HOMEWARD BOUND: SHORT STORIES

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This collection contains a preface that discusses the role of landscape and place as they are used in fiction, particularly when they are colored by the writer’s own memories of home. The preface is followed by four original short stories, three of which relate to a fictional small town in Texas. “Under the Surface” involves two young boys who begin to relate thoughts of the dead body they find to their own absentee mother. “Tommy” explores a young man’s memories of his recently deceased friend, as well as the gossip of a small town. “Stubborn” depicts a man’s struggle after his wife has delivered an ultimatum. “Out of the Valley” is about a father and daughter questioning what it means to be normal.
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PART I

PREFACE
There’s a town named after Knute Rockne hidden in the pastures of central Texas. You can reach it by heading east on Hwy 71 out of Austin, then turning right on FM 20 before you reach the city of Bastrop. Depending on your speed, you can make it the next thirteen miles in less than ten minutes, although you should drive more slowly at night, when the unmarked deer crossings are harder to spot. Take a left where FM 20 intersects with FM 535. You’ll know you’re in the right place by the gas station nestled in the intersection, the Rockne Grocery. In the next mile you’ll pass both the local church and the local bar, strategically placed next door to each other. Across the street lies the other local bar and an old machine shop—both have been closed for years. Blink, and you’ll miss it—my entire childhood wrapped up in one little town.

Eudora Welty writes in her essay “Place in Fiction” that good fiction must be “steadily alight, revealing.” In order to keep confusion and disbelief at bay, the reader has to trust the story, and so the author must not only be constantly illuminating the reader, but also providing a firm position on which the story can stand. The novel’s “world of experience” must be visible at all times (234-235).

In this way, place and landscape are particularly significant not only as setting, but also as they are used to lend authenticity to a story. When place is fully developed and believable, even if it is merely mentioned in passing it is able to enlighten both character and plot. In fiction, where the reader has already willingly suspended disbelief once, when he or she starts reading, it is especially important that the reader does not find himself doubting the author or the story as he makes his way through the narrative.
In her essay, Welty posits that place is often quietly and unobtrusively working to build the story while other aspects of the story—character, plot, feeling—are “doing a good deal of wing-beating” to cover the same ground (231). Far from saying that place is more important than character or plot, Welty suggests that landscape as a significant aspect of writing is often neglected in favor of the others. She believes that place in fiction can add to good writing three important things: validity in the material, an “achieved world of appearance” through which the writer can speak, and individual worth in the story for the author (232). Place is a device through which the author can use his or her own experience and point of view to direct the story he wants to write. From this place of nonfiction, a writer can branch out to create a work of fiction that is grounded in reality.

Because of the importance of place, we see many writers choosing to return over and over again to the same place in their writing. Here I am primarily concerned with those that return “home,” or to a place in their life that holds both familiarity and significant meaning, using it to lend weight to the stories they choose to tell.

Welty is unsurprisingly known for using landscape as an important aspect of her writing. In Welty’s case, she is not focused on a particular town or community so much as she is using her reflections on Southern culture and Mississippi life to create a sense of realism and authenticity in her work. In one of her best known short stories, “Why I Live at the P.O.,” the details that Welty supplies allow us to put together a picture of China Grove, where Sister and her family live, although the story itself is primarily focused on the interaction of the family. The Southern culture is recognizable through Sister’s voice and the family’s dialogue—“Anybody in the world could of heard you, that had ears”—as well as Welty’s naming of the characters. Sister, Papa-Daddy, Shirley-T: all are handles that call to mind a rural setting and small town
family life. She is also able to reveal in-character that China Grove is woefully under-populated; Sister’s family “are naturally the main people in China Grove” and the post office where she works, which theoretically should cater to a larger area, is still the next to smallest P.O. in the state of Mississippi.

The key to Welty’s use of place in “Why I Live at the P.O.,” as well as in all of her fiction, is not merely that she is able to create a fully realized, fictional setting for her characters, but that it is done with such a light touch that the reader is able to easily identify place without needing excessive detail. It’s is Welty’s familiarity with Mississippi that allows her to build a fictional world that feels effortlessly genuine.

While she is known for writing about the Southern culture Welty is clear to point out that place is not a term that can be associated with “regional” writing, which she describes as a careless term because it disregards the writer individual. In a similar way Timothy Oakes, in his essay “Place and the Paradox of Modernity,” defines place not as a community or region, but rather “a site of both meaningful identity and immediate agency,” separate from regional writing because place is a construct of the individual who is depicting it (Oakes 510).

William Faulkner takes a much more serial approach to place in his work than Welty does, although they are referencing a similar region. He uses the fictional Yoknapatawpha County as the setting for many of his novels and short stories, modeled after the real life Lafayette County in Mississippi where he spent most of his life. Within this construct Faulkner is able to create place that is both authentic to Mississippi life and entirely his own. He generates for Yoknapatawpha County a history and population that are within his power to rearrange as the story calls for it, while still borrowing elements from the history of Mississippi and Lafayette County. As well as painting a vivid picture of life for Yoknapatawpha residents, Faulkner draws
the reader into his creation by referencing real place names and landmarks surrounding the
county. Instead of drawing attention to the fictionalization of Yoknapatawpha County, this serves
to endorse the area as if it is also a real place, providing legitimacy rather than detracting from it.

Faulkner’s use of landscape is not as understated as Eudora Welty’s; by crafting a place that he is able to return to again and again in many different works, he is given more space in which to build the narrative of his fictional county. Through a span of novels and short stories Faulkner details a full history for Yoknapatawpha, a history that depends on both fictitious and non-fictitious events in- and outside the county, as well as an extensive population that crosses over from one story into the next.

John Edgar Wideman does something similar in his own novels and short stories. Although Wideman’s fiction covers a range of characters and places, he often returns to the same places—and sometimes even the same characters—particularly the neighborhood of Homewood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Reading Wideman’s work is often like taking a tour through the streets of Homewood, where he lived for several years as a child. Whether he’s describing his brother’s early life in the neighborhood, fictionalizing his family’s history in Homewood, or contributing an article about basketball to *Sports Illustrated*, something of Homewood resonates through Wideman’s writing, distinct and unfathomable. Each piece adds to the version of Homewood that Wideman has created, which is in his own words both “the actual black community where I was raised, [and] the imaginary landscape I dream up as I go along” (“The Language of Home”).

Wideman does not disguise Homewood by changing its name the way Faulkner does with Yoknapatawpha County. He frequently uses real life events from the neighborhood—as well as his family history—in his fiction. Wideman writes in the article “The Language of
Home” that he has “learned I can say the things I want to say using the words and telling the stories of Homewood people.” These people often include family members whose names go unchanged, or else characters who borrow the names of his family members, or characters who borrow their circumstances. In Wideman’s novel *Hiding Place* he continues the story of Tommy, who first appeared in the collection *Damballah*. Tommy’s story closely resembles that of Wideman’s brother, a tale which Wideman also details in his memoir *Brothers and Keepers*.

This strong attachment to real life place and events does not mean that Wideman’s writing is any less fictional than Faulkner or Welty’s is. In several different interviews and articles, Wideman is quick to point out that there are two versions of Homewood—the real neighborhood and his construct of it. While he is ostensibly writing about Homewood, Wideman is still able to reinvent the neighborhood—changing, adding, or omitting facts when his story calls for it (“Home: An Interview” 454). As Welty said, place is the voice of an individual, not an actual setting—it will always be fiction, because even at its most honest it is still filtered through the author’s perspective.

This dedication to Homewood, its intertwining stories, and the physicality of landscape within the narrative—Homewood as a whole is rarely described, but can instead be pieced together by a map of street names—allows Wideman to show the reader a deeper understanding of place in fiction. Homewood becomes a conglomeration of city streets, family, and a strong sense of the African American community that inhabits it. It is a fully realized picture of a specific community, genuine and meaningful.

It is this same completeness that I have worked to discover in my own writing about my hometown.
Rockne is a dead or dying cow town hidden away in central Texas, a community of 400 German-Catholics, most of them related to me. There isn’t much of a town to see, just a few public buildings off of FM 535, but its borders extend as far as the locals want to claim they do, several miles down the road.

I was born and raised there. My parents and my grandparents were born and raised there. It’s a small community; everyone knows who you are and who your parents are and they’ll love you for it, for just being part of the town, just like them. Plenty of people to spend your time with, if you feel like it. Plenty of places to be alone, too, if you want that. Which I did.

It’s a warm place, Rockne. Very welcoming, very pleasant. It’s also got a reputation of being something of a party town. I suppose that’s true enough—sometimes it seems like it’s more unusual to see someone without a beer in their hand than it is to see them drinking. In a lot of ways it’s a typical Southern small town: lots of good food, hardworking people, long-standing traditions.

And I loved it. As a child, I never once thought it wasn’t the perfect place to live—open spaces, family and friends all in one place. And all of them constantly reminding me how great I was.

I graduated from Bastrop High School fourth in a class of almost five hundred. Bastrop was the next town over, growing larger by the minute, and its school system accommodated the town of Bastrop and the rural communities that surrounded it. It was expected that after graduation I was going on to do great things, and perhaps I was or am or will eventually, but at the time I was sure that I didn’t want to leave.

Rockne was a safe haven and the outside world was perilous for someone who was convinced of their own importance and intelligence and yet too timid to take this confidence out
into a public life. I was a big fish in a small pond—not popular, especially among my own age group, but well thought of. In Rockne, I knew I was someone special. Elsewhere, I was nobody. By watching my older sisters in previous years, I was also certain that leaving home meant never coming back. I could visit, I could stay for years at a time, but I would never be able to return to the same time and place that I had left. I would not be the same person, or Rockne would not be the same town. Leaving meant leaving a part of myself behind.

It was only with the advice of a persistent mentor ringing in my ears that I headed off to college in Denton, Texas, four hours away from my hometown. “You have to get out of here,” she said to me. “Get out of this box you’ve put yourself in. You want to be a writer? Then you have to go. You already know everything here; you have to experience something else.”

At college, with new people and places to explore, I started to view Rockne as the thing that had been holding me back. I came to believe that it was a great place to grow up, but it was a place that had to be left to children and older adults. The in-betweeners, people who were still learning who they were, like me—well, they had to get out. I pitied the friends that I’d left behind, those who chose to stay close to home, who went to Texas State University because it was only an hour away. It seemed obvious to me that they weren’t maturing or moving on, not the way that I was. Not seeing the same things we’d seen all our lives, the same people.

I still thought of Rockne as my home. But the longer I stayed away, the less I seemed to belong there. My friends were happy to see me when I visited, but they were getting along fine without me, and so often I felt out-of-place with them. They liked to drink, to go dancing, hang out in crowds, all of the things that I’d once tolerated in order to be close to them. It started to feel as if I’d never really lived in Rockne at all, and I hated that it had taken so little time for me to get to that point.
A few years passed, and my writing suffered. It also bored me. I didn’t want to write about what I knew, so I wrote about everything else.

Then one of my friends found out she was pregnant. When the shock wore off I thought, well, that’s what happens when you stay in Rockne. I was confused and sad and angry for her, wondering how Amy of all people had ended up with a child at twenty, unmarried, living with her dad again. She’d been my first friend. When others were around we played house or Barbies, but alone we pretended we were in college already and carried around her dad’s old algebra books. We saved damsels in distress together until we became feminists at age seven and decided to save the men instead. Amy was practical, level-headed, smart. So how was it that I was still studying Shakespeare while Amy was learning how to be a parent? It didn’t seem possible that our lives were so different. I blamed the town.

I didn’t know what to say to her or if I should say anything at all, so I started to write—about Amy, about Rockne, about being a kid and then being whatever the hell I am now. When I got stuck I invented a father for her child. In a domino effect, this invention changed the whole piece, as slowly Amy’s character, my narrator, and the town morphed into something new. It was exciting and familiar and, most importantly, it interested me.

And so I started to write more stories that took place in the same world. Somewhere along the way I found out that the more I wrote about my home, the less I was actually writing about Rockne. At first it was strange to go back and read what I’d written and realize that the town that now featured in many of my stories was so similar and yet dissimilar to the town that had raised me.

The struggle has been not only to transfer the concept of Rockne onto paper, but to reconcile the many different versions of it that I have seen over the years into one complete
version. There are times when the childhood love I have for my home cannot be reconciled with the bitterness of my adult life; the viewpoints of an insider and an outsider conflict. At the same time, these different viewpoints can be useful in determining how different characters would approach the world around them.

Using a familiar place to determine landscape in fiction can offer both freedom and limitation. Because it can be so easy to access a memory of home and insert it into fiction, it is likewise just as easy to stay confined to the world of fact.

Wideman appears to have no difficulty with this. In an interview in 1992 he states:

There is a neighborhood in Pittsburgh called Homewood. It was there before I was born and probably when I’m dead it will still be called that. It’s considered a number of streets, houses, population changes—people get old and die. It’s a real place in that sense... The distinction I want to make is that, once I started to write, I was creating a place based partly on memories of the actual place I lived in, and partly on the exigencies or needs of the fiction I was creating. Once I began to write, to create, I felt no compunction to stay within the bounds of Homewood. (“Home: An Interview” 453)

Wideman’s description of the writing process, of using a combination of memory and fiction to build a story, is something that I am familiar with. But Wideman appears to have no trouble distinguishing between the Homewood of his fiction and the Homewood that actually exists.

When I started to write about Rockne, if I did it consciously, I found that it was more difficult to stray from the world I knew than I had expected. And my own feelings about Rockne were so convoluted and confused, half love and half hate, that the conflict of the story started to drown under my own personal conflict.

To solve this, I had to create my own version of the town, my own Yoknapatawpha County.

The first story in this collection, “Under the Surface,” is not explicitly set in any particular town or adjacent to any landmark, but the rural setting is reminiscent of my own
childhood. At a young age, life primarily revolves around the places that are accessible to you. For Ben and Hayden, this narrows their personal landscape to their family, their home, the woods behind it, and the pond nearby. The children are isolated in these areas, left alone to their own devices while the adults in their life are concerned with other matters. While their mother is able to escape when she feels the need, Ben and Hayden are incapable of leaving to pursue other options. Because they live in the country, there is nowhere close enough for them to visit without having an adult drive them. Ben at least is able to occupy his mind with trying to care for his family, but Hayden is left adrift and constantly surrounded by places that remind him of his mother and, eventually, Stella Juarez.

The second story, “Tommy,” is the original offspring of the nonfiction essay I first started when my friend Amy became pregnant. While it stands alone here, a version of this piece has also evolved into the first chapter of the novel I am currently working on, set in the small town of Wildflower, Texas.

Place is an important aspect of this piece, as Wildflower acts not only as a background setting that colors the characters and their speech pattern, but also as a community that acts, reacts, and forces itself into the storyline. In this piece, which has a much broader focus than “Under the Surface,” both location and community insert themselves into the narrative through Les’s perspective. Out of necessity, the town is more developed as a place and character than it was in the previous piece. More so than Ben and Hayden, who view their lives as limited mostly to their home and the area surrounding it, Les has grown old enough that he is able to explore its borders and the people within it. He knows every back road and every name, he knows where everyone lives and he is particularly focused on where everyone dies. In several places Les takes
the reader on a journey through the town, as the characters drive through it, mapping at least part of the physical space of Wildflower.

But this is not just information that Les himself possesses. The other townspeople know Wildflower just as well and often insert themselves into the narrative, gossiping about Tommy, listening to each other in bars, the whole town involved in planning a single wedding. They act as one entity, speak in one voice, and with the exception of Jim Russell, Les’s narration treats them as one body and occasionally allows them to take over the story. Les himself does not appear as a character until a few pages into the piece, content to be both an outside observer and a member of the collective. He even tells Jim Russell’s part of the story as if he was personally there, because at least in part Les buys into the same collective mind he also disdains.

More than any other piece, both “Tommy” and the novel version show an adaptation of Rockne that is most recognizable. The back roads, the dance hall, the local bars, the church and attached cemetery—these are physical places that I am intimately familiar with. More familiar still is the collective unit that is the Wildflower community. While Rockne is usually not as judgmental and gossipy as my fictional town tends to be, the camaraderie and communal dependence are aspects of Rockne that Wildflower has maintained through each draft, from the first to the latest.

This tendency to depict townspeople as a collective We rather than individuals is part of what has led to the third piece of this collection, “Stubborn.” Like Faulkner’s Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* or Hemingway’s Nick Adams, Jim Russell is a character who appears (usually in the background) of several of my stories. Jim is the everyman, the average Wildflower resident. So often the people of Wildflower are grouped together in an vague entity known solely
as “the town.” With Les’s narration, this serves to denote familiarity and relativity in a small town rather than insinuate that “the town” is a single character in itself.

But Jim’s story is that of the individual, one who has troubles of his own that have been simmering while the rest of the town goes on with their lives.

The back roads of Rockne have always held an interest for me. In many ways, I don’t associate the geographical town of Rockne with the church or the local hotspots. Mainly I think of driving in circles with my father on barely-paved roads of which to this day I still recall every curve. He would smoke and drink and I would watch the trees pass and we would never say anything. Or I would drive the roads myself on my way to a friend’s house, in a truck that shook when it went under 45 mph.

My father still drives those roads every day, beer in hand, although he has given up the cigarettes.

In “Stubborn” I wanted to use what I can remember of the back roads of Rockne to create a landscape that is constantly in motion but never changing as Jim contemplates his marriage, a place that is quiet and restful while he is full of turmoil. It is a path that is so well-known to Jim that he doesn’t have to think about what he’s doing as he drives, so that he is able to concentrate on the ways he is disappointed with his life.

“Out of the Valley,” the last story in this collection, can feel a little out of place. All four stories are set in small towns; however, while the earlier stories were focused in similar rural settings and aimed for authenticity, this piece works within a fantasy world that has very few rules and is not defined by any particular area.

There is a lot about the Valley itself that is left out of this piece—no physical markers or clues to its location or region, no Les or Jim to map out a series of back road connections. The
boundary—which is necessary as a means to keep both the town and the main character isolated—is only vaguely alluded to as a red rock wall with an incomprehensible gate.

In writing this piece, it was more important to me that I captured a few moments in time where place stands in indirect opposition to the main character (and by extension, her father). The girl positions herself as the outcast, as being unexceptional even though she is literally the only one of her kind within the Valley. In this mindset, place itself becomes the enemy—both the area within the boundary and the people who populate it. The girl cannot believe that she is destined to live in a place she doesn’t belong. Perhaps more significantly, none of the characters excepting the narrator believe that she is meant to live in the Valley with them.

With this piece I wanted to explore how it feels to grow up in a small town when you don’t belong and there is no escape until you’ve grown. To love your home so much that you hate not to be a part of it. And then when you do escape, as the girl realizes, sometimes you find yourself missing what it felt like to be the outcast. Place itself is less important than how you identify with it.

I rarely embark on a story intending to write about home, but often the stories that I want to tell and the characters I want to introduce can be found there. The landscape of my fiction is constantly evolving as my positions to Rockne allow me to access different viewpoints. As Welty writes, “[t]here must surely be as many ways of seeing a place as there are pairs of eyes to see it” (“Place in Fiction” 243). Far from limiting myself to writing continuously about one place, I am opening as many pairs of eyes as I can to see it.
Works Cited


PART II

ORIGINAL STORIES
Under the Surface

When Ben uncovers the dead woman’s hand with a shout—jumping back so quickly that he nearly falls into the water behind him—Hayden freezes. The grasshopper he’d caught only moments before stretches its legs and springs from his loosened fist, landing scant inches from the woman’s fingers. The nails are short, bitten to the quick like Mom’s are. *What if it’s her?* Hayden thinks, and he tries to scream, to cry, to run away. But he can’t do anything but stare.

He’s been looking for her everywhere: around town, on the news, even in the woods behind their trailer home. Dad told Hayden that their mother had decided to go away for a while, but Hayden didn’t believe it. Something had to have happened. She was sad before she left; she yelled at Dad and threw things. Ben wouldn’t talk about her, but Grams told Hayden that his mother was homesick for places she’d never been and people she’d never love. Grams is always saying crazy things like that. Hayden knows his mother wouldn’t have left of her own accord.

And now they’ve found her body, maybe. Hayden watches as Ben takes a deep breath, wipes his hands on his torn, holey jeans, and steps forward to crouch beside the hand. He reaches over and lightly touches the wrist, brushing the dirt away and grasping at it with two fingers—maybe feeling for a pulse, just like they do on TV. He gags but doesn’t pull his hand away, and the dark scent of damp earth grows stronger as a breeze glance

Ben moves his hand, gliding it up and over the mound as he shakes his head, muttering to himself in a voice too low to hear, gauging the distance from the wrist to whatever he hopes to find. As Hayden struggles to find his own voice, Ben starts to dig a yard from where he started,
gently moving the dirt aside as if he were looking for nothing more than an acorn beneath a stack of leaves.

It takes him a few tries and the widening of his search, but eventually Ben’s fingertips brush skin and he jerks before continuing to sweep the loose dirt from the woman’s face. The sudden movement startles Hayden out of his stupor, not enough to knock the tears out of his eyes but enough for his feet to move. One step, two, three—back to the water, his sneakers squelching in the mud at the edge of the tank as Ben continues to dig. Beneath a layer of mud, her skin is faded and hollow, but smooth. It covers sharp cheekbones, the gentle curve of a defined jaw, a straight but slightly humped nose. Her eyes are closed, dirt clinging to the eyelashes. Even the ants swarming around the tank haven’t touched her yet; she is perfect and—thank God—completely unfamiliar.

Hayden feels the tears fall then, the fear that his mother might be dead—and so close to home—leaving him in a rush. As Ben uncovers the rest of her face, and some of her hair too—long, dark, plastered with mud and spread out around her—Hayden realizes for what seems like the first time that there is someone else’s body in front of him, someone new. Someone who isn’t Mom but who also is no longer breathing.

Ben knows it isn’t her from the moment he uncovers her fingers in his search for bait. But he also knows that Hayden will convince himself that it could be. His little brother doesn’t know any better; Hayden still thinks there is something keeping their mother from them other than herself. But Ben does know better. He knows that Mom never does anything she doesn’t want to; surely that includes dying.
So he uncovers the woman, just enough that they can get a half-decent look at her, but he gets carried away. He keeps sweeping his fingertips across the woman’s skin, darker than his own, and by the time he is satisfied that enough of her is uncovered and turns to tell Hayden that they should go home and call Dad, his brother has fled.

In the days that follow, after being questioned by the police and Dad and Grams (repeatedly), Ben learns that the woman they found was Stella Juarez, from two towns over. The 10 o’clock news—which Dad watches every night as he does the dishes and cleans the mess Grams has made in the living room—paints the picture of Stella’s deadbeat, live-in boyfriend, who grew angry upon learning that Stella was planning to leave him. She was subsequently choked to death in a fit of passion, the boyfriend panicking and leaving her to rot on the bank of random cattle tank Ben knows no one will ever fish at again in his lifetime.

“How’s your brother been?” Dad asks, turning off the TV and slumping next to Ben on the couch, smelling strongly of dish soap. “Has he been sleeping?”

Hayden hasn’t been sleeping, although he pretends when he thinks someone’s looking. Dad buys it, of course. But Ben has never—in his whole life—seen Hayden sleep anywhere but on his stomach. Except for this week. This week Hayden sleeps on his side and keeps his face pointed towards the window, his breathing anything but steady. When Ben peeks over the edge of the top bunk he can see Hayden down below, staring. Waiting for someone to show up behind the glass maybe, a dark outline against the moon’s glow.

The first couple of nights after they found the body, Dad came into their bedroom every hour to check up on them, but then his work schedule caught up with him. Ben knows Dad isn’t going to hover over them. When Mom left he’d worried for weeks the boys were going to break down and cry, and spent as much time as he could trying to make them forget she was gone. But
time isn’t something Dad has much of now. Not with Grams needing to live in a nursing home they can’t afford. Not with working extra hours and Saturdays. August is approaching, and once Ben and Hayden head back to school there will be no one to keep an eye on Grams during the day.

“Dad,” Ben says suddenly, turning to look at his father. “What are we going to do?” But Dad’s eyes are closed, his head tilted back, fast asleep. Ben leaves him there, joining Hayden in their room. As he climbs the ladder to his bunk, he notices that Hayden is lying on his stomach, and he smiles.

Hayden dreams a memory. It is his seventh birthday, a Wednesday, and he wakes up alone in his room. In real life he had stumbled across toys and action figures left scattered over the bedroom floor, but in the dream he glides out the door and into the kitchen without effort. He knows it is a dream, but he can smell the pancakes all the same, a thick and sugary scent that hangs in the air. Mom is singing to herself as she sprinkles chocolate chips into the batter. Dad and Ben like their pancakes with syrup. She only makes chocolate chip pancakes for Hayden, and there is a stack in front of his chair already.

“He’s coming!” Ben whispers, as if Hayden isn’t right in front of him. “He’s coming!” Dad scrambles to light the candle they’d placed in his pancake stack and steps back, grinning. He took off from work for the day—a first. Mom wraps her arms around him from behind and rests her chin on his shoulder. “Happy birthday, Peanut.” Ben beams at Hayden from his seat, ten years old again and happy. Mom begins to sing the birthday song, and Stella Juarez joins in from her seat on the countertop.
She is naked, smeared with mud, swinging her legs in time to the song. Hayden hadn’t known she was naked when they found her, but the cops told him that much, or rather, had told Dad. Clumps of dirt fall from Stella’s hair, mingling with the chocolate chips scattered across the counter. It doesn’t make much difference. Mom never kept the countertop as clean as Dad does now, even on her good days.

The dream continues, the day as Hayden remembers it. Mom makes his birthday a glorious, sunshine-y day. They play cops-and-robbers in the woods; Dad and Ben catch them easily, but Mom has already hidden Ben’s Little League trophy. “You’ll never find it,” she tells Dad. “You can torture us all you want!” And when she laughs, Stella Juarez laughs. She sits next to Hayden’s mother in the grass and leaves and the two women smile at each other.

Then they go home—Dad, Ben, Hayden, and Stella Juarez. They leave Mom playing hide-and-seek in the woods and Dad grills chicken tenders for dinner and Stella Juarez bakes brownies. When Hayden bites into his, it tastes like mud, and he chokes. Stella watches him struggle to breathe, and the last thing he sees are her dead eyes closing, dirt clinging to the eyelashes.

Hayden wakes with his face buried in his pillow, his mouth filled with flannel pillowcase as he gasps for breath.

Ben remembers the first time his mother left because she drove him to Matt Wilhelm’s house for a sleepover and Matty’s big brother told her he’d give her a free beer at the bar in town if she showed up while he was bartending, and she had looked so happy at that Ben thought she should go out more often if it always made her look so beautiful. The next day she picked Ben up from Matt’s, put on a red dress, and told Dad she was going out for girls’ night.
She wasn’t home when Ben got up the next morning, and she wasn’t there to meet them at the end of the lane when the bus dropped them off after school. Ben got worried and dialed the Wilhelms’ number on their old kitchen phone. A man answered, and Ben asked if he knew where his mother was, if he’d seen her. The man laughed and said that he hadn’t.

A few days later Mom showed up looking suntanned. “I was just having some fun,” she told Dad.

“But I called,” Ben said. “I called Matty’s house. His brother said he didn’t see you.”

His mother blushed prettily. A few weeks later, Ben looked up Matt’s phone number and realized he’d switched the last two digits, and he hadn’t spoken to Matt’s brother at all.

Stella Juarez starts entering Hayden’s dreams most nights. Almost always she lingers in the background, occasionally joining him to help defeat his foes or when he has to take a difficult math test he’s forgotten to study for. She never speaks in these dreams, but sometimes she laughs.

Some nights Hayden dreams of things that have happened before, and one night he dreams of his eighth birthday, not long after Grandpa died. Grams has come to live with them, and they’ve realized that the old woman is a bit crazy. Dad says she’s just getting old, and she’s having trouble remembering things. Like the fact Hayden’s a boy. Or that Grandpa’s dead.

Stella Juarez is lying on the couch when Hayden walks into the living room. “Happy birthday, Peanut,” she says in Mom’s voice, and she pushes herself up onto her elbows. “What do you want to do today?”

Ben is eating cereal at the table, reading, and he glances up at her like he’s surprised she’s moving. Milk drips down his chin, which he brushes away absently.
“Can we play cops-and-robbers again?” Hayden asks, and Stella frowns at him.

“We play that all the time,” she says, although they haven’t played in months. “Besides, I think I’m going to town today. I can’t stay cooped up in this house any longer, now, can I?” Hayden nods, ashamed, and Ben looks down at his book again, eyebrows raised. He looks a lot like Dad.

Even in dreams, Hayden’s life moves slowly. He and Ben play a few games of Battleship, watch cartoons and The Price is Right with Grams, and wait for Dad to get home from work. For lunch Ben makes instant macaroni and cheese, handing a bowl to Hayden and coaxing Grams to try some. She’d been fine most of the morning, but now she’s acting like she’s six, pouting in her recliner.

Stella Juarez brushes through the kitchen in Mom’s favorite red dress, much too fancy for a Monday afternoon. “I’ll be back later, Peanut,” she says to Hayden, and Ben frowns from his seat on the couch. “Have fun.”

Ben stands. “Where are you going, Mom?” he asks, sounding much older than eleven. “You—you should stay here. Today.”

“You sound just like your father, Ben,” Stella scoffs. “I’ll be back later. I promise.”

But she won’t be back later, Hayden thinks, waking up in his bedroom. She’ll be dead later, and we’ll never see her again.

In the morning, his brother asks Ben if he’s ever dreamed something that’s happened before.

“Like a recurring dream?” Ben asks, setting a plate of scrambled eggs with ketchup in front of Grams, who thanks him. Ben usually eats cereal for breakfast and lets Hayden get
whatever he wants, but Grams has been lucid for days and he’s so grateful he decided to cook.

“Yeah, I’ve had those. When I was little I used to dream about being a Power Ranger. I still have that one sometimes.” He shakes his head. “Weird.”

“No, that’s not—” His little brother digs into his eggs. “Never mind.”

When Hayden goes outside to play, Ben watches him from the window to make sure he heads into the woods, and not in the direction of the tank where they found Stella Juarez. Hayden had been mumbling in his sleep last night, for the first time in months. And yesterday, for the first time since she left, the phone rang and Hayden didn’t ask if it was their mother.

“Hayden’s birthday is coming up, Grams,” he says, closing the blinds against the bright summer sun. “Do you know how to bake a cake?”

“Of course, Danny,” she answers, calling him by his father’s name. Ben’s used to it.

“What kind did you want to make?” She rises from the table to rinse her plate.

“Yellow. With chocolate icing.” Mom always said that was the only kind of cake worth having. Their father liked German Chocolate, but Hayden likes yellow cake. “We can ask Dad to buy what you need at the store this weekend.” He sends up a prayer that Grams will be herself on Hayden’s birthday. Ben sure as hell doesn’t know how to make a cake, and he wants Hayden’s birthday to be a good one. For all of them.

Grams turns from the sink, the dishtowel forgotten in her hands. “I wish that wife of yours was here, Danny. She was always so full of life. Hayden needs someone like that. He’s been so down in the mouth lately.”

“I wish she was here, too,” he says, and sighs. “Come on, Grams. The Price is Right is about to start. You don’t want to miss that.”
The night before his birthday, Hayden can’t sleep. Shallow, even breathing can be heard from the top bunk and he knows that Ben’s asleep, so he sits up in his bed and leans against the wall, using his sleeve to wipe the tears from his cheeks. Ben’s been watching him closely these last few weeks. Too close. Even Grams has been trying to think of fun things for Hayden to do, to keep his mind occupied. But Hayden can’t figure out what he’s supposed to be doing. Everyone else has a job to do. Dad’s always at work. Ben tries to take care of Grams and Hayden. Grams is… well, she keeps herself distracted. What’s Hayden supposed to do with his days?

He thought she’d be back by now. She’d left before, but she always came back after a week or so. And really, the months leading up to her disappearances were always worse than when she was gone, when she alternated between lying on the couch complaining of boredom and getting angry at Dad or Ben—almost never Hayden—for things beyond their control. It was bad when Grams came, and someone had to take care of her while Dad was at work. Mom hated it.

But when she wasn’t bored, or angry, or gone—she was amazing. Fun and funny and beautiful and exciting. Hayden loved her. He loves her. When she’s around, the world is more colorful.

But for now his days are gray, and his nights belong to Stella Juarez. Well. Tonight she won’t get to him. Tomorrow is his birthday, and he won’t waste it thinking about how Stella Juarez has intruded upon all of his memories. He’ll stay up all night if he has to.

And so he does. Or he tries. Once the tears dry and he hears Dad go to bed after settling Grams for the night, he starts to grow sleepy. There are times when he thinks his eyes are open, but then suddenly he realizes that they are not. He doesn’t allow his head to fall forward onto his
bent knees, but he realizes he’s using the wall behind him as a pillow and attempts to sit up straighter.

“It’s going to be harder than I thought,” he whispers, jerking himself awake once more.

And that’s when he sees her, outside the window, pale in the faint moonlight, dark hair obscuring part of her face as she peers at him through the window, hands cupped around her eyes.

He screams, and the whole bunk shudders as Ben jerks away. “Hayden, what—”

Their door is thrust open and Dad rushes into the room, rumpled and exhausted but fully alert. “What is it? Hayden, what happened?”

Ben leans over the edge of the bunk so far he almost falls. “Was it another nightmare?”

Dad frowns, sitting on the bottom bunk next to his youngest. “Another?” he asks.

“No, no!” Hayden sobs. “No, I’m awake. I was awake. This time. She’s here.” He points to the window but its empty, dark. The only thing that can be seen in it is the shadow of Dad’s truck, looming in the driveway. “She was there!”

“Hayden,” Dad says, pulling the boy onto his lap. “Hayden, please, calm down. Who was there?”

And Ben, with an odd tone in his voice, starts to ask a question of his own: “Was it..?”

Hayden can feel himself shaking in his father’s arms as he calls the image to mind again. “Stella Juarez,” he says. “Why is she here? I wasn’t asleep. I wasn’t.” With a sob he buries his face into his father’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Dad says, and hushes him, keeping his arms wrapped around the boy. “She’s not here. Hayden, she can’t hurt you.”
Ben is making chocolate chip pancakes for Hayden the next morning—or trying to—when the screen door opens and his mother enters, an overflowing duffel bag in hand. “Hi,” she says simply. “Ben.” Her hair is dark around her face, long and full and freshly trimmed in the latest style.

He really had thought maybe this time she wouldn’t come back. After four months—almost five—he thought they’d move on, get Grams the help she needed, go back to normal lives. “Hi—Mom.”

She looks around and holds up a gift bag he hadn’t seen yet. “Where’s Peanut? I brought him a surprise.”

It will be a surprise, Ben thinks, and glances down the hall. “He’s still in bed.” In Dad’s bed, to be exact. It had taken them an hour to calm Hayden down, and eventually Dad had sent Ben back to his room.

“And your dad?” She smiles sheepishly, the way she always did when she knew she was going to get away with something she shouldn’t have done.

“He’s at work.”

She laughs, a bright and unfamiliar sound. “It’s Saturday, Ben.” Like he was the silly one.

“Yeah,” he says. “Dad’s at work.” He flips a singed pancake and looks at her, wishing he could tell her all of the things that went wrong when she left. Like Hayden crying in his sleep. Or Dad working all the time to get Grams in a nursing home before school starts. Or even finding Stella Juarez, who Ben knows shows up in Hayden’s dreams because she’s in his, too.

And he wishes he could tell his mother that they were better off without her, because if she isn’t going to stay put then she needs to stay gone.
But he knows saying it won’t make a difference; they’ve never known how to talk to each other. Mom will laugh, and Ben will frown, and she’ll look at him fondly like he’s still a small child. He’s too much like Dad, he guesses, and Mom has never known what to say to the man who knocked her up and married her at nineteen. So he says, “Don’t go in your room yet. Hayden’s sleeping in there.”

He serves her pancakes that smell and probably taste of burnt chocolate, but before she takes a bite the bedroom door creaks open and Hayden stands in front of them in his TNMT pajamas, looking younger than a nine-year-old should.

“Happy birthday, Peanut,” his mother says softly, smiling at him.

* * *

* * *
Tommy

Tommy’s death swept through the town of Wildflower like a dust storm, clinging in all the cracks, snaking through the screen doors, lingering in the air, coating everyone in a sticky grime.

I heard Tommy was drunk, they say. Yeah, well I heard he’s been drunk most of the last year, since his daddy kicked the bucket. Nah, he’s just been taking care of the Lawson girl; they’ve been living in that trailer by her daddy’s house. His mama’s gonna be so sad, with both her men gone. I heard he’d been with another girl. That’s just crazy, Tommy ain’t had eyes for anyone but Jamie since the tenth grade. Well, I heard he was with another girl. So? I heard he was drunk; it wouldn’t be the first time, of course. I bet he was speeding; Tommy was always speeding around in that tiny car of his.

It’s a shame, they say, a rotten shame. That girl pregnant and unmarried, and little Tommy Morgan dead? I remember when he was just a boy, the sweetest boy you ever saw. You remember when he kissed Miss Martha Bradley in the church? She was so pleased, God rest her soul. Such a shame, such a shame. I heard he was drunk, and he was probably on drugs, too.

They want to believe it’s his own fault, because if that’s so then they don’t have to grieve so hard.

Tommy’s daddy died last year. He wasn’t young but he was too young for that. They found him face up in the brown summer grass, an ax at his side and a felled young lacey oak lying next to him, its baby branches sheltering his face from the harmful rays.
Some said heart attack, others heat stroke. A few people said brain aneurism, but who were they to know? Someone in the back of the bar said that Tommy’s daddy cursed God and that God cursed back and left Cliff Morgan lying by that dead oak tree, but they were shushed pretty quick.

Jim Russell saw Tommy’s daddy as he was driving down the old Wilhelm road, his rusty brown truck kicking up dust as he finished his last cigarette—this is my last one, I swear, then I’ll quit for Denise’s sake—and flicked it out the window. He watched it fall to the side of the road, right up next to the Morgans’ fence line. Jim didn’t need to keep his eyes on the road, he’d driven it so many times with so many last-cigarettes, so he didn’t hurry to lift his eyes from this one, and that’s when he saw a flash of white from Cliff’s undershirt. Jim pulled his truck over to the side of the road and turned off the ignition, but it was too quiet against the stillness of the woods, so he turned the key again and left it rumbling in the background.

Cliff Morgan’s face was tangled amongst the branches of the fallen oak and turned away from Jim, who patted absently at his empty shirt pocket for another comforting last-cigarette. A young mockingbird balanced on Cliff’s chest, cocking his head at Jim in its provocative bird-manner. It hopped down Cliff’s chest and pecked at the zipper of his jeans. When Jim shifted his weight forward to check on the fallen man, the bird flew up and away, clearing the grove of its last living occupant, excepting Jim.

Jim Russell was forty if he was a day, but the stillness of the oak and the quiet of the woods sent him straight back to his pickup, back up the dusty country road, to the shelter of his father-in-law’s place by the highway, where he found a phone and called for an ambulance.

In the evening, Jim’s foot was hitched up on the bottom rung of the nearest barstool and he was describing the sunset that day like it was a picture on a calendar or something, making it
sound like Tommy’s dad was lifted into the sun on a cloud. Jim Russell is a poet, dirty fingernails and all, and when he stood in the old bar at Henry’s and told the grieving population of Wildflower about how he found Cliff, he was a hero, too. He’s short and compact, grizzled and mean as a bull when he wants to be, but that night he stood tall, sad, and proud. Imagine Mr. Morgan lying cold and alone in the failing summer sunlight. Imagine Roberta Morgan calling her husband’s name into the dusk. Imagine Tommy finding his father lying under the oak in the darkest of country nights.

Tommy’s daddy died last year; he wasn’t young but he was too young for that. Tommy took it pretty hard, so when he got in that wreck everyone just assumed he’d been drinking again.

Jamie Lawson and I used to play college in her backyard. A couple of old evergreen trees against the barn served as our school, and we’d hole up between the branches and the wall with her daddy’s old calculus books and pretend to study. Sometimes we’d play house there, and I’d pretend Jamie was my wife, that her dog was our child. I told her I was the man of the house, and she told me to shut up, she was studying to be a doctor.

Now Jamie’s finishing as many courses as she can before the baby comes, driving over an hour every day to the new community college in Austin, and then she’ll keep working that same job she’s had since high school, behind the stale wood counter of the bank in Quaxia, counting other people’s money for a living. She should have gotten out of Wildflower, that’s what she should have done. Instead she kept getting sucked back in, and now she’s pregnant and living alone with her daddy, without even Tommy to show for it.

Tommy could’ve stayed in Wildflower. Tommy was always the darling of the town, even when he was tearing through it like he couldn’t wait to rip it apart, Jamie and I as close on his
heels as we could get. “You be the Sundance Kid,” he’d say to me. “I’ll be Butch.” Tommy’s
daddy loved that movie, before they found him beside the oak tree.

“How don’t I ever get to be Butch?” I’d ask.

“Let it go, kid. I’m Butch. Let’s go find Jamie and rob something.”

He kept it up, too, when Jamie was working as a teller during high school. “Hey,
sweetheart. give me all your money. ‘I got vision, and the rest of the world wears bifocals.’ Give
me all your money.” Then they’d kiss over the counter, her long dark hair brushing the worn,
polished wood, and the people sweating in line would boo.

When they were finished, Jamie would smile at me—a shy, conspiratorial smile for third-
wheels and old playmates—and the dimple in her left cheek would blossom. “Hey, Les. You
here for a deposit?”

And I’d smile back. “Hi, Jamie. Nah, we’re just here to see you.”

Nothing was the same once they got engaged. Time was we were inseparable, the three of
us, and even when Tommy joined the baseball team in town Jamie would show up to watch him
practice, and I would show up to keep Jamie company, and we’d all drive home together in
Tommy’s silver car. On weekends Tommy and I would sneak a few cans of beer out of my
father’s cooler, hightail it across the pasture to Jamie’s house, jump into Mr. Lawson’s old Ford,
and just drive. We’d take the loop, down the highway past Tommy’s house to the old Wilhelm
Road, past the oak grove where Jim Russell would find Cliff Morgan, through a series of back-
road connections until we hit the highway again. Sometimes Jamie would invite one of her
girlfriends along, someone from school she thought I’d really hit it off with, but more often I’d
beg off and it’d just be the three of us, Tommy and me taking turns driving and Jamie always in
the middle, flicking at the radio dials and laughing at the things Tommy said. Jamie had the prettiest laugh.

But one Friday night Jamie had a meeting at the bank in town so Tommy and I went alone in his car, ending up at the dance hall on Hellums Hill. Wildflower held wedding receptions and Christmas parties at the Hill, but lately it’d been dull in town; the floor was slick without the sawdust they scattered over the floor on dance nights. Tommy and I pulled at the loose door until it opened—we’d been sneaking in for years—and lit the camping lantern he’d brought. Shoving his fists in his jean pockets, Tommy looked around the hall like he was seeing it for the first time, sizing it with his eyes, counting the ceiling fans.

He turned back to me. “I’ve got something to tell you,” he grinned, hanging his head, looking as sheepish and innocent as he had when we’d first met in Sunday school.

I waited.

“I’m going to ask Jamie to marry me. Picked up the ring yesterday and everything.” Then he looked up at me, pulling his right hand of his pocket like he was preparing for a handshake or a high five or something. I held off, trying to think of something, anything to say to my friend of ten years.

“That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard.”

Tommy’s eyes flicked downward, the way they did when he was surprised or angry. He pulled back and frowned, shaking his head. “Not the reaction I was expecting.” His hand reaching up and flicked the bill of my cap. “Stop joking, kid, I’m being serious.”

“Well, stop it,” I pushed his hand away. “You can’t just get married, Tommy. That’s not the way it’s supposed to work.”
“I wasn’t planning on ‘just’ doing anything,” he scowled as he shoved the offending hand back into his pocket. “What the hell is wrong with you? Les, I had this crazy idea that you’d be happy for me—for us.”

“Yeah, crazy,” I agreed, bobbing my head like a crazy person myself, “crazy, that’s you. People don’t get married straight out of high school.”

He laughed. “Everyone gets married straight out of high school; this is Wildflower. And it’s Jamie—”

“You can’t just get married, Tommy! People change after high school. You shouldn’t—”

“Who’s changing?” he asked.

I raised my voice. “You shouldn’t assume that you’re both going to change into people who want to be together. You don’t know that Jamie is always going to want you.”

“That’s why I was going to ask, you dumb shit.” Reeling around, he lashed out at a folding chair left over from the Wagner wedding and watched it skitter across the floor. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked again, his voice even.

“I—you can’t—just—” I scraped my jacket across my face. Tried to make all of this make sense. “This isn’t right. It’s just not right, Tommy.”

I heard him take a deep breath, and when I looked up he was nodding and looking around. Like he was crazy too. “Let’s get out of here, kid. I’ll take you home.”

We took the short route, up Wilhelm Road to the highway, past Tommy’s house and up the lane to mine. Tommy stopped in the driveway and looked at me but I turned away, staring across the pasture to Jamie’s house; there was a light on in her room.

“Please don’t marry Jamie.”
I heard the cloth of his jacket scratch as he shook his head. “That’s up to Jamie, but I’m sure as hell going to do everything I can to make it happen—I was going to ask you to be my best man, if she said yes.”

If she said yes—if Tommy and Jamie were getting married—I yanked on the door handle and peeled out, quick as I could, marching towards the house. Tommy called out to me, yelled my name through his open window.

I spun around. “Fuck you.” I near about choked on the words, but Tommy heard me all the same. His face set, he switched gears and sped out of the driveway, spitting gravel as he went.

Those weren’t my last words to Tommy, but they were pretty close.

Within hours of the asking it seemed like everyone knew about the engagement. If it had been anyone else but Tommy—like, me and Jamie, for example—the town would have shut itself down and participated in mass judgment or a prayer meeting, spreading the news and their opinions on it in one collected breath. They would have quirked their lemonade smiles, sweet and sour and cold as ice, and sent disapproving glances over the tops of their bibles and their beers.

But it was Tommy, and better yet it was Tommy and Jamie, so instead the entire town set to planning the wedding of the two sweetest kids who ever came out of Wildflower, Texas. Father Matthew cleared every Saturday for the next two years and the ladies at the bakery began debating the pros and cons of chocolate covered strawberries. Miss Helen from the hill offered her entire garden for the floral bouquets, and her brother Jake said he would build them a nest for cheap. On the hill, the Hellums started gathering sawdust for their wedding dance.
The night that Tommy died my eyes opened to the unfamiliar but recognizable screech of metal against barbed wire. The sound was light and dull, piercing enough to wake the neighbors and pull me out of dreaming, but nobody got out of bed until the squeal of a car door against Dad’s pipe fence sounded, a scraping crunch as the vehicle hit the rigid corner post, hard.

The closest neighbors rushed to their front patios and peered into the silvery darkness, but they were too far away and could only make out headlights flickering over the dry Texas grass. Only Jamie’s daddy and I were close enough to see Tommy’s car down by the road, and I couldn’t see Mr. Lawson’s face from a quarter-mile away, but I bet it looked like mine.

“Call 911,” Daddy told Mom, and he and I took off down the lane, my father at a fast jog, me at a sprint. We could see Mr. Lawson cutting across the pasture, could hear him yelling at Jamie to stay in the house.

Daddy and I had to take the long way, across the cattle-guard and through the ditch, down the silver pipe fence I painted every year to the corner post Tommy had crashed into, right next to the Lawsons’ lane. Jamie’s dad beat us there, slipping through the barrier and wrenching open the passenger-side door, since Tommy’s side was still cinched up against Daddy’s pipe fence.

“Tommy. You alright son? You alright, Tommy?” He was still bent over in the doorway when I skidded to a halt, my father not far behind. I asked Mr. Lawson if Tommy was okay, but he didn’t answer.

“Ambulance should be on its way, Bill,” Daddy said in his calm voice, not even panting hard like I was. I turned to look at him and he lifted his head, squinting through the darkness and the dust. “Bill—Bill, your girl’s coming. She’s coming across the pasture.”

Bill Lawson backed up, lifting his head from the car. “It’s—Jamie, honey, please go back inside.”
But Jamie kept coming.

And I swear, I didn’t think it then—about how Jamie was going to be left alone with the baby, and how she’d need someone with her for support, and maybe that support could be someone like me, someone who’d been her friend forever and who loved her more than he loved anyone or anything in the whole world. I didn’t think about playing house beneath the trees or the way her smile left me warm and cold at the same time, like I’d just been sipping on scotch. I swear to God I didn’t think it then, not with my best friend still warm with the life that had left him. I was too busy thinking about Tommy, and the demise of Butch Cassidy, and who was going to tell Tommy’s mother that her son had gone the way of her husband, dead on the side of the road.

But I thought it later. Just for a second, but there it was.

And that’s when I knew I had to get out of Wildflower.

*   *   *
When Jim Russell walked into the general store the attendant set a pack of Marlboros on the polished wooden counter before Jim had even closed the door behind his son. It made Jim a little angry, thinking about what Denise would say. Which made him even more angry; he hated when she inserted herself as the voice in his head. *You promised,* it said, even though he hadn’t done any such thing. But he didn’t say anything about it to the attendant, just told him to ring up a six-pack of Pearl Light, a Coke, and a package of Target candy cigarettes as well, at his son’s insistence, and the Russells returned to their evening drive.

Jim followed the country highway for a few miles before turning onto Old Watterson Road, a thin paved road that would lead him to another, which would lead him to another, until he eventually got lost or found his way back to the highway again. But Jim would never get lost. The roads he and Little Jimmy would be driving tonight—roads that Jim Russell had been driving for over twenty years now—criss-crossed and curved through their deserted farm town, around the outskirts, through the middle. All of them different and yet the same—some were paved, others dirt or gravel, some surrounded by heavy oak woods, some sparse.

But mostly the roads were all the same, roads to get you from point A to point B, roads to take you home again and to send you off to work. Unless you were Jim Russell and you did both of those things but you also just drove, aimless, made the loop over and over again, seats of his truck smelling like the cologne he’d used for ten years and the cigarettes he’d smoked for twenty.

“Do you think we’ll see any deer, Dad?” Little Jimmy asked, fiddling with an old pair of binoculars Jim kept in his glove compartment year-round. He’d told the boy a hundred times
how to adjust them so he could see clearly but his son—eight-years-old and lacking common
sense—had never been able to get it right, or else he just needed something to do with his hands
as they drove, often in silence.

“Sure we will,” Jim answered, flicking ash off the end of his cigarette with a practiced
motion, letting it fall out of the open window. “Saw eighteen the other night.”

The boy’s hands tightened on the binoculars. “I bet we see twice that many tonight, huh,
Dad? Two heads are better than one. Right?” Jim shrugged and took another drag. He never
refused when Little Jimmy asked to join him on his nightly drive, but he never asked him to
come along either.

Denise wouldn’t be happy to know Jimmy had joined him again, but she’d still been at
work when Jim was ready for his drive and there was no one to tell the kid that his homework
wasn’t done or dinner would be ready soon. Jim rolled down the windows to let the cool October
air wash over them, but they’d still return smelling of cigarettes and Denise would blow her top,
pull out all the brochures she’d been stockpiling over the last few months, throw them in Jim’s
face—after their son had gone to bed, of course. Couldn’t let the kid see her being anything but
perfect.

True enough, she was a great mom. She was always taking care of somebody, even
before they’d had Jimmy. It was her upbringing, the eldest of six kids; she said she didn’t know
what to do when there wasn’t anyone around to bandage or feed or give advice to. Well, she
called it giving advice. Jim mostly called it meddling. Sometimes he called it just plain annoying.
Use to be a joke, him teasing her, pinching her sides, calling her “Mom.” It was a term of
endearment when they’d first had Little Jimmy. Wasn’t sure when he stopped finding it funny.
The crack of a distant rifle echoed through the trees as Jim turned onto a new road, ignoring the graffitied stop sign to his right. “What was that, Dad?” Little Jimmy sounded even smaller than usual. “Didja hear that noise, Dad?”

Jim exhaled into the cab. “Target practice,” he said as the smoke fled through the open windows. “Someone shooting, you’ve heard it before. Sound carries this time of year.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jimmy said, relieved and sheepish. His father stifled a sigh by taking a swallow of his beer. His son looked like a puppy caught wetting the carpet, slumped down in his seat, eyes twitching this way and that as he and Jim heard another shot, empty, hollow, resonant. The boy’d jump at his own shadow, Jim thought. Hard to think, between him and Denise, how they’d produced a kid like that. Denise had never been scared of anything when she was young. He’d known that the moment they met outside the dance hall in town and she asked for a cigarette, even though he was her cousin’s boyfriend and a local troublemaker.

Later Jim would ask her if she’d ever smoked before that moment, and she said no, but she’d always wanted to try it and she needed an excuse to leave the dance for a few minutes. He watched her take the cigarette in hand, lit it for her, bending over so that his face and hers were close, too close, but she didn’t pull away. She’d been studying the art of smoking, she would tell him, which is how she managed not to look completely foolish as she took her first drag. Carefully exhaled. They engaged in idle chatter.

He’d felt the need to introduce himself, show off for her—ridiculous. Town this small, they’d known each other for years, by sight and by name if not personally. She probably knew about all the stupid things he’d done, reason enough not to speak to him. But he didn’t know enough about her—the texture of her hair, thick and curly, the weight of it; the length of each finger as she held a smoldering cigarette. The curves of her body he recognized, recalled seeing
her in church or at school or in photographs, heard again the comments he’d made to his friends about those curves. But seeing her up close, talking to her, something strange hit him—he could spend the rest of his life with this girl standing in front of him. Going on sixteen years now he’d done just that.

Then she went and decided to change things.

“Look, Dad,” Jimmy whispered. “Dad, look! I see one. There! See it?”

They were driving by the Wilhelm place, land that no one lived on anymore but it looked like Joe Wilhelm had set up a feeder at the edge of the clearing. And there she was, beautiful and not. Scruffy, well-fed, calm as she chewed her dried corn and watched them pass. Jim slowed the truck and then stopped it completely; there was no one around to get angry that they were blocking the road. The doe’s head and neck were oddly small atop her body. Her tail was matted and her coat ruffled from trekking through the short but dense oaks surrounding the feeder. Legs and head a lighter brown than her back, but her eyes were impossibly dark.

Little Jimmy lifted his binoculars slowly to peer at her, and Jim wondered how well she could see them. Was she even interested in them or just cautious? Acting as if she was unconcerned but maybe her heart was beating fast, thinking that they could lift a gun as easily and as quickly as they could lift binoculars. Did she know what a gun looked like? No one around here would shoot at a doe, nothing to show for it—perhaps, had she seen what happened to others of her kind?

“No horns, Dad,” Jimmy said, dropping his hands but keeping his eyes fixed upon the still animal. Jim nodded, shifting back into Drive and lifting his foot from the brake. At the edge of his vision Jim could see his son lifting a candy cigarette to his lips just as Jim lifted the real thing to his.
When Little Jimmy had been born Jim wanted to name him Matthew, but Jim’s mother—the boy’s grandmother—decided that her son needed a namesake and somehow Denise got it into her head that it was a good idea—not even calling him James, but sticking him with “Jim,” a middle-aged name, a name that barely fit an eight-year-old, much less an infant. Jim said, at least let’s call him something else so we don’t get confused, so they settled on calling him Matthew, which became his middle name. Except the town didn’t pay attention to what they wanted and neither would Jim’s mother. Everyone started calling the babe “little Jimmy Junior” and soon the name stuck, not just in their minds but in Jim and Denise’s too. Little Jimmy wouldn’t answer if you called him Matthew. Never even fought against everyone calling him “little” all the time, the way his father would have done.

So Jim got his namesake, even if he hadn’t wanted it to begin with, just wanted a son he could play ball with. Took a few tries—Denise had two miscarriages before Jimmy was born and for a few years Jim didn’t even think about playing sports with him, just happy the kid was healthy. But then he found out that Little Jimmy couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn if he was standing ten feet in front of it, not with a baseball or a football or even the damned soccer ball Jim bought him, thinking that maybe the boy’d be better with his feet than he was with his hands.

Still, the boy laughed at all of Jim’s jokes and made good grades. He liked to read; Denise always said that like it was good thing. And he was a hell of a lot of fun to play cards with—seemed like the only time the kid could keep a straight face was when Jim taught him to gamble. He also knew that when Dad was thinking it was best if little boys stayed quiet and drank their Cokes and ate their candy cigarettes.

Jim watched his son suck on the candy as they drove, sneaking glances at him while Jimmy was preoccupied with counting the deer they spotted—eight so far. The thing about candy
cigarettes was that you could pretend like you were really smoking them if you knew what to do, the white, chalky sticks dotted with red dye at the tip to show you which side was lit. Jim had done the same thing when he was a kid, driving around with his dad. If you took a very, very small bite and chewed it up without getting too much saliva in it, you could essentially pretend you were blowing smoke, the chalk puffing from your lips in bursts, although it wasn’t like any smoke Jim had ever seen. Little Jimmy had wrestled the plastic-wrapped package open with much difficulty when they’d begun the drive, practically swallowing the first piece of candy in his haste, but as Jim watched he savored the second and the third, cradling them between his first and second finger, stretching his arm out of the window and gently flicking at the stick, occasionally casting glances at his father to make sure he was doing it right. In those moments, Jim made sure he had something to see—the proper hold, smooth exhale, casual yet calculated every time. He’d show the kid how it was done. They’d played this game before, he and Jimmy. It usually made him laugh to see his son choke on the sugar he inhaled by accident.

Except not tonight. Didn’t feel much like laughing tonight—hadn’t felt like laughing for a few days now, or maybe a few months longer than that. Denise’s brother Ronnie had gotten sick, that’s when things had gone bad, he thought. Cancer, but it wasn’t even lung cancer, just bladder cancer. Except the doctor asked Ronnie if he smoked, said that smokers got it more often than non-smokers, and damn it all if that hadn’t been enough for Denise to increase her efforts to get Jim to quit. She’d been after him for ages about it and for the last year had been particularly intense, refusing to wash clothes that stunk of cigarettes, bringing home brochures she picked up at the doctor’s office when she accompanied Ronnie to his appointments. She asked Jim what they were supposed to do if he died, told him she didn’t want him smoking around Little Jimmy, let him know every day in some small or big way that she didn’t approve of this part of his
lifestyle. Although, Jim thought, she hadn’t disapproved of it when she was bumming a cigarette from him when they were nineteen. Or when she married him at twenty-three. Or at twenty-eight, after their second miscarriage, when he was going through two packs a day and driving the back roads for hours at a time.

Little Jimmy called out the tenth sighting of the night, a young six-point who looked like he wouldn’t last the winter. The deer looked sickly and Jim wondered if maybe there wasn’t something going around, though he didn’t say anything to Jimmy about it as they turned onto Hannah Lane, which would lead them back out to the main road and home again.

The trees on Hannah Lane were larger than most, huge oaks that formed canopies above the cracked pavement. There were no pastures here, no fences to keep anything in or out, and the darkness between branches stretched out to brush against the pair as they gazed out their respective windows.

Jim could taste the hour on the breeze. Soon it would be too late to spot any more deer. Didn’t matter. He wasn’t looking anyway.

It was a few nights past when he and Denise had been lying in bed, still naked from the only sex they’d had in weeks, but after they were arguing again in loud whispers. Denise had been nagging him a lot lately, but she was past being worried. Now she was flat out angry and she’d let him know it.

In the driver’s seat Jim lit another cigarette, the last having been put out and abandoned a mile back, flicked out the window into weeds that grew thick along the side of the road. He hadn’t meant to have more than a few tonight, but the thought of Denise made him light another. The recollection of her bare body reminded him that she wasn’t quite the same woman he had
married, curves a bit softer than they’d been at nineteen, hips wider. Flesh that was no longer
tanned or taut but had always been beside him on their bed, warm and comforting.

He knew what she said about his smoking habit, what the doctor’s brochures said. Did
she think he didn’t know any of those things? Didn’t believe it all, of course. No one he knew
had ever died of smoking. Supposed to be dangerous but there was danger in everything. Her
brother Ronnie had never smoked a day in his life and look at him now. Life was scary. You
couldn’t let it stop you from doing things, couldn’t be a coward about it. Jim knew what it was to
be a man.

Last week one of the lifts that the highway department used broke and the man who’d
been in the lift—trimming branches so they wouldn’t get tangled in electrical lines—well, he’d
fallen thirty feet. Broken a leg and both his arms. Lucky he didn’t break his neck, his partner
said. Lucky the lift hadn’t fallen on top of him and sealed the deal. But did Jim let that get in the
way of his own work? Hell no. He’d been trimming branches the next day, on a machine of the
same model.

“Accidents happen,” Denise had said when he pointed this out, and she’d pulled the sheet
up over her breasts, shivering. “I know that. We protect against them the best that we can. But
this habit of yours, it isn’t an accident. And to tell you the truth, I think it’s a lot easier to protect
someone from faulty machinery than it is to protect them from themselves.” And she’d turned
her back on him.

“You’re trying to protect me?” he’d laughed. She didn’t answer.

But before they fell asleep, she flipped back around and lifted herself up by her elbows,
eyes looking oddly bright in the shine from the night light in their bathroom. “If you won’t quit
for yourself,” she said, “then I’ll make you quit.”
Jim huffed, half asleep already. “How?”

She moved her legs under the covers, thinking. “I don’t know yet,” she admitted, and he grinned.

“Well, sweetheart, you let me know when you figure it out.” He felt her stir, irritated at his words.

Jim had closed his eyes then, intending to drift off, but then he felt her hand on his face, stroking his hair at the temples. He opened his eyes and looked at his wife. The shadows on her face made her look older as she started down at him. “If you don’t quit,” she said softly, “I’ll leave you.”

There was something oddly calm about the way the words had left her mouth, because of course she believed that was all there was to it. There it was—ultimatum in place, let’s see how he takes it.

But Jim hadn’t taken it at all. He’d just let it sit there between them, her demand flopped on the bedspread, waiting to be picked up and embraced or thrown away. Jim didn’t say anything, didn’t tell her not to leave, didn’t yell at her for threatening such a thing. Didn’t know what to say to her anymore. Hadn’t known what to say ever since, for three days now, so he didn’t say anything.

Jim knew he could quit if he wanted to, he thought, glancing over at Jimmy in the passenger seat. Knew he didn’t want her to leave, didn’t want to lose her or the kid. But Jim was angry. He’d never been so angry in his life. The feeling suffocated him, forced him to leave the house each night and just drive, but he couldn’t escape it. Why would she say something like that, throw their life away for a few lousy cigarettes? Damn her for making him choose. No
contest, it was her over the smoking, but her words were an insult and he wasn’t going to take it lying down.

“Dad, look!” His son pointed eagerly at something on the left hand side of the road.

“Holy moly, that’s a big one!”

The buck was large, ten-points at least, and it gazed off into the north like it was counting stars only it could see. It stood fifty feet from the road, in a small clearing devoid of any other life, its hide quivering as it assessed the noise of the truck’s engine. For this, Jim decided to stop again. Out here in the middle of nowhere, there was no need to flash his hazard lights. Instead, he kept the headlights on as he parked and lifted his foot from the brake.

They stared at the animal. Little Jimmy asked question after question about why it was bigger than the others, why it didn’t run, why his father didn’t pull out his rifle and shoot it. Jim made no attempt to answer. Neither took their eyes from the deer; thick-necked and tall, it held court over the empty clearing. Jim thought he’d never seen an animal so calm. Strong and alone as it stood up against the rest of the world.

When had Denise stopped being the girl he fell in love with? Even with the sight before him, Jim couldn’t get her out of his mind. She wasn’t young anymore, but then neither was he. Still a beautiful woman, still funny, still caring and passionate and all those things he told her she was when he proposed. But something was different. Maybe he was different.

Didn’t feel like it, though. Felt like he’d traded in a wife for a mother, always telling him the right thing to do, always nagging, like he was Little Jimmy.

The boy had finished all of his candy cigarettes. He was wide-eyed, hands wrapped around the thin cardboard package. You’d think he’d never seen a deer before, just read about them in those books of his.
“Here,” Jim said unexpectedly, handing his unfinished cigarette to the boy, wondering what Denise would think of this, then realizing he knew exactly what she would think. Little Jimmy watched him expectantly, waiting to see what his father was going to do that needed two hands. Jim laughed at this, feeling as wild and reckless as he had at nineteen as he gestured to the cigarette.

“Try it,” he said.

Little Jimmy froze, his eyes growing even wider in his freckled face. For a moment Jim thought he was going to cry. That was typical. But then Jimmy squared his shoulders narrowed his eyes, and brought the thing to his lips. For all he’d been studying Jim, the boy didn’t do it like Denise had her first time. He didn’t have her grace. Jimmy briefly inhaled and started choking, the smoke leaking from his nose and the corners of his mouth as he struggled to breathe. Jim laughed again, pounding his son on the back the way he would an old friend. He felt like he was in control of himself for the first time in days.

After a few minutes Little Jimmy, hardly coughing now, smiled weakly up at him, tears streaming down his cheeks. For a moment, and for no reason at all, Jim felt that everything was going to be okay.

The crack of a rifle firing not far from where they sat startled both father and son. Too close, Jim thought. The buck in the clearing must have thought so too and it spooked, diving into the woods and quickly disappearing from sight. Jimmy shook his head from side to side, his breath heavy as he searched for the source of the noise. Jim was less worried, although the initial sound has surprised him. Still, it was time to get the kid home, especially if there were hunters nearby. Stupid hunters, by the sound of it. He moved his hand to shift back into Drive, but a rustling in the woods next to them made him pause. It wasn’t on the same side of the road as the
ten-pointer, so he knew the deer couldn’t have been returning. Within seconds the noise heightened, a great crashing sound as dead leaves and branches were pushed aside. It came from the side of the road near Little Jimmy. Jim reached out a hand to hold the boy in place.

The trees were so thick on this side of town that they didn’t see the animal until it was almost upon them, breaking free from the shelter of the woods, barreling full-speed-ahead towards Jim’s truck. It was a deer, another buck even larger than the one before it. Its rack was a cacophony of uneven, intertwining points that gave it neither beauty nor majesty, just a look of crazed bewilderment as it sped towards them. In a moment, Jim had no doubt, it would use those tremendous muscles to leap aside, pass in front of the truck, and disappear into the same patch of weeds that the other had used for cover.

Mere moments after it appeared the deer reached the edge of the road, pushed against the dirt that lined the blacktop, and leapt. So close, Jim could see the animal’s eyes, although they weren’t trained on him, weren’t trained on anything as far as Jim could tell. Though the deer wasn’t foaming at the moment, its eyes looked like the eyes of a rabid skunk Jim had once run across and killed. Instead of crossing in front of the vehicle, as Jim had predicted, the beast lowered its great horns and rammed them into the side of Jim’s truck, barely three feet from Little Jimmy’s open window. There was a sound of breaking glass as a headlight shattered, then a frenzied squealing as the deer shook itself loose, its head flopping wildly atop its neck.

Jimmy screamed, or tried to. A short squeak burst from his lips and was lost as he began to cough again, fresh tears growing in his eyes. Jim, after a second of shock, remembered the lit cigarette still in the kid’s hand and grabbed at it before it was dropped. Jim took a quick drag for comfort and stuffed the thing into his almost-empty beer can, where it sizzled as it met the last swallow.
The animal shrieked in pain and Little Jimmy moaned, his right hand pressed tight against his mouth to stifle his coughs and sobs. Even someone as young as the boy would know that the deer’s neck was broken, just by looking at it. Jim didn’t have any idea what to do.

His son lifted his head, face green. “Are you going to help him, Dad?”

Jim didn’t know how. “Sure, buddy,” he said. “I’ll help him.”

The last vestige of sunlight was fleeing Hannah Lane as Jim stepped out of his truck and around the front of the vehicle, inching closer to the floundering animal before stopping altogether. There was no way to get close to it without getting hung by one of the points of that magnificent rack. The deer, spying Jim, struggled to move away, but its legs didn’t seem to want to oblige. Jim heard retching from within the truck; the kid was vomiting on the floorboard.

Jim couldn’t proceed if he didn’t know what to do and couldn’t even wrap his brain around what had just happened. Truck wasn’t even moving, that thing just ran straight into it, head first, full speed, no regard for any consequences. Damned thing could have killed itself—may have done—right in front of Little Jimmy. What were they going to do?

What was Jim going to do? He patted at the cigarette pack in his shirt pocket, made sure it was still there. Where it had always been. Maybe where it always should be. Denise and her fucking ultimatum. She was so damned stubborn. He knew she was worried, couldn’t fault her for that, but she was running them into the ground. They’d been happy and now they weren’t—seemed clear enough to Jim. The deer looked like it was nodding in agreement.

Why couldn’t she have left well enough alone? She just had to push, sink her teeth into him. Watching the deer, ignoring his son’s tears, Jim wondered. Did she think that if she just kept running at the problem eventually it’d move out of the way? Probably. Except things didn’t work like that, Jim knew. The dying animal in front of him was proof of that.
Jim didn’t know what Denise wanted to hear, but he knew what he was going to tell her. When he and Jimmy were home he’d pull her aside, tell her they had a good life, Little Jimmy and the house, and they loved each other. Always had. No reason to mess that up. No reason to leave over something as insignificant as a habit. They could talk about Jim quitting some other time, as long as she didn’t throw out any more demands. Maybe he’d even tell her about the deer, or at least tell her what he thought about it, since the kid was likely to have already told her the story.

He wondered what she’d think of the buck charging at them, clearly crazy as all get out, crashing into the vehicle as if it didn’t see it. Then—Jim sobered up at the thought—dying a slow death on the side of a back country road. Jim hadn’t carried a gun in his truck since Jimmy was born, no hunting knife hidden in his glove compartment. He couldn’t put the animal out of its misery. He raised a hand to scratch at the back of his neck, and the movement—so casual—startled the deer.

The beast lifted its odd horns—how it did that with a broken neck, Jim didn’t know, it shouldn’t have been alive at this point—and moved towards the woods as quickly as it could, weaving, legs twisted up in each other as it hobbled away. The woods were silent as it entered, branches pushed aside quietly, the only sound a rustling of leaves on the ground. Slowly the deer disappeared into the foliage. Jim and his son watched for several minutes but the buck didn’t return. They could still hear it moving though, and suddenly there was a sharp cry, accompanied by the sound of the deer crashing to the ground. One last moan from Little Jimmy, and the woods were silent once more.

* * *

51
Out of the Valley

When you are born, I know that no one has ever seen anyone like you in the Valley. Six pounds, seven ounces with lovely rounded limbs, ten fingers, ten toes. Your skin is a soft porcelain blush, almond shaped eyes—brown. Just brown. You are almost bald, and your ears are mid-sized. Your nose is small.

You are perfectly normal, and your mother cries. Tears spill from her wide violet eyes, glowing in the dark bedroom. I had hoped you would inherit those eyes. “There is no place for a child like this here,” she says, clutching you to her chest, and what she does not say is that she wishes you had not been born at all.

You are four years old, and your sisters tease you. Analynn steals your dolls and when you try to get them back Castien holds you down with two arms and uses a third to stick ice down your pants. In singsong voices they tell you that you’re a foundling, a baby-in-a-basket someone spotted just outside the Valley and brought inside for our amusement. You’re one of Them, they sing, and I can feel how angry you are. But not at your sisters.

They’re teasing, they love you, they don’t expect you to believe them—but they also hate you, without even knowing it. You are coddled and petted and everyone they know is asking them what it’s like to have a beautiful, normal baby sister. Normal is such a magical word in the Valley, a word that is a part of Them, the outsiders. Never one of our own. Normal is mysterious. Normal is new.

By the time you have managed to wrench yourself from Castien’s grasp, Analynn has alighted on the chimney and dropped your dolls on the roof of our home. They both leave for
school and you sit in the grass and wait as I fetch a ladder. You don’t dwell on what they have
told you. You have heard it so many times before that you think the words themselves are almost
meaningless. So you don’t think about them, but they twist and turn in your heart.

Your sisters are too old for bedtimes stories, but four nights out of five you ask me to tell
you about Jessarona’s journey into the kingdom of Reverie. Jessarona was a girl without a home,
an outcast in a strange land. Her story is long and takes several nights to tell as she battles both
the prejudice and love she feels she does not deserve. Your favorite part is when Jessarona
reaches the town of Whimsy and we come to the end of her story. A smile radiates across your
face, but I hate this part—when you are smiling and you don’t even know how much pain you’re
in. You are uncommonly pretty. In a town of people with blue and green and orange skin, extra
limbs and eyes, wings and horns and most of all special talents, you stand out.

Everyone in the Valley is different. Everyone in the Valley is unique. But we are also all
exactly the same, and there is no one in the Valley quite like you, and you feel it.

You are eight and you ask me what it’s like to be special. “Everyone is special,” I say,
just as I said when you were four and lonely. “You are special.”

“Not the way everyone else is,” you say simply, pushing dark hair out of your eyes with
both hands.

“That’s what makes you special.” When your sisters were eight years old, they believed
me. You do not.

“Elisa at school can shape-shift,” you say. “Today she turned her hair into gold. Real
gold. And yesterday she was a tiger. What can I do?” You think it’s a rhetorical question, but a
part of you is waiting for me to answer.
I don’t list all of the things you do so well—how kind you are, how you make me laugh, how good you are at math and science, how helpful you were when Castien broke two of her arms playing football. You know all of these things and they are not the answer.

Instead, I tell you how it feels to have to work from home because I cannot control how often others’ emotions seep into my own. I try to explain how frustrating it is to be accosted at the grocery store, to be asked over and over again how Mr. So-and-So feels about Mrs. So-and-So, is he subconsciously desiring his attractive coworker, and would I be a dear and let Mrs. So-and-So know if anything changes. And I let you in on my own secret: how painful it is to be hated for the very thing that makes me unique. Everyone wants to know what other people are thinking, but no one wants to be told about the dirty little secrets they are hiding from themselves. “Sometimes being special is no good,” I tell you.

“But you’re a big hit at parties,” you say, parroting your mother, and we both laugh.

As you walk away I realize I have said the wrong thing again. You are laughing at your own joke but the feeling in the pit of your stomach reminds me that no one who is hurting wants to be told that everyone else has problems too. It is not comforting to point out the injustice of the world.

You are ten and your mother is pregnant again. No one else will admit it, but your mother worries aloud that the baby will turn out like you. “It is hard enough convincing one child that she has a place in this world,” she says, “let alone two.” (If sometimes you cannot see why I married your mother, consider how rarely she leaves a thought or feeling floating around in her subconscious. Your mother is a very direct woman. I know you hate it.)
When your little sister is born we are all relieved; she has inherited your mother’s eyes and your grandfather’s hair, which swarms around her small head like cotton candy.

You had wished for a miniature version of yourself, but without a second thought you fall madly in love with your new sister. And when baby Lhili starts speaking after only three weeks you barely hold a grudge. You teach her all the words you know.

You are fifteen years old when I sneak you out of the Valley for the first time. I’ve been planning this trip for months but you’ve been dreaming about it longer. We waited until winter set in so we could bundle up, a heavy coat and scarf and hat hiding the little things that would give me away.

It would not be hard, if I tried, to explain to you the constant hum of loneliness and want that swarms and echoes in the Valley. You’ve felt it yourself. In the last few centuries since the boundary went up, so few of us have been able to pass through the gate and no one has been able to live outside for very long. It is too hard for someone with our genetic mutations to hide what we are.

And there is the fear. When I tell you that fear is always a huge motivator, you nod, but you don’t understand how fear is behind everything that anyone ever does. You do understand how we’ve been taught that to leave the Valley is a death sentence. Our ancestors sequestered us here to keep us safe, a haven for the unfortunate souls that the outside world is not willing to accept. Be true to yourself, and make sure no one else knows about it. Now, no one has the power that they once had. No one can break the boundary or spill the secret. So few of us can even cross over at all.
There is a small town fifty miles out of the Valley. If not for the people, it would look like home to you—the same kind of streets, a school with a jungle gym, shops filled with clothes and books and toys.

But you ignore them. You feel lightheaded as you pass people in the street, people who have two eyes and ears and arms and legs, people without magical powers or tails. People like you. They feel normal. Normal is usually your least favorite word—today it is the happiest word you know.

I ask you not to stare.

You smile at me. “Of course,” you say. Then you don’t say anything for a long time.

At first you feel like Jessarona when she steps out of her canoe onto the docks of Whimsy, like you’re turning around and around in circles with so many, many things to see that blinking is both a distraction and a brief respite from the colors and shapes of the bazaar.

But you don’t. You don’t spin with your arms out wide, and you don’t smile at the things that are not to be smiled at. You don’t stare openly at the people who look like you do, because that would be rude. And because people would notice. You’re finally blending in, so well that it’s almost like you’re not even there.

Finally I tell you that we have to leave. There are so many voices out here, so many thoughts and I can’t contain them all, can’t keep myself hidden for much longer. I’m sure to break.

We go home. The boundary welcomes us back and the gate closes behind us, hidden where no outsider will ever be able to find it.
You are sixteen and have just returned from your second visit outside the boundary. There is a chameleon in your math class you hope will ask you out on a date. You’ve never gone on a date before. You think that you must look different now, confident. You’ve been outside. Surely someone will find you interesting now.

As you walk through the hallways of school, you hear Elisa the shape-shifter gush to a friend that the chameleon has asked her to the upcoming school dance, and isn’t it great? You smile a little sadly as you pass—maybe the tall Junior from Astronomy will ask you instead.

He doesn’t. No one asks you, and you stay home that night.

I am not your mother. I cannot be direct and tell you what I know if it will hurt you. I can’t tell you that none of your classmates know how to approach you. You aren’t like anyone else they know. They are intimidated not by your difference, but by theirs. They all like you, of course, but they don’t know what to do with you.

Elisa is jealous of the way everyone always seems to be watching you, but you never see it. You don’t even notice that she has started to look a bit like you.

You are crying on your bed, and I should not be allowed to intrude upon this moment.

You are seventeen and your mother starts sending out college applications for you. It’s not something you’ve ever imagined for yourself. No one in the Valley has ever gone to college, no one has ever been able to live comfortably outside of the boundary—why would you entertain the idea for yourself?

You’ve imagined living on the outside before. After your visits you tried to think of what it would be like to be surrounded by normal people all the time, but the thought is overwhelming. How it would feel to be the same as everyone else around you.
Your mother says that she wants you to have the kinds of opportunities that she can never have, that your sisters can never have. But what she does not say—cannot allow herself to even acknowledge—is that she wants you out of the way. You are a constant reminder of the world outside the Valley, and she cannot ignore it if you are right in front of her.

You cannot believe that you are leaving.

You are eighteen, you have left the Valley, and you are surrounded by people who look and act and think just like you.

Your new friends ask where you come from, and you tell as much of the truth as you can. You’re from a small, isolated town. You’ve never been outside of it much, which is why you’ve never seen the inside of a mall or ridden a rollercoaster or had a McDonald’s cheeseburger. You don’t elaborate much and your friends don’t press. They’re too excited to show you all of the new things you can learn.

There are so many people around, all of the time, and you tell me how great it is that you’re finally fitting in. But you have to write it all in a letter—I’ve lost track of you.

I write back and tell you that I miss you, but I do not tell you how empty I am without your thoughts and feelings intruding upon mine. They were always so strong and now they’re gone. When the house is empty and the town is calm, it is so quiet.

You are twenty-one and it’s been almost two years since your last visit home. Letters have not been enough to quell your homesickness, and you tell yourself that a quick visit, just to see the family, will be enough. You borrow your roommate’s car and start the drive.
I have been aware of you these last few months. There are some things you don’t tell yourself, can’t pin down, but the feelings are so strong that they reach out to me across the miles and stop me in my tracks:

You miss being special. You miss knowing that you weren’t quite like everyone else in the Valley. At the university, out in the world, you are just like everyone else. Wish granted—you are no one in particular. You are normal.

You are boring, and so is the world around you.

It is a thought that would have once comforted you, but if you allow it to reach you now it will destroy you. I told you once that everyone is special and you didn’t believe me. If I said the same to you again, you still wouldn’t trust it. Wherever you are, you persist in believing that you are unexceptional.

As you turn onto the small dirt road that will lead you to the boundary, excitement starts to build in your chest. You’re practically singing by the time you park the car in a familiar clearing just outside the boundary. You can’t believe that you had ever thought of leaving this place. This is your home, you think, and step out of the car.

I’m waiting on the other side. You’ll pass through any moment.

This is your home, but things look different. You know that you’re in the right place. The grass around the gate has recently been mown and it lies in thick rows, undisturbed by the light breeze that plays across your face. It is all familiar except for a dense line of boulders at the western border of the clearing, where the gate should be. It is not until your hand is pressed flat against the red rock of the wall that you realize the boundary is sealed to you, just as it is sealed to all who are not of the Valley. You are so close, but you have never been further from home.

My heart breaks with yours.
I can feel you gathering all of your secrets to your chest, revealing them to yourself one by one. There is a pain that is too large to describe, and I can’t tell if it’s yours or mine. When there are no more things about yourself that you do not know, you turn away.

I can no longer feel you. You are lost to me.

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