ignoring the men, and brought a packed bag to the car. She left the door to the car open and went back inside the house. She'd been crying.

Where are you off to in such a hurry, the Sheriff asked,

None of your business, Ghost's father said.

Is it your sister, son Lyle asked Ghost, his eyes glimmering in the sun. Did you hear from here?

The Sheriff put an arm on Ghost's shoulder.

Did they catch her whoring again somewhere?

Ghost's father lunged at the Sheriff. He went for Lyle's throat with curled, callused fingertips. Ghost wedge himself between the men, pulling his father back.

Dad, he said. It's not worth it.

Ghost's father swung at the Sheriff. The punch missed, Ghost yanking his father's arm out of trajectory. Ghost caught an elbow in his face.

Fuck, he said.

His nose bled. Blood dribbled down his fingertips. His father's face went slack. His mother came out of the house again, carrying another bag.

We don't swear in this family, she said. And we don't act the way we've been acting.

James, I'm sorry, his father said. James, let me see.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. His mother went back into the house. The Sheriff grinned in the background.

Don't call me James, Ghost said. That's not my name.

His father's eyes were moist with anger and sadness. Ghost slapped the handkerchief away. He pulled his keys from his jeans pocket.

Please, his father said. Wait. Don't run off like this.

Ghost looked back and forth between Lyle and his father. He shook his head.

Fuck this place, he said. Let him have it. Just let it go.

He turned his back on his father, got in his car, and drove away.

*

Dogs

Ghost walked into the center of the yard and stood a few feet from Wardell. He noticed a trail of blood leading over the patchwork grass to the fence at the edge of the lawn. There was blood pooled beneath where the dog was tied. The dog lunged at Ghost, jerking against the end of his chain. Ghost stood his ground, addressing Wardell, who hadn't bothered to look at him.

"Where is she?" he asked.

Wardell grabbed the dog's collar from behind. He slipped the knife into its throat, pulling it to the ground. The dog struggled, then stopped moving. Wardell wiped the blade of the knife against his pant leg. Then he untied the dog, picked it up, and carried it in his arms across the yard. He followed the trail of blood to the fence, where he dumped the dog's body into the garbage bin on the other side.

Ghost called after him.

"I'm serious, Wardell. You need to tell me where she is. Tell me she's ok."

Ghost walked to the dog pens, unlatching the gate and walking down the length of kennels inside. Only a few dogs remained. Wardell chose one and grappled with it until he had it on the leash. He dragged it out of the pen and walked it to the center of the yard.

"Wardell," Ghost said, looking at the knife in the man's hand. "Please. I'm asking here."

Wardell tied the dog to the stake. It bit at his hands but he knew how to handle dogs. He grabbed the scruff of the neck without getting bit and slid the knife inside its throat. The dog let out a sharp whine, thrashing about. Then its body went limp.

"It don't matter, Ghost. "

"Did you kill her, Wardell?"

"Why would I kill Kayla? I loved her like one of my own. I never had anyone who stuck with me the way she did. She was good to me."

Wardell's shoulders drooped again. He looked down at the ground, at the dead dog tied to the stake.

"Shit," he said. "I let her down, Ghost. I never got her out the way I promised. I tried, but I wasn't strong enough. I'm noting but a lousy fucking sleepwalker."

Wardell untied the dog and held it in his arms. He stood up.

"I never had an education. Didn't have no patience for a real job, working with my hands. Sheriff offers me a real nice deal, work for him the small towns, sell dope, run guns, pimp women. All I gotta do, he says, is watch out for this baby girl. This little thing named Kayla James. Cute little thing, no more than 8 or 9 at the time. Sheriff says to keep her in school, if she'll stay. Says I can do whatever with her when I want, once she's old enough. Says he can't keep as close an eye on her as he used to, since he'd be busy running for Sheriff and all."

Wardell carried the dog to the fence, threw it over the top. He went to the pent to retrieve another dog.

"I did what I was told. Sold myself out to the Sheriff, like I always done. Drugs, women, guns. That was our life, mine and Kay's both. She quit school, said she wanted to work with me. So I let her. I brought her in. She was a teenager then. She started using. We needed more dope than the Sheriff wanted to supply. So sure enough I started pimping her."

Wardell dragged another dog to the stake. Ghost watched, his stomach turning at the sight of yet more blood. Wardell kept talking, not once looking at Ghost.

"It was around then the Sheriff started fucking her. He'd stop over from time to time, whenever he needed to tell me about another job he needed done. Then he'd go off alone with Kayla while I shot up, or while I went off to do his business. Thing is, when I'd return, Kayla'd be all busted up. She had a lot of bad shit happen to her turning tricks, but never as bad as what the Sheriff done. All kinds of mean things. Things you and I wouldn't even dream of, would never cross our minds.

But the Sheriff, he's one sick son of a bitch. He'd play out all these fantasies, abuse his power with Kayla. Make her hurt, near kill her."

Wardell wiped the blade. He hoisted the dog, carrying it across the yard. Ghost stood in the same spot he stood when he first arrived. He listened to what Wardell had to tell him. He watched everything unfold like he were in someone else's dream.

"Something about the way the Sheriff treated her just didn't sit right with me. I got to thinking over time, that maybe I could do something about it. So I started thinking up a plan, a way to get some money fast and take Kayla away from here. I tried to be real clever, beat the Sheriff at his own game, rip him off."

Wardell took the second to last dog from the kennels. He pulled him across the yard by the leash, then tied him to the stake. He stopped for a moment, catching his breath. For the first time since he arrived, Wardell looked directly at Ghost. He looked worse than he had when Ghost saw him last, a few weeks ago. From the looks of it, without Kayla he'd gone on a lengthy binge, slowly killing himself with heroin. He was wasting away inside his own body. His hair was white in places, where he hadn't lost it. His skin was sallow, even for a black man. And the abscesses, even beneath the sheaths of blood, could be seen all over his arms. If Ghost looked like a ghost, Wardell looked like he was on the verge of being a corpse.

Wardell walked closer to Ghost. He lifted his shirt, revealing a series of burn marks on his stomach, marks that had healed into scars over time.

"I ain't the only one of us who been burned," Wardell said. "Sheriff figured out that I was up to something. Got a crew to hold me down. He used a golf club he heated up in fire. The fucker branded me."

Ghost felt his own scars tighten on his face. He didn't know what to say. He stared at Wardell's belly and felt a sickness in his own gut. He felt dizzy, hungry, in need of a good long sleep. He was about to look away from those hideous burn marks, when he noticed a familiar tattoo on the

center of the man's chest, above the scars. It was the same tattoo he saw on the arm of the man behind the wheel of the car in Richmond, the man who drove off with his sister. Ghost didn't need to ask Wardell what the tattoo signified. He could figure it out for himself.

"The Sheriff shoulda killed me," Wardell said, lowering his shirt. "But he gave me another chance, figuring he had me by the balls for the rest of my life. He said if I didn't get in line and do what the fuck I was told, he'd come after Kayla next. He said he'd burn her so bad I wouldn't recognize her afterward. That's when he had one of his guys give her that tattoo. The one above her pussy. To show he owned the bitch, just like he owned me."

Wardell turned away from Ghost and leaned over the dog. Ghost heard the animal yelp, then whimper. Wardell's shoulder's shook, and then he stood, wiped the blade on his pants and untied the dog. He picked the dog up, forgetting to unhook the tie. He pulled against the chain, cradling the dog in his arms, until the collar slipped off the dogs neck. Wardell carried it over to the fence, then dumped it over.

There were no more dogs left in the pen.

Wardell walked to the back of the house, passing Ghost, who still stood where he was. He hadn't heard it while the dogs were being killed, but as Wardell walked by him Ghost heard his pockets jangling, like he managed to fit a length of chain inside. He followed the sound to the house, watching as Wardell untangled a garden hose attached to the spigot, turning the water on before he walked the hose to the center of the yard. He started washing the blood away, moving it down the gently slope toward the cages. Ghost watched him work, then followed him as he walked closer to the cages. Wardell washed the blood across the kennel floors, then hosed the entire place down until there was no sign of blood, no sign of any animals having been there recently. There were no food or water bowls in the cages. Wardell must have already removed them.

"If you didn't take her, Wardell," Ghost said. "Who did?"

Wardell walked back across the yard, gathering up the hose on his way. Ghost followed. When Wardell had finished winding the hose, he shut the water off and opened the back door. He disappeared inside the house, not bothering to look back at the yard before he left it. If he had looked back, he would've seen what Ghost saw. A cleaned backyard, with a trail of blood Wardell had neglected. A trail of blood running from the stake in the ground, where a dog chain and a collar still lay hooked, to the fence, on the other side of which a dozen dead dogs overflowed the garbage bin.

Wardell sat in the living on the couch and turned the television on. The VCR was running by the time Ghost came into the room. Two naked women with a man between them. Ghost ignored the screen. He stood by the window across from Wardell. Wardell picked up a syringe, tied a knot around his arm with a rubber tube. There were several more needles lying on the table in front of him. Wardell injected his arm with the syringe.

"I don't know nothing about a kidnapping," he said, "other than the one you done. The night you took her from me."

Ghost cringed as Wardell pulled the needle from his arm. He'd shot directly into one of his open sores. Wardell leaned back for a minute, his jaw hung open. Then he reached for another syringe and pulled the rubber tube tighter around his arm.

"Damnit, Wardell," Ghost said. "I found a bullet. There was blood."

Wardell shot himself again in the arm.

"Where'd you find the bullet?"

"On the wall of the porch."

"Where on the wall?"

"Down low," Ghost showed him with his hand, though Wardell's eyes were barely open.

"About as high as my knee."

Wardell shook his head, slowly. His speech slurred.

"They killed the dog. Unless they made her drop down to her knees"

Ghost felt sick at the prospect of someone forcing Kayla to the ground.

"I told Kayla he wasn't much of a fight dog," Wardell said. "He couldn't keep her safe. Just like me."

Wardell's voice dropped off. He reached for the third and last syringe. He stuck himself while Ghost looked at his reflection in the window.

"Was it the Sheriff?" he asked Wardell.

"Who else would it be?" Wardell mumbled. "Played us both from the start. All three of us. Getting back at us for what we done. Getting back at you for what she done to him. What she done for you.."

Ghost didn't understand. He crossed the room and stood beside Wardell. Wardell's eyes were closed.

"Because of what who did? Because of Kayla?"

Wardell smiled. He mouthed Kayla's name. Then he opened his eyes.

"Take good care of her for me, Ghost. Tell her she'll always be my whore."

Wardell's eyelids fluttered. Ghost looked down at the syringes on the bed. He realized he had no idea how much heroin was in a normal dose. Now he knew what Wardell was doing.

"Damn it, Wardell!" he said. "What did Kayla do for me? Because she came to the Valley? Was there something else?"

Wardell's head fell back. His voice was heavily slurred. Ghost grabbed him by the collar and shook him. A line of spit dribbled out the corner of his mouth. Ghost sat beside Wardell, cradling his neck so Wardell could look him in the face.

"Not Kayla," Wardell said, closing his eyes for good. "Your sister."

Ghost stayed in the house for a little while after Wardell died. He'd tried in vain to resuscitate the man, shaking his body as he laid it out on the couch. When he gave Wardell mouth to mouth, he heard the sound of coins rattling. Then a rush, all at once, like he'd one the jackpot at a casino. He looked down at the ground, where a pile of Buffalo Nickels had spilled from Wardell's pants pocket. He recognized the coins. He left them on the floor. When he stood he realized that in trying to revive Wardell, his hands and clothes were covered in the dog's blood. He went into the bathroom and cleaned himself off. He borrowed some of Wardell's clothes, exercise sweats and a tee-shirt much too large to fit Ghost's frame. He looked in the mirror and saw a scarecrow. He imagined how his face would look in a police sketch, and he wondered if the Sheriff had wanted him to come to the house like this. If he'd wanted Ghost to believe Wardell had killed the girl, maybe hoping Ghost would kill Wardell and the Sheriff could use the murder as blackmail. Ghost certainly didn't look like a sympathetic character. He could easily be portrayed as a villain. He wasn't sure what to believe anymore. He looked around the house before he left. Everything had been cleaned and neatly arranged by Wardell, even the cigarette butts and the stale smell of ashes. Wardell had cleaned the house like he'd cleaned up the yard, the dogs. The only thing Wardell hadn't cleaned was himself. Ghost left his bloody body lying on the couch, illuminated by the glow of the television screen, the strip of rubber still tied around Wardell's arm like a ribbon.

Ghost walked out into the cold night air. When he neared his car, a set of headlights came on across the cul-de-sac. A car pulled forward. It scraped bottom as it went over a speed bump. Ghost saw the Sheriff grinning behind the rolled down window of his patrol car.

"Wasn't sure you'd get to this point," the Sheriff said. "Thought I better keep an eye down here, just in case."

Ghost's head was spinning. He stood motionless beside the car.

"I wouldn't want you to get all righteous about the things Wardell could tell you about. No need for you to take it up with someone else. Not while I got Kayla. Wouldn't be a smart move on your part, if you want to see her alive again."

Ghost said nothing, waited for the Sheriff to continue. But the Sheriff just smiled.

"Ball's in your court, son," he said. "Just know that wind of anything gets to anyone, to *anyone*, and Kayla's dead. I won't make it pretty, either."

Ghost swallowed hard. His throat was dry. He could smell the blood on Wardell's body. The blood from all those dead dogs. He wanted to end this thing tonight.

"Get Kayla and bring her to the Valley. I'll sign your papers and we'll leave. That's it."

The Sheriff nodded, rolling up his window.

"Glad to see you finally see things my way," he said and drove off.

*

The night his parents died, Ghost and Susan took separate cars from the playhouse and drove to the Valley. She followed him up the access road to the Lookout Tower, where she climbed into his car in the parking area.

So you haven't told me, what did you think of the play? she asked.

I'm sorry, he said. I didn't see it.

She looked confused.

I couldn't bring myself to go inside, he said. I read the newspaper today.

Susan looked down at the floor of the car.

I was hoping to tell you in person. I wasn't sure if I should write you a letter when I sent the tickets. It's just --

She peered over at him.

It's just a strange situation. I never thought I'd be back. I never thought I'd see you again.

Me neither, Ghost said.

Are you ok?

What choice do I have? he said.

Then he smiled, laughed.

I mean, it's not like we're a thing or anything. You're not betraying anyone.

She nodded. She looked him in the face, touched the one thin scar on his cheek.

Then how come it feels like I am?

They sat for a while in silence. Thunderclouds rolled in over the eastern mountain. The smell of rain blew across the Valley, filling their lungs with moisture.

Those clouds are moving in fast, Ghost said.

Let's go up the tower, she said.

She touched his hand. They got out of the car and ran down the path, making it to the tower just as the rain began to fall. He stood beneath her, making sure she didn't slip off the metal rungs. When they reached the top they sat beside each other, facing away from the Valley so the wind hit their backs.

We got a phone call today. From my sister. She's up in Pennsylvania. Harrisburg or somewhere. She's in trouble.

What happened?

All I know is her boyfriend is dead. They think he killed himself. She's being kept at the police station until someone comes to pick her up. They've got her on suicide watch or something.

That's awful.

Yeah, Ghost said. Awful pretty much describes my sister.

I remember her so differently.

She was different. But even before you left, she started changing. After the knee injury.

I remember, Susan said. She gained so much weight. She looked so unhappy.

Anyway, he said.

So your parents are up there now?

They're on their way. Well, they're probably on their way back by now. They wanted me to come with them.

You should've gone with them.

No, he said. I belong right here. With you.

He reached out and touched her arm. He slid his palm along her skin, her shoulder, then up her neck until he touched her face. She turned away from him,

Please, she said.

But he turned her face to him and kissed her. She tried to resist at first, then fell into it. He pulled her to him and she climbed on top. She opened her lips to him and their mouths met for the first time in 14 years.

My God, she said. It's like nothing's changed.

What happened happened fast. She straddled him, and their clothes peeled off, one piece at a time. Thunder cracked and it began to rain. They sat on the edge of the Look-out Tower, making love. The rain wet their bodies and they clung to each other for warmth. Susan's skin was goosepimpled. Her long red hair was wet with rain. The wind blew against them both and they shivered as they fucked.

I want to see, she said. I want to see the storm. I want to see the Valley.

So he stood her up, leaned her over the railing, facing East. Toward the center of the storm, toward the Valley. They saw lightning in the distance. Lightning that struck the Valley floor, seeking out the old oak tree, the one they first made love beside. Ghost held her from behind, pressing into her and pulling her back all in one motion. She clung to the railing like he clung to her hips. He pressed hard, and she turned her face to the side, threw her hair over her shoulder. He looked down on her, and as lightning struck across the sky, he cried her name into the night and came. She smiled, and she came, turning her dimpled cheek to him. He grabbed her by the neck and pulled her toward him, bending her back like a spoon. He buried his face in her long red hair. He closed his eyes.

I've never stopped loving you, he said.

But he didn't say loving. He said fucking. They both heard it. There was no denying it.

Same here, she said, her dimple gone. Same here.

Imbroglia

Nat was waiting at the house when Ghost returned. He sat on the porch swing, an envelope on the seat beside him. He stood when Ghost climbed up the stairs.

"I was gonna stop by with these yesterday," he said. "But then I saw you had the Sheriff over. Woulda come by earlier today, but I had some business for the election. Figured you wouldn't mind my waiting here till you got back."

Ghost heard Nat's dogs barking the distance. He thought of all the blood in the backyard of the Chateau. He shivered.

"Everything all right, son?" Nat said. "What'd the Sheriff have to say?"

Ghost walked past Nat, pushing through the front door.

"You need to get out of here, Nat. Go now."

Nat followed Ghost inside the house. Ghost went to the fireplace and took the gun down off the hearth. He went into his father's study, looking through the closet for shells.

"What's got in to you, son?" Nat said, following Ghost around the house. "Settle down and talk to me."

Ghost swung around to face Nat. The gun dangled between the two of them, but Nat's eyes were fixed on Ghost. A handful of shells filled Ghost's free hand. He held the shotgun with the other.

"Just go, Nat. I'm not signing your papers. Not now, and not ever. So go."

Nat licked his lips. He didn't leave the room.

"Son, I seen your daddy work his ass off to feed you and your own, and he still managed to keep true to his kin, never give his land away. I seen your great granddaddy do the same, and before that, his daddy gave his life for all of this, for everything you got."

Nat waved his hand above his head, a circle. Meant to encompass the house and all that surrounded it, the Valley itself.

"Now you're telling me you're gonna tear down everything six generations of your kin built up from scratch?"

Ghost took a deep breath.

"I'm not signing, Nat."

Nat came closer. Ghost opened the chamber of the gun. He loaded two cartridges.

"Where's this coming from?" Nat asked. "Did the Sheriff threaten you?"

"It doesn't matter," Ghost said, locking the chamber of the gun in place. "Just go and leave me alone. You're not wanted here anymore."

"James," Nat said, "Take a deep breath."

Ghost thought of Kayla. He thought of the Sheriff on top of her. He thought of Dopehound, of all that blood. He raised the gun and pointed it at Nat.

"Don't call me James," he said. "And leave. Now. Leave or I'll shoot you, Nat."

Nat refused to leave.

"This isn't you, son. This ain't the way to do it. You're angry. I can see it. You could too if you only let yourself. Your folks are dead. Your sister's dead. The only thing you've got left here is your daddy's land. And I'm trying to preserve that for you. Hell, what do I have left? Ain't hardly got a friend who remembers me. Wife's dead, sons are dead. Only things I got are my dogs and this Valley. I ain't just working on your behalf. I'm trying to keep *my* family name alive, too."

"It's not worth it," Ghost said. "Nothing lasts. It all just vanishes. You're only causing pain by hanging on. We got to let it go."

"I can't let it go."

"And I can't sign those papers. Fuck it. Let the Sheriff have it. It's caused too much trouble as it is. Just take the money and run, Nat. There's nothing left worth fighting for."

Nat stood his ground.

"The Valley's worth fighting for."

"The Valley?" Ghost laughed. "Look around. What's good about the Valley anymore?"

"The Valley itself, not the Valley men make of it. The land. The mountains. The soil."

"You're crazy, Nat. It's a dream."

"Maybe so, but it's one I don't plan on waking up from."

"And I don't plan to sign," Ghost said. "I'm sorry, Nat. It's over. Leave."

Nat stared at Ghost. He shook his head. His eyes got smaller.

"I had more faith in you," Nat said. "You ain't nothing like your daddy was."

Then the old man turned, walked out of the room, and left the house.

Ghost hung the shotgun above the fireplace. He didn't know what he would do with it. But it made him feel better to have it loaded, in case he needed it. In case something didn't go as planned.

He waited on the porch for the Sheriff. He could still hear Nat's dogs howling in the distance. The Sheriff took longer than Ghost had hoped. The moon came up. Ghost walked to the rows of firewood, where the snakes had all dispersed, and started splitting logs to pass the time. His adrenaline was high, and he split the logs easily, despite the dull tip of the ax blade. Another hour passed before Ghost saw headlights cross the bridge in the distance. Five minutes later and the Sheriff's patrol car pulled up in front of the porch.

The Sheriff got out, but there was no sign of Kayla.

"Where is she," Ghost said, coming to meet the man by the house.

"She's safe."

"I'm not signing anything until I see her. That was the deal."

The Sheriff laughed.

"You'll sign what I tell you to sign. You are *not* the one in charge here, son."

"If I don't see Kayla," Ghost said. "I don't sign."

"Yeah," the Sheriff said. "You do."

Ghost felt helpless.

"Wardell knows everything," Ghost said. "He swore he'd tell the cops if Kayla and I both don't talk to him by midnight. If we don't tell him we're ok."

The Sheriff laughed.

"That's cute. But I ain't stupid. Wardell's dead. Whatever he knew or didn't know don't mean much now. Him dying's about the best thing he ever done. He's gonna put me in office."

The Sheriff held a manila envelope beneath his arm. He creaked his way up the steps and walked inside the house. Ghost left the ax leaning against the porch railing and followed the Sheriff inside. The Sheriff spread the contents of the envelope across the kitchen table. Ghost lit a candle and set it on the table. The Sheriff took a ballpoint pen from his pocket and handed it to Ghost.

"Tomorrow morning," the Sheriff said, "after I take these papers to the attorney, I'm gonna break a case that's enough to get me elected. All these robberies that have been happening in the Valley, right? We're gonna find a truckload of stolen goods in the house. Gonna find drugs, too. Lots of em. More than Wardell ever knew about. Gonna book the dead man for his crimes. Then I'm gonna be front page news, Savior of the Valley."

The Sheriff faked a political smile. His cheeks blushed, his jowls shaking as he tried to hold the pose. Then his face went slack.

"Now sign these fucking papers."

Ghost stepped forward.

"Don't I need a witness?"

"I'll find a fucking witness," the Sheriff said, handing Ghost a ballpoint pen.

Ghost opened the envelope and started reading the contract. The Sheriff hit him on the back of the arm.

"Don't bother reading it," he said. "Just sign."

"What about Kayla? What happens when I sign?"

The Sheriff lit a cigarette. Ghost heard Nat's dogs howl in the distance. They sounded close.

"I bring her to you. You hang around a few days, to confirm that you did, in all honesty, sign these papers on your own free will. Then the two of you scam, and I never see your faces around here again."

"What if Kayla won't cooperate?"

"She will. You both will. Cause if you don't, I'll nail her ass to the Chateau, too. Put her ass in jail. Whose gonna believe a whore and a scarred up motherfucker over me? You two try to twist anything out of shape, and I'll bury the both of you. Don't doubt me, son. I'll put you right alongside your sister in those graves out back."

The Sheriff pointed with his cigarette toward the kitchen window, in the direction of the family cemetery, down the trail in the woods behind the house. Ghost shook his head.

"My sister isn't dead," he said.

The Sheriff smiled. His left eye twitched.

"Course she ain't."

Ghost was just about to tell the Sheriff about Wardell's final words. He felt sick to his stomach, like there was more to every story that he didn't know. Like someone was going to come along and tell him that even his own life is only partial in his memory. That there were parts of it he didn't live and didn't know about. More mysteries to haunt him, enough to fill the rest of his life.

But before he got a chance to speak, Nat appeared behind the Sheriff. He held the ax in his raised arms and brought the blunt side down against the back of the Sheriff's neck. The Sheriff stumbled forward, knocking into Ghost, who tried to balance himself on the tabletop. The weight of the two men shoved the table against the countertop. The candle nearly fell over, but it didn't go out. Ghost's hands slipped on the contract papers, causing them to flurry in the air in all directions. The

Sheriff fell on top of Ghost. Papers scattered across the kitchen floor. Nat kicked the Sheriff in the side of the head, cutting open his ear.

"Nat, don't!" Ghost said.

But Nat had already unlatched the Sheriff's holster, and pulled his gun out. Nat stood above the fat man, pointing the gun at his skull. The Sheriff rolled to his side, clutching his bleeding head, and Ghost wiggled free from underneath his weight. Ghost stood with his back against the kitchen table, on the opposite side of the Sheriff as Nat. He held his hands out in front of him.

"Don't shoot him, Nat. He's the only one who knows."

The sheriff groaned, laid his head back on the kitchen floor. He looked at the blood on his fingertips and his eyes rolled back in his head. Nat kept the pistol aimed at the Sheriff, but looked at Ghost

"What on earth are you talking about, son?" he said. "Tell me what the hell is going on."

"He's got Kayla," Ghost said.

"I heard that part," Nat said. "But who in the hell is Kayla?"

"It's a long story," Ghost said. "But he's the only one who knows. He knows about my sister, too."

Nat scrunched his face up. Ghost's heart was pounding inside his chest. He pressed his palms together.

"Please, Nat. I don't know all of what's happening. But I know Kayla won't be safe unless he brings her to me. And he wants the land for that. I have to make the trade. I don't have a choice."

Nat shook his head.

"I say we call the real cops. Someone who ain't as crooked as this load of horseshit."

Nat kicked the inside of the Sheriff's ankle. The Sheriff winced and drew his knee up toward his chest.

"He'll kill her," Ghost said. "I can't take that chance. No cops until he brings Kayla."

The Sheriff reached for his ankle. It was dark in the room. Nat looked down at the Sheriff and laughed.

"You ain't so tough when you're laying on your back. Like a turtle. You're only good when you're the one on top of things."

Nat turned to Ghost. He reached behind him with his free hand, and retrieved the manila envelope he'd stuck in the back of his pants. He held it out in front of him for Ghost to see.

"The only way to make this work," Nat said. "Is to turn him in for all he's done. Now I don't know about this Kayla, but I know we've got enough evidence to put Carp away for good. You need to think this over, son. You can finish what your sister never could."

Ghost felt dizzy again.

"My sister?"

"I didn't tell you. Because I figured telling you now would only cause you more pain. And I figured if you knew where she hid the evidence, you'd have brought it to light by now. But hell, it's time you knew the truth."

Ghost heard something rattle in his brain. The kitchen shook. Nat opened his mouth again and blood came out.

*

They slept beside each other in the back of her SUV. When they woke, they didn't say much. There wasn't much to say.

Take care of yourself. Be well. So long.

He drove down the east side of the mountain and she drove down the west. He crossed Washington's pass just as she turned south on Route 11, heading for the junction with 81. When he turned down the access road to cross the river, he noticed police cars stopped in front of the bridge. It was only drizzling now, the sky gray, but the river had washed over the bridge in the night. A layer of water about an inch or two deep still spilled over the culverts and across the concrete surface of the bridge. Fog covered the Valley in a thin skin, like water in the river was steaming, but not boiling over. None of the patrol cars had their lights flashing.

When Ghost heard the news, his stomach turned inside out. He fell to his knees. But he didn't cry. He stopped himself. He stayed on his knees for a minute. He swallowed everything, like he was used to doing by now. Then he stood and told the detectives what he knew.

He had to guess, but his guess was probably accurate. Ghost's father was in a hurry, was angry because he'd probably been arguing with Ghost's sister the whole drive down. He didn't notice the water on the bridge, or he didn't pay attention. Ghost's mother probably said something, might have raised her voice in warning. But his father drove the truck over bridge, and the tires swept out. The vehicle plunged into the water with Ghost's mother in the passenger seat, and his sister between them.

The culverts were plugged with fallen trees and loose debris. The river swallowed the truck, turning it over in its rapid wake. This much the detectives confirmed. The truck end up front side up, with its lights shining just below the surface of the river, shimmering beneath the water like a fish. This is what Nat noticed when he'd driven down to check the fence, to check that none of his and

Ghost's father's cows got too close to the flood and drowned. Nat saw the truck beneath the headlights. Nat called the police.

Ghost noticed Nat for the first time, standing on the other side of the bridge beside his pickup truck. He looked at Ghost with his hands in his pockets. He made no gesture, but his shoulders slunk low. Ghost could tell from his demeanor, by the way his head hung, that Nat had been crying.

A tow truck came. They managed to throw and lock a chain around the grill of his father's truck. They used the winch. But the force of the river nearly pulled the tow truck in, once the submerged truck broke free of its hold on the earth and started rolling again downriver. So they hooked the truck to two others and that was enough weight to reel it in by. When they pulled it to the shore, Ghost saw his mother and his father. Their bodies were gray, lifeless. They were still strapped into their safety belts. His sister wasn't in the cab.

His parents were declared dead on the spot, but his sister's body was not found. They looked all morning. All afternoon, until dark. She'd all but disappeared. The police trolled the river all the way to where the North Fork met the South, but they found no sign of a body. The metal hooks the patrolmen tossed from rowboats came up empty. Only a half empty purse with her ID, and a patch of fabric from a torn sleeve found wrapped around a piece of broken windshield, proved Ghost's sister was even in the vehicle when it submerged. Three days after the coroner pronounced his parents dead from drowning, the authorities officially declared his sister a missing person. No further search was ordered.

Panic

The Land Trust envelope fell to the floor, spattered with blood. Nat dropped the Sheriff's pistol as he collapsed to the ground, his body limp. There was a hole in his neck the size of a golf ball. His eyes were fixed open, staring up at Ghost, his lungs pumping blood out of his throat. He lay on the floor, arms at his side, and twitched to death like Wardell's dogs had done. Blood spilled on all sides of him, spreading out across the kitchen floor. In the dim light of the candle, the gently flowing blood shone like the surface of the river. Ghost didn't take his eyes off Nat until he stopped moving altogether.

Then he looked over at the Sheriff, who was struggling to pull himself up off the floor. There was a small ankle revolver in his hands. He used the other hand to grasp the refrigerator door handle, to lever himself to his feet. The handle snapped off, and he fell to his knees. Ghost made a move toward him, but the Sheriff thrust the pistol in his direction.

"Don't you fucking move," he said.

Ghost stood motionless at the feet of Nat's dead body while the Sheriff got to his feet again. He touched the side of his head and gasped.

"That motherfucker," the Sheriff said. "Old man's as silent as a cat. Did you see him coming from behind?"

Ghost shook his head. The Sheriff squinted at him, a glimmer flashing in his eye.

"You fucking did, didn't you?"

"No," Ghost said. "I swear. I only want Kayla."

The Sheriff kicked the broken door handle with his foot. It shot across the linoleum and clanked down the hallway. The Sheriff looked down at Nat's bloody corpse, then looked all around at the Land Deal papers that were strewn about the kitchen. Half were soaking in blood.

"This is a fucking mess," he said. "This is not what I had planned."

He noticed the uncorked bottle of wine on the countertop. The one with all the pills dissolved inside. The Sheriff picked it up in his meaty hands.

"I need a fucking drink," he said.

He guzzled the wine, breathing deeply through his nostrils as he did. He paused, grimaced, then guzzled again. He drank more than half the bottle.

"You need to keep the cork on, son," he wiped his mouth with his shirtsleeve. "That shit tastes rancid."

He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes, hiccupping as he did so. Red bile shot from his lips before he had the opportunity to swallow it back down. He wiped his mouth with his fingertips, then flicked the spittle in the direction of Nat's corpse. Ghost remained silent and still. The Sheriff looked at him and laughed.

"Shit, who would ever think it'd come to this. Down to you and me."

Ghost could smell Nat's blood in the kitchen. He looked down at his body. Blood covered his shirt and his bare arms. Not sheaths of it like on Wardell, but flecks. Like the little polka dots Kayla drew on his body to pretty him up.

"Get down on your knees, son," the Sheriff said.

"Why?"

The Sheriff walked toward him, pressing the gun in his face.

"I said get down."

Ghost knelt on the floor. The Sheriff wobbled.

"That wine's going straight to my head," he said, touching the back of his skull. "At least I don't feel the hurt as much."

Ghost had no idea what to expect. He knew he had to convince the Sheriff he was worth keeping alive. At least for the time being. He had to stall long enough for the pills to take full effect.

"What are you going to do?" Ghost asked. "It's your gun that killed Nat."

The Sheriff smacked Ghost across the cheek.

"I'll cover it up," he said. "Frame somebody else."

"Frame who?" Ghost said between clenched teeth. "Me? Kayla? Wardell? That's a long shot and you know it."

The Sheriff bared his teeth at Ghost. He pressed harder with the gun. Ghost's upper lip started to bleed.

"You've only got one choice," Ghost said. "That's blame Nat. Blame the tumor in his skull. Say I tried to sign the land over to you, and Nat overheard. Just like what really happened. We'll say Nat tried to kill you. We'll say you shot him out of self defense. The whole scene is here, all the physical evidence. We just have to spin the circumstance."

The Sheriff chewed it over. He took another long swig from the bottle of wine, then he tossed the bottle into the sink. The glass shattered, and wine splattered on the countertop and against the windowpane. The Sheriff hiccupped, this time swallowing back his bile.

"Why should I trust you? You'll turn over the second I leave you alone with Kayla."

"I won't, I swear."

"I don't believe you," the Sheriff said. "I'd rather take my chances on the run. At least you and that nigger bitch will be dead, out of my life once and for all."

The Sheriff stepped back, putting both hands on the pistol and taking dead aim at the bridge of Ghost's nose. Ghost closed his eyes. He thought of Kayla. He played the only card he had left, and hoped it worked. He opened his eyes again and spoke as quickly as he could.

"I know where my sister hid the evidence," he said. "It's with the money, the inheritance. Let us go and the money is yours. That's how fucking serious I am. It's all yours. Everything. Just tell me where to sign and what to say. You win."

The Sheriff's face went white. He lowered the gun slightly.

"I mean it," Ghost said. "It's yours."

"How long have you known?"

"It doesn't matter."

"She said she didn't tell you where it was. She said you didn't know. She said to leave you out of it."

Ghost didn't know what the Sheriff was talking about.

"You saw her before she left?"

The Sheriff smiled. The glimmer in his eye shone brighter than ever.

"Oh, I saw her," the Sheriff said. "I saw her here, in your house the night you shot your face to hell. I saw her and I killed her, buried her in the same grave you buried your mom and dad."

Ghost was too filled with adrenaline to register a reaction. None of this seemed real. Nothing had seemed real since the day he came back to the Valley.

"She must have seen me coming up the drive. Must've grabbed the money, ran to the creek here. Then hid it in the water. Clever bitch. No wonder I never found it when I turned the place inside out. Hell, you'd already trashed it pretty good before I got inside. You probably didn't even notice I'd been through it, trashed it up worse than you had, the state you must have been in when you came back."

Ghost knew, then, why and when his sister scribbled the note before she left. It had nothing to do with blaming him. It was written in haste. Trying to hide the inheritance and the evidence from the Sheriff, after Nat took Ghost to the hospital, after she'd called Nat and told him everything. Except she must not have told him where the money was. Because he couldn't have known. She buried it after he'd gone with Ghost. A last minute decision. Tear the important parts from the journals, bury that and the tape recorder with the money, leave a cryptic note that only Ghost could understand, in a place that only he would know to look for it. It was, in its own way, the best possible choice given the time and circumstance. His sister had done the best she could. It was Ghost who failed her in his shortsightedness, his self-centeredness. His guilt.

The Sheriff leaned over Ghost like an eclipse. He pressed the gun against Ghost's cheek. The candlelight flickered over the Sheriff's square face.

"This is your last fucking chance on earth," he said. "That money and that evidence is all that stands between you, Kayla, and six feet of Valley dirt."

Ghost stared down the barrel of the gun. He looked into the Sheriff's eyes and saw only blackness. He saw a man so rotten to the core that it wouldn't matter if he sought revenge or not. The man was so evil he'd ceased to be a man at all. He was a walking corpse. One gigantic fucking ghost.

"They money's there," Ghost said. "I swear it is."

The Sheriff pressed the gun deeper into Ghost's cheek.

"Show me" he said.

*

You take all the time you need, is what Nat told him. I'm under contract with your daddy to care for your land, and that's just what I'll do until you're ready to take things over.

Ghost trashed the house. He threw out what reminded him most of his parents. Their shoes. Their toothpaste. Their bath soap. Every personal object was a pinprick in his heart.

He spent days alone in the house in the Valley. He didn't eat and he didn't sleep. His parents were cremated. The Sheriff delivered the ashes, but Ghost didn't answer the door. When the Sheriff had gone, Ghost found a briefcase full of money on the porch, beside his parents' ashes. He buried his parents in the family plot, beside his grandparents and his great grandparents and their parents. All the way back to the first Webb that ever owned this land. His great great grandfather, who built the original foundation where the house still stood.

He returned the money to the Sheriff, leaving it on his doorstep with a note.

I don't need and will never take money from a Lee.

Ghost cashed in his father's insurance money. He packed it in briefcase and brought it home with him. He set it on the kitchen table and packed a bag. He was about to leave when he heard the porch steps creaking. He ran to the living room and grabbed his father's shotgun, afraid it might be the Sheriff. He felt dizzy, hungry, tired. The front door opened.

His sister walked into the house. She was pale, thin, lifeless. For a split second Ghost mistook her for a Ghost. He raised the gun. She opened her mouth to speak to him and he pulled the trigger.

But nothing happened. The gun did not go off. Ghost opened the chamber, checked to see if the gun was even loaded. That's when the hangfire exploded in his face.

*

Ghost in the Water

The Sheriff walked him through the woods at gunpoint. Ghost walked fast so the Sheriff had to struggle to keep up, so the blood would rush to his head. He turned around every so often by in the light of the moon he saw the Sheriff blinking, then shaking his head like he were wagging his jowls. He swaggered back and forth, to either side of the trail. But the Sheriff was big, and maybe even that amount of drugs wouldn't be enough to knock him out. The drugs were past the expiration date, too. Ghost could only hope his plan would work.

But it wasn't even a plan. It was dumb luck. Like the hangfire when he pulled the trigger on his sister.

"Slow the fuck down," the Sheriff said.

"We've got to hurry," Ghost said. "So we can call it in while the body's still warm."

Ghost led the Sheriff down the trail. They turned right at the fork in the road, heading toward the water. The Sheriff fell behind.

"Slow down, I said," the Sheriff ran to catch up. "That wine really hit me. Must be the bump Nat gave me on my head."

By the time they reached the river, the Sheriff was swaying back and forth. He looked woozy, but he still held the gun pointed at Ghost. Ghost stood by the water, beside the Sawmill Bridge. In the moonlight, the Lightning Tree, standing tall and crooked, looked like something from a movie. Something that could come alive and swallow everything good and green inside the Valley, bit by bit, until there was nothing but an empty bowl left. A barren, dust-filled bowl. The Sheriff walked over to the tree and leaned against it.

"I remember," he said, his eyes opening and closing, "the first time I saw your sister swimming in this creek. She was fast, son, I'll give her that. Even as a kid."

The Sheriff sat down on the ground with his back to the tree.

"It's a shame she never learned to mind her fucking business."

The Sheriff's voice dropped off, like Wardell's had done back at the Chateau. But then the Sheriff's eyes opened wide, and he sat up straight, swinging the gun in front of him until he had Ghost in his sights again.

"What the fuck," he said. "You drugged me, didn't you? How'd that happen?"

The Sheriff forced himself to his feet, looking more aware now than he had in the last fifteen minutes.

"You little shit," he said. "Just like your sister. Can't trust any of you Webbs. You're all backstabbing little cunts."

The Sheriff walked toward Ghost, still wobbling but looking more alert.

"Now where the fuck is this money."

Ghost pointed to the water, beneath the bridge.

"Down there," he said.

The Sheriff laughed.

"She sunk it in the creek? Right under my fucking nose?"

The Sheriff's eyes glimmered in the moonlight. Ghost felt his pulse rise. He thought about rushing at the Sheriff, but the man seemed too aware of his surroundings. The drugs hadn't had the effect Ghost had hoped. Maybe it'll get worse for the Sheriff. Ghost's only option was to stay alive, and hope he had the opportunity to overtake the Sheriff before the Sheriff shot him.

"Where's Kayla?" Ghost asked.

"Get me my fucking money," the Sheriff said. "No money, no Kayla."

He motioned toward the water with the gun. What choice did Ghost have? He took off his shoes. Then he pulled off his shirt, exposing his xylophone chest, and waded out into the water. He looked ahead of him, toward the center of the pool he nearly drowned in when he was a child. The water his sister pulled him from, when she saved his life. Six feet of water, pooled beneath the bridge

at the point of a half-moon bend in the creek. On the other side of the water, the Lee property. On this side, Ghost, the Sheriff, and the Lightning tree with his and Susan's engravings. He wanted to burn the tree. He wished he'd burned the tree when he'd burned everything else in the house.

He waded to the center of the pool, where he could barely touch on his tiptoes and keep his head above water. The Sheriff held him at gunpoint, stepping backwards to lean again against the tree. Ghost submerged. He turned over in the water, and swam to exactly where he knew his sister would have buried the money. In the sunken wheel, directly below the bridge. He reached ahead of him in the pitch black water, felt the wheel's rotten boards against his fingertips. He pulled himself down by it, getting a grip with his fingertips and pulling himself deeper, lower, until his belly hit the muddy bottom of the creek bed. He refused to think about falling through the ice as a child, the way it felt to nearly drown. He refused to think of his parents, and the river that washed over the bridge and claimed their lives, that filled their lungs with the same water that sourced this creek. He refused to think at all, just act.

But he could hardly breathe. He was losing air. He tried to count the seconds like he'd done with his sister. He imagined how long she must have held her breath to free herself from the truck, to survive the long and turbulent journey downriver. He wondered did she try to get their mother or their father out. Or did she only try to save herself. What kind of guilt had she been living with, the week after the accident? He wondered if, perhaps, she tried to help them from their belts, but the river, or perhaps their father in an attempt to save her, pushed her out of the cab before she had the opportunity to free them, before she had the chance herself to drown by their side.

Ghost felt nothing inside the wheel, and for a moment he wondered if he was wrong. He wondered if he imagined it wrong. Maybe there was no missing letter in his tattoo. No hidden meaning to her note. No buried cash. No evidence. Maybe there wasn't even a note to begin with. No tattoo. No map to the secrets of the past. No accident. No past. No Odis George. No Kayla. No Wardell. Maybe there was nothing. No house. No bridge. No tragedy.

Maybe there was no Ghost.

He almost pulled back. But then he reached a little deeper, as far back into the wheel as he could. His body nearly caught within the space between the wheel. It was there he felt it, just in front of him. Something crinkly, with something hard inside. He got his hands around the thing and pulled it loose. It slid from the well of the wheel like a pulled tooth.

Ghost wriggled his body free of the wheel, dragging his treasure from the mouth of the hole in the bottom of the creek. He surfaced with it, barely touching bottom, gasping for breath. He was directly under the bridge. He remembered the cow he'd seen in the dark of the other bridge, the night he returned to the Valley, remembered the awful sounds it made as it drowned beneath him. He remembered the sound of his own wailing, when he heard about his parents death. He remembered the longing, the anger, the grief. He remembered the smallness of his pain, the acuteness of his grief. His mother's sneakers. His father's shaving razor. The little things he never thought to pay attention to until they were gone. He remembered how he longed to see his mother yawn, to hear something as simple as his father sneeze. He remembered how he'd lost them. How they were gone from him. How they were never going to return again.

Ghost swam toward the shore, pulling the briefcase behind him. When he could touch the bottom easily, he waded out of the water. He fell to his knees on the shore and dropped the briefcase in front of him. The Sheriff was sitting down again, with his back to the tree, pointing the gun at Ghost.

"I guess them aqua gills run in the family," the Sheriff said. "Bring the money over here."

"Tell me where Kayla is first," Ghost said, gasping for air. "Please."

The Sheriff looked tired. He had had a hard time holding the gun on Ghost. He grinned.

"So now you're begging me. Ain't that what they call ironic? You're the English major, the writer. You tell me. Cause last I heard from you, seven years back, you told me you would never ask nothing from a Lee. Now look at you. Your daddy would be so fucking proud."

Ghost knelt beside the money and he begged.

"You've won," he said. "Just let us go. Give me Kayla and let us go. We don't mean anything to you now. You'll never see us again."

The Sheriff laughed. Then he hiccupped, coughed. He spit blood onto the ground. Then he rubbed his throat and tried to stand. He couldn't stand. Ghost watched him struggle, saw him sweating all around the neck and armpits. He could hardly keep his head steady. His neck wobbled around on its axis each time he tried to look straight at Ghost.

"What'd you give me, damnit?" the Sheriff wheezed. "I feel like I'm a fucking bobble head doll."

"Tell me where she is and I'll go get help."

The Sheriff laughed.

"Like hell you will."

He managed to straighten himself, still sitting with his back against the tree. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket. He showed it to Ghost.

"I could call for help right now," he said. "But what's the point. If I can't walk out of here with that money, I'm going to jail."

"I'll burn the evidence," Ghost said. "No one will know. We'll stick to the story about Nat."

The Sheriff laughed. He hiccupped and blood spilled down his chin. He didn't wipe it off.

"You think I was sold on that bullshit?" he said, his eyes glazing over. "Shit, I was gonna shoot you the second you gave me that cash. Take the money and run. The rest of what I got is tied up with my brother. He keeps a fucking tab on me. Why you think I deal with trash like Wardell? I gotta keep to the underside of things to make some money on the side. And now all that's tied up in the investment deal. With loan sharks and investors you do not want to fuck with. So, hell, I'd be better off disappearing from the Valley even if I didn't shoot Nat. You maybe gave me the best chance of surviving that I could have hoped for. Showed me a way out of knee deep situation."

The Sheriff shook his head.

"But now my legs don't work, and I can't fucking see clear enough to know which one of you to shoot. So this is it. You and me. I see it now. This is how it has to end. We were meant to die together, side by side."

The Sheriff fired off a round from his gun, which missed Ghost by a few feet.

"We're fuckups. you and me," the Sheriff continued. "It's over for the both of us. There ain't no more story to be spun here. No twist to add to make it turn out right in the end."

The Sheriff fired another shot that hit the briefcase. Ghost didn't move, afraid that any sudden motion would help steady the Sheriff's gaze.

"Tell me where Kayla is," Ghost said, hoping the Sheriff might slip up in his weakened state of mind. "You're just high, damnit. You're not dying. Tell me where you're keeping her and I'll drag you out of here. Just tell me where she is. You've got to have some fucking sympathy for her. At least a little bit, somewhere in that big fat tomb you call a body."

The Sheriff stopped firing the gun. He laughed, his throat gurgling. He spat on the ground.

"I almost forgot," he said. "The best part, getting to see your reaction. Getting see the truth register in that clever little brain of yours. Open the briefcase."

Ghost unwrapped the briefcase from the garbage bags his sister had tied off around it. Water had found its way inside, permeating the plastic over time. But the briefcase itself was waterproof, and everything inside was dry as the day it was packaged. All the money was there, the money he thought his sister had stolen from him. The money he nearly shot her over. And on top of the money, his sister had placed an envelope. Inside the envelope Ghost found the pages torn from his sister's last journal. He also found a handheld tape recorder, with a cassette inside.

"Play it," the Sheriff grinned, the glimmer in his eye dulling with each drawn out breath, each slurred word, each bloody hiccup.

Ghost recognized the voices on the tape. His sister's, and an older man's. He couldn't place the voice at first. But then he realized who it was. Dr. Spencer. His childhood physician. The man who oversaw Rachel Lee's delivery. The one who pronounced her and her baby dead. But as the tape revealed, the doctor admitted that's not what happened. The Lee baby didn't die. He was paid to keep it secret. Paid to lie.

It all made sense. The dimple. The red hair. The darker skin. He remembered what his sister had said, long ago. *It's cause she fucked a black boy.* He should have seen it long ago. But he was too obsessed. Too preoccupied with his desire. He couldn't put two and two together. He treated it all like a dream, when it was very real. When it was all too real.

The tape was only five minutes long. When it ended, the Sheriff, still grinning, pointed with his gun to the diary entries.

"Read em," he said. "Let's hear what your sister thinks about it all."

Ghost read the entries aloud. They revealed more than he could imagine. Everything he thought he knew was wrong. There was so much more to the story. So many more perspectives, so much more to tell. He couldn't fathom it. He could never know the whole story, even after hearing all the bits he didn't know. After knowing the truth about Kayla and the night her mother, Rachel Lee, died giving birth to her. After knowing the truth about his sister, how she'd tried to expose the truth and died because of it. How she hid the money to protect Ghost, leaving him a clue he so easily misunderstood, because of his own selfish pride, a clue that he could use to finish the work she'd started and expose the Lee family once and for all, end their rule in the Valley and halt the land deals that were already underway the year Ghost's family died.

The final page of her journals had a tear in the bottom. The tear was the size of the note his sister left for Ghost. The note about the money. The key to all the secrets. The simple fact Ghost misunderstood. What came down to nothing more than a missing word.

"So now you know," the Sheriff said.

"She's your niece," Ghost said, the pit of his stomach filled with sand.

"My grand niece, yeah," the Sheriff said. "That's why I look out for her. We told Ames we would watch after her. Then my brother said to kill her, after Ames left. But I couldn't do it. Call me what you like, but I ain't a baby killer. So I kept her under wraps. Paid whores and other folks I know, under the radar types, to raise her up. Then when she was old enough I paid Wardell to keep to her. I checked in when I could, gave em money, gave em drugs. Gave Wardell enough money to pay bills on that house of theirs. I been like a daddy to her from the start."

Ghost felt his stomach turn.

"You rape her," he said. "You whore her out and you fuck her."

The Sheriff reached into his pocket for a cigarette, but the pack was empty. He threw it into the creek.

"Who're you to judge?" he said. "*You* fucked her. You didn't treat her different than me or anyone else. Paid for her to come to your house and fuck you like the nigger whore she is."

"Where is she?" Ghost insisted. "If she's alive, where is she."

"She's alive," the Sheriff grinned. "And she's depending on my knowing where she is. Depending on me just like always. My little slave of a niece. Just like you. Your sister, too. Slaves to what I got that you want. To what I own that you need. Drugs, money, women. Your sister wanted cash. Tried to bribe me with that tape you got there in your hands. Wanted cash so she and her thug boyfriend could get out of dodge. Thought she could actually quit the dope that I'd been selling her for years. Thought her boyfriend would change his ways."

The Sheriff's eyes were half-closed, but he didn't pass out. The pills were not enough to take him under, even if he thought that he was dying. Ghost could see, clear enough, that his last ditch effort had failed.

"See," the Sheriff continued. "They wanted out of the game, your sis and her boy. Just needed money to run on. Seems the boyfriend wasn't so fond of your sis once he got to know her."

Blew his fucking brains out rather than run off with her. Just like Kayla. She was eager to play the part of the whore when I asked her to. She didn't put up much of a fight when I come to take her away from you, either. The dog did, sure. But Kayla came so easily it almost made me feel sad for you. Sad how you always fall in love with women who don't want you. Pathetic how you swear how much you hate me and my kind, yet you keep coming back to fuck my kin. Shows what kind of dirty little bastard you are."

Ghost said nothing. His head was throbbing. His entire body was shaking. There was nothing left to do. Everything he'd tried to put together had come crashing down on top of him. He was threw fighting.

"Now kneel," the Sheriff said, pointing to the ground with his gun.

He pointed the gun at Ghost's head and Ghost knelt down on the ground beside the briefcase.

"See, son, I win even when I lose," the Sheriff said. "Cause you'll never find her on your own. No one will. I got her locked up somewhere secret, somewhere hid from the rest of the world. Cause I own that little bitch, dead or alive. You don' get to bargain with me. I run the fucking show around here. Look around you, son. I own --"

The Sheriff's face dissolved into a burst of blood and bone. Ghost's ears rang from the sound of the gunshot. By the time he realized what was happened, Nat had already collapsed, for a second time, to the ground, this time ten yards to the left of the Sheriff, where he'd come out of the woods at the edge of he trail. Ghost looked at the dead Sheriff and his heart fell out. Now he would never know it all. Only his sister and the Sheriff knew. It was as secret to him as Kayla's whereabouts. Gone, forever. Left to die alone in the darkness of obscurity. Lost, never to be found. Closure he and everyone else would have to live without. The story ended before he reached the final chapter.

Nothing was left but the pain and curiosity of loss, without the object lost. He would never find Kayla. He would never know the truth.

Ghost took a moment to collect himself, then he crawled over to where Nat laid face down in the dirt. His wrinkled hands still held Ghost's father's shotgun. Ghost turned him over and stared down at him. Nat's face was covered in blood, his throat mangled. He was barely passing air through his lungs. Nat's pupils were dilated and fixed, focused on some distant land. He opened his mouth one last time speak. Ghost drew near, turning his ear to the old man's bloody lips.

"Protect the Valley," Nat said and died.

*

When Ghost returned from the hospital, his sister and the money were gone. Nat drove him home, but left him alone like Ghost requested. It was Nat who brought him to the hospital in the first place. He was the only one besides the Sheriff who lived near enough to hear the gun blast. It might have gone unnoticed, just another shot in the Valley, except Nat had been worried about Ghost's condition all along. He told Ghost he came by because he was afraid he'd killed himself.

Ghost let Nat believe that's what he tried to do, and Nat let Ghost believe he really came to the house because he'd heard the gunshot.

Ghost searched the house for the money but found nothing. The last place he checked was his father's study. Instead of finding the money there, he found the first edition family copy of *Walden* set on the middle of his father's desk, where it didn't belong and where he hadn't left it. He flipped through the book, and found a note his sister had scribbled on a torn piece of lined paper.

The money is your grave.

Ghost was hit hard in the chest by guilt. He gasped for breath and breathed guilt in. Swallowed guilt into his stomach. Let guilt flood his veins the way Susan had for so long. He was infected by it. It became his disease.

He flipped to the front inside cover of the book. He ran his fingers down the long list of first-born Webb sons, to whom the book and the name James were bequeathed upon birth. He found his name, last on the list, just below his father's. He was the last surviving Webb son. The last surviving male heir. With his sister gone, and maybe dead, he was the last to carry Webb blood altogether. The final hope to continue the lineage, to tend the land, to dig in deep and survive.

Ghost emptied himself of all emotion other than his shame. He picked up one of his father's pens and scratched over his name with black ink. Then he closed the book, put it on the shelf, took the note his sister left for him and walked out of the room.

He packed a small bag. A few essential things. Then he took the keys to the car his father bought him and drove down the long, winding driveway until he reached the bridge. He paused for a moment, crying what would be his last tears for the next seven years. Then he wiped his face, took a deep breath, and buried everything in the ground with his parents. He crossed the bridge, drove north on Washington's Pass until he slipped between the slit between the mountains at the top of the Valley, where he then headed West on Route 66, speeding to escape the sun that peeked over the horizon behind him.

Burn

The Sheriff's fat face was unrecognizable. Ghost searched his pockets and found his cell phone. He was about to dial the police when he noticed something glimmer in the moonlight, something on the Sheriff's left hand. Ghost bent over and grappled with the Sheriff's fat pinky finger. He pulled the object off the tip, where the Sheriff had only gotten it wedged up to the first knuckle. Ghost rolled the object over in his palm.

It was the ring she stole from him the night they met. His Nana's ring.

Ghost dropped the cell phone onto the Sheriff's body. He closed his fist around the ring. Only the Sheriff knew where Kayla was. Ghost understood now that any chance at discovering her whereabouts died when the Sheriff did. Like it or not, the Sheriff owned the girl. He always had. Ghost was living out a dream, a fantasy. He was no hero, no savior. He was just as bad as all the rest of them, just as hopeless, just as bound by the chains of the past. Ghost closed his eyes, brought his fist to his lips, and kissed his knuckles. He knew, in that moment, that Kayla was gone forever.

He put slid the ring around his pinky. Then he tore the badge off the Sheriff's chest and threw it toward the bridge. It splashed in the water and sunk to the bottom of the creek, near where his sister had buried the briefcase. He looked at the lightning tree. He thought about Susan's note, the first she ever wrote. *My love for you is as strong as --*. He knew then what he had to do.

His clothes were sopping wet. He stripped naked. Then he took the money and laid it all into the hollow of the tree. He reached into the Sheriff's pocket and retrieved the gold lighter. He used the money as kindling, He blew on the flame to make it burn. He took fallen branches that had been shed from the tree and shoved them inside the fire. He broke off low-hanging limbs, forced them down the throat of the tree, using it's own body to consume itself. Soon the fire caught the trunk and Ghost wasn't needed anymore. The fire took over, burning brightly in the night. There was no rain to put it out this time, no thunderstorm. Then he crumbled his sister's final journal entries into a ball and

threw them deep into the mouth of the fire. They disappeared like all her other journals had, in the fire in the house.

He was about to throw the tape recorder into the fire, too, when he realized his mistake. There was someone left who knew the truth. Someone who had kept his face out of this for far too long. The only one left that Ghost could ruin. He would go to him. He would bring the evidence. It might be his last hope of finding Kayla. If the man knew. If the Sheriff hadn't kept it to himself. It was a long shot. But at least, if nothing else, Ghost would expose the truth, she light on the past as it really was, not as it was said to be by those with money and power. Then he would disappear. Disappear for good this time. Disappear and let the Valley sort things out for itself, someone else restore the balance.

Ghost stood back and watched the fire. Fiery limbs broke off the top of the tree and fell into the creek with a hiss. He had no where to be until the morning. There was nothing he could do until daylight. So he sat on the ground between Nat and the Sheriff's dead bodies and he watched the fire. He watched for hours until the tree burned down, until there was nothing left but ash.

At dawn he brought the shotgun back to the house with him. He hung the shotgun back on the hooks above the hearth. He gathered the things he'd brought with him from the Midwest. He packed a small bag. He dressed himself. He put the evidence in his car. Then he drove down the long, winding driveway. He passed the mended fence, saw the cows passively caged inside the pastureland. He drove the car across the bridge, turning North when he reached the main road. He slipped through the hole between the mountains as the sun peaked over the horizon, its light glimmering on the surface of the river like a fish.

They could piece it all together, a recognizable version of the truth from partial information, like all he'd read about telling stories back at school. The way a tale is told, what's kept in and what's left out. The tape would be enough to build a case around. Just like his father's sunken trunk was

enough to reconstruct the night of the accident. Just like all his sister's and the Sheriff's secrets. Ghost's entire life was built around incompleteness, the limits of perspective. He was always unfulfilled. Void of resolution. And now he was alone, again, at the end of the story. The only one alive to tell the tale. To tell what he knew. To pass the limited and incomplete story on to those with enough power to make a difference. Those with enough interest and compassion left to care. To want and seek a truth that even he, being witness to these tragedies, could not provide.

He drove until he reached Route 66, where he headed East this time. He drove east because he had to pass this burden on, relieve himself of the poison of seeking answers, finding closure, searching for a way to tie up all the loose ends, save the girl and save the land, saving himself in the process. He was done with it. Once and for all. By noon it would be someone else's problem, someone else's tale to tell. Someone else's problem left to fix.

And that's why he drove east, toward the rising sun, because he had to, toward the city because he had no choice, no real say in the matter anymore, headed for the district street where Judge Lee would soon be arriving at work, decorated in his suit and tie, Starbucks coffee cup in hand, settling into his leather chair to read the morning paper, protected from the light of the sun by the tint of the shaded, wall-to-ceiling windows of his penthouse suite.