Ampersand is an annual journal published by the English Department of Carson-Newman College and is the collaborative effort of students in Graphic Design ART 463, under the direction of Julie L. Rabun, and Creative Writing Seminar ENG 327, under the direction of Susan O'Dell Underwood.

As the word which describes the symbol for “and,” Ampersand reflects the spirit of collaboration in the creative community at Carson-Newman College. It is also a nod toward the future, implying the fresh start of a new generation in a new millennium.

am · per · sand (am'per · sand), n. the character &, meaning “and” [alter. of and per se = and, & by itself = and]. Used chiefly in business correspondence and reference works. In addressing firms, use the form they habitually use (...and Company or ...& Company) and in quoting, follow your original carefully.

Graphic Designers:  
Julie Burton  
Kellan Clay  
Tasha Cole  
Sarah Gearhart  
Faith Long  
Luke Merrell  
Nathanael Mosher  
Heather Reynolds  
Laura Tucker  
Todd Turpin

Literary Editors:  
Kate Barber  
Emily Davis  
Hayley Griffith  
Ah-reum Han

Dictionary definitions provided by Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, unabridged.  
© 1951 The World Publishing Company.


On publication all rights revert to authors and artists. The opinions and creative ideas appearing in Ampersand do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial staff, graphic designers, faculty advisors, or Carson-Newman College.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table of Contents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attention, Please</strong> Ah-reum Han</td>
<td></td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>America the Beautiful</strong> Rebecca Brady</td>
<td></td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dear Daisy</strong> Megan Slomski</td>
<td></td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Growing Young</strong> Hayley Griffith</td>
<td></td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socks</strong> Hannah Williams</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eric Parker’s Daughter</strong> Kate Barber</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duomo at Noon</strong> Hannah Williams</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Café on Babcock Street</strong> Kayla Beth Moore</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chuck Rocks Ireland</strong> Kate Barber</td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seven Miles</strong> Hayley Griffith</td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sure</strong> Kayla Beth Moore</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nitara Bledsoe</strong> Hayley Griffith</td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Piano Maker</strong> Abi Parker</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Was Always Your Mother</strong> Olivia Wood</td>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elegy to a Garden Vine</strong> Rebecca Brady</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stomping Grounds</strong> Abi Parker</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If Cows Could Talk</strong> Emily Davis</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table of Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old Red Farm Gate</strong> Emily Davis</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blackberry Virginia</strong> Emily Davis</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Waiting for Prince Charming</strong> Abi Parker</td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Told a Londoner...</strong> Kate Barber</td>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where I Belong</strong> Kate Barber</td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LENA BUCKLEY</strong> Ah-reum Han</td>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Keukenhof</strong> Kate Barber</td>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Anniversary</strong> Emily Davis</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Luke</strong> Sarah Gearhart</td>
<td></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Rules of the Hardy Girls</strong> Kate Barber</td>
<td></td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>We Thought We Were Rich</strong> Hannah Williams</td>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Still, Sister</strong> Sarah Jane Bennett</td>
<td></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One</strong> Ah-reum Han</td>
<td></td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Up a Creek</strong> Cassie McGaha</td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contributors’ Notes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&amp; Series</strong> Heather Reynolds</td>
<td></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attention Please  Ah-reum Han

You sigh a bridal veil, and it smothers you to your bones. One hand's on a Samsonite just small enough to fit the rest of your life in. Here you are, staring at the taxi-side of Rickenbacker International. You instinctively flick open your cell phone. Wed, Oct. 30, 10.14am. No messages. No missed calls.

The doors blink open as you approach, and you nervously reapply the Chapstick you just nervously licked off. You stop abruptly.


Orange lights flicker lethargically as a fat security guard carries his defunct live cargo across polished floors. One feathery woman decked in a pink tweed jacket and white pantyhose, sits cross-legged, eyes out of kilter as she scoots along backwards. She's hooked inseparably to a Burberry bag that sits on her lap, and she's so close you can smell her perfume. Expensive, you think. After they've passed, you sigh and drag the numb weight along the glistening floor toward the lines.

You're surrounded in a bustle of muted activity, a sterile choreography. Solemn individuals tap sharply towards their destinations, weaving through the traffic of urbanites and cosmopolitans who in turn tap sharply towards their destinations. The clinks of metal on marble, the beeps of machines in use, and the shuffled pulse of homesick feet: its echo and its echo's echo is our music.

There's this little girl wearing Minnie Mouse ears tugging at the hand of a young lady who may be her nanny or her mom. The lady seems to be in a frantic conversation on the phone and seems completely oblivious to the determined yanking at her fingertips. Her mom, you decide. The little girl tires quickly but then sees you watching. You, shivering in your Barbie pink Samsonite and your Gap dress. She shuffles towards you testing on the heels of her feet and tells you she has a hamster called Butterball who looks like a ball of butter who is now stuck in the ceiling of her house (may he rest in peace).

You: [fake laughing] Why are you walking like that?

The little girl with the Minnie Mouse ears who has the hamster called Butterball who looks like a ball of butter who is now stuck in the ceiling of her house (may he rest in peace): Because I want to.

She says this with the authority of any parental because-I-said-so that you've ever heard.

She stumbles slightly and loses interest. "Here, mommy!" she pulls off her Minnie Mouse ears and shoes it into her mom's hand, carefully closing her fist.

"Watch me!"

Meanwhile, you settle into the thin-backed indigo plastic, bringing your bag between your knees. You close your eyes momentarily. You have been microwaving yourself to nutrition for as long as you can remember, and yesterday was no exception. But you haven't had anything since yesterday's leftover Lean Cuisines and you wish that you'd thought to bring something to eat.

The little girl performs another extravagant cartwheel while her mom distractedly punches something into her Blackberry.

"Good, honey." She mumbles.

Click. Click. Click. Cough. Click. Click. Click. Click.

Henry Showler was a bad father, but he had a good son. He used to come late every night and stay up late and pretend that his son didn't live in the upstairs bedroom where his wife used to live when they were together but not really together. Little Showler thought that if he was good enough then maybe his dad would play with him again, so he never asked for anything and he always kept his room tidy and he got all As and accidentally left his report card lying around on the office desk where his dad worked every night with the door closed. He asked Santa that year for a real dad.

So one day that year Henry Showler became a Christian which meant that he decided that he would become a better person. Naturally, he took his son fishing in the lake out back, the one where his daddy and his granddaddy taught him to catch fish with shiny metal hooks. Jesus liked fishing too. So Henry Showler brought with him a pole and a pole and a box full of goodies and a Can't Believe It's Not Butter butter pot of chocolate truffle soil and taught his boy how to stick his fingertips into the pot until he could feel the ribbed wriggly worm and skewer it on the end to tempt fish to die.
And they did. The fish swarmed for the voiceless squirming treat of a feast. This made the plastic ping of the taut string make little Showler’s face light up the way it used to when his mom was alive to love him and used to tell him that he was a special boy and that he was going to do big things with his life and he believed her. Little Showler could see silver streaks coming up towards him and he got all excited. He didn’t realize that he didn’t know how to save himself when he leaned into the water like Narcissus fascinated in the reflection and fell into the image of the best present Santa had ever gotten him. Henry Showler was distraught. He jumped in to save his son. They both drowned.

So the little urn you see here is for his boy and the big one is for Henry Showler. He was a bad father, but he had a good son.

Attention please. For security reasons, any baggage left unattended will be removed and destroyed.

On the other side of the check-in desks two men sit face-to-face in a Burger King booth. A disarray of crumpled paper and plastic lies scattered haphazardly on their trays. They hold hands under the table, tilting in to each other. Their mouths are moving and you wish you knew what they were saying because it looks earnest. You don’t notice that you too are leaning in just a little bit, but then one of them – the one with the army green North Face jacket – looks up and sees you. The hands withdraw. You guiltily pretend to open your bag and look for something.

Pink OSU sweats and Uggs. A girl collapses into the seat across from you just then, jaws clenching and unclenching. Once in a while she scrolls through her iPod, looking for something that will tell her what she wants to hear or will hide what she wants to forget. When she was young and stupid, she used to think that snow literally came down in baseballs of compacted ice, but now she knows that it’s more like powdered sugar. When she was young and stupid, and the weather got to that state where it’s cold enough to snow but not stick, she imagined the highway as an enormous tongue tasting the furry ice-stars. Each dissolved into oblivion and became part of something bigger.

She’s a closet painter, too scared to do anything too wonderful for the rest of her life. She stopped in high school when she won the prize for Most Promising Artist. Promising. Now the only thing she knows to draw is the Lady of Shalott that are just mediocre stains on a page of derelict dreams. She still likes to watch flurry. Those specks of frozen water huddle, suspended between heaven and hell. They just hang and drift until some rogue wind sneezes. Then, they scatter. One of her best friends once told her that if you lay down to watch them drop, and you looked at the sky instead of the snow, it looks like the sky’s falling on you. And you know, sometimes we all need the sky to fall on us. Although she wouldn’t tell anyone because godforbid that she say something young and stupid, she still wants to believe that snow is more than precipitation in the hydrologic cycle; that they are frozen teardrops of sad dead people, or the grand finale of celestial figure-skaters on acid, or that God jumped into a giant puddle somewhere way up there beyond the blue and the gray just for fun.

Her boyfriend was in Iraq while she was a nervous wreck for two years. When he came back, she waited outside of the airport doors, smoking a joint feverishly. The red glow was all she had to concentrate on until she felt that tap on her shoulder. She bursts into tears and wraps her arms and legs around his body, cigarette pressed between two shaking digits. Laughter against a half-open smile; as she kisses him, smoky air fills his mouth and slinks out of each nostril. They breathe deeply together.

Attention please. For security reasons, any baggage left unattended will be removed and destroyed.

People are starting to board. A lump of flabby fluorescent shirts stand congregated on one side of the line. Telltale Lanyards show that these people are probably headed to some exotic location.

You’re reminded of the few haggard middle-aged men you saw stumbling out of the gate on your way here; they came, bronzed to perfection, with eyes that sparkle from AIDS-orphaned children and dying families in Africa. So they come back bearing good news of their changed soul and live their changed lives for about three months or so.

The seat belts light are off, and you tighten your belt as you turn up your headphones and watch as Casino Royale plays for the third time on the screen overhead. Right next to the person with the baby who won’t stop crying who’s right next to the person with the Lanyard who’s right next to the person with the black suit who’s right next to... Etc. Etc.
the land rolled as it does in East Tennessee and we rolled with it in our rattling Buick. Soon I was carsick. I leaned my head against the window and watched the fields whiz by. Just fields and fields and more fields. There hadn’t been a break in the scenery since the little poe-dunk town we’d passed awhile back. I sighed.

Chicago was nine hours behind us. Chicago with its familiar, ragged skyline and its busy streets. Its sight and smells and sounds. Mama said Aunt Penny had run off to LA so now we had to go take care of the “old folks.” Whatever that meant. Apparently we were going to live with my grandparents, great aunt and uncle, and great grandmother. I hadn’t known that I had any family besides Mama and my little brother Johnny who was sulking in the back seat.

There was a little, white church. Then more fields. A white farmhouse. Up a hill, down a hill. Another farm house, big and yellow with a shiny tin roof and a white-railed porch. Mama pulled our old Buick into the driveway, the gravel crunching under the smooth tires.

“Welcome home,” Mama murmured.

The first “old folk” I saw was Grandmother. She came sprinting out of the house as soon as we pulled in wearing a Santa Claus sweater—in the middle of August—and fuzzy house slippers. She met us with frightening exuberance, grabbing me in a headlock, tussling my hair, and shaking me viciously. She smelled old—like an old book whose pages have grown brittle and dusty from being on the shelf too long. The smell was so overpowering that I breathed through my mouth.

“What’s your name little girl?” She screeched.

“Sarah,” I gasped.

“Stinkbug?” She said then cackled, “Well that’s a stupid name.”

I was beginning to fear death by suffocation when the wiry, prune of a woman attacked Johnny and smothered him in the same chaotic embrace. I watched fascinated and mortified.

I’d never seen anyone before that looked so old. She was so shriveled—like a raisin—you could hardly tell where one wrinkle ended and the next one began. Mama told me she was my great-grandmother and she lived in the big, yellow house with her three children Ginger, Enlo, and Audrey and her son-in-law, Wib. Audrey and Wib were my grandparents.

Wib, however, assured me that he was not. He sat in the dark den of the house, his beady eyes drilling into us, and shaking me viciously. She smelled old—like an old book whose pages have grown brittle and dusty from being on the shelf too long. The smell was so overpowering that I breathed through my mouth.

“What’s your name little girl?” She screeched.

“Sarah,” I gasped.

“Stinkbug?” She said then cackled, “Well that’s a stupid name.”

I was beginning to fear death by suffocation when the wiry, prune of a woman attacked Johnny and smothered him in the same chaotic embrace. I watched fascinated and mortified.

I’d never seen anyone before that looked so old. She was so shriveled—like a raisin—you could hardly tell where one wrinkle ended and the next one began. Mama told me she was my great-grandmother and she lived in the big, yellow house with her three children Ginger, Enlo, and Audrey and her son-in-law, Wib. Audrey and Wib were my grandparents.

Wib, however, assured me that he was not. He sat in the dark den of the house, his beady eyes drilling into us and his flabby flesh hanging over the easy chair. A long black cane lay across his knees.

“Hey, Daddy,” Mama said.

He blinked, and she nudged me with her elbow.

“Hi, Grandpa,” I said.
Wib spent the rest of the day talking about the rabid, yellow, man-eating cats, and Ginger spent most of the night chewing bubble gum and sticking it to the sides of the house to keep them away.

Mama would chuckle and sometimes scold Wib for provoking Ginger, but I found his teasing infuriating. Mostly because it was my job at the end of the day to scrape the chewing gum off the sides of the house.

I remember the first day of highschool not because it was the first day of highschool but because it was a day that perfectly surmised the absurdity of what my life had become.

I stumbled off the bus that afternoon disappointed with my unglamorous highschool life and waved to Enlo and Johnny who were squatting in the shade against the side of the house whittling and smoking cigars. Johnny had obviously gotten home before me and had not wasted time finding some trouble to get into, but for once I was too wrapped up in my own mood to bother scolding him. Instead I admired Enlo's horse and Johnny's stick then tiptoed up the porch steps and into the house hoping Wib would be asleep so I wouldn't get drafted for the fourth time that week.

Mama and Grandmother were arguing in the kitchen.

"It's not Wib's birthday!" Mama yelled into Grandmother's ear.

"Whatdya mean you got dibs on Thursday?" Grandmother shouted back as she shuffled pots and pans and bustled about the kitchen. Mama sighed, exasperated, and tried to block her from opening the refrigerator door.

"Grandmother, you don't know how to bake!" Mama yelled even louder.

"Now you listen here…" Grandmother started.

I rolled my eyes then crept down the hall, past the den. I was halfway up the stairs when I heard him holler, "Come 'ere! Hey, you, come 'ere!"

I sighed and trudged back down the steps and into the den where Audrey was painting a sculpture of a rooster and Wib was scowling from his easy chair.

"Yes sir…" I mumbled as I shuffled past him.

"Now when I was a general…" He began.

I nodded but didn't move.

"Damn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

Wib spent the rest of the day talking about the rabid, yellow, man-eating cats, and Ginger spent most of the night chewing bubble gum and sticking it to the sides of the house to keep them away.

Mama would chuckle and sometimes scold Wib for provoking Ginger, but I found his teasing infuriating. Mostly because it was my job at the end of the day to scrape the chewing gum off the sides of the house.

I remember the first day of highschool not because it was the first day of highschool but because it was a day that perfectly surmised the absurdity of what my life had become.

I stumbled off the bus that afternoon disappointed with my unglamorous highschool life and waved to Enlo and Johnny who were squattting in the shade against the side of the house whittling and smoking cigars. Johnny had obviously gotten home before me and had not wasted time finding some trouble to get into, but for once I was too wrapped up in my own mood to bother scolding him. Instead I admired Enlo's horse and Johnny's stick then tiptoed up the porch steps and into the house hoping Wib would be asleep so I wouldn't get drafted for the fourth time that week.

Mama and Grandmother were arguing in the kitchen.

"It's not Wib's birthday!" Mama yelled into Grandmother's ear.

"Whatdya mean you got dibs on Thursday?" Grandmother shouted back as she shuffled pots and pans and bustled about the kitchen. Mama sighed, exasperated, and tried to block her from opening the refrigerator door.

"Grandmother, you don't know how to bake!" Mama yelled even louder.

"Now you listen here…" Grandmother started.

I rolled my eyes then crept down the hall, past the den. I was halfway up the stairs when I heard him holler, "Come 'ere! Hey, you, come 'ere!"

I sighed and trudged back down the steps and into the den where Audrey was painting a sculpture of a rooster and Wib was scowling from his easy chair.

"Yes sir…" I mumbled as I shuffled past him.

"Now when I was a general…" He began.

I slumped into a chair and buried my face in my hands.

"Attention!" He shouted.

I nodded but didn't move.

"Damn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.

I gulped, "I'm a girl," I replied.

He said nothing.

"And that's General to you," he said.

"Sir?"

"Yes, that's right. General Harper," He said thumbing his chest, "World War II. Attention, soldier."

I nodded but didn't move.

"Darn kids," he said dismissing me with a flip of his wrist.

"Little boy, I'm not your grandpa," he growled.
face and men are falling all around you, I'd bet a million bucks that you—you!—would be the first man to run."
"I'm a girl, Wib."
"She's a girl, Wib!" Audrey echoed.
"She could pass for a boy, Wib."

"I'm baking you a cake, Wib!" Grandmother called from the kitchen where Mama was still trying to grab cooking utensils from her.
"Damn cake!" Wib yelled back.
"Banana shake? How the hell am I supposed to make a banana shake?" she snapped.

"Good Lord, I swear, it's like taking care of a bunch of overgrown babies," I heard Mama mumble, "The older they get the more they act like little kids.

Just then, thundering explosions resounded from the kitchen. Boom, boom... BOOM! One after another like gunshots or fireworks.

"We're hit!" Wib shouted, heaving his heavy, sagging body from his chair. He brandished his cane like a saber and charged into the kitchen shouting, "Everybody take cover!"

I could hear Mama and Grandmother screaming. Audrey had covered her ears, eyes as big as silver dollars. I lunged across the room, pulled Audrey's wheelchair towards me, spun it around, and accelerated down the hall towards the front door. Suddenly, I heard Ginger shrieking upstairs.

"I gotta get Ginger!" I yelled to no one in particular, spinning around and heading for the stairs.

"Leave her!" Wib roared almost gleefully, emerging from the kitchen and catching Audrey's wheelchair, which was still careening down the hallway.

"There's no time! Every man for himself!"

The explosions still reverberated from the kitchen where Mama and Grandmother were still screaming and Grandmother was trying to save her precious cake from impending danger by throwing it out the window.

"Oh Dorothy!" Ginger screeched as she all but fell down the stairs. I was dashing towards her and Wib was racing Audrey down the hallway when the explosions suddenly stopped. Everything was still for a moment. Ginger looked at my wild, curly hair and then at me.

"Is that the sound your hair made when it blew up?"
I blinked.

I heard a rattling in the kitchen. "It's alright everybody!" Mama called nervously.

"Mama...?"

"It was just Enlo's Coke cans!"

"Enlo's Coke cans?" I thought.

"Enlo!" Grandmother howled, "What the hell you doing putting your damn Coca-Cola in the freezer?"
I slapped the palm of my hand to my forehead.

Wib wheeled Audrey into the kitchen and I followed behind, Ginger combing her fingers through my hair.

"Enlo!" Mama yelled.

Enlo bashfully climbed the porch steps followed by Johnny and the two of them stood in the kitchen doorway covered from head to toe in Grandmother's cake batter.

"What's going on?" Johnny wailed.

Ginger immediately abandoned me and began scooping the batter off Enlo and Johnny and licking it off her fingers. Wib glared at her. Mama erupted in laughter. Grandmother began frantically hunting through the pantry for bananas.

"Damn cake," Wib muttered as he turned and headed back to his easy chair.

Audrey turned to me, "How was school, Sarah?" She asked.

Ginger passed away when I was fourteen. She had been feeling under the weather, so I took her breakfast in bed one morning only to find that she was gone. I remember thinking that she looked very unlike herself, so still and with her face all white. When I touched her, her skin was cold. I sat with her for a while and I cried a little bit and then I went for Mama.

Three days later we all walked to the church for Ginger's funeral. She was buried in her favorite, most ridiculous outfit, complete with her bright, red galoshes. Everyone else wore black and either cried or stared glumly at the casket. I didn't think the solemn atmosphere suited Ginger very well.

After Ginger's funeral, life at the big, yellow house was much less colorful.

Grandmother, Enlo, and Johnny still kept Mama and I on our toes, but the three of them put together couldn't cause half the trouble Ginger had. Wib became even more dour and brooding. He read his newspaper and puffed away at his pipe and managed to be even more spiteful than usual.

There was one blessed change, however. Wib no longer lectured me about patriotism and civic duty, but instead enlisted Johnny as his new recruit. I'm inclined to believe this change was due to the fact that I'd begun to develop breasts and Wib could no longer ignore the obvious truth that I was, indeed, a girl—a species entirely ill suited to combat, according to him. And Johnny was as good a replacement as any since he'd lost all his baby fat and looked much more the part of a young man ready to molded into a heroic soldier. I didn't feel the least bit sorry for him.

The change came about too late, though. Wib died of a heart attack a few months later. I would like to say Wib's death saddened me but, in fact, it did not. I felt sorry for him (if it's possible to feel sorry for a dead man), that he died such a sour old grouch disliked by almost everybody, but I did not miss him.
It was gloomy outside, the day of Wib’s funeral, which was very appropriate, as were the black clothes and the tears (well maybe not the tears) and the cold gravestones. Since Wib had been a general, the local guard was there to do a military routine. This only amused me because a few of them were young and handsome and I was suddenly very aware of my new breasts. Mama, Grandmother, Audrey, Enlo, and Johnny were all trying to cry and miserably failing at it, which I also found amusing.

It was not till the guard began to play taps that I realized how entertaining Wib’s funeral was really going to be. Or perhaps I did not realize it till I heard the distant thundering and bellowing of Mr. Rushmore’s cows.

“Oh shit, the cows,” I heard Mama mutter.

And shit on Mr. Rushmore for using a trumpet to call them to eat, I thought.

Across the marshy field they came, galloping at breakneck speed, slipping and sliding in the muck, heads raised in prolonged wails. There was only a flimsy barbed wire fence between the cow pasture and the cemetery and the crowd instinctively shrank back as the herd of hungry cows lurched and then slid to a halt along the fence line, watching for their food and mooing persistently. They bellowed so loudly that the pastor couldn’t be heard above the racket. He continued preaching, however, trying to yell above the noise.

Mr. Rushmore, who I spotted in the crowd, was looking very sheepish.

Then I realized what was going to happen next—the twenty-one-gun salute. I suppressed a snort and clamped my hand over my mouth. The cows spooked and scattered after the first round, careening across the field they’d just come floundering through, bellowing and colliding. Mama’s lip twitched, Enlo chewed his unlit cigar with shocking fervor, and Grandmother buried her face in her handkerchief.

A few moments passed during which Reverend Carter tried to regain his composure, the mourners tried to make themselves mourn, and the guard looked embarrassed and uncomfortable. After a moment I noticed a long, black snake, which had been upset by the frantic cows, slowly making his way through the unsuspecting crowd and straight towards Wib’s grave. Horrified, I elbowed Johnny whose eyes widened.

“If Grandmother sees that snake she’ll have a heart attack too and then there’ll only be five of us!” he whispered.

I nodded, tugged at Enlo’s shirtsleeve, and subtly pointed to the snake. Enlo’s face turned beat-red and he twitched nervously. Then he slowly began moving closer, arm outstretched, towards the snake that had stopped momentarily behind Grandmother’s black pumps. He’s going to catch its tail and toss it back over the fence, I thought. Genius, Enlo!

I was wrong. Instead, Enlo grabbed a large rock from the ground in front of him and began beating the snake’s head with it. The dead snake, or half-dead snake, writhed on the ground, its body flailing and contorting. Grandmother flew into hysteric and across the cemetery faster than any ninety-year-old woman ought to be able to run, especially in pumps, and the rest of the crowd scattered as quickly as the cows had, yelling and pointing.

“I grabbed the twitching snake and tossed it over the fence.

Mary knows she’ll never leave these four walls alive. She knows that her assigned room, smelling of old ham salad sandwiches and disinfectant, is home, where she has lived for eight eternal years. She knows this is where she’ll die. She knows that no family comes, will ever come to visit her, to offer their swollen, compulsory smiles, salted with grief and smothered in lifeless chatter. The road hasn’t been a long one from White Pine, but she knows this is where it ends.

I asked her if I could help her pick out her clothes for tomorrow. She motioned toward the sad blue cabinet in the sterile corner, and I chose one of the pre-paired shirt-and-pant combinations on her approval. Carelessly, mindlessly, I grabbed a pair of socks from the clustered pile. “How about these?” Her face squinted — she stared at the socks until her eyes began to pace the room. “They have to match,” she answered. Commanded. Begged.

Mary knows her days are like the last few drops of water at the bottom of a glass. She knows time is a stream drying up. But the life in her bones is still swirling, still aware, still clutching the expectations of a generation past. No choice is made without deliberation, and every choice is a weathered fist thrust toward the heavens in obstinacy. A plea, an offering, a stubborn promise that her life is not yet complete.

He always smelled like cigarettes. Always. Even when she came into church every Sunday morning, her hair, her clothes, her skin filled the air surrounding her with the scent of Marlboro Lights. She never tried to hide the smell, never covered it with perfume or air freshener. I think maybe she wanted people to notice during the fellowship time, wanted them to be aware of her habit when she walked past them at the quick stop. She wanted them to comment to her father the next time they saw him that his daughter reeked like an ashtray. Every day that she called Coeburn, Virginia home, she made a conscious and steady effort to do everything in her power to piss him off, like it was her only way of getting some kind of revenge. You can’t blame her, or at least I never could. Even now that she’s gone, years later, I still associate what some might call the stench of cigarettes with her, and each time I catch a whiff of it at a Friday night football game, I see her in my head. Sometimes, I even buy a pack just so that my hand will smell like her after I’ve smoked one.

From the time I was thirteen years old until I was twenty-three, I called Lindsay Marcia Parker my best friend. We lived in this little town called Coeburn in the southwest corner of Virginia. Me, I loved the mountains, I loved the smell of the river after it rained. I loved the community of the town and the family that we formed. But Lindsay was different. Lindsay hated Coeburn, Virginia with every last cell in her body. I always knew that one way or another, she would make it out, even if it meant leaving me behind. And I always knew that when that time came, I would somehow be able to let her go.

Lindsay’s dad was the Reverend, a sort of town hero around here. He preached at the biggest church in the town, on the corner of Maple and Pine. Everybody went to his church. Everyone knew who he was, and everyone knew his two daughters, Lindsay and Natasha Parker. Around here, you’re known by your parents, by your family. If someone doesn’t like your daddy, they don’t like you either. And that’s just kinda the way it goes.

Anyway, so Lindsay’s daddy was like this big local hero. He always went to the hospital when you or someone in your family was sick. He always went to folks’ homes to pay visits when something bad was happening in their life. He sent people cards on their birthdays and sympathy cards on tough anniversaries of deaths and divorces. A big church in over in Tennessee somewhere even asked him to come guest preach at their church. Everyone loved Reverend Eric Parker. Everyone except for Lindsay Parker, that is.

See, not many folks’ know who Eric Parker really is. They all walk around, talking about how great he is and how they’re just so lucky to have him in their lives. Most people didn’t know, but I did. I knew when Lindsay told people her bruises were from falling down the stairs or tripping over her own two feet that she was lying. I knew the truth. But I never did say anything. And maybe I should have, maybe I should’ve told everybody. But Lindsay never said a word, so neither did I. Usually when people talk about the things in their
lives they regret, they talk about the things they did. Me, I have more regrets from things I didn’t do than from things I did. And one of them was keeping my mouth shut about Eric Parker and his family.

When we were kids, she was this perfect, follow the rules type of girl. She didn’t swear, like all the other kids in the seventh grade, and she always carried a Bible around, like she was afraid her daddy was going to catch her without it. Before she ate her lunch, she would bow her head and pray and thank the Lord for His blessings—even with everyone watching. When she finished a conversation with you, she would say “God bless you,” and wish you a good day, and she was sincere about it, too. That was back when she had a lot of friends, when she was popular, a normal girl—or, at least as normal as the pastor’s daughter can be. She was sweet to people; she was the type of person you couldn’t help but love, even if you didn’t particularly like her or believe the way she did.

But that was all before her mom died. After that, everything changed. The sweaters and past the knee skirts she wore to school disappeared and they were replaced with tight jeans and low cut tops and high heels. Her tight bun came down and her brown hair was as free as she was. The Bible was gone, and I never saw her touch one again, not even in church. She was thirteen when her mama died and she changed everything about herself she could possibly think of, like maybe if she was a different person, she wouldn’t be the girl whose mama just committed suicide. I remember overhearing Mrs. Patterson say one Sunday morning that Lindsay wasn’t pretty anymore, because she never smiled. But if I lost my mama when I was thirteen, I don’t know that I’d smile much anymore either.

After Mrs. Parker died, all the kids who used to hang out with her backed off. They didn’t want anything to do with her all of a sudden. No one sat with her at lunch and no one asked her to the school dances. I used to watch her sometimes, how she would just sit alone, like it never occurred to her that people used to surround her at lunchtime. She would stare into her soup, as concentrated as if she were watching a movie, and just sit there in pure and utter silence. I had never been good friends with her, although I had a couple classes with her over the years. I knew her, I knew who she was, but I didn’t know her.

The first day I sat down and ate lunch with Lindsay Parker, I thought I was just doing my good deed for the day. She needed someone, and I wanted to be there for her. I didn’t know that she would change my entire life. There are some nights I take her picture out from under my mattress, and I just cry. My wife will come in the bedroom and wonder what’s the matter with me, and I’ll dry my eyes and lie about it. I love my wife, but I don’t think it’s possible to love someone the way I loved, and still love, Lindsay Parker. I’ll stare at her picture for hours, wondering where she is, if she’s happy, and what might have happened if I had opened my mouth and told someone how vile and evil that son of a bitch who calls himself a reverend was.

Sometimes I think about walking down the street and into his church and shouting to the entire congregation about what he did to his family, and what he did to that girl. I want to publish it in the town newspaper, or broadcast in on the evening news, something, anything. I think sometimes maybe if I tell now, it will right some of the things I messed up so long ago. But I never did that. Lindsay never ruined her daddy’s reputation, so I never did either.

I remember the night I first realized I was in love with Lindsay Parker. I wore green, she wore blue. I was sitting on my bed, doing my Biology vocabulary words for chapter three. It was ten o’clock on a Tuesday night, and my parents had gone out to Kingsport, Tennessee for the afternoon and still weren’t back yet. I remember every last detail. I was in the middle of writing the word “mitosis” when I heard five loud, consecutive bangs on my front door. Startled, I jumped off my bed and flew down the stairs, reaching the door just in time to hear three more banging noises. When I jerked open the door, I found a bloodied-faced, sobbing Lindsay and a blue blouse that was hanging halfway off of her.

“Good God! What the hell happened to you?” I exclaimed, pulling her inside out of the ten degree January weather. I took her in my arms, not even thinking about the fact that the blood from her face was now smeared all over my shirt. She buried her face into my chest, and she just sobbed. And I just stood there, holding her, feeling my hands move up and down with the shaking motions of her body. Finally, when her tears turned to hiccups, I pulled her back from me to look her and up down.

“Did he do this to you?” I asked her.

She just nodded.

“Dammit, Lindsay!” I cried, covering my own face with my hands, and then reaching out to wipe one last falling tear from hers. “How long are you going to let this go on? When are you going to tell someone, someone besides me? I know you, you’re strong. Why do you let him to do this you? You have to leave.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But where am I going to go, Tommy?”

“I, I don’t know. Here, you can stay here,” I offered.

“Tommy, you know him. He’d drag me home. Your parents would send me home. No one in this town would believe that Reverend Parker beats his own daughter,” she pointed out, cringing at her own mention of her father’s name. “I can handle this. I’ll be okay. I just… I needed you this time.”

I nodded, rubbing my now pounding temple with my forefingers. “Linz… I’m not saying it makes it okay, believe me, I’m not. There are no excuses. But you provoke him, I know you do. Does he hit Natasha?” I asked her.

She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“Because she does what he says and she never calls him out on his shit,” she said, matter of factly.

“Then why do you? I know he’s an ass, I do, I know that, and I’m not
“Lindsay?” I squinted. “Lindsay, what the hell are you—how did you…?”

Why can’t you just obey him like Tasha and keep what you think to yourself?”

She just blinked at me, like I had just asked the most idiotic question in the world. There was this deafening silence, and I was afraid she was about to turn on her heel and storm out without a single word or explanation of any kind. Instead, she just continued to stare at me, like maybe if she didn’t move her eyes from mine I would look into hers and figure it out.

“Because,” she said after some time, still staring at me, keeping her 

“I don’t understand. What do you mean fight for your family? Why do you have to fight him? If you didn’t fight him, you wouldn’t have to run down the street covered in blood, you wouldn’t have bruises colouring your arms every week.”

And then, just like I feared, she turned, and she left. In that moment, I fell in love with Lindsay Parker. She knew that standing up for herself, that being strong, was going to leave her with blood and bruises. I looked down at my now blood and tear stained shirt. But she doesn’t care, I thought. Lindsay was the kind of girl who would fight back until it killed her. Even if I didn’t understand, even I had no idea exactly what went on in that house, I did know that when Lindsay felt strongly enough about something, she would never back down. No matter the cost.

It was exactly two and half hours later when I heard a tapping noise on my bedroom window. My window was two stories off the ground. It must be a tree branch, or a bird, or…

“Tommy!” I heard, as the window was pushed upward, making a soft creaking sound.

“I rolled over, jumped slightly, and flicked on the lamp beside my bed.

“Lindsay?” I squinted. “Lindsay, what the hell are you—how did you…”?

“I climbed the tree,” she said with a shrug, like it was a dumb question. She swung one foot and then the other inside my bedroom and hopped off the ledge. She was dressed in a grey sweatshirt and black sweatpants that were tucked inside of her off-brand Ugg boots. Her face was cleaned up from earlier that night, and the shine of mischief was back in her eyes.

“She looked at me, suddenly very serious as she sat down on my bed, peeled her boots off and pulled the covers up to her chin. “I never told you why I fight him, or why I hate him so much,” she said.

“I took her by the hand. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. He’s taking his side. But Linz, when you yell back at him, when you disobey him on purpose, when you go to church smelling like cigarettes, you piss him off. Why? Why can’t you just obey him like Tasha and keep what you think to yourself?”

She just blinked at me, like I had just asked the most idiotic question in the world. There was this deafening silence, and I was afraid she was about to turn on her heel and storm out without a single word or explanation of any kind. Instead, she just continued to stare at me, like maybe if she didn’t move her eyes from mine I would look into hers and figure it out.

“Because,” she said after some time, still staring at me, keeping her 

“Because,” she said after some time, still staring at me, keeping her 

“I don’t understand. What do you mean fight for your family? Why do you have to fight him? If you didn’t fight him, you wouldn’t have to run down the street covered in blood, you wouldn’t have bruises colouring your arms every week.”

“No,” she shook her brown hair, causing it to toss like waves in the ocean. Soft, and smooth, but with a sense of danger and mystery. “No, Tommy, you don’t understand. You’re my best friend, you’ve been my best friend for four years, since we were thirteen, and I never told you how my mother died.”

I studied her, unsure of what she was alluding to. “Lindsay, your mother committed suicide. She shot herself. The whole town knows that.”

Her face hardened as she looked back at me with her hard, caramel brown eyes. “No,” she contradicted me firmly. “No. No, my mother did not commit suicide.”

Silent, I just rubbed the back of my own hand with my thumb, and waited on her to continue. I didn’t understand. Of course Marcy Parker killed herself. Mrs. Washington next door heard the gunshot. She came running over the second she heard it, bumping into Eric Parker on her way to the porch, who had been outside feeding their three dogs. They had nearly knocked one another over trying to get inside the house, and when they did, they’d found Mrs. Parker in a pool of blood. Dead. With a thirteen-year-old and an eight-year-old screaming on the stairs leading down into the living room.

“My mother didn’t kill herself,” Lindsay repeated. “My father did.”

I felt my mouth fall open.

A single golden hoop fell onto the floor as Marcy Parker’s body was hurled into the wall. As she tried to stop the flow of tears that were falling as a waterfall into a river, she slid down against the wall and onto the floor in defeat. Across the room lay a shoe and scraps of her blouse that her husband had ripped from her now bleeding and bruised body. “Please,” she begged, struggling to get out the words. “Please, Eric, stop!” Her voice was now but a whisper as she looked up to put that suitcase down? Did you? Did you stop when I said to quit actin’ like you was gonna up and leave me? Did you stop what you was doin’? Did you?” He spit brown saliva into a Coca-Cola can and wiped his mouth clean with the back of his hand.

“Stop! Huh?” roared Eric Parker. “Stop, ay? Did you stop when I told you to put that suitcase down? Did you? Did you stop when I said to quit actin’ like you was gonna up and leave me? Did you stop what you was doin’? Did you?”

He spit brown saliva into a Coca-Cola can and wiped his mouth clean with the back of his hand.

Eric, please, I’ll… I’ll stay! I’ll—I’ll st-stay,” she vowed, her speech broken and stuttered as she spoke.

“You will, huh? You’ll stay with me? Why? Because of those two brats you call daughters? Is that why? Oh, I’ll take good care of them, Marcy. You just go on and leave. You get your bags and walk right out that door and I’ll give your precious babies all the lovin’ they can handle!” His yellow smile displayed bits and pieces of Red Seal long cut between his teeth, and he cackled as his hand came across his wife’s face one more time before he walked out of the room.

Marcy’s weeping ceased at last as she lay still on the floor. “Please Jesus,” she prayed in the softest of voices. “Jesus, protect my girls. Jesus… If you’re there… Help me. Help us get out of here…”

As her consciousness began to fade, Eric returned with a pistol in each
They thought Tasha and I had come downstairs because we heard the shot, but her blood spattered the wall and stained the white carpet. She was laughing over her, trembling, she pulled the trigger and collapsed in a heap. Marcy’s eyes filled with tears that never fell, and she squeezed them to shut as she pictured her little girls’ faces one last time. Then, with her husband at her right temple and on this trigger he placed his own finger. “Now here’s what’s gon’ happen. You listenin’? Now…” As he grinned, one could almost see the devil in his eyes and in the depths of his evil soul. “Now you’re gonna pull that trigger, darlin’. And if you don’t—I’m gonna pull mine. Which one it gon’ be?”

Marcy’s eyes, filled with tears that never fell, and she squeezed them shut as she pictured her little girls’ faces one last time. Then, with her husband laughing over her, trembling, she pulled the trigger and collapsed in a heap. Her blood spattered the wall and stained the white carpet.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t do anything. An unbearable silence passed between us before I finally managed to say: “Linz, I… I, I’m so… so… Oh, dear God…But how, how do you know that? I thought you were upstairs when the shot was fired.”

“I was watching the whole thing from the staircase,” she whispered. “They thought Tasha and I had come downstairs because we heard the shot, but I’d been standing there the entire time. He just hadn’t noticed. After the gunshot, he ran out the back door and then ran around front and bumped into Mrs. Washington, like he’d been outside all along. And then he pretended to be sad. He pretended like he was sorry, like he was grieving. He cried at her funeral and he preached on coping with loss for the next four Sundays. And it made me sick.”

“But she didn’t move. “Tell who, Tommy? Tell Officer Mitchell, Reverend Parker’s best friend? Tell the Sheriff, the head deacon at his church? Who the hell is gonna believe me? You think they’re gonna take my word, the word of the rebellious preacher’s daughter who tries to make her father look bad on purpose? They hate me, Tommy. They all think I’m a burden to the greatest man they’ve ever met. They feel sorry for him, because of me. Why do you think they never investigated it as anything but suicide? There must have been bruises all over her. They never even considered it; they just peed her off the floor and took her to the morgue. The guys that prepared her for the funeral had to have seen she’d been beaten, but who would ever even stop to consider Eric Parker would beat his wife in this town? Who would ever believe me?”

And I knew she was right.

He’d never kick her out of the house, because that would look bad. And she couldn’t run away, because the minute he reported her missing, every cop in the next three counties would be looking for her, and she wouldn’t get anywhere before they found her. She didn’t have a car or a dime to her name, anyway.

I didn’t know when, or how, but I knew that I had to get her out of Coeburn. I always knew she’d leave me behind, but I never thought I’d be the one who helped her leave.

It was two more years before I was able to come up with a plan to get her away from Eric Parker. Two more years of bruises and bloody noses, two more years of her choosing to stand her ground when he insulted her and hit her, two more years of her fighting back relentlessly. It was two years of pain that I caused her because I failed to get her out sooner.

For two years after I knew the truth, I let her walk around town with her head held high while all the girls called her a whore, all the boys screwed her and bragged about what an easy lay she was, and all the women followed her with their eyes and gossiped, calling it “a prayer request.” She didn’t have any friends, she didn’t have anyone or anything, save me. She’d get drunk on Saturday night, sleep with some sleezbag, and then show up at her father’s church Sunday morning. I think it was her way of proving they didn’t get to her. It made them uncomfortable to see her in church each week, and yet they would have condemned her even more if she wasn’t there. She didn’t sing the songs, and she didn’t listen when her father walked up there, all clean and bright smiles, a Bible in his hand and in his best Sunday suit and tie. It was about the presence, about letting them know that she knew what they thought, and she didn’t care. And for two years, I let her follow that routine, never telling her how desperately in love with her I was, never trying, not really, to get her out—because I knew once she was gone, she’d never come back.

One summer, I told my parents I was going to Nashville to visit a classmate of ours that took a job there a year ago, after graduation. I took Lindsay with me. She packed one suitcase. We skipped church one Sunday morning, the first time she’d missed a Sunday in her life, probably, and we
left. I drove her all the way to Nashville, and once we got there, I put her in a cheap hotel room and left her with some money I’d saved up from working at the grocery store since sophomore year of high school. I was glad that I’d always been good at saving my money—I left her there with $5,000. She would have enough to stay at the hotel until she found at apartment, and enough to live on until she got a job. I hoped, anyway.

Lindsay had been on a downward spiral her whole life. She was cynical, and bitter, and she hated God and religion as much as she hated her father. She didn’t believe in anything, she didn’t pray, she had nothing, not even hope. She was dark, and cold even at times, and even though I spent half my childhood as her best friend, I still feel like there was so much about her I never even knew. I knew her favourite colour was red and her favourite band was Mayday Parade. The polish on her fingernails was always chipped, and she wore her mother’s silver necklace in the shape of a broken circle. I knew she screwed boys who had no respect for her in some kind of desperate attempt to fill a hole inside of her. I knew she drank until she had numbed the pain and blocked out the memories. I knew her favourite colour was red and her favourite band was Mayday Parade. I knew she was a fighter.

And I know that no matter where I had taken her, she would’ve have ended up where she did. It was either get her out of Coeburn, or watch her die there, and I knew that. She phoned now and then to let me know how she was, but the gaps between our calls grew longer and longer each time. She took drinking turned into all day and all night events. The cigarettes turned to joints, and the beer turned to hard liquor and moonshine. She never went to church again in her life. And the Saturday night drinking turned into all day and all night events.

The last time I saw her was in Nashville about four years ago. She had told me the name of the club she worked at a long time ago; I didn’t even know if she was still there. It had been two and a half years since I’d heard her voice or seen her face. Eric Parker had never gone looking for her. He told everyone she’d run away, and he did report her missing to give off the allusion he cared, but they never found her. I don’t think they tried. Any SOB who had any brain at all could piece together that she’d gone missing around the same time I’d left on my trip. But they never did, or maybe they just didn’t want to. No one missed her in that town, no one but me. I was the only one who really knew her, who knew enough about her to miss her. Even if her father hadn’t gone looking for her, I knew I had to.

I walked into the darkly lit club, pink glitter shining from the floor, nervous and unsure of myself. I didn’t know if she’d recognize me, or even want to see me. As I made my way slowly to the front of the club, toward the stage, I saw her. I saw her for the first time in four years. I’ve loved her every moment of every day, and this is the first time I’ve seen her somewhere besides in my dreams at night. But instead of sitting across from me at a kitchen table, dressed in jeans and a button-up, the way she is in those dreams, she’s dressed in a G-string and a bra, and she’s humping a metal pole.

My jaw dropped. I don’t know how long I stood there with my mouth open before I realized I was gawking at her. I knew what to expect, and still, nothing could have prepared me for what I was staring at. My Lindsay, my beautiful Lindsay, grinding on a stage and accepting one dollar bills from men and stuffing them in her bra, never breaking rhythm. I wanted to slap the face of every guy staring at her like she was an object, just sex strutting on a bare stage. Instead, I just stood there, my feet planted firmly on the floor, unable to move.

After ten minutes of begging and persuasion, I convinced a waitress to go backstage and tell Lindsay Tommy was here. I was afraid she wouldn’t care, wouldn’t come out at all, but she surprised me again. She came running out, dodging the tables and the drinks, the men whistling and hooting, dressed now in a sequined lingerie outfit. A squeal escaped her throat, a noise I hadn’t heard since we were about fourteen years old. Her smile was as wide as the valley back home, her eyes shining like a sunrise behind the mountains, and she jumped up in my arms and wrapped her long tanned legs around my body.

After her shift was over, we went out for margaritas and dancing. As she held my hand, walking me back to my hotel, she told me about how she’d gotten the job at the club, the friends that she’d made, and how thankful she was I helped her get out of Coeburn. I told her about my new girlfriend, Mandie, about Natasha going off to school at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise, and about how I’d never set foot in her daddy’s church since she left. Her eyes were red, and she was thinner than usual. If I’d thought about it, really thought about it, I’d’ve known she was using drugs. But I didn’t want to think about it; all I wanted to think about was how she was here, with me now.

I spent two more nights in Nashville before I had to go back to my job in Virginia. As I held her in my arms one last time, and whispered, “I love you, Lindsay,” I caught the scent of her hair in my nostrils. She still smelled like Marlboro Lights. I thought about her every minute of the car ride home, and I cried for most of it.

They found her body in a dumpster a couple blocks away from the club. There were burn marks around her neck, they assumed from a rope, and glass and glass in her scalp. She was a stripper, a nobody, with no family, no one to claim her. Her manager finally identified her body in the morgue. They called it a drug deal gone bad, and with no leads on the murderer, closed the case within a couple months.

There was no funeral. Eric Parker had her ashes buried next to her mama, in the graveyard behind his church. He told everybody he couldn’t bear to sit through a service, but the truth was he didn’t want to spend the money. There are always flowers on her grave, her favourites, pink tulips. I know the whole town thinks her daddy puts them there, and I let them. I’ve certainly never seen him at her grave.

After a while, it was like Lindsay Parker never existed. The neighbours who moved into town years ago and had asked, “Oh, aren’t you Eric Parker’s...”
daughter?” when they saw her pumping her gas, had forgotten about her. Her school teachers, who had watched her come in with bruises and sprains, and never addressed it, never spoke her name again. She became a shadow, a brief memory of the past. Every now and then, someone will mention Eric Parker’s daughter, how she ran away from home and got herself killed because she was on drugs. They’ll tell it to their kids, like a horror story to scare them into staying in Coeburn for the rest of their lives. They don’t even use her name anymore. She never had her own identity when she was alive, so maybe it’s only appropriate she still doesn’t now that she’s gone. At church on Sundays, in high school, at the diner, she was always just “Eric Parker’s daughter.” The rebel child, the reverend’s daughter. The day that Lindsay was baptized, back in the fifth grade, the water was high and muddy. It had just rained the whole week before, and it had caused a lot of the dirt and mud to wash down into the water. I remember because they carried on with her baptism as planned, even though the water was brown with mud. When Lindsay came up, washed anew in the blood of Christ, her clothes weren’t clean and wet—they were soiled with dirt. She was baptized in dirty water. Maybe we should have known then, maybe that’s why she turned out the way she did, because her two-faced, lying, hypocritical bastard of a father baptized her in mud.

Mandie is out of town this weekend, and I’m sitting at home on a Sunday morning, drinking a Budweiser on the front porch and smoking Marlboro Light after Marlboro Light. My hand smells like her, like Lindsay. I feel a single tear fall down my cheek, and onto the framed picture I’m holding in my trembling hand. I think of all the things I didn’t do, all the things I knew and never acted on, all the things I never said. I think of how I never even got up the guts to tell her how madly in love with her I was. Maybe I knew it didn’t matter, because she was too wild, too big for this town anyway. A girl like her wasn’t meant to be fenced in or tied down. I stop rocking in my chair, and stare out at the blue and purple mountains. The sun is shining. It’s a beautiful day in Appalachia. The kind of day Lindsay would have loved. I look at my watch. It’s twenty minutes past eleven. I imagine Reverend Parker has just begun his sermon. One minute I’m standing on my porch, looking out at the mountains. The next, I’m standing with my hunting rifle in the middle of the church, the women in their Sunday dresses screaming and crouched behind the pews, the men shouting at me to put the gun down. I rest it on my shoulder, and aim. I kill Reverend Eric Parker in one, clean shot.
people don't really ever talk about Elliot. They don't ever ask where he is or when he's coming back or when the last time someone heard from him was. Sometimes I wonder if everyone here has forgotten about him. If I am the only one that remembers he ever existed. But then I see the way that Beatrice's head always pops up, no matter what she is doing, every time the bell above the door of the café rings, and I know that I am not the only one who remembers.

I was inside the café wiping down the tables and listening to "Let it Be" by the Beatles the night before Elliot left. We were closing up for the night. They stood on the sidewalk outside, hugging. She was wiping her eyes. I tried not to stare. I always did try not to stare at them. She was resting her head on his chest, facing the road. Her blonde hair glowed in the light of the streetlamp and he stroked her head. They looked like a couple in a movie and I tried to imagine what they must be saying to one another. Then I stood back work. Elliot drove his Jeep and she rode in the passenger seat with her feet propped up on the dashboard wearing a pair of Elliot's sunglasses. He drove us down to the river by the tracks. People went down there to jump off of the bridge, something that I had never done before. There was a boy that had died there a few years ago. Fell wrong and broke his neck or something. When we parked she and Elliot hopped out and started down the trail. I guess Beatrice could tell that I was little nervous.

“So you coming, Harlo?” she asked as I lingered close to the Jeep. I looked back at the Jeep and then down the trail where they were walking. Beatrice was holding Elliot’s hand and dangling her towel in the other.

“Ugh, yeah. Yeah, I’m coming.”

The bridge was much higher than I imagined and the water below was moving much faster than I thought it should be. Elliot took his shirt off, handed it to Beatrice, hopped up onto the trestle, let out a big, “Wahooo!” and jumped. We rushed over to the edge and waited for his head to pop up. I scanned the water below, seeing only rocks and white water. Beatrice pointed and said, “There he is.” He had floated much further down than I had expected. Fell wrong and broke his neck or something. When we parked she and Elliot hopped out and started down the trail. I guess Beatrice could tell that I was little nervous.

“Don’t be such a chicken, Harlo,” she said, snatching her arm away. I made tea and sat at the bar in her kitchen and she would look out the window while I told her about my week.

I always did try not to stare at them. She was resting her head on his chest, facing the road. Her blonde hair glowed in the light of the streetlamp and he stroked her head. They looked like a couple in a movie and I tried to imagine what they must be saying to one another. Then I stood back work. Elliot drove his Jeep and she rode in the passenger seat with her feet propped up on the dashboard wearing a pair of Elliot’s sunglasses. He drove us down to the river by the tracks. People went down there to jump off of the bridge, something that I had never done before. There was a boy that had died there a few years ago. Fell wrong and broke his neck or something. When we parked she and Elliot hopped out and started down the trail. I guess Beatrice could tell that I was little nervous.

“So you coming, Harlo?” she asked as I lingered close to the Jeep. I looked back at the Jeep and then down the trail where they were walking. Beatrice was holding Elliot’s hand and dangling her towel in the other.

“Ugh, yeah. Yeah, I’m coming.”

The bridge was much higher than I imagined and the water below was moving much faster than I thought it should be. Elliot took his shirt off, handed it to Beatrice, hopped up onto the trestle, let out a big, “Wahooo!” and then jumped. We rushed over to the edge and waited for his head to pop up. I scanned the water below, seeing only rocks and white water. Beatrice pointed and said, “There he is.” He had floated much further down than I had expected. Fell wrong and broke his neck or something. When we parked she and Elliot hopped out and started down the trail. I guess Beatrice could tell that I was little nervous.

“Don’t be such a chicken, Harlo,” she said, snatching her arm away. I made tea and sat at the bar in her kitchen and she would look out the window while I told her about my week.

I always did try not to stare at them. She was resting her head on his chest, facing the road. Her blonde hair glowed in the light of the streetlamp and he stroked her head. They looked like a couple in a movie and I tried to imagine what they must be saying to one another. Then I stood back work. Elliot drove his Jeep and she rode in the passenger seat with her feet propped up on the dashboard wearing a pair of Elliot’s sunglasses. He drove us down to the river by the tracks. People went down there to jump off of the bridge, something that I had never done before. There was a boy that had died there a few years ago. Fell wrong and broke his neck or something. When we parked she and Elliot hopped out and started down the trail. I guess Beatrice could tell that I was little nervous.

“Don’t be such a chicken, Harlo,” she said, snatching her arm away. I made tea and sat at the bar in her kitchen and she would look out the window while I told her about my week.
She looked down again at Elliot, then bent her knees and jumped out without screaming.

Beatrice is super friendly to all the customers. All the old men and ladies that come in know her by name and she always remembers to ask about their kids or their pets or their flower gardens. I think that most everyone here wishes that she were their daughter or granddaughter or niece or something. Mr. Hall is a farmer who comes in for lunch every Monday and Friday. He brings her vegetables that he grows. Beatrice loves cucumbers, so in the summertime he brings her a basket full of them once a week. She brings back the empty basket; he brings back more cucumbers the next week.

Mrs. Petterson loans her novels. I've often wondered if Beatrice really reads them or not. Lots of them are racy paperbacks with graphic depictions of blondes whose tops are falling off and whose hair is being blown in all sorts of sexy directions, wrapped up in the arms of a man with equally sexy hair. I have trouble picturing Beatrice sitting at one of the benches in the park, or sitting on her chase by the window in her apartment sipping tea, reading any of these books. But whenever Mrs. Petterson brings them to her, Beatrice will bring them back in a week or two and they will have a conversation while Beatrice rings up her cranberry turkey wrap about how much she enjoyed the read. Mrs. Petterson will then go on to talk about the next trashy book that she reads or not. Lots of them are racy paperbacks with graphic depictions.

One weekend Beatrice and I made plans to go downtown to the art district. There was a film festival that day in the park and we were going to go thrift shopping. Beatrice was going to take me to the little shops where she finds all of her cheap jewelry. When I got to her door I knocked and said, “Hey Beatrice, it’s me. Are you ready to go?” There was no response. I looked at my watch to see if I was on time. We had planned to meet at noon. I waited for a second and then I knocked again and said, “Beatrice!” I went to knock again but stopped my fist short of the door. I remembered that I had seen her bike chained up in front. I considered sitting down and waiting to see if she would come out soon. I looked at my watch again and turned my back to the door. When I walked down the steps and back out the front, I saw that her kitchen window was open and I could hear the wind chime clinking in the breeze.

“Harlo,” Beatrice said to me while we sat at her kitchen bar sipping green tea, “have you ever been in love?”

“I avoided eye contact with her as I steeped my tea bag, concentrating on the swirls in my cup. A lump came up in my throat and it made me nervous to realize it.

“Well, I don’t think anyone has ever really been in love with me, so I’m not sure that, even if I have, I would be able to recognize it.” I looked past her into her living room where a big picture that Elliot had taken still hung above the couch. It was a landscape photo of some breathtaking mountain in a place that I had never asked about. Probably out west somewhere because that’s where he does most of his work. I wondered if she ever wanted to throw it out the window or smash it with a baseball bat.

“Do you think you ever will be again?” It came out before I could stop it.

She looked out the window for a second then hopped off of her stool and rinsed her cup out. She walked into her bedroom and shut the door. I rinsed out my cup, grabbed my coat, and let myself out, affording a glance at the picture hanging on the wall, as straight and prominent and lonely as a skyline, before I shut the door behind me and bounced down the stairs and onto the quiet street below.
It was a Friday and I was ringing up Mr. Gray's regular large coffee and blueberry scone to go when he walked through the door. I heard the bell, looked up, and there was Elliot. Standing there tall and lean, slightly bearded, looking around with his hands in his pockets. I gave Mr. Hall his change and handed him his bag. I watched Beatrice turn from the table she was bussing. The heavy black bus tub full of plates she was holding crashed to the floor. I don't think she even blinked at the sound. Her hands hung loosely at her sides, gangly and strengthless-looking as willow limbs. All movement in her stopped as she stared blankly at the man at the door. It seemed as if the slightest breeze could have knocked her over. I held my breath as Elliot crossed the room toward her. He wasn’t looking at anything at all but her. Five long strides and they were nearly toe-to-toe. He looked down at her. She still looked straight ahead, like his chest was transparent, like she could see through him to the places that had kept him away. Like staring them down would make them answer her. I thought they might just stand like that for years, facing off in silence, until he reached for her chin and tilted her face up. She was not smiling. She was searching in his face for the thing she had been waiting for.

She was mopping and I was putting up the chairs. I couldn’t decide if asking about it was a good thing or a bad thing. She was like a little porcelain doll dangling from the fan blades, spinning and spinning. I wanted to cut her down. Either let her smash herself against the floor or set her on the shelf where she could just be.

“What are you going to do, Beatrice?”
“I don’t know, Harlo.” Her voice had the trembles. She wrung her hands in her apron.
“How long has it been?”
She stood still, staring out the window. I wondered if she was looking at the place on the street where they had danced.
“Two years, eight months, and nine days.”
She stood there like a statue, like a robot. Like I had pressed a button.

“How long has it been?”
I told her that I would finish mopping. She said thanks, put up her apron, grabbed her purse, and walked out the door, the bell dinging behind her.
I waited for a couple minutes and then followed behind her, the bell ringing for the last time that evening as I walked out. They used to have dinner at Joe’s Pizza Inn on Salem Avenue when she would get off from work, so that’s the first place that I went. My anxious, walking steps quickly became long, running strides. Once I got to the corner of Broad Street and Salem Avenue I could see the pizza parlor. There was Elliot, sitting at a table by the window. It was dark and he sat there tapping his knees, sipping his drink.

I stood there on the train trestle for a moment, listening to the water.
them. You’re the one that needs to be a part of someone’s life.”

She let her arm drop from the door and turned to face me.

“You don’t have to go in there. You don’t have to go to the café again in the morning. You don’t have to listen to the bell above the door every single day and hope, every time it rings, that Elliot is going to walk back through the door and into your life. Going in there isn’t going to fix anything. It just keeps you spinning in the same circle you’ve been spinning in for so long. It changes nothing.”

She held my gaze stone-faced. For a moment I thought she might believe me. But she pushed the door open and I watched her walk into the pizza parlor and into Elliot’s arms. He kissed her on the forehead, and pulled out the chair for her. She sat down and took off her coat.

I didn’t go in to work the next day. I slept in and left the phone off the hook. Around three in the afternoon I walked down to the café. The bell above the door rang when I came in, and Beatrice and I made eye contact. She was ringing up Mrs. Petterson’s cranberry turkey wrap. Ray came out from behind the counter.

“Where the hell have you been, Harlo? What are you thinking just not showing up this morning like that?”

“Im quitting, Ray. I came down here to tell you.”

“Well, that’s just perfect, Harlo! You’ve worked here for three years without ever missing a day and now your just going to prance in and say that you’re through. Thanks for the notice, Harlo. That’s just great.”

“You’ll be just fine, Ray. There are plenty of girls in this town that’d love to work here.”

Beatrice stood behind the counter starring at me.

“There are plenty of other girls that’d love to be just like Beatrice.”

I turned around and headed toward the door, the hardwood floors squeaking under my shoes.

I heard something slam on the counter, and then, “F*** you, Harlo!”

Beatrice was red in the face when I turned around. She was breathing hard and biting her lip.

I slammed the door behind me as hard as I could as I walked out.

Later that night, after the place had closed down, I used my key that Ray had forgotten to ask me for to get into the café. I took a screwdriver with me. The next day when I packed up all my stuff in my car, I laid the bell that had hung above the door in the passenger seat beside me, and drove with the windows down all the way to Nashville.
he screen door slammed behind me with a loud slap and my feet had already left the front porch by the time it closed.

I walked across the yard with my long, shaking hands covering each temple. I could hear my little sisters whimpering and my mother sobbing and my Uncle Amos trying to calm her in the house behind me, and the sounds echoed around in my head. Across the brown, prickly yard to the road where I slowly removed my trembling hands from my forehead and clenched them at my sides. I stepped out into the middle of the street and stared down the long stretch of pavement as if I could see to the very end of Marshall, this town I lived in that I suddenly hated so much. The moon and the streetlights cast my figure in four shadows against the cold concrete. This road cut straight through Marshall, north to south, and I would run seven miles on it tonight.

My bare feet thudded the pavement rhythmically as I beat my way south and soon I was sucking oxygen as desperately as Uncle Amos sucked his cigarettes. The houses I passed were dark and silent, their windows gaping black holes, but I was not afraid because this was my side of town and these houses belonged to my people. There was the Lee’s house, as old and run down as Mr. Lee himself, and there was my best friends’, Johnny and Don’s, house, small but clean like our own. And there was the Millers’ house, yellow with pink shutters. Who painted their shutters pink? I hated it because I hated the Millers. They were not black but they were sympathizers and thought much of themselves for it. Dad said they were good people, but I knew he disliked them. Mom said they were pompous and condescending, Mr. Miller had given me a silver dollar once.

“Here, Son,” he’d said flipping into my hands. I had passed it off to my little sister, Anna, later. I did not need a white man’s money, or his pity.

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth the way I stopped at the railroad tracks to catch my breath. The tracks lay perpendicular to the main road and they sliced Marshall from east to west. The tracks were Marshall’s dividing line as socially as they were geographically. The blacks lived north of the tracks and the whites lived south of them. It was 1964 and Marshall was still as segregated as most other Alabama towns, or any town in the South for that matter. There were a few who lived across enemy lines in order to make a statement, like the Millers, but such blatancy was rare because those families were Klan targets, or so it was rumored. I disliked families who lived on the wrong side of the tracks. In my opinion, they made everybody uncomfortable and only fueled the racial tension that was already rampant in Marshall.

I held my head in my hands for another minute, rubbing my short, coarse hair, then I wiped the sweat from my eyes and continued to plow my way south.

The middle school was not far on the other side of the tracks. It was a dilapidated, cheerless brick building and I had first experienced racial prejudices in a tangible way within its sad, sagging walls. Marshall’s schools were integrated in 1959 when I was eleven years old. Arthur was proud to be going to the newly integrated middle school. He, like Dad, saw it as a victory for our people. I, however, did not see the victory in it. The police escorted Arthur, Johnny, Don, and I, and a few other black kids in with stern faces and murder on the faces of the mob that screamed at us as we walked through.

There was no end to the humiliation and abuse. Finally, one day Mrs. Addison, the vise president, came to us each individually in our classes and took us to a small closet classroom in the basement of that wretched building, and there we were taught all day by one teacher. Arthur was furious.

“What’s the point in having an integrated school if we spend all day in one classroom by ourselves?” he said as we walked home. Johnny and Don and I said nothing. I knew by their faces they were as relieved as I. We talked Arthur into not saying anything to Dad or anyone else about it.

“I just let it alone,” he said, remembering his son being dragged out of school in a scuffle. "Just let it alone, and we’ll be okay.

I shuddered as I slowly ran past the middle school. All I knew of that building was its mildewed basement, and that was enough.

My mind flashed back again and suddenly Arthur was lugging me home from school with a scowling face. As we reached our house, I noted with chagrin that Dad’s car was already parked in the driveway. Arthur struggled to open the front door as I fought to escape his grasp, but he managed to drag me into the house by my collar and push me in front of Dad who was leaning against the kitchen counter talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers. I did not look at her but rather stared at Dad over her shoulder wearing her screen door talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers. I did not look at her but rather stared at Dad over her shoulder wearing her screen door talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers. I did not look at her but rather stared at Dad over her shoulder wearing her screen door talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers. I did not look at her but rather stared at Dad over her shoulder wearing her screen door talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers. I did not look at her but rather stared at Dad over her shoulder wearing her screen door talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers. I did not look at her but rather stared at Dad over her shoulder wearing her screen door talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers. I did not look at her but rather stared at Dad over her shoulder wearing her screen door talking to Uncle Amos. Mom turned around from where she stood washing dishes, and when she saw me she dropped her sopping dishrag on the floor with a screech, knelt beside me, and began dabbing my face with her fingers.
Uncle Amos and Dad stood in the front yard. There was a cross burning there.

A year or so after my incident with Billy Gebhart, Arthur, Jenny and Anna, I had wanted to run then like I ran now. Away from Dad and his principles and Arthur and his pride in I knew not what. But instead I had bit my tongue till it bled and said nothing and done nothing. Now I tasted salt again as my sweat leaked into my mouth. I licked my lips and savoréd it, feeling my anger crescendo, driving me faster. My arms and legs pumped wildly, and I soon reached the high school that squatted in the shadows just beyond the middle school. It was the high school that I now walked to every day and in it there was no closet classroom in the basement to retreat to. Arthur had walked to the high school with a swagger. He had held his head high. He had been fearless. Sometimes I thought Mom and Dad believed I was a coward, but I was not afraid, and I really was not even prejudiced against the white people. I just knew they hated us, and I wished Dad could leave it at that.

Every week the men in our neighborhood would come to our house, and after Mom fed them super they would meet in the shed out back. Arthur would walk with us sometimes Johnny and Don would stand with us. Other times I was alone. I was walking home from school one day when I noticed that Arthur was unusually quiet, and he remained so all evening. His silence frightened me, and I could not shake the fear as I lay in bed that night. I woke up to Mom's screams, the sounds of racing footsteps, and the front door slamming shut. Arthur and I both bolted out of bed and barreled to the front porch where Mom knelt crying. Uncle Amos and Dad stood in the front yard. There was a cross burning there. The flames licked the dry wood wildly and scarred the grass. Thick, black smoke billowed into the night air, but was only visible within the angry light cast by the fire.

Uncle Amos and Dad stood as still as statues, staring at the burning cross. I wanted to scream at them to tear it down and put it out, but they just stood. Uncle Amos' arms were folded across his broad, burly, black chest, and Dad's hung limp by his sides. I knelt down to hold Mom. Arthur slowly made his way down the front porch steps to stand beside Dad.

"It's my fault, Dad," I heard him say above the crackling fire and Mom's sobbing.

"They call us names," he said, "But we're better than that. You can be better than that."

I could feel how hard my face was. Dad sighed and stood up and looking down at me he said sternly, "Be not overcome by evil, Son, but overcome evil with good."

I lay in bed that night with my backside still throbbing and soon after I had drifted off to sleep, I woke to the sound of a brick crashing through our kitchen window. There was a note tied to it that Dad would not let me read. It was night again, but now there was no burning cross. There was just the sounds of racing footsteps, and the front door slamming shut. Arthur and I would pick Bruce Atkins daughter out of all the silly, stupid white girls, I thought bitterly.

Dad nodded his head as though he understood. Then he put his hand on Arthur's shoulder and they stood there like that, Arthur chewing his lip and silently crying. Uncle Amos puffing out his chest in his angry way, and Dad... Dad looking the way he always did with his face blank and his eyes deep so that I couldn't know what he was thinking. The cross still burned and lit their dark, shiny faces with red light. I looked at my big hands holding Mom's arms and for the first time I wished they were white. It was night again, but now there was no burning cross. There was just me and the darkness as I ran through Marshall. I clenched my hands, nails drawing blood from my palms. My fists punched the air, my feet pounded on the pavement, and my heart hammered so hard it hurt. "Go Bears," I gasped as I passed the high school.

Finally, I saw the dark outline of the downtown buildings. Dad spent alot of time downtown it seemed, even though his hardware store was on our side of the tracks.

Every week the men in our neighborhood would come to our house, and after Mom fed them super they would meet in the shed out back. Arthur would open our bedroom window those nights and we would stay awake for hours listening to their voices. I could always hear Dad's voice rising above the others. They would talk about the Klan, about rights, about the wrongs done to our people, and about many other things I did not quite understand. They would organize marches and sit-ins and they would go downtown to protest every month. They came to our house because Dad was their leader. Least that's what Arthur said.

Running along Main Street through downtown, I shook my head and closed my eyes. I didn't need to see, the road was straight. I didn't want to remember. I beat my head with my fist when I found that I saw the memories just as well with my eyes closed. Every time the men went downtown, Mom would make me, Arthur, and Jenny and Anna swear we would not cross the tracks. So Arthur and I would go and stand with our toes touching the iron rails, waiting for Dad to come home. Sometimes Johnny and Don would stand with us. 

"It's my fault, Dad," I heard him say above the crackling fire and Mom's sobbing.
"What do you think they're doin'?" I asked.
"They're routin' out the Klan," Johnny replied.

We should go watch," I said. I suddenly felt very brave for saying it when all three turned to look at me with wide stares.

"Sam, we swore to Mom we wouldn't!" Arthur cried.

"Oh come on, Mom won't know. Don't tell me you don't wanna see what they're doin',' " I said.
Arthur bit his lip and looked longingly down Main Street.

"No way, we'd get caught!" Don protested.
"You won't tell Mom?" Arthur asked uncertainly.

"Course not, you think I want to get whipped or something?" I replied.

"You're not really!" Johnny said.
Arthur looked at me and slowly began to smile and we stood paused like that for a second before we each bolted in the same instant across the tracks, our shirttails flying out behind us.

"Wait! Arthur! Sam!" Johnny yelled after us.

Arthur turned and ran backwards calling, "Come on! Don't be chicken!"
I laughed and raced faster when I heard Johnny and Don's footsteps behind us.

When we got downtown, we moved like lanky cats behind the buildings till we found a bench in front of Carson's Barbershop to hide behind. We tried not to breathe so hard as we peaked between the wooden slats.

There were our men and a few women walking up and down the sidewalk there were the whites who stood along the sidewalks watching, looking angry, of what to do. I licked my lips, then hesitantly climbed onto a stool next to Arthur. Dad looked at him for what seemed a long time, then turned and looked at me. I clenched and unclenched my fists at my sides unsure of what to do. I licked my lips, then hesitantly climbed onto a stool next to Arthur.

The police came and arrested Dad again and a few of the other men too, but they did not acknowledge Arthur and I. I think Arthur wanted to get arrested.

"Take your brother home, Arthur," he said.

I started to turn on shaking legs but Arthur held me firmly. I looked at Arthur and was mortified when he defiantly shook his head.

Dad's eyes narrowed. "I said go home, Son," he commanded.

"No," Arthur said, and leaving me, he hoisted himself onto one of the stools at the counter. Dad looked at him for what seemed a long time, then turned and looked at me. I clenched and unclenched my fists at my sides unsure of what to do. Dad kept marching.

When we reached the diner, Arthur pulled me inside, and the glass door shut behind us with a clang. Dad and Shoog and Lonny and Mr. Lee and several others were sitting quietly at the lunch counter. I tried not to see the angry white faces or hear them talking. Shoog elbowed Dad and nodded in our direction, and Dad turned to look at us, his gentle face creasing into a deep scowl.

"Take your brother home, Arthur," he said.

The police came and arrested Dad again and a few of the other men too, but they did not acknowledge Arthur and I. I think Arthur wanted to get arrested. We watched them handcuff Dad and when they turned him back around he looked at Arthur and said, "Go home, Son.

This time Arthur did and I followed only too willingly.
It was days before Dad came back home to us and the night he did I stayed up late listening to him and Mom argue.

"Damn your principles," Mom cried. It was the first time I'd heard Mom cuss and I could also hear she was crying, "We're your family, Henry, we need you!" she said, "What if you don't come back next time?"

"Nothing's going to change if we don't do something, Myra," he said.

"I don't want anything to change if this is what it costs. I want our family..."
to be safe and not afraid that someone might throw a brick through our window or burn a cross in our yard.”

“Our family will never be safe and we will always be afraid so long as things stay the way they are,” he said. I wanted to march in there and tell him that Mom was right. That we were more important than a cause. But instead I covered my head with a pillow and tried to sleep.

No, I did not like downtown. I darted past Grant’s Diner and tried to ignore that ache that had permanently lodged itself in my side. My breath came in short gasps and my legs felt like lead. But I was almost there. The warehouse I was running to was at the far south end of town. I had been there only once before. It was rumored that the Klan met in the abandoned building. Arthur and I had heard the men talking about it one night as we lay in bed.

“We’ve got to go there,” Arthur said.

“To the warehouse?” I asked incredulous. “No way!”

“Don’t you get it Sam? Micah’s Daddy was shot last week, and I don’t hear anybody saying it, but it had to be the Klan. We could go there. We could spy on ‘em. We could know who they’re gonna target next before they do anything!”

I was running to was at the far south end of town. I had been there only once before. It was rumored that the Klan met in the abandoned building. Arthur and I had heard the men talking about it one night as we lay in bed.

“We’ve got to go there,” Arthur said.

“We shouldn’t do this…”

“Arthur we’re going to get killed,” I whimpered.

“Arthur!” I snapped, “I want to go home!”

“Arthur!” I hissed again.

“Arthur!” I hissed.

“Arthur!” I hissed tugging at my shoulder and pointing upward. I could hear my mother screaming even from here and my father dying even from wherever he was. I knew we would find him. In the river or in a ditch or hanging or burn a cross in our yard.”

“I want to!” Arthur persisted.

“You’re stupid, Arthur,” I said. “Let the men take care of it if they want to.”

“But I want to!” Arthur persisted. It took him weeks to talk me into it, but finally one night we sneaked out of the house and ran, ran across the tracks, past the middle school and high school, through downtown, all the way to the warehouse. Seven miles nonstop. We ran till I thought my heart would burst.

When we got close the warehouse, we stopped and laid on the pavement behind the lumber store to catch our breath.

“If we’re breathing too hard, they’ll hear us for sure,” Arthur explained. After a while, we stood and walked the rest of the way to the warehouse, slinking in the shadows.

“There’s cars parked outside! They’re here!” Arthur whispered.

“We should do this…”

“Shhhhhhhhh! Come on. We might be able to see something through one of the windows!”

We moved through the parking lot, sliding between the cars till we reached the warehouse wall. Most of the windows on the first floor were broken in, and the door was missing. The entire first floor was shrouded in darkness.

“Arthur, there’s no one here,” I said.

“No, look,” he replied tugging at my shoulder and pointing upward. I looked and saw that the windows on the second and third floors were boarded up.

“They’re up there,” he said. Then he moved through the doorway and began picking his way across the broken glass that littered the cement floor.

“Arthur!” I hissed.

I waited outside the door till the darkness completely engulfed him.

“Arthur!” I hissed again.

When I still did not hear a reply, I crept into the building after him.

I caught up to him at the bottom of the stairs and that’s when we heard murmured voices creeping down the stairwell to us. We both froze and I thought for a moment I might wet my pants.

“Arthur we’re going to get killed,” I whimpered.

“Are they talking or… chanting?” Arthur whispered moving up a step.

“Arthur!” I snapped, “I want to go home!”

Suddenly we heard them stirring and chairs scraping across the concrete floor upstairs. Then the voices grew closer. We froze again for half a second before we turned and scrambled out of the warehouse.

Now I was back. Not because Arthur and I had seen the Klan the night, the rumors were still rumors, but because I did not know where else to go.

I wished more than anything that Arthur was here with me now but he had left for college. The first in our family. He would know what to do if he was here. He would not be running wildly in the dark towards an abandoned warehouse.

Things had only gotten worse in Marshall over the years. I heard about it most nights from my bedroom window. There had been more bricks and crosses and deaths. And now Dad had not come home from work. Uncle Amos and the men had gone looking for him, but they had found no trace of him.

This was why Mom and Jenny and Anna were crying. And this was why I ran. Ran to the warehouse because I did not know where else to run. I was looking for the Klan, I was looking for my father.

But the warehouse was empty. Of course, they wouldn’t bring him here! I thought. Seven miles. Wasted. Where was my Dad? Where had they taken him? I walked across the dark first floor and slowly, hesitantly, up the stairs. Because the windows were boarded, there was no moonlight to see by. I could not even see my hand in front of my face. I moved my feet across the smooth cement without picking them up off the ground, slowly feeling my way to what I thought was the middle of the room. I stood limp, desperate, in the stifling darkness.

I imagined there might be pentagrams painted on the walls around me. Their horror, ghost-like white sheets might be piled up in a corner. I strained to see in the darkness. Why had I come here? Why was I here? I began to cry for I thought I could hear my mother screaming even from here and my father dying even from wherever he was. I knew we would find him. In the river or in a ditch or hanging from a tree, we would find him.

“Damn you!” I screamed. The words burned my throat and polluted the air around me. I thought I saw Dad’s stern, unnerving face as he stooped over me and placed his hand on my shoulder. I searched his deep, brown eyes and felt his warm breath wash over me.

“Damn you all…” I whispered.

Then I turned and stumbled back down the stairs and ran out of the warehouse and back down Main Street. My bare feet slapped the pavement rhythmically as I beat my way home. I fled into the darkness, running fast to protect my family.
Nitara Bledsoe

My name is Nitara Bledsoe, and I like it because it is my grandmother's name. Nitara is Cherokee for "deeply-rooted," and in my family a name is not just a name, but an identity, a word that characterizes you, and, in many ways, is the fate of who you will become, of what you are.

Bledsoe means that I am Melungeon—a people tabulated by the government as "some other race." This name means that I am from nowhere and belong to no one, that I have an obscure ancestry, that my family is an ambiguous people of the Appalachia, that we are gypsies and outcasts. It means that people look at me and spit "redskin" and "n-----." It means that I am of an evil people, a damned soul. But mostly it just means that I am hated.

How can I be so ungrounded but deeply rooted? My name conflicts and so I should be conflicted. But I am not because I know the truth, like my grandmother.

The Indians and the Negroes lived and worked the land, their blood and sweat mixing with the Earth that our people are born of, that we live in communion with, and that we die to. The land is my heritage and this mountain I live on is my Mother.
hunder yowls beyond the hour, like the gray cat prowling. He slips sideways between the hips of the old milk cow, barely disturbing the flies that sip saliva from the mouths of her ankle sores. She does not have the energy to bite at them. Something elegant in the way the gray cat’s shoulders swing so close to the ground make the tired trees turn. They drop their dead leaves behind him, which scrape the earth with one last chuckle.

He keeps his eyes open, unblinking. He is not the sleek serpent he used to be. He is scabbed or bleeding and his fur is matted thick with it. His whiskers are broken, and his balance is unadjusted. He treads heavily, and the small, black cat hears his approach before she catches his scent. She does not abandon the spot she’s warmed on the sorry porch step. Perhaps she hopes he will not care for her, or perhaps she welcomes the attention. He brings the thunder closer, the carmine red of his open, panting mouth the only spot of color in the notable distance. She guesses his breath will be heavy, and it is: rank, sticky-thick against her ears as he rapes her. He growls low and long where only she can hear. She keeps quiet. She does not have the energy to bite him. He leaves her huddled beneath the arch. She leaves nine of her neck hairs in his mouth, and he will lick the gravel to remove her taste, stopping to urinate before moving away.

Inside, shrunken bodies rouse. Something wet waits inside a bottle on the kitchen table. The breath of the woman beside it smells similarly, as the liquid settles into her veins. She is thirsty and listens for more thunder. The land here is too dry to suck. Rains come and slide across this place with no intentions of staying. Dust sticks to everything, even the backs of eyeballs. She thinks if the ground ever turned to red mud she would fill her mouth, nose, and ears with it, just to know the damp. The radio in the corner says the rain will go around them. “You bastard,” she mutters, and her eyes dart to the wedding ring sitting on the table across from her. She always removes it when she drinks, and hopes it didn’t hear her curse.

The sounds of booted footsteps precede a body in the hallway. A man emerges, hands on his fly, carrying a shirt with yesterday’s sweat. His mother’s Italian heritage sticks out in thick, black hairs across his chest which shudder as he huffs across the room. Closing his hand around the woman’s shoulder he leans close to kiss her cheek. She turns from him, pulling out of his reach. He holds her firmly enough and kisses her neck, whispering something in her ear to which she does not respond.

The front door closes and she hears his spit smack the ground. She watches his black profile fade into the sickly thin light of morning, squinting to witness if the earth or sky will swallow him. Not today.

Beneath her robe she is all sweat and freckles. On her left thigh, the brown dots configure the Big Dipper. Her husband used to chase the outline
of it with his finger; once or twice with his tongue. She raises the bottle to her lips and the memory recedes.

A fly tastes her forehead, and she shakes the creature off. She holds her head steady as her brain settles back into place.

She collects the money from the bedside table with little pleasure. There is an old wooden box, decaying slowly beneath her bed. A week’s dust has settled over the box, and it sticks to her fingers when she opens the lid. She curves the bills in her hand around an existing cylinder of money, eyeing the new thickness. Wedging the wad between a stack of old letters and one newer, she knows the box will have to splinter before it is her time. The wood has bowed. Having lost its shape some time ago it sags into itself, the grains splayed and holding loosely. Still it waits. She sighs. “Not yet, but almost.”

The scent of the letters lingers around her, and she noses them for two heartbeats before returning them to the dark.

The house’s back broke the night the man first followed her home. A home may live and thrive as its inhabitants do. It may maintain itself for centuries in the presence of humans, inhaling them through its walls, like oxygen. But years of sadness, of neglect, can rapidly devastate. Immunity is lost to termites and splintering. The right side of the woman’s home sags into the earth; wishing to join it, its boards itch to rot and be consumed by worms, and yet it stands. It was once a proud petal-white, rising out of greenery surrounding. Now it is neatly swallowed in a dense, brown canopy. Brittle vines still grip the house’s siding, and for whom do they cling to one another, if not for her?

Her children were raised on neglect. When they were each sixteen and her eyes began to water. The house had taken pity on her then, darkening the heartbeats before returning them to the dark.

Two nights later when he came scratching on her back door, she swigged moonshine. It seeped out of his pores, and got trapped in the thick black hair that littered his chest. He painted like it was an effort to reach the bedroom. She didn’t bother with niceties, just balled her dress and slip atop her shoes and in the corner, and lay on the bed, pretending not to notice as he tripped over the leg hole of his underwear, streaming his own clothes across the floor and jostling her weight on the bed. She closed her eyes and took small, obligatory breaths as he moved over her. She could feel the heart beat of the box of letters beneath the bed. She gripped the sheets and welcomed the guilt.

Right then, beneath a yet emerged moon, the house gave up. Тhe basement’s foundation split into three clay-mouthis cracks. A smarter man would not have thought himself responsible for the tremors, but the man found the breath to chuckle.

She rolled him off with the palms of her hands when he collapsed on top of her, coughing sawdust against her neck. She stretched and turned off the light, covering her disgust with darkness.

The next morning the sun rose happily, casting its harsh light of forgiveness: a second chance, maybe. The woman rose and found the bottle in the cabinet, the first of many mornings much the same. Her muscles were tense from sleeping so rigidly far away from his touch. When the man found her in the kitchen she told him he wouldn’t be coming back, but when he emptied his heart and the bills from his wallet onto her table, she made no more protest. He was far across the morning when she rolled the money up into a tight, ashamed cylinder and snuggled it next to her dead husband’s war letters as explanation. She pressed her face against the grain of the box and breathed out.

Two nights later when he came scratching on her back door, she swigged the spike-hard liquid and tried not to gag when his big, grubby hands fumbled with her bra. He had been fumbling ever since.

Four years later and the morning sky still wears its usual gray, but the earth feels cooler. Thunder in the distance had awoken the woman, and she sits on her side of the kitchen table, kissing the lip of the bottle, letting it hang for a moment on her own lip in disbelief. She wonders if she heard the radio correctly:

"Expect heavy rains in the area throughout the day. Stay indoors at all times..."

Thunder dances across the sky like a temptress, close enough to hear, but never close enough to satisfy their land. She lays her forehead against the table, giggling, barely noticing the footsteps sounding in the hallway. Raising her head, she smiles for the first time in years, wanting to tell her husband the good news.
Her words are lost, however, as the man enters the kitchen. Her smile falls, but she allows him to kiss her; she has not yet bathed off last night's ick. As he exits for work, she wishes the rains would come and take him, maybe split him apart like the lightning-peeled oak behind the house.

With the thin skin of her robe she wipes the dust from the decrepit wooden box, and fingers the carved writing beneath. She curves the bills smoothly around the existing roll and wedges it between the old letters and the newer one. She taps the bulge with the side of her fist until it lies flat enough to close the lid. The wooden sides of the box moan and crack open like angry skin breaking to relieve its disease. The letters billow and erupt across the crumpled, unmade covers, hiding in the folds of her robe and nestling her toes. She smiles for the second time that morning and picks them up at random. Removing her robe, she reads them naked on the bed. There are a hundred. They smell ancient and she feels hungry for them. They are tender brown and their edges fold into each other like praying hands. Words of worry, but mostly love and longing, curve across the page slowly in her husband’s clean writing. She lays them across her body as she finishes them, covering her left breast as she reads the final one.

She smiles for the second time that morning and picks them up at random. Removing her robe, she reads them naked on the bed. There are a hundred. They smell ancient and she feels hungry for them. They are tender brown and their edges fold into each other like praying hands. Words of worry, but mostly love and longing, curve across the page slowly in her husband’s clean writing. She lays them across her body as she finishes them, covering her left breast as she reads the final one.

My children,

Forgive me. I do not belong on this earth without your father. I have nothing to give you. Burn the house. The land is worth nothing.

(Although I was not always),
your mother

She thinks about kissing the envelope seal, but doesn't. She makes the bed with care, pinching along the edges of the mattress and smoothing out the wrinkles with the back of her hand. She positions the busted box on top. Thunder growls close enough to shake the windows, and moving through the house she opens every one of them, laughing into the cool breeze that sucks the curtains in and out.

From the top drawer of her dresser, beneath folded, decaying silk her hand finds the bottle. It is cool, brown glass, warming in the cradle of her hand. The label is no longer legible—just some pain medicine her husband earned from the war.

In the kitchen she tunes the radio to something old, something her husband and she might have danced to. She places his picture on the table, his ring beside it. The thunder is so close now she can feel it rummaging around inside her ribcage. Her teeth tap against each other as if she's shivering.

She hums with the song as she opens the bottle and lines the pills up along the tabletop. They lie parallel in a row, like sterile white soldiers. What milk is left in the refrigerator she drains into her favorite blue-green Ball jar and places it on the table in front of the pills. Beyond the porch a cat yowls, and the wind carries the sound in through the open window. She stands to look out.

The gray cat canter up the dirt walk toward her porch. His eyes are low and mean, his shoulders swooping with each step. He approaches the small black cat who dozes on the porch: some pet the woman had forgotten had stayed. The woman's eyes narrow, not understanding why the cat does not sprint away from him. She only waits, eyes closed as he comes closer. The thunder seems to ride on his back. The woman can spot the thick line of rain just in the distance, slithering fast. The gray cat growls low from his belly, and yet the black cat remains unmoving. The woman can taste the cat's calm. He mounts her, his white teeth stark against her fur. The rain is close now, erasing the paw prints the gray cat left in the dust only moments before. He seems to strengthen with the rising tumult.

Something moves the woman, perhaps the wind, onto the porch, and she hovers over them. The gray cat, unfazed by her presence, continues to rape the black. Fat, heavy drops hit the woman's shoulder, and barefooted, she kicks the gray cat into the tall, wild growth. Drops pelt his fur flat against his skeleton, but his body does not move. The rain is quick and hard, now, slicing the living with sheets of toothy rain. The woman remains on the front steps letting it beat her, until she shivers with cold. She laughs and holds her head back, letting the water drown her open eyes. She feels forgiven. She turns, gathers the black cat in her arms, and moves back into the house.

She finds the letter to her children once again, as water trails its way across the wooden floors behind her. She scribbles something out; writes something new in. Returning to the table, she swallows the first pill.
nearly a moon we shared
each morning you crossing my path
or rather, standing in its way
threatening my facial features
the skin on my legs at risk
more than once nearly your prey
one careful step my salvation

nearly a moon I considered
your likeness should captured be
slothful, indecisive, now ashamed
no further proof of your once existence
than this trace of posterity
these weeks' hatred we shared
’till in the course of all life you were taken

nearly a moon in retrospect
I step in muscle memory,
forever my stride ingrained
still cautious of your inch-long thorns
veritable claws reaching onto the sidewalk
from tree otherwise fit to climb
now unhindered by Victor Vine

Elegy to a Garden Vine  Rebecca Brady

Stomping Grounds  Abi Parker

& Series  Heather Reynolds
I grew up on a farm. Not the kind of farm you automatically imagine with chickens, and pigs, and horses. We only had cattle; we had about a thousand of them over three hundred acres, but they were the only animal we raised. I always wished we had more animals like Old McDonald. That song could go on and on for an hour naming various farm animals and their noises. There was no variety on our farm, just boring cattle that “moo”ed almost constantly. I learned to sleep with the sound of their calls to each other as a lullaby. Before I was born, my parents and grandparents milked the cows and sold the milk, but now we don’t even do that. We raise them and sell them for beef. I remember one spring when I was in charge of keeping the ledger that listed all the new calves that were born. I would write down the date they were born, the number they were tagged with, and then I would scribble a name for them in the margin. All of the cows that I named were from people in the Bible. I remember my favorite was Bartholomew. He was reddish brown with a white patch on his eye and I bottle fed him from birth. I wanted to keep him. But Dad had to sell him at the market because a buyer wanted five male calves and the only other ones we had were female. I cried for days over Bartholomew; naturally Dad put a stop to that fact about my childhood, they conjure up questions and ideas that they think go along with it. I do not know how to ride a horse, feed chickens, or slop pigs. I don’t even know how to milk a cow. I do know how to drive a tractor, bottle feed a calf, mow and bale hay, and plant tobacco. The last one always stayed and helped until quitting time and she and I walked down the farm road together on our way to Granny’s house for supper. Dad and Uncle Peter were finishing the last couple rows of planting for the day and said they would be coming soon. I remember thinking that I was too old to be holding Mom’s hand—I was eight years old—but I knew that Mom needed me. When she was pregnant with me and my twin sister she fell and broke her left ankle. A couple of the bones were crushed and she had to have metal rods surgically inserted so that she could walk. That’s why she intertwined her fingers with mine and held on tight as we descended a steep part of the path. We made it past the hardest twist in the road but just when Mom started to loosen her grip on my hand, I felt her falling. Gravel and dust billowed around both our feet as I tried to stop her, but she landed and pulled me down with her. I landed on my bottom and immediately jumped back up to check on Mom. She cried out in pain and said she was hurt. She told me I had to run back to the field and get Daddy.

“Go, Lydia! Run!” she yelled, when I stood there helplessly, not wanting to leave her. I made myself turn around and start back up the hill we had just hiked down. I tried to run but I my eyes began to tear up. The more I started crying the slower my steps became until I realized that I was barely even jogging anymore. I wiped the tears and snot onto the bottom of my t-shirt and started running, really running. I felt my legs burning as the dust I stirred flew in my mouth as I gasped for air. My eyes were still watery and I almost didn’t see the flash of light reflect off the electric fence in time to stop. I gulped as I stood inches away from it for half of a second before ducking under it and running again.

I made to the field, but I couldn’t see anyone. “DADDY!” I screamed with the breath I had left. Then I heard the tractor just over the ridge on the farthest corner of the field. I continued screaming as I ran even though I knew he

in the ground about a foot apart from each other. The machine did the rest of the work. It was so much fun for me—more fun than hay season when the only job for me to do was roll the square bales down to the bottom of the hill and climb back up over and over. My two other sisters came and helped sometimes too, but I enjoyed it the most. I was a big tomboy; and I was a daddy’s girl.

Most of the childhood memories I have involving the farm are about my dad. I loved it when he would let climb up on his lap and drive the tractor when I was little. I would beg to go to the Feed & Supply store in town with him and he usually let me if I had my homework finished. My mom was there to help out too, but she always grumbled that she did not like cattle. I think she was scared of them like me; she denied that but she used to say, “They might look dumb but God gave them a brain, seven stomachs, and brute strength and I just don’t like that combination.” So Mom mostly came to help during the hay and tobacco seasons when no cows were involved.

I remember the tobacco season when Mom came to the field in the afternoon bringing more water and a snack of some sort. She stayed and helped until quitting time and she and I walked down the farm road together on our way to Granny’s house for supper. Dad and Uncle Peter were finishing the last couple rows of planting for the day and said they would be coming soon. I remember thinking that I was too old to be holding Mom’s hand—I was eight years old—but I knew that Mom needed me. When she was pregnant with me and my twin sister she fell and broke her left ankle. A couple of the bones were crushed and she had to have metal rods surgically inserted so that she could walk. That’s why she intertwined her fingers with mine and held on tight as we descended a steep part of the path. We made it past the hardest twist in the road but just when Mom started to loosen her grip on my hand, I felt her falling. Gravel and dust billowed around both our feet as I tried to stop her, but she landed and pulled me down with her. I landed on my bottom and immediately jumped back up to check on Mom. She cried out in pain and said she was hurt. She told me I had to run back to the field and get Daddy.

“Go, Lydia! Run!” she yelled, when I stood there helplessly, not wanting to leave her. I made myself turn around and start back up the hill we had just hiked down. I tried to run but I my eyes began to tear up. The more I started crying the slower my steps became until I realized that I was barely even jogging anymore. I wiped the tears and snot onto the bottom of my t-shirt and started running, really running. I felt my legs burning as the dust I stirred flew in my mouth as I gasped for air. My eyes were still watery and I almost didn’t see the flash of light reflect off the electric fence in time to stop. I gulped as I stood inches away from it for half of a second before ducking under it and running again.

I made to the field, but I couldn’t see anyone. “DADDY!” I screamed with the breath I had left. Then I heard the tractor just over the ridge on the farthest corner of the field. I continued screaming as I ran even though I knew he

in the ground about a foot apart from each other. The machine did the rest of the work. It was so much fun for me—more fun than hay season when the only job for me to do was roll the square bales down to the bottom of the hill and climb back up over and over. My two other sisters came and helped sometimes too, but I enjoyed it the most. I was a big tomboy; and I was a daddy’s girl.

Most of the childhood memories I have involving the farm are about my dad. I loved it when he would let climb up on his lap and drive the tractor when I was little. I would beg to go to the Feed & Supply store in town with him and he usually let me if I had my homework finished. My mom was there to help out too, but she always grumbled that she did not like cattle. I think she was scared of them like me; she denied that but she used to say, “They might look dumb but God gave them a brain, seven stomachs, and brute strength and I just don’t like that combination.” So Mom mostly came to help during the hay and tobacco seasons when no cows were involved.

I remember the tobacco season when Mom came to the field in the afternoon bringing more water and a snack of some sort. She stayed and helped until quitting time and she and I walked down the farm road together on our way to Granny’s house for supper. Dad and Uncle Peter were finishing the last couple rows of planting for the day and said they would be coming soon. I remember thinking that I was too old to be holding Mom’s hand—I was eight years old—but I knew that Mom needed me. When she was pregnant with me and my twin sister she fell and broke her left ankle. A couple of the bones were crushed and she had to have metal rods surgically inserted so that she could walk. That’s why she intertwined her fingers with mine and held on tight as we descended a steep part of the path. We made it past the hardest twist in the road but just when Mom started to loosen her grip on my hand, I felt her falling. Gravel and dust billowed around both our feet as I tried to stop her, but she landed and pulled me down with her. I landed on my bottom and immediately jumped back up to check on Mom. She cried out in pain and said she was hurt. She told me I had to run back to the field and get Daddy.

“Go, Lydia! Run!” she yelled, when I stood there helplessly, not wanting to leave her. I made myself turn around and start back up the hill we had just hiked down. I tried to run but I my eyes began to tear up. The more I started crying the slower my steps became until I realized that I was barely even jogging anymore. I wiped the tears and snot onto the bottom of my t-shirt and started running, really running. I felt my legs burning as the dust I stirred flew in my mouth as I gasped for air. My eyes were still watery and I almost didn’t see the flash of light reflect off the electric fence in time to stop. I gulped as I stood inches away from it for half of a second before ducking under it and running again.

I made to the field, but I couldn’t see anyone. “DADDY!” I screamed with the breath I had left. Then I heard the tractor just over the ridge on the farthest corner of the field. I continued screaming as I ran even though I knew he
The Old Red Farm Gate  Emily Davis

As faithful as the sun, at the beginning of each new day
the gate creaks open, echoing across the acres,
calling like a rooster's crow to wake the lazy-bones still under the covers.

As welcoming as an open church door
it slowly swings back and forth in the hay-filled air,
letting the cows roam and graze.

As commonplace and ordinary as any other gate,
weathered and faded from years of Indian summers,
the red railings frame the colorless barn up the dusty farm road;
and the bars leave crumbles of rust and paint on the palms
of rough, callused hands passed down through generations
from father to sons—even daughters.

As somber as a death row's guard
it decides the farmer's destination from either side:
to the fields to feed the hungry cattle, or home to eat at supper's waiting table.
it unlocks for the chores that are waiting like every other day,
and clangs shut, resolute and unfeeling.

couldn't hear me. When I topped the ridge and saw the tractor I waved my arms
and jumped wildly until he turned off the tractor, hopped down, and ran toward
me. I was crying again and wasn't able to answer his yelling questions until he
reached me. “Mom fell,” I panted as he bent down to my eye level. He jerked
back up quickly though, and ran to Uncle Peter’s truck, telling me to get in it
and yelling at his brother that Laura was hurt in the same breath.

Hopped into the cab, but I don't remember the trip back down the
farm road. I'm sure Dad went fast, and I'm sure he had to stop and unhook the
electric fence half-way down, but the next thing I remember is him helping Mom
slide into the seat beside me.

“Are you ok?” I asked but dad was already in the driver's seat before she
could answer.

“Are you sure it’s broken?” he worried.

“Phillip, I heard my ankle snap. It’s broken for sure.” she stated calmly.
She wasn't crying; she didn't seem hurt or frightened. She told me later that
she was probably in shock during that ride to the hospital.

“Which ankle? The metal one?” I asked.

“No, honey, the other one.”

“Oh… Mom? Were you laying there for very long? Did I take too long?”

Tears were still falling down my face as I thought about how bad it must have
been hurting while she was waiting for me.

“No, honey! You did so good,” she soothed. She patted my arm and then
gripped it hard as Dad spun around a curve.

“Phillip! You’re going to kill us all!” she fussed. She still held onto my
arm as she looked down at me and smiled. “You know what I did while I was
waiting?” She bit her lip to keep from laughing too hard so she could tell us
what happened. “I yelled at the cows!” she spit out.

Dad let out a surprised chuckle, “What?”

“And then I threw rocks at them!”

We all laughed even harder as she explained, “Well. They were staring
at me.”

Needless to say Mom didn’t help put on the farm very much after that.
She had plenty of excuses: the cows didn’t like her, Dad wouldn’t let her, and
metal rods in both of her ankles made impossible to hike the farm road. I still
enjoyed being on the farm for a few years after that but I eventually grew out of
it I guess. I don’t think I would get much enjoyment from picking the fat green
worms off of tobacco plants anymore, but sometimes I still wish I could sit on
Dad’s lap and steer the red tractor around the farm.

I haven’t walked up the farm road in years. Some things I don’t want to
remember. But it holds a place in my heart because it is a part of my childhood.
I don’t mind being a farm girl; in many ways I’m proud of it. At least I know how
to plant a garden or castrate a bull and make it a steer if I ever need to someday.
Aleisha was gone. "Big and better things," she told anyone who asked. Those County could offer. She had been told from a young age that she was talented. The eccentric widow had filled the seven year old's head with dreams of faraway places and exotic people. From the time Aleisha started second grade she had no children and their siblings had already passed way. She thought of Mrs. Calloway's husband Gerald must have been. Chill bumps formed on Aleisha's skin when she was eighteen. Aleisha left her little hometown and never looked back. As she traveled to the places she had always dreamed of going, she sent postcards back to Mrs. Calloway telling her about her adventures. In Myanmar she watched the last rays of the sun glitter across the seventy-six-carat diamond dome of a Buddhist temple; in Rwanda she visited a church memorial museum still stained with the blood of innocent victims. Japanese Zen gardens, medieval towers in Portugal, and Greek street markets occupied her mornings while almost every afternoon was spent practicing and every night was another concert performance. On her biyearly month long vacations, she went scuba diving with manta rays and turtles in the Fiji Islands or relaxed at a private bungalow in New Zealand.

Aleisha wanted to do the same. While her mother was working as a part of the American Symphony Orchestra and touring across Europe, she settled down from her adventures. When she found a good man like Mrs. Calloway's husband Gerald must have been. Chili bumps formed on Aleisha's arms as she took in the sad, dilapidated house and yard. "Gerald used to keep the garden so nice and vibrant. So many colors and flavors. It wouldn't do for me to let it get grown over with weeds. He wouldn't want it that way," Mrs. Calloway would say with a shake of her head. Her only thing worse than living in Blackberry, Virginia is not even her father's double bypass surgery in 2007—had been able to drag her back. As she traveled to the places she had always dreamed of going, she sent postcards back to Mrs. Calloway telling her about her adventures. In Myanmar she watched the last rays of the sun glitter across the seventy-six-carat diamond dome of a Buddhist temple; in Rwanda she visited a church memorial museum still stained with the blood of innocent victims. Japanese Zen gardens, medieval towers in Portugal, and Greek street markets occupied her mornings while almost every afternoon was spent practicing and every night was another concert performance. On her biyearly month long vacations, she went scuba diving with manta rays and turtles in the Fiji Islands or relaxed at a private bungalow in New Zealand.

And that one day she would do great things. She believed every word, and as soon as she had graduated from high school along with fifty seven other seniors, Aleisha was gone. “Big and better things,” she told anyone who asked. Those things included a music scholarship to Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York and a job as a part of the American Symphony Orchestra and touring across Europe.

As the peaceful, comfortable feeling of the place washed through her, she was reminded of why she was back. Twelve years had passed and nothing—not even her father’s double bypass surgery in 2007—had been able to drag her home. Granted she had been in Europe and Asia for almost the entire past three years, but truthfully she would have concocted any excuse to avoid this town. Not all the memories were bad though; almost every afternoon was spent practicing and every night was another concert performance. On her biyearly month long vacations, she went scuba diving with manta rays and turtles in the Fiji Islands or relaxed at a private bungalow in New Zealand.

But that was no longer possible. Aleisha was back. She was pulling into the same familiar driveway where her mother used to drop her off. But the elephant ears in the big metal washtub outside were gone. The lilac bushes were brown and lifeless. She remembered learning about exotic plants and herbs, how to raise, care for, and use them. She bought seeds on her travels and sent them back to the elderly widow but she always kept some for herself. For her own garden that she planned on growing one day. One day when she settled down from her adventures. When she found a good man like Mrs. Calloway’s husband Gerald must have been. Chili bumps formed on Aleisha’s arms as she took in the sad, dilapidated house and yard. "Gerald used to keep the garden so nice and vibrant. So many colors and flavors. It wouldn't do for me to let it get grown over with weeds. He wouldn't want it that way," Mrs. Calloway would say with a shake of her head. Her only thing worse than living in Blackberry, Virginia is not even her father’s double bypass surgery in 2007—had been able to drag her back. As she traveled to the places she had always dreamed of going, she sent postcards back to Mrs. Calloway telling her about her adventures. In Myanmar she watched the last rays of the sun glitter across the seventy-six-carat diamond dome of a Buddhist temple; in Rwanda she visited a church memorial museum still stained with the blood of innocent victims. Japanese Zen gardens, medieval towers in Portugal, and Greek street markets occupied her mornings while almost every afternoon was spent practicing and every night was another concert performance. On her biyearly month long vacations, she went scuba diving with manta rays and turtles in the Fiji Islands or relaxed at a private bungalow in New Zealand.
In contrast to the shabby structure a wheelchair ramp was built onto the side of the house from the front door and across the right side of the house. The unpainted wood looked barely worn at all, as if Mrs. Calloway couldn’t bear to see the deterioration of the yard and garden and not be able to do anything about it.

Aleisha easily spotted the spare key to the house. The hiding spot had not changed since she had left. She had felt so grown up and responsible at thirteen years old when Mrs. Calloway had trusted her with the location of the key. Mrs. Calloway had discovered the hollow container that she kept it in at a flea market on one of her monthly Saturday excursions. Aleisha remembered the row of onions that used to line the window sill, ripening in the sun. They varied in size, shape, and color, except for one that stayed the same. It was made of plastic and had a small opening on the bottom much like a salt shaker. Its color blended in with the other onions and kept it hidden in plain sight. The onion now sat on the sill alone looking forlorn and extremely out of place.

The inside of the house was a shock for Aleisha. Everything was different it seemed, from the hospital bed in the living room to the shiny silver handrails installed in various rooms around the house. The guest room where she used to stay when her mom worked a late shift at the restaurant was covered with white sheets over the furniture. The walls were desolate leaving white squares on the faded paint where pictures of sunsets in Costa Rica and Moscow’s Red Square had once hung. As she walked through the rooms, Aleisha noticed that all of the pictures were gone: taken off the walls in the living room, the mantle above the wood stove, and the bookshelves in the study. The only one left was sitting on top of Mrs. Calloway’s bedroom dresser. It was the snapshot the Calloways standing on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea in Tripoli, Libya. Mr. Calloway was stationed there for eighteen months when he was in the Air Force. He didn’t see much action according to Mrs. Calloway; “but he was brave and willing,” she would reminisce, looking at that picture. “The only thing Gerald loved more than his country was me.” She would say sadly. The two were married just before he shipped out and he insisted that she meet him in Tripoli a couple weeks later.

Aleisha always wondered why the couple never had children, but she had yet to find someone that she could feel that way about. She dated; she had met a real estate agent in Australia in 2005 and the two exchanged emails about it. She had felt so grown up and responsible at thirteen years old when Mrs. Calloway had trusted her with the location of the key.

When she saw Aleisha coming toward the door, the woman smiled and held the dish out like a birthday present. "Hello, dear," she smiled sympathetically. Her voice was soft and concerned, and her eyes were kind yet curious.

"Hi, Mrs. Hartsock. How are you?" She took the condolence food from her as she stepped inside.

"Oh, I’m just fine, dear. Healthy as a horse, my doctor says. Except for that loud, dirty stuff these young people play in their little sports cars though. No, that’s not really music, you know." The seventy year old woman gave her a knowing look as if the solution to the problems of the world rested within these words of wisdom.

"Oh my!" she said, suddenly remembering the dish in Aleisha’s hands. "Dear, you should really put that in the refrigerator. It’s a chicken pot pie that I threw together yesterday. I wasn’t sure when you were coming, so it’s not ready to eat right now. If you put it in the oven for about twenty minutes, it’ll be perfect, if I do say so myself.”

"Well, Mrs. Hartsock, I really appreciate it but I’m not staying here. I’m going to a motel. Probably the Super 8 in town." "Oh, well… I just figured," she stuttered. “But that’s ok, dear. Harry just loves my chicken pot pie and, and I’m sure he will eat it. Or you could heat it up here and take it with you wherever you go. I do wish you would consider staying here though. I mean, I think Ellen would have expected you to, you know? Now that your parents have moved to Gale County and all, I think she would have wanted you to be here. But I can just take this back if that’s what you want, dear.”
The small woman moved to take the dish from her and Aleisha immediately regretted telling the woman her plans. She was so sweet and endearing. The look of disappointment on Mrs. Hartsock's face was more than she could refuse. Aleisha gave in.

"Mrs. Hartsock, I think you're right. I...I think I'll just stay here. I mean it would just be easier than having to get a hotel. And I'm sure Mrs. Calloway wouldn't have minded."

"Sure she wouldn't, dear! If you want I can help you set up the sofa bed."

"Yes, dear. She was alone for most of her life here in Blackberry. At the last I think she was incredibly sad and depressed. Why did she…?" Aleisha began.

"I'm not really sure, dear. I know she was incredibly sad and depressed these last couple months. She took down all the pictures and postcards and put them in boxes along with the photo albums and all those letters. She looked through them and read the letters almost every single day. It's like she had nothing else to do."

"It's so sad to think about how long she lived in this house all alone."

"Yes, dear. She was alone for most of her life here in Blackberry. At the end I think she was just tired of being by herself. I think she was ready to go,"

she sighed quietly.

Aleisha sat and talked with Mrs. Hartsock for an hour until the woman realized she had to get back home and fix supper for Mr. Hartsock before Wheel of Fortune began. "Well dear," she said, "I reckon I'll see you tomorrow night at the funeral. You have a good night, dear."

"Thank you so much for everything, Mrs. Hartsock."

"Sure, dear, and don't forget to lock the doors, you hear?" she reminded as she left.

Aleisha sat on the edge of the couch bed after her guest had left, looking at the barren house. What if I moved back? The idea was appealing. She had to admit that she was tired of going from place to place and having nowhere to actually call home. The apartment she kept in the suburbs just outside New York City was barely even decorated since she was rarely there. It wasn't as if she needed to keep touring with the orchestra for the money. She loved her job, but maybe this had happened for a reason. Maybe this was the right time for her to settle down. She remembered how she used to hate this town. She would compare all the cities she visited to it, thinking how much better it was to be in Florence, Italy or São Paulo, Brazil than in Blackberry, Virginia. These cities seemed bigger, more developed, and more sophisticated; but they were also nosier, more rushed, and more polluted. Small town life might be good for her. Maybe she would even find someone to settle down with here. The loneliness that she usually tried to hide or fill with a string of acquaintances from city to city began to take over. Aleisha felt it more strongly than she ever had before.

She was tired of that life. Foreign and exotic people no longer seemed as exciting to her. Simple and uncomplicated was much more attractive. Aleisha suddenly had the urge to find the picture albums she remembered from when she was little. She thought of the single picture on the dresser in the bedroom and decided to start there. The two top drawers were filled to the brim with the postcards Aleisha had sent to Mrs. Calloway from her travels. She glanced through them recognizing Dublin, Sydney, and Jerusalem. In the lower drawers she found the albums, filled with pictures and the memories came rushing back. Nothing used to satisfy Aleisha more than to sit and leaf through every album asking questions about each city, the exciting things to do and people to meet there. She took out three albums, stacked them on the bed, and opened the bottom cabinet doors in the dresser. Inside she found two large hatboxes, one blue paisley print and the other pink and gray striped. She opened the blue one first and saw stacks of faded, crinkled letters wrapped in rubber bands. Aleisha had never seen them before and she was instantly curious. She remembered Mrs. Hartsock mentioning letters that Mrs. Calloway used to read over and over. She felt a bit guilty for meddling in something that seemed so private, but she didn’t argue with herself about it for long. She had to read them.

Aleisha sat on the floor and read late into the night until she finally took the boxes to the bed in the living room to read more. She didn’t sleep at all during the night, but by the time she was done, she was far from being sleepy. She was so overwhelmed and confused that she pushed away the exhaustion. She ate breakfast, showered and packed, and was at the Burman, Warner, and Wainwright law office by eight thirty sharp. She was way too early for her one o’clock appointment, but she reasoned that such a small town couldn’t have very many pressing legal issues.

She was right. Donald Burman, the senior lawyer at the firm, invited her into his office before she even had time to sit down in the waiting area. He was a serious man, straightforward and respectful. He read the will to Aleisha, explaining any stipulations that may have been confusing and answering any questions about the details. The entire property including the house was bequeathed to Aleisha Greene. But the thirty year old had no idea what to do with it. She was sure Mrs. Hartsock would take some of the possessions; it seemed that the two were very close these last few years. Thoughts swirled around in her head as she contemplated selling or leasing the house, and maybe even giving the car to her parents. Although she was still incredibly confused she no longer intended to stay in Blackberry.

She left the office and walked to her car with the manila envelope of files in her hand. Mr. Burman had mentioned a letter that Mrs. Calloway had left for Aleisha that would hopefully explain the meaning of the other letters she had found. She slowly opened the envelope and found the light blue envelope with one folded page inside.
Dear Aleisha,

I want you to know how proud I am of you. You have become the person I always believed you would be and always wished I could be. I have left everything I own to you because I know that you will not hold on to it for sentimental reasons. Sell the house, and the car. They are of no use to me or to you. Inside my bedroom dresser are all the photographs and postcards you sent me along with the photo albums you used to love and two hatboxes of letters. I only ask that you keep these things. You may not understand the letters after you read them and you may not want to keep them, but they are the only memories of a precious loved one and the life I gave up. The man who wrote them loved me. He was dear to my heart, but for many reasons we could not be together. He went to so many incredible places, and sent me pictures and mementos. With each new city and each new letter, he would beg me to join him. I never did. Some days I regretted my decision, but never enough to change my mind and leave my dear Gerald. He never knew and I am grateful for that. I didn’t want to hurt him or you either for that matter. It was just easier to let you believe what you wanted. Your eyes were full of such admiration and excitement that I couldn’t bear to tell you the truth. I hope you can forgive me.

With Love,

Ellen Calloway

Aleisha closed her eyes and leaned back in her seat. So much made sense now. She started her car and began to drive. Down the narrow one way streets and back country roads of the Blackberry, Virginia. The longer she drove, the more she started to hate what she saw. Mrs. Calloway had stayed in this little town almost her entire life and she had nothing to show for it. The woman had lived vicariously through the other people in her life and had lied about it. She had stayed out of a sense of loyalty and security. She had been afraid.

The longer she thought about it the more Aleisha realized that she could not, would not stay in the town where she had grown up. The only good memories she had of the town were now spotted with lies. Aleisha drove up the ramp to the highway and left all of it behind. She told herself she was doing the brave thing, taking the action that Mrs. Calloway was too afraid to take. She was living, experiencing, and seizing control of her life. She looked back at the town in the rearview mirror. The sun was high in the sky reflecting off of the tin roofs of the houses and the old marquee sign. She realized how quickly she had changed her mind and she knew that one day she would be back. Maybe in another twelve years. She tried to get excited about travelling across the U.S. for the next tour with the symphony. She sighed as the town grew smaller behind her. The only thing worse than not living in Blackberry, Virginia, is living in Blackberry, Virginia.
No, it’s not a state. It’s a region.
The Appalachian Mountains?
And it’s not “appa-LAY-shun;”
it’s “appa-LATCH-uhn.”
Contrary to popular belief, no,
I don’t wear overalls to school.
And I don’t own a straw hat.
I’ve never walked through town
with a strand of hay sticking out of my teeth,
and yes, as a matter of fact, I do bathe every day.
My verbs agree with my nouns, and I think
you’re the one with the funny accent.
None of my cousins are married—to each other,
and for Christ’s sake, just because I’m from Tennessee
doesn’t mean I live on some tractor plowing farm.

Tennessee. Yeah, where Jack Daniel’s is from.
So nice of you to have a point of reference.
No, I don’t have a Mason jar of moonshine hidden in my closet!
...It’s in the kitchen cabinet behind the canned beans.
Don’t be ridiculous.
And you know, maybe I do prefer cowboy boots to stilettos,
and maybe I’d rather drink a beer by the fire
than a martini in a bar.
So?

I live thirty minutes away from the nearest grocery store.
There are exactly two red lights in my hometown:
one by the liquor store, and one by the quick stop.
No, not the “petrol station.” The quick stop.
I eat lunch every Thursday afternoon at the grill
in the back of the drugstore, and I drink my tea with
ice and lemon, not steaming in a patterned China teacup.
Wait a second—are you seriously repeating everything I say
in a Forrest Gump accent? I don’t talk like that!
Why are you laughing at me? Stop laughing at me!

Good God. Remind me to start telling people I’m from Florida.
ew Craven is a wretched place in July. The weight of the rain stretches that Kool Aid blue until at two fifteen the skies explode like water balloons. The whole man-made earth heaves and shudders under the downpour. It always scars the dirt with pockmarked craters and wakes up the horned beetles, the spiral worms, and the millipedes that trickle in between the crusty callouses of the road. With it comes that stench of human sweat and urine that stains the armpits of any city. It tastes something like madness, a nagging anxiety fluttering between the half-shadows of prostituted alleyways.

LENA BUCKLEY WAS HERE. On the fifteenth floor of Bearden and Sons, a slate building with fifty thousand reflective eyes looking out onto a dingy downtown Lena Buckley sat in the fourth to last cubicle on the left side of the elevators, a carpeted 8 by 6 rectangle that was respectably hers since 2006. She was five foot eight in three-inch heels, meaning that when she got tired, she could lie down perfectly straight on that ugly yellow carpet even with her shoes on. On her breaks, she liked to get perfectly horizontal and play dot-to-dot on the speckled ceiling tiles. Recently, she found herself losing track of time. One moment would blend into the next, an amateur documentary with neither beginning nor end, separated by the number of sips of coffee between 9 and 5.

She was five foot eight in three-inch heels, meaning that when she got tired, she could lie down perfectly straight on that ugly yellow carpet even with her shoes on. On her breaks, she liked to get perfectly horizontal and play dot-to-dot on the speckled ceiling tiles. Recently, she found herself losing track of time. One moment would blend into the next, an amateur documentary with neither beginning nor end, separated by the number of sips of coffee between 9 and 5.

She carried a black Sharpie in the inside pocket of her jacket, a suede imitation paint, and under them, various disheveled men and women looking for some place to hide for the night. A man missing everything three inches below the left kne lay in cut cargo pants and tan jacket. With suspenders crossed at the front and pen caps and paper clips haphazardly criss-crossing his chest, he looked like a cross between an overzealous boy scout and a broken action figure. He, too, was part of the paint, part of the red. Graffiti like blood-splatter on the beer belly gut-walls of the city.

When she was seven and three quarters she swallowed a tadpole whole like a jellybean, and her grandmother laughed and laughed. The purple ones were her favorite; jelly beans, that is. She ate so many jellybeans growing up that she rotted half her baby teeth to little black nubs by the time she reached sixth grade. She has a sweet-tooth, her grannie used to say when child services came around. She had a bunk bed then, a rickety wooden structure that creaked and groaned like a cranky arthritic woman whenever she turned over in bed, and she would hear those creaks and groans in her dreams late at night. She only slept on the top because she was afraid of the top bunk collapsing on her. And she liked that she was that tired, that the top made her room look different, new even. She went to sleep every night as close to the edge as possible, face wide open to the room below. That year Lena Buckley wrote this letter to Mr. Claus:

Santa I want a futafon.
I want anewcolorer for my
Dog. I want a Bell
from your slay. I want
a new Bike. I want
a skuter like mey
Granpas. But Pink.
Lena Buckley.

Between the time when her eyes were 30 inches to 54 inches off the ground standing up plumb straight, she left a plastic plate of white chocolate chip macadamia nut cookies on the coffee table in the living room every year. And every single one of those years on Christmas Eve, Lena's grannie would wake up to her bedside alarm at 3.30am. She would stretch her left hand to pat the cool flat of the bed before she reached over to heave the covers from her chest. With a low groan in the semi-darkness, she would swing her entire body feet-first into pink slippers and shuffle into the living room. She would turn the light on, eat a cookie, reach for her glasses, and reply to the note in perfectly slanted cursive signed: "Mr. Claus." Now all that was left of her grannie was a note on the fridge, ripped out of a spiral notebook, that read in perfectly slanted cursive:

- milk
- apples
- flour
- brown sugar
- macaroni
After she turned the light on, she reached under the sink and picked up a thin, Jersey was on. It cast long shadows under the coffee table and behind the couch. People hours later would lift shivering cigarette-stub fingers, ends beaming red like tail lights, and talk about how they were just on their way to talk. "Your granddaddy was born the exact same day I was," she'd tell Lena, "just two towns away and about three hours apart. It was like Mama Earth was planning it all along. I knew who he was – do you understand what I mean, Lena? – I mean I knew him in the way that you can lay eyes on a person and see right into the black of his skull and somehow see light. That's who your granddaddy was to me," she'd shake her head and continue to talk. "I want you to know something. Your granddaddy was right here up to the day you were big enough to pull yourself up on your own two feet. He'll be a good man. He loved me and he loved you even before you slipped out all breathless and slick with your mother's blood. People didn't treat him right but you know that didn't matter to me. He loved me." She looked out the window briefly. "Your parents did wrong by you, but your granddaddy was right here up to the day you were big enough to pull yourself up on your own two feet. He'll come back soon, in time for Thanksgiving I expect, and he'll come with onion sacks of jellybeans, a shiny new dishwasher, and bookshelves full of bedtime stories. He loved me." She would stroke Lena's hair, brushing her bangs out of her face, and then clear her throat.

"Your granddaddy was born the exact same day I was. . . ." she'd recite. Lena would lift up her head from her coloring book, crayon in her right fist, and smile as she listened.
Melinda climbed onto the white wicker chair on the front porch and knocked down the bird’s nest in the corner with a broom. The rounded bowl made of twigs and grass tumbled down spilling its contents onto the porch and the ground below. Three tiny speckled blue eggs splattered on the concrete walkway. Another teetered on the edge of porch, and she watched from above until it finally decided to roll off. Melinda stared at the lifeless fragments for a moment, horrified. She swallowed back tears, breathed in deeply, and then calmly stepped down from the chair. She put back in its place by the door and told herself that it had to be done. She tried to put the image out of her mind as she swept away the mess and focused on what she had to do.

Calvin would be home in an hour and she still had a few chores left on her checklist. She had planned their anniversary night for weeks, and it had to be perfect. She knew her husband would be surprised with everything she had prepared. He had been reluctant to agree to let her decide how to celebrate, but for once Melinda insisted. Four years may not be a big milestone, but she wanted to make it special, a night to remember.

Four years ago Melinda and Calvin had pledged their love and commitment to one another at sunset on a secluded South Carolina beach. It was a traditional, unpretentious affair with only a few friends and family in attendance. They declared their love with personal vows, promised to never be parted until death, sealed it with a kiss, and were pronounced husband and wife. Afterward, they danced in the moonlight to Frank Sinatra crooning “The Way You Look Tonight” from a battery-powered CD player in the white sand as the waves splashed in harmony. It was a perfect night that she would never forget.

She was determined to make the anniversary of that night just as memorable. The house was completely spotless; she had dusted, vacuumed and mopped everything in sight. She had mowed the yard, trimmed the bushes along the driveway, and cleaned the windows, inside and out. Her last task was to prepare the food for dinner, which she was dreading. She had wanted the night to be special for Calvin, so she had made fried chicken. Being a vegetarian, it was difficult for her, but tonight she felt that he deserved a meal that he would enjoy. She had planned every detail of the night around his reaction. She knew him well enough to be confident that he would be surprised.

Melinda knew she was a perfectionist, but almost everything she did was for her husband. She adored him and loved being married to him. She overlooked his flaws and focused on improving her own. Her obsessive need for control was something that annoyed Calvin, and she was aware that at times she overstepped her place. Once about two years ago, he had left her for several days because he said he felt manipulated and smothered when she made decisions without him. She had been devastated and had almost called...
Calvin had been cheating on her shook Melinda's resolve. Her faith in him, and that she could never live without him. She promised herself that they would always be together no matter what she had to do. When he came back Melinda had decided to be the perfect wife. She began planning her life around his to make certain he was content and happy. She just wanted to keep him close to her. Making their marriage work became the most important goal in her life and she resolved that she would never give him a reason to leave her again. She determined that they were inseparable.

Her decisive behavioral change created a relatively calm, peaceful coexistence between them until about two weeks ago when a storm cloud appeared on the perfectly blue sky Melinda had painted. The discovery that Calvin had been cheating on her shook Melinda’s resolve. Her faith in him, their relationship, and their future was crushed. She had found two handwritten letters hidden behind his bedside table when she was rearranging the furniture in their bedroom. They were short, but not at all vague with their suggestive phrases and double entendres. Melinda was shocked. She spent a couple days in confusion and depression, certain that she had lost Calvin and that he was already planning to leave her. She told Calvin that she was sick and pretended that everything was fine between them. She cried some and moped alot until she saw the upcoming date on a calendar and decided that she wasn’t ready to give up just yet. She came up with the perfect plan to keep Calvin with her. Their anniversary was going to be unforgettable.

She couldn’t lose him; they belonged together. Melinda told herself that over and over in her head as she separated the food into covered dishes. She placed them, a bottle of champagne and two glasses, and a fresh strawberry pie in the small picnic basket someone had given them for Christmas last year. Instead of her normal basic colors and tight braid or bun, Melinda was wearing a low-cut red dress and leaving her curled hair flowing around her shoulders. Her lips were painted a bright shade of scarlet and around her neck hung an expensive necklace that Calvin had bought her while they were dating. She sprayed a hint of perfume on her neck, and sat by the window to wait for him. For a moment she thought about reneging on her plan; they could stay home, picnic in the living room floor, and watch old John Wayne movies all night. She knew Calvin would enjoy that. But then she thought about the letters. They were hidden in her jacket pocket lying on the bed, forming a lump in her throat. She started the car again and put in a CD; Sinatra’s voice resonated through the speakers and they smiled at each other, remembering together. She hummed along as Calvin popped the cork off the champagne and poured a glass for each of them. He toasted to their four years of marriage and she added that they would be together forever. They drank the toast and Calvin whispered that he loved her. The last rays of light cast a gleam of the hood of the car and Melinda leaned in close to him, took his hand and stopped the car. She closed her eyes and concentrated on his reassuring arm around her as they beheld the view. The sun was setting, casting a pink glow through the trees of the park and glistening on the wet rocks of the waterfall.

Melinda took out the picnic she had prepared and watched Calvin’s excitement over his special meal. She started the car again and put in a CD; Sinatra’s voice resonated through the speakers and they smiled at each other, remembering together. She hummed along as Calvin popped the cork off the champagne and poured a glass for each of them. He toasted to their four years of marriage and she added that they would be together forever. They drank the toast and Calvin whispered that he loved her. The last rays of light cast a gleam of the hood of the car and Melinda leaned in close to him, took his hand in hers, and whispered in his ear. When she pulled back he started to speak, astonishment evident in his expression, but she shook her head and put her lips on his. At the perfect moment, she put the car in drive and pressed the gas pedal.

She watched from the window as his car pulled into the driveway and listened as the garage door opened. Calvin came around the corner just as she began descending the stairs. His reaction was exactly as she had planned. Amazement, pleasure, and anticipation registered on his face as he took in her appearance. Melinda smiled.

Hand in hand, they walked through the house to the car and put the picnic basket in the back seat. He tried to get her to reveal where they were going, but she wouldn’t tell. As she drove, Calvin’s voice calmed her anxiety. He rambled about work and current events and she listened and nodded at the appropriate times, watching the sun begin to sink on the horizon. When she exited off the interstate, Calvin guessed where they were going and Melinda grinned at his excitement. Though it wasn’t far away, they had never been to Raven Cliff Falls before, because Melinda was afraid of heights. The cliffs sat atop a gorge that dropped four hundred and twenty feet deep into the mountainside. But she could do it for him, she told herself. She could put it for their perfect night together. She cautiously pulled up to the edge of the cliffs and stopped the car. She closed her eyes and concentrated on his reassuring arm around her as they beheld the view. The sun was setting, casting a pink glow through the trees of the park and glistening on the wet rocks of the waterfall.

Amazement, pleasure, and anticipation registered on his face as he took in her appearance. Melinda smiled.

Hand in hand, they walked through the house to the car and put the picnic basket in the back seat. He tried to get her to reveal where they were going, but she wouldn’t tell. As she drove, Calvin’s voice calmed her anxiety. He rambled about work and current events and she listened and nodded at the appropriate times, watching the sun begin to sink on the horizon. When she exited off the interstate, Calvin guessed where they were going and Melinda grinned at his excitement. Though it wasn’t far away, they had never been to Raven Cliff Falls before, because Melinda was afraid of heights. The cliffs sat atop a gorge that dropped four hundred and twenty feet deep into the mountainside. But she could do it for him, she told herself. She could put it for their perfect night together. She cautiously pulled up to the edge of the cliffs and stopped the car. She closed her eyes and concentrated on his reassuring arm around her as they beheld the view. The sun was setting, casting a pink glow through the trees of the park and glistening on the wet rocks of the waterfall.
The Rules of The Hardy Girls  Kate Barber

The name is Amanda Clark, president of a (sort of) secret foundation here at Forrest Hills High School called “The Hardy Girls.” Now, to be a member of The Hardy Girls, there’s only one requirement: you have to have dated, or almost dated, Nathan Hardy, “Andy” Hardy, we call him. Really the fact that his nickname is Andy Hardy ought to warn off most girls, but it doesn’t. We call him that because of that old Judy Garland movie that Mrs. Richards always makes her ninth grade English class watch, even though it has nothing to do with English. Love Finds Andy Hardy. The thing is, love may always find Andy Hardy, but Andy Hardy—well, he’s never found love, and there’s a big difference.

Reason I’m president is because I’m sort of a patient zero, if you will. I was Andy Hardy’s original victim. Or one of four original victims, rather. Girlfriend, beginning of freshman year. As it turned out, Mr. Hardy had not one, two, no no no, not one, but three other girlfriends, all from different high schools in the area. Tricky, tricky. Now how would I ever have figured out he was three timing me with three other skanks in the county? I wouldn’t have, except for my best friend, Michelle Rhodes, knows Emily Grayson, who was cousins with Trisha Bryan, one of his other girls. We figured it out, and we even confronted him. He wasn’t sorry, or embarrassed, he just laughed at us. The other guys always let a guy’s reputation precede him, and Andy Hardy does not have a good reputation. Me, I didn’t respect the blacklist. I dated Andy Hardy. We dated for about two months before I realized he was also talking to Molly Whitman. And Angela Wood. Oh, and he was sleeping with Amy Yarberry.

Kaitlyn Fairchild, Hardy Girl #26, presents Rule Number One: “There’s a reason for the blacklist.”

I was a sophomore when I met Andy Hardy. I suppose I could lie to you and say I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but I think the locker room blacklist eliminates that excuse for just about everyone. Oh, you’ve heard about the blacklist, right? Well, just in case you haven’t, there’s this blacklist in the girls’ locker room on the third floor. It’s literally a black piece of paper, and basically, it’s a list of boys in Forrest Hills High that you really just shouldn’t date. Blake Anderson is on there, you know, Mr. Way Too Clingy, Let’s Get Married Tomorrow. And then there’s Nick Ackles, who only dates girls with big boobs. For the most part, the guys on the list could be dated, in theory, as long as you knew what you were up against, and how to fight it. The trouble with Andy Hardy is you never know exactly what he’s going to do—we’ll get into that in more detail with Rule #2. But anyway, he’s number one on the blacklist, like you didn’t already figure that one out. If a guy is number one on such a list, there’s probably a damn good reason, wouldn’t you agree? I mean, how much of a skeet do you have to be to be listed as the number one “thou shalt not date” out of a school that is home to what? Three, four hundred guys? You should always let a guy’s reputation precede him, and Andy Hardy does not have a good reputation. Me, I didn’t respect the blacklist. I dated Andy Hardy. We dated for about two months before I realized he was also talking to Molly Whitman. And Angela Wood. Oh, and he was sleeping with Amy Yarberry.

Hayley Jones, Hardy Girl #15, presents Rule Number Two: “He never plays the same game twice.”

For the most part, I do feel that this particular rule is quite clear. As Kaitlyn previously stated in her explanation of Rule One, this is why simple knowledge of Andy Hardy cannot even begin to prepare you to fight him and win him over. It simply cannot be done, and the reason for this, is Andy Hardy never plays the same game twice. That is his edge, his upper hand; you never know just quite what to expect. He’s unpredictable. Oh, you know, of course, that he is going to lie to you, that you absolutely cannot trust him. But it is the way in which he begins the “conquest,” if you will. With me, his game was “Go Green.” I am very active in the movement to keep the planet green. When I first met Andy Hardy, I was purchasing groceries at the local store. He bumped into me on my way out the door, causing me to spill the contents of one of my canvas bags. When he stopped, apologized, and began to help me replace the items into the bag, I noticed that he too, was carrying “Go Green” bags. We began to talk, and he told me he was also very active in keeping the planet green and being environmentally friendly. When I came to my senses, I learned that, of course, Andy Hardy had no interest whatsoever in the planet. He simply had noticed me a couple registers down, purchased “green” bags for himself, and bumped...
Well, girl, you're in luck, because that's what he wants too! OMG, like imagine Julia Sharp, Hardy Girl #47, presents Rule Number Three:

“**You are not ‘special.’**”

There’s an exception to every rule, and the exception to Rule Number Two is Rule Number Three, and it’s only a partial exception, but an exception nonetheless. Andy doesn’t play the same game twice, he always mixes it up a little bit, except for one little detail: he always makes you feel like you’re special. I’m a little different from all the other Hardy Girls, because, I came back to Andy four times—four times I tried to date that SOB, and you know, he told me I was different from all the others, because he kept coming back to me. That made me special, like he couldn’t let go of me, like there was something about me that made him keep coming back, and I figured he must be in love with me, right? Like no matter who he was with, he was always thinking about me, and so I start getting in my head, this ridiculous, super retarded idea that I’m gonna be the girl who breaks Andy Hardy, you know, like I’m going to be the legend, the girl who “tamed the shrew.” But it’s impossible, it I swear to God it is, because no girl is ever going to break this guy, not any time soon, and that’s a promise. Oh, he’ll lie to you, he’ll tell you you’re different; you’re not like the other girls from his past, no, no you’re prettier, smarter, s**xier, a better dancer, a better kisser, whatever, but the point is, somehow, you make him feel different. You make him feel like a new person, give him sensations in his soul he’s never felt before, and you’re the girl who changed everything. There’s just one problem with believing that, with believing you’re the girl who’s going to become a legend, the one who’s going to finally break Andy Hardy: we all believed it. We all believed that Andy Hardy was all I thought we were different, better, but we weren’t, and if you think for a second you’re any different, you better think again. You’re just the girl Andy Hardy is going to get lucky with—er, I mean, date—this week. He will use you, play with your emotions, screw with your head, guilt you, and lose you, and in the end, you’re any different, you better think again. You’re just the girl Andy Hardy is going to get lucky with—and, I mean, date—this week. He will use you, play with your emotions, screw with your head, guilt you, and lose you, and in the end, you’re any different, you better think again. You’re just the girl Andy Hardy is trying to get lucky with—er, I mean, date—this week. He will use you, play with your emotions, screw with your head, guilt you, and lose you, and in the end, you’re any different, you better think again.

Chloe Parker, Hardy Girl #31, presents Rule Number Four:

“**He will say/do whatever he thinks it will take to get you.**”

So you don’t want a relationship. Am I right? You just want a good time. Well, girl, you’re in luck, because that’s what he wants too! OMG, like imagine that! Oh, you want a relationship? A serious one? Ready to settle down? No shit! So is he! Makeout buddy? Boyfriend? Just want to date for a while? Girl, it don’t matter what you say, he’s gonna agree with you. If you want him to show up at your door and take you out to a fancy restaurant, it’s done. If you want him to pick you up two blocks away and go three towns over so your parents don’t find out you’re dating a senior, he’ll gladly oblige. I told him I wanted to go out every single night; I wanted expensive presents, you know, to be treated like any black woman wants to be treated. Nice things. So he buys me nice things. Until I get in his bed. And then, suddenly, all those nice things, they stop. It doesn’t matter what he really wants, or what kind of guy he really is, he’s just doing it to get you. Girl, that’s the thing about this guy, no one knows who he really is or what he really likes, because he says and he does whatever it is he thinks he needs to just to win you over. And once he wins you, girl, you best believe he’s gonna drop you like a condom wrapper on the floor. It’s a game. A chase. It’s all about whatever it takes to get you and add another name to his list. You’re just a notch in his bedpost. Which brings us to Rule Number Five. Do yo thing, Brandy!

Brandy McKinney, Hardy Girl #8, presents Rule Number Five:

“It’s all about the chase.”

Okay. Pay attention, skank. Rule Number Five just might be the most important rule there is. Rule Number Five is essential. If you can’t follow Rule Five, you’re gonna fall right straight into Mr. Andy Hardy, and that’s a promise. Listen to me: It… is… all… about… the chase. Got that? It’s a chase. Andy Hardy is a boy who loves games, and he loves him a good chase. Me, I hold the record for the longest Andy Hardy chase. Made the boy chase after me for a good three months before I finally stopped running. Oh, he’d blow up my phone, leave me little notes in my locker, flowers now and then. He’d text me, say he was thinking about me, couldn’t wait to see me, wished I’d let him take me out, all that jazz. But once I let him take me out a few times, that was it. We went to a basketball game, a movie, and out to eat once, and then all the calls and flowers stopped. He told everyone “he’d gotten me.” He won me. And that was game over. Game so freakin’ over. I was a conquest. I refused him, I made it hard, and that fueled him. When you act like you don’t care, he can’t stand it. But as soon as you buy into it, as soon as you let him get what he wants, you’re done. You become a Hardy Girl for life, and he moves on. More than that, he moves on and when you don’t understand why, he tells everyone you’re a psycho stalker who is in love with him and just can’t let it go. My advice? Don’t stop running. Ever.

Marley Adams, Hardy Girl #67, presents Rule Number Six:

“He’s smooth talker because practice makes perfect.”

Let me guess what line got you hooked on Andy Hardy. Did he tuck a strand of hair behind your ear and say “God. You’re just so beautiful. I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as you are” and smile? Simple, yet always effective. Textbook Hardy. No, wait, I know, he actually used one of those lame lines:
"Is your daddy a thief? I'm just wondering who stole the stars out of the heavens and put them in your eyes." Am I getting close? Here's the deal: if he can work his way into your heart with his words, if he always knows exactly what to say, it's because he's said it all before. If it's like something out of a movie, knowing him, it probably really is out of a movie. Of course your date with him was perfect. Of course he said all the right things at the right time. Of course you couldn't have written a better night—it's an act. When you get right down to it, Andy Hardy is the best actor alive. It's perfect because it's rehearsed, and he's rehearsed it with every other girl in the county. I was comparing notes with Hardy Girls Numbers 4, 17, and 48 the other day, and get this: he took us all on the same first date. We had a picnic out by the dam, and he brought wine he'd gotten from his older brother, made our favourite foods, and held our hands and told us all we were the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. He told us that finding us was a blessing from the gods, or some load of BS, and that he didn't have to search anymore, he'd found the perfect girl. All of us. It came out smooth, and sincere, and hey, I bought it. Who doesn't want to be told that? But it sounds like a dream because he's practiced it to make it sound that way. It's like something out of a storybook because it's a line. Everything he says is a line. Any time a guy knows all the right things to say, and is completely chill and smooth about it—red flag, baby. There's a reason for that, and it is not that he's into you. Oh, and if he ever invites you to a picnic at the dam, that's also code for skinny dipping. Just by the way.

Ashley Nottingham, Hardy Girl #59, presents Rule Number Seven:

"Resist the charm."

It's what makes you fall for him. It's the way he offers to cook you dinner, just so he can spend time with you. It's the way he texts you good morning and good night, or randomly throughout your day to tell you he hopes it's wonderful. It's the way he kisses your forehead when your head is on his shoulder, the way he slides his arm around your waist and squeezes you like you mean something to him. It's the way he holds your hand at the mall, or kisses you quickly when he thinks no one is looking. With those eyes. And it's over. You're done. You just became a Hardy Girl all in that one moment. Don't look him in the eye when he's talking his bull crap to you. Don't do it! You are powerless against those big blue babies, unless you know ahead of time that you have to resist them. The eyes. Gets 'em every time.

Beth Price, Hardy Girl #45, presents Rule Number Eight:

"Beware of the Hardy boy eyes."

Those eyes of crystal glass blue, they're not ordinary eyes. I don't know what God was thinking giving a boy a set of eyes that perfect, but if you ask me, it was a mistake. It's not just that his eyes are completely gorgeous—it's like, well, it's almost like they have some kind of... power or something. It sounds stupid, I know, but let him look at you with those eyes, just once, and see if you don't have to fight the urge to pass out on the spot. He'll tell you he's had a wonderful night, and look down at you with those eyes, and you kiss him. You can't help it. You call him out on his crap, he looks down at the floor, a sad look in those eyes, then he brings them back up to you. A wave of guilt spreads over you, and you feel terrible, and apologize. You take everything back. He looks over at you in complete silence, smiles that stupid crooked smile of his, and gives you that look. With those eyes. And it's over. You've done for. You just became a Hardy Girl all in that one moment. Don't look him in the eye when he's talking his bull crap to you. Don't do it! You are powerless against those big blue babies, unless you know ahead of time that you have to resist them. The eyes. Gets 'em every time.

Carolyne Montgomery, Hardy Girl #62, presents Rule Number Nine:

"The Double Whammy: Never make excuses, and never believe it is your fault."

Okay, so there was this one time, I caught Andy making out with Susan Patron outside of the Chemistry 2 room, right? And so I said to him, I said, "Nathan Hardy! What in the world do you think you're doing? Do you think you got the right to treat me this way?" And he says to me, he says, "Baby, I was scared. I was afraid you were gonna break my heart, go back to that old boyfriend of yours, and I freaked out. She doesn't mean anything to me. If you just acted like you cared more, like you wanted me... Well, I never would've done it." Notice there ain't no apology anywhere in there. And suddenly, I feel like it's my fault. He's right. I haven't acted totally interested. I've played a little hard to get. It's Andy Hardy, I thought that's what you had to do. But he feels neglected. I sent him straight into the arms of another woman! He's just scared, that's all. I intimidate him. All I need to do is show him a little more love—and—NO! Wrong! This is his thing, right? It's what he's good at. He's running around on you, and you find out, and the next thing you know, it's your fault. You're making excuses for him, blaming yourself. And you can't do that, you cannot! Because if Andy Hardy is gonna be Andy Hardy, and face it, he is, he will always have that other girl on the side... well then you can't believe it's your fault. You can't make excuses for him, invent stories that explain his behavior. Never make excuses for the way he mistreats you, and never, ever, under any circumstance let him turn it around and blame you, because you didn't do nothing wrong.
always right. She was talking about test taking, but I think this applies in real life, too. Everyone's first instinct is always to run, but he talks you out of it in this subtle way that makes you think it was your idea. You talk yourself out of it. And if your first instinct isn't to run, then it should be. Because the thing is, no one deserves to be treated this way, and I'll be damned if I let one more girl go through his crap without a decent warning. Ten rules, eighty-eight girls. Consider yourself warned.

The Rules of the Hardy Girls:

1. There's a reason for the blacklist.
2. He never plays the same game twice.
3. You are not special.
4. He will say/do whatever it takes to get you.
5. It's all about the chase.
6. He's a smooth talker, because practice makes perfect.
7. You have to resist the charm.
8. Beware of the Hardy boy eyes.
9. The Double Whammy: Don't make excuses and don't ever think it's your fault.
10. You will never be "the one"—you'll always just be "another one."

Amanda Clark, “Patient Zero,” presents Rule Number Ten, the essence of the Hardy Girls’ beliefs:

“You will NEVER be the one—you will always just be another one.”

I think more than anything, this rule is why we're all where we are. It goes back to Rule Number Three, “You're not special.” We're all Hardy Girls because he made us believe we were it. The one. You don't find the one in high school, to start with. But he makes you think this is different. You're the exception to the rule, right? No. Wrong. You are the rule. No matter what he says, no matter how charming, no matter how he looks at you with those eyes, or what lies he tells you, it is all a game. It's an act. You're not the one, and you never will be. None of us ever will be. You will always be another one. Just another Hardy Girl. This rule is a huge deal. If you can't remember this rule, you're toast. This is the biggest load of crap in the world. You are not the one, so don't ever for a second let yourself believe differently. Not for a second.

So there you have it. The rules of the Hardy Girls, one through ten. Andy Hardy is dangerous, more than anything, because no one knows who this guy really is. No one knows what his favourite baseball team is, or what television shows he likes, or what he wants to do with his life, because it changes from girl to girl. Nearly half of us have been, or truth be told, still are in love with Andy Hardy, and the thing is, we're all in love with 88 different people. We don't know who he really is, or what he really thinks, because we all knew a different Andy Hardy. My Andy Hardy was into classical music and old school jazz. Ellen Whittaker, #72, her Andy Hardy secretly loved to dance. Chloe Parker’s wanted to be a doctor and discover something that would change the world. He's full of shit. Always. We're in love with 88 different Andy Hardys, and the thing about being a Hardy Girl, is you're a Hardy Girl for life. Oh, we'll grow out of it eventually. We'll go to college, get a job, get married, and one day we'll forget all about Andy Hardy. But right now, in high school, this is something that believe it or not, will change you. Andy Hardy will scar you. You won't be able to recognize a nice guy if you tripped over him in church, because from now on, you'll think every guy that opens his mouth is lying to you. Andy Hardy is like being handed everything you ever wanted, and then having it taken away. It messes with your head in a way you can't explain. You'll feel cheap and used and stupid, and above all, you'll be embarrassed when everyone says “I told you so.” Don't make excuses for him. I did. We all did. And we were all right to start with. My fifth grade teacher used to tell me that your first instinct is almost
goods are sloppy here under the bridge tonight. The structure stands silent in the cold crisp of the quiet. Buzzing whooshes of travelling cars sing lullabies from the nearby interstate, as each varmint huddles against their claimed patch of concrete, an arm layin watch over the bulky bundle of all that they own. The slight puffs of their breaths are visible clouds, pulsating above their wretched heads, expanding to become one with the cold night air before the reinforcement of the next exhale arrives. Some sit shivering, some lay snoring. Some still have their eyes wide open, thinking. It feels like waiting here.

I hear some miserable street rat start to stir through her belongings. A girl, the age of my sister. Her hair, slick and weighted. Her face, white and purple, with cheekbones the size of Texas catching the light of the moon. She sighs as she combs her shaky hands through her things, finally pulling out what she’s looking for, a syringe.

I watch as she unties the double knot of her grimy shoestring and pulls out her shaking foot, a hole in the heel of her thick sock. She pulls it off and hurriedly slides her finger between her big toe and second, removing the blockage of toe jam. She doesn’t hesitate. Her muscles tense as she pierces the soft skin between her toes. She slides the drug into her veins, her posture relaxing, a small smirk of gluttony appearing upon her filthy face. I watch as she sits back and stays still for a while, a smooth glass creeping over her eyes as she smiles at no one, but maybe me. She looks happy.

Suddenly, she stands up and dances. Bobbing around in her snagged and faded slacks, the bouncing of her breasts barely visible under her layers of sour, stained sweatshirts. She is shameless. Her left foot is still naked as she spins around and begins to make noise, her attempt at music. The cold has stolen her voice, leaving an awful sound. A scratchy song snaking out from under the bridge. She is loud enough to open the eyes of most bridge bunkers and we all watch her as she giggles and sings and spins with her head and hands raised to the cement ceiling. When she stops, her brain sloshes and strips her of her balance. She weaves a few steps in this and that direction and finally, she falls.

Onto a broad black woman, a sleeping oak with skin darker than the night. I watch as the woman’s eyes flash open and scan as spot lights before stopping on the giggling girl who is now sitting up. The woman lays stone still, prepping for the pounce. A deep growl, low and leering, releases from her larynx. The sound of a predator sending warning out through the jungle trees.

And the girl is surprised to hear it, for some hesitant smile creeps up her face and I can see her confusion. A frozen deer standing before her prey. Then, she barks out a playful growl of her own and leans forward quick to bite the woman on the cheek. A game. The woman’s arms bolt as lightening
to clench their hands around the girl's neck, squeezing to kill her. I watch a
giggle form from the girls face, inaudible, as the woman's grip gives death to it.
The girl does not resist in the slightest. Obedient, patient for what comes next.

The rest of us wait for murder under the bridge. The choking lasts long enough to teach a lesson, and
I feel myself tingle with excitement as I think,
I continue down the sidewalk.

The girl does not resist in the slightest. Obedient, patient for what comes next.

The rest of us wait for murder under the bridge. The choking lasts long enough to teach a lesson, and
I feel myself tingle with excitement as I think,
I continue down the sidewalk.

The rest of us wait for murder under the bridge. The choking lasts long enough to teach a lesson, and
I feel myself tingle with excitement as I think,
I continue down the sidewalk.

The rest of us wait for murder under the bridge. The choking lasts long enough to teach a lesson, and
I feel myself tingle with excitement as I think,
I continue down the sidewalk.

The rest of us wait for murder under the bridge. The choking lasts long enough to teach a lesson, and
I feel myself tingle with excitement as I think,
I continue down the sidewalk.

The rest of us wait for murder under the bridge. The choking lasts long enough to teach a lesson, and
I feel myself tingle with excitement as I think,
I continue down the sidewalk.

The rest of us wait for murder under the bridge. The choking lasts long enough to teach a lesson, and
I feel myself tingle with excitement as I think,
I continue down the sidewalk.
tresses of her hair, racing gravity down her body to the shower floor and into the drain. She is rocking back and forth slightly with her fists clenched tight. The water has long run cold. I call her name and she pulls back the curtain, a prairie dog popping up to listen. She sees herself in the mirror and stares, finally closing her eyes as tears slip from beneath her lids. She steps from shower, leaving the water running. She stands naked, dripping. Her breasts are budding and fragile. Youthful. Fat is concentrated in a ring around her belly, wearing swirled stretch marks as flags for uniqueness. Her skin is young and olive and wears the water beads well. She continues to cry. Here is my chance.

"Look" I tell her. "There on the counter is a razor. Use it to cut yourself where your blood runs the reddest." She looks at the razor but doesn’t move to hold it. She looks back into the mirror. Listen to me. "There, behind the mirror. Plenty of poisons to choose. Practically a pharmacy"

Slowly, she opens up the mirror to reveal a packed medicine cabinet. She traces her fingers along the labels, judging their power by their prescription. "Yes, that one," I tell her. She pulls it down to feel its weight in the palm of her hand. The bottle is full and tempting. "That’s it, go on." She hesitates. "Life is not as important as you’d think. A little is enough," I say.

She stares at the bottle for several seconds before speaking to slice the silence. "Enough," she says.

I watch as my sister puts the bottle back behind the mirror, turns off the shower, and towels off her young body. She leaves to her bedroom and I follow. I watch as she fingers through her closet thoughtfully before taking out a red dress. It is mine.

She sits down in front of her mirror and applies dark shadows to her eyes and a just kissed shade to her lips. She dries and curls each strand of her hair into neat ringlets and runs silver hoops through the tiny holes in her ears. We both appraise her in the mirror. She is stunning. My sister stands up and walks out the front door without shoes.

I follow her down the sidewalk, watching her stretch out her hands to feel the breeze blow between her fingers. She makes short stops along her path to pick a stranger’s flower. A rose from the bush in front of a small retro home, a magnolia from the tree outside the courthouse, a daisy from the sidewalk planter. She stores them in her arm, curved as a basket for the blossoms. She holds them as children. Down the street, around the corner, up another block, all the while collecting flowers.

She arrives at a small cemetery tucked neat behind a stone Baptist church, adding speed to her pace as soon as her feet leave the cement for grass carpet. She knows exactly where she is going.

When she gets to my grave, she unloads the flowers and they fall scattered over my plot. She bends down, closes her eyes, and traces every word of my epigraph with her fingers like brail. My sister sits down with her back against my tombstone, and takes turn picking up each flower and plucking its petals one by one. "I didn’t do it on purpose," she says to me.

I leave to walk back to the bridge, to witness whatever is there.
hey call our home the Land of the Morning Calm because at
dawn our mountains wake up dressed in dewy-virgin mist and
all you can smell are wet cones. Then the sun charges in with
his exhaust fumes, commuters, halogen lights and strips her.
In this way our mountains are raped every morning.

Me and my mom are the only ones left now. We moved to
Seoul when my mom was all swollen up with me. She named
me after the river that wanders through the belly of this metropolis. Back when
my mom was in high school, the Han River was rank with chemical waste,
human refuse, and dead bodies. One hazy summer night, she told me through
drunken sweat and mucus about her sixteen-year-old brother who had rung his
body off the Mapo Bridge. It was hard to be in those days.

_Dae Han Min Guk:_ that’s what we Koreans call our country. One nation,
one people. We don’t think of North and South, because we long for the uncles
and great aunts and sisters and cousins and sons across the barbed wire. My
mom never let me forget myself. She always called me by my full name, my
real name: “Han Ga-ram.” And I would love the way that it streamed off her
tongue just like the gentle current of the river flowing unhindered beyond the
demilitarized zone. “Hans come from the same ancestor,” she would whisper,
“We share the blood of queens and scholars.”

It was around 2003; there were rumors of governmental reunion and we
saw families on TV bowing, weeping, and embracing each other for the first time
since 1950. She wasn’t on TV, but my mom was there. She left that morning
clutching pink foxgloves and returned the next day cradling the flabby blossoms
against her chest. The dusty bouquet still rests in her bedroom, next to the
piece of the Berlin Wall on her dresser.
**Contributors’ Notes**

**Hayley Griffith** lives in New Market, Tennessee and is a junior at Carson Newman, majoring in English: Creative Writing and Literature. She is an avid reader and an aspiring novelist.

**Ah-reum Han:** Ah-reum’s name is pronounced like the air you breathe and the rum you drink. She is a junior Creative Writing and Cross-Cultural Sociology double major from Korea/the Gambia/Senegal. Her rootlessness makes her fidgety, and so she wanders listlessly through life like a wayfarer on an odyssey not of her choosing.

**Faith Long** is the last of the Journalism majors at Carson-Newman. She is a pretend art major but more importantly a student of all subjects. Her goal in life is to bring glory to the Most High God in anything and everything she does.

**Cassie McGaha** is a junior from Johnson City, Tennessee. She is majoring in Computer Information Systems with a minor in Photography. She enjoys scarves, tea, and laughing.

**Luke Merrell** is a junior from Rutledge, Tennessee that is majoring in Graphic Design at Carson Newman College. He enjoys music and plays guitar in a Christian/rock band.

**Kayla Beth Moore** is a junior English and Religion major from Tellico Plains, Tennessee. Her favorite stories start with places – she loves a lot of places. In her opinion, you cannot beat a rocking chair, a front porch, a glass of lemonade, and a theological query to ponder. She’s got way more questions than answers, and is beginning to be ok with that. Currently, her favorite word is wayfarer.

**Nathanael Mosher** is ironically a unique creation on God’s green earth just like everyone else.

**Abi Parker** is a sophomore from Campbellsville, Kentucky majoring in Cross Cultural Sociology and English. She enjoys long sits on cold beaches, smelling books, taking pictures, petting hedgehogs, and spontaneous adventures.

**Heather Reynolds** is a senior photography major. She loves owls and always having a positive outlook on life.

**Megan Slomski** is a Sophomore studying English Education. She strives in both disciplines to capture the beauty of creation as well as the beauty of the human condition. She plans to become a English Teacher and a writer.

**Laura Tucker** is a Junior year graphic design and religion student. She plans to open a non-profit some day, loves working with middle school students through YOKE and her favorite animal is a duck.
Contributors’ Notes

Todd Turpin is a graphic design major finishing up his junior year at Carson Newman. He first attended college in 2001 at Ball State University majoring in telecommunications. While enrolled at Ball State, Todd was deployed to Iraq with the USAF in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Upon returning to the US, Todd worked in several fields including healthcare, real estate, engineering, and management before returning to his true love, art.

Hannah Williams is a junior honors student double-majoring in Literature and in Graphic Design and also has a minor in Missions. On campus, she is involved in EPC, Mortar Board, and Alpha Chi. She has had the opportunity to study abroad in Italy and in South Africa, and she has also presented research projects at conferences in San Diego and in Knoxville. Aside from school, her life is filled with Adobe Creative Suite, enjoying time with those she loves, and eating lots of fruit. She plans to pursue a career in the graphic design field, whatever that might entail.

Olivia Wood is Moon’s middle name, with a camera orbiting her neck and a pen planted in each pocket.