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## Parental Absence

Benjamin Brainsby

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Parental Absence

Benjamin Brainsby

An Abstract presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing.

## Abstract

The two short stories presented herein feature wildly different narratives operating under a common thematic umbrella; absent fathers.

While not always the central focus of the narrative, or the principle motivation of the protagonists, the fathers' absence in both stories casts a long shadow that defines their sense of happiness. Characters in both stories suffer from a feeling of incompleteness that is rooted in the longing for the absent father.

In both cases the father's absence is beyond the protagonist's control and as such they must react to the affect it has on their lives and the situations that it, at least in part, places them in.

Beyond that the stories could hardly be more disparate. One is a period piece with scenes of violence, the other a contemporary journey of self-discovery. The main characters in each are of different ages, different sexes, different centuries and different socio-economic environments. But in contrast to the many differences between the two stories, in some pseudo-Freudian way, I believe that common theme they share is so fundamental to the make-up of the characters, and to each of us, for the nature of our parental relations can largely define us, that their similarity is much greater.

Parental Absence

Benjamin Brainsby

A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree  
of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing.

## **COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY**

Assistant Professor M. Beth Mead, M.F.A.  
Chairperson and Advisor

Professor Michael Castro, Ph.D.

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## Introduction

In introducing myself and the work to follow I have decided to begin with a conclusion. I am not a writer. As I emerge from the tunnel of this MFA in Creative Writing, no conviction presents itself as strongly as this one, that I am not a writer. Though these pages should, in time, defend this opening position no introductory essay could serve its purpose without touching on the same.

I could not claim to be an authority on who is, and who is not a writer; nor could I state the required characteristics or talents of a writer, but my deficiencies are certainly such, though it may be hard for me to identify them with any precision, as to preclude me from association with that fraternity.

I have not always held the view with which this essay opened. I only wish I could have adopted it earlier. Unfortunately, there was a time, one I cringe to recollect, when I might have been found describing myself to another party as 'a writer'. The memory calls to mind an old school friend who, unemployed and drifting through his twenties dedicated the greater portion of his considerable free time into singing with a band. This friend would then introduce himself to others as 'a musician.' I felt the title he gave himself was disingenuous. True, he played the guitar (though never on stage) and he certainly had no income other than that pulled in engagements in clubs and pubs, but awarding himself the title of musician suggested a level of dignity I thought unwarranted and misleading. So it with the exact same disapproving mind I recall when I committed the exact same offense.

There is perhaps a possibility that I have yet to identify the style of writing for which I am best suited. Poets, journalists, biographers, historians are all likely to write terrible fiction, as I do, yet still be considered writers, but in the absence of demonstrated skill in any of these fields I feel more comfortable again declaring that I am not a writer, and wish I had never proclaimed otherwise.

There is an adage that roughly says, 'find what you enjoy doing, and do it.' Some of my closest acquaintances strongly hold to this adage as the defining rule for one's professional life direction. It is not a bad position from which to attack the world, and so it is not bad advice to impart upon a friend, but in my case it had two flaws. First, I am a terrible writer. I am fairly certain that Dan Brown is content with his millions to never lament the atrocities he commits to page and given the same level of remuneration I would probably be too, but the thought of producing literary offal is not appealing. Second, I have not enjoyed the writing, which would contradict a central premise of the adage. It is very possible that many artists do not enjoy the creative process, but I had a dreadful time writing these two pieces. When I thought I was, or had the potential to one day become, a writer I was persuaded by an inner voice, some family members and a cheerful admissions clerk to enroll in this Creative Writing program. What better place, reasoned I, to nurture my fledgling talent? What I discovered was that writing is perhaps the hardest thing I have ever done. I read a quote by one author, whose name my memory has since jettisoned that said something along the lines that writers were the only people for whom writing is hard. I took solace in this quote and repeated it to whenever I could. Most people disagreed with the quote and I



thought how terrible their writing must be. For my part, I have found writing to be horrendously difficult, and beyond that, mentally crippling. The figurative act of picking up the pen has the power to wither my brain. From the outside it appears so simple to write. I read a fair amount and believe I can discern the good writing from the bad, but when I begin to write I feel as if I have never read a book in my life, every single sentence is a struggle to overcome, basic rules of grammar are lost to me, and any attempts to build character, further the narrative or develop an encompassing theme are at best clumsy and at worst completely absent. I understand the artistic process is not supposed to be easy. Artist's struggle over their work, but while writing gave me heavy doses of agony, I saw little to no ecstasy. I would like to have felt there was something inside me worth committing to paper, a story worth telling. I would have liked to have felt that the work I was doing was worthwhile or valid. I would have liked to have felt that I knew what I was doing, or knew where I was heading with my work. Instead I felt dead inside. Never have I believed more strongly in the idea of a soul, a creative fire that burns within us, and it was the complete absence of mine that convinced me.

The whole process was so frustrating, to sit at a computer trying to say something, and being found utterly incapable, and I would take that frustration out on those around me. Writing frustrates me and frustration makes me antisocial. I do not want to be the man that writing transforms me into.

Today, writing is a bigger mystery to me than ever before, by which I mean I understand it less than ever before. Naturally all but the most precocious begin with some nascent uncertainty, but I feel I began at that point and regressed ever

further away from any level of understanding. The more I learn the more ignorant I become. I am simply baffled by literature. Why is it so difficult? What is it about the act of picking up a pen that clouds the brain? Can it really be so difficult when it is practiced with such proliferation?

The two pieces presented here are works of my creation, and I each disappoints me. I am not pleased with them and I am not proud of them. When first conceived, each was intended to be greater than it became. I imagine that contentment is not a pre-requisite for submission but I expected it nonetheless, I expected it and was disappointed that I could not attain it. I thought at first that the failing of the work was due to the time spent on its composition, juggling the responsibilities of work, marriage and a new born child was not conducive to writing. But I eventually concluded that my satisfaction could not be bought by seven year's service. I still didn't understand my characters, I didn't believe them, I didn't believe in them and I didn't believe in the story they were telling, but with thousands of dollars lost to this program, that had already lasted years longer than originally intended, culmination was the upmost priority. So I finished the two pieces as best I could and present them here for your scrutiny.

Upon first review they might appear to have no thematic connection. One has a modern setting, the other is a Civil War period piece; one's drama is violent and possibly suspenseful, the other's is restrained and quieter; one deals primarily with women and young girls, the other deals with men. Even the composition method of each was sharply different from the other. The narrative of the Civil War story was based on, or was a variation on a story a fellow classmate had told

me once. I asked her permission to take the bare principal of her story and retell it. The characters, setting and plot are all my creations but it was all thrown over a skeleton structure obtained from someone else. Consequently, I knew when I began writing, at least in part, how the drama would unfold. I was not decided upon the conclusion, I did not know how the story would end, but I knew how it would begin and how the suspense would be created.

For the other piece, none of this was known. I wrote from an entirely different point of view. I followed a writing principle I read described by Margaret Attwood. She said she begins with single idea, a knife in a room, say, and begins to ask questions about it, why is it there, etc.? As the 'dressing the skeleton' method had not been easy for me, I tried this other method for the next piece. I began with a man coming home to his apartment to find his girlfriend had left him, and at that point, at the genesis of that single idea, I had no other concept of how the piece would turn out. There were no other characters in mind and no other narrative ideas, all that was to be explored/uncovered as the story progressed. Even after losing faith in my writing, long after it began to be laborious, I was interested in the development of this story. When writing the Civil War story I struggled with maintaining the narrative line. Each scene presented a fresh challenge to guide the story to its conclusion. Writing it was like steering a boat through rough seas. Every wave takes it off course so the need for corrective navigation was constant. That and the map I was following was less than complete. But with the modern story, those concerns did not exist. I entered each scene with no idea how it would evolve, what would be discussed, or which

characters would be involved. I just allowed my pen to blaze a trail that I followed. Regardless of the quality, or artistic merit of the end result, I was interested in the composition method adopted. It was something new for me, and not entirely unsuccessful. Certainly, when comparing the two stories presented here, I could not say the more traditional approach, that used for the Civil War story, produced a superior work.

It was actually quite a surprise to me when I considered the thematic link between these two pieces, and how I had subconsciously touched on something close to me. Both stories deal with absent fathers, the effect this has on that man's children and the attitude they have towards him. In the modern piece the father's absence is reflected in the narrative. He does not appear, and his whereabouts are unknown until the end, and even then, he's discovered to be dead. I think this approach helps underlie the effect this loss had on the central character, Beckett. In the Civil War story the father, though absent in the main narrative, is introduced in a prologue that I was advised to omit from final submission. Seeing the effect of the textually absent father in the second piece I can see the merit of this suggestion, but then again it is interesting to explore both.

The two fathers are viewed entirely differently by their respective children, due mainly to the reason for their absence. The Civil War father is at war, absent because of duty and honor. I think his children are told, and might have to be reminded, of his worthiness of his sacrifice, but that maybe they, particularly the youngest, feel some resentment towards him for leaving. Conversely, in the modern story, Beckett has long begrudged his father for abandoning the family

when he was younger. It has affected all the subsequent relationships in his life yet still I think he wants to forgive his father, or he wants to be given the opportunity to make peace with him. So both relationships are subject to contrasting attitudes to varying degrees. My own father recently divorced my mother generating a great deal of resentment towards him, which has obviously poured over into my writing. But like Beckett, I am often happier to bury the anger and disapproval in favor of reclaiming a portion of the happier time before the break down of our relationship.

## Beckett, Abandoned.

As soon as I opened the front door I knew Nancy had left me. Her absence hung on the very air. It permeated everything, as if the house was haunted by the specter of a tragic passing. The hallway looked spotless, uncharacteristically so. This went beyond a regular cleaning. I proceeded into the living room and saw the same unnatural tidiness and sterility. Every room was the same, quiet, cold, clean and eerily empty. It was not in Nancy's nature to leave a dwelling unkempt (we had often worked on repressing that urge when checking out of a hotel) and she had kicked that instinct into overdrive for this one last departure. It was clear this was Nancy's sincerest expression of an apology to me, her parting gift. If my habits had condemned us to live in perpetual squalor I might have interpreted this final act as the closing emphasis to some unspoken argument, but we had not lived in filth. I knew why Nancy had left, I understood why Nancy had left, and I understood why she had left the house immaculate. Regardless, the whole effect was not what I knew had been intended. It was a kindness on her part, an apology and an olive branch. The blending aromas of bleach and lemon tinted furniture polish asked for understanding and clemency, and the pristine carpets and untarnished surfaces offered a blank canvas upon which I was to sketch out my new life. This was how I saw her mind working. But the house was so clean it looked Spartan. It looked entirely uninhabited. Nancy had been so zealous in her task she had effaced all evidence of her existence in that home. It felt like she had never lived there, as if her name had been struck from the records, or I had awoken from an incredible dream in which our relationship was purely a figment

of my dreams. It began to look callous on her part. I knew it was not. Nancy had not the capacity for callous thought, but one should be excused for ignoring reason when their girlfriend has left them.

I should confess that while I was immediately convinced that Nancy had absconded, and rightly so, it was not the first time I had assumed that exact conviction in the same manner, and who knows how many times I had experienced, let us say, moderate suspicion that she had left me. It was not so much the constancy of Nancy I questioned, it was a general lack of faith in all people, of which she was an attributed member. The psychologist would tell you it stems from my father walking out on my mother and I when I was nine years old, and you cannot really argue with the logic.

I looked through the barren rooms with the understanding that this was now my house, filled with my furniture, my pictures, my decorations, my *things*. I had not chosen any it. If I had, it was a gruff acquiescence I never thought would have a negative repercussion. But it was now me who was stuck with the tastes of another. Why did she buy this stuff if she was just going to leave it with me? That was as far as my anger got.

An hour or two later the phone rang. Only two people called the landline, my mother and Mr Anonymous Salesmen, I prayed for the latter. The idea of leaving it unanswered flashed across my brain but was easily overcome by a cavalcade of opposing thoughts; it might be Nancy, it might be important, someone might be dying, someone might be in trouble, and it was just rude not to answer the phone.

That kind of thinking was impossible to overcome, so I picked up the receiver and spoke my greeting.

‘What’s wrong with you,’ came the voice down the line, ‘you sound miserable.’

‘Hello, Momma.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘Nothing’s wrong. I just got in...’

‘You sound miserable.’

‘Well I just got in.’

‘That makes you miserable?’

‘I’m not miserable. I just got home and the, well the house is clean. I think Nancy’s left.’

‘What do you mean, “left”?’

‘Left me. She’s gone. She’s taken her stuff and gone.’

‘Again?’

‘She’s never left me before, Momma. That was a misunderstanding. We’ve been over this before. I’d forgotten she was at some work event and the apartment just looked a little too clean and empty and I jumped to the wrong conclusion.’

‘So why do you think she’s gone this time?’



'She cleaned the apartment and took all her things.'

'Is this a hallmark of hers, cleaning the place before she leaves?'

'It's not a hallmark because she's never left me before. The other time was just a coincidence.'

'Maybe it's not. Maybe last time she just changed her mind and came back to you.'

'She didn't take her stuff last time. Her stuff is gone, Nancy is gone.'

'Did she leave you a note?'

'A note? No. I haven't seen a note.'

'Why would she leave without writing a note? I don't understand.'

'I don't know, Momma. She's never done it before.'

'Beckett, I don't think you can say she's left you unless there's a note. She's probably gone to stay with a friend for the weekend.'

My mother continued to build upon her supposition but at this point I ceased to actively listen. I was sure I had heard much of it before and if, despite the evidence of all history to the contrary, my mother was capable of espousing a novel idea I would gamble on it being still unworthy of consideration.

Withdrawing from the conversation yet maintaining the façade of active participation has never proven difficult with my mother. A few agreeable grunts interspersed over her monologue appear to satisfy her demands of an audience. I

could probably maintain the illusion for hours but realizing that Nancy's departure would engender many more such calls I broke this one off as soon as I roused the strength.

'I should go, Mother.'

'Oh well, before you run off let me say what it was I was calling about.' My mother had a way of chatting at great lengths before actually commencing her intended subject. It might be wondered, if left unchecked, by which I mean presented with the threat of the conversation being terminated, whether she might ever of her own volition raise her main point. However, to test these limits would require the staging of an obscenely long and literally pointless conversation with my mother which was beyond my scope of acceptable sacrifices.

'I just wanted to let you know that Pastor Meyers is retiring at the end of the month and to see if you will be attending the dinner the church is putting on for him.' Since graduating from my Lutheran High School I had successfully pursued a tactical withdrawal from church activity. It was the kind of campaign Nixon would have endorsed; a gradual reduction of engagements. By this stage I had pretty well eliminated Christmas and Easter services, too. Consequently, I had not seen the old Pastor in years. Despite my war to reclaim my free time from the clutches of the church, I was not insensitive to this news. Pastor Meyers felt like an extended family member if for no other reason that that he knew us all so intimately. I was the youngest of the family and even I had known the man nearly 30 years, my whole life in fact.

'Why is he retiring?' I asked. I tried to guess the man's age. Simple math put him at best in his mid-sixties and he still had that touch of dark hair to his moustache that deterred me from guessing he was any older than that. Sure that was a standard age for retirement, but it had never occurred to me that a Pastor would treat his vocation in the same way as a bank clerk. 'Is he ill?' I added, impressing myself and probably my mother too with how concerned I sounded.

'No, he's not ill Beckett. The good man's entitled to seek his retirement same as the rest of us. The dinner they're having is next Saturday but you need to let me know now because it's thirty dollars.'

'Thirty dollars! What are they serving, lobster?'

'I think it's Ziti, but what does it matter Beckett, really? He's given us nearly 40 years of service.'

'I don't know. With Nancy leaving this might not be the best time.'

'Beckett, your girlfriend running off does not have any bearing on this matter. I can tell you that your debt to this man, for all his service to you and this family, is inestimable.'

'I know that, I do.' I could feel the guilt encroaching upon me now. My mother could emit guilt upon me like radiation, I had no defense to it and if left exposed it could burn my free will. It had become critical that the phone call terminate here.

'I just can't commit to it today. I'll call you in a couple of days, OK?'

She grunted something and before I hung up I added a quick, 'Thanks for listening, Ma.' Though my mother often saw offense in the most casual of remarks, she was incapable of sensing irony. With the phone cradled I considered unplugging the jack, not trusting myself to withstand that siren, but the possibility of missing a call from Nancy, or even some ER staff desperate to convey the message that she had been found, was safely recovering under their care, and had been asking for me, these ideas and a flood of others kept the phone connected. Instead, I went looking for the note. My mother was capable of stumbling upon a lucid point and she had been right about the conspicuous absence of a note. I never imagined Nancy would leave me without a word but the thought of her composing a note was too cold for her. It made her departure a cowardly act and Nancy did nothing cowardly. But this was one cowardly act that had apparently earned the approbation of society. It was the accepted practice, the done thing. Leaving a 'Dear John' was de rigueur when abandoning your lover, to do otherwise would be a perversion of convention. Love and marriage, horse and carriage, can't have one without the other, and all that.

I found the note 40 minutes later affixed to the fridge by a magnet in the shape of a turtle. It was written in pencil but showed no signs of amendment. She had written it all out in single effort as if the words had been rehearsed over and over and were known to her by heart. She said we had come to our end, that it was better for both of us, me particularly, she stressed that, and that time would exonerate her from any judgment of wrongdoing. So those were not her exact words but the point is rendered faithfully. By sticking to her best-for-both-of-us

message she avoided having to make any apologies in her note. If you knew her like I did you would not have surprised you. I never knew Nancy to make a single apology. Fault was something she always failed to attribute to her own actions. You could rail against the injustice of it all, I certainly did, but it was all for naught. Her commitment to her own infallibility was unshakeable and, in a way, contagious. But the infallibility is not contagious, it is the idea of her being infallible that you cannot help but be drawn into. Strength and confidence can conquer most spirits.

Unmentioned in the note was where Nancy had moved to. I struggled with the motive behind this omission. Surely it was a calculated move and not just absent mindedness. She purposefully omitted her current whereabouts. Was she fearful I would track her down, bellow at her from the street like Stanley Kowalski? What impression had I left upon her that she felt unsure, unsafe even, with my knowing where she was? Would I now be seen as an abusive, revengeful partner? Was this Nancy's legacy to me? Between her non-apologetic lines portraying two sweet-hearted and honest souls grown apart as a course of nature, beyond the façade of amicable differences was this hidden message, literally invisible in fact, a message casting me as a devil.; that I was, at best a bothersome pest, and at worst, a violent At some point during this revelry of over-examination I lost faith in my ability to analyze the possible motives and implications of Nancy's note. I read it through a couple times and then filed it away in my sock drawer. This seemed silly so I took it out again and propped it on the end of a bookshelf, leaning with all its weight upon a tome on World War Two. I went and fixed myself a drink, it

was Friday and my girlfriend had left me so it felt right. I sat on my couch staring at the bookshelves, which usually calmed me, but the note disturbed me. It held a power over my emotions, I hoped by keeping it in sight I might prove stronger than it but the battle suddenly seemed meritless. I still felt I had to retain the note, as painful as it was, so shoved into one of the now empty drawers that had held Nancy's clothes, and tried to forget it was there. One day in the future I would open that drawer and be reminded of its terrible secret but I hoped to postpone that as long as I could.

The idea that was alone drew upon me. I was not yet lonely, though I knew that would follow soon, but I understood I was alone. It is not a state I have ever enjoyed. I used to believe my aversion to being alone signified weakness of character but it is an inhuman trait. Clearly nature did not design us with the intent of living independently. People were supposed to live with other people co-dependently; it was that natural order of things. Nancy had thrown nature's plan for the cosmos in my face.

By ten o'clock that evening I had received calls from my sister, my brother-in-law and bizarrely my sister's ex-husband, all having no doubt received their intelligence from the fountain head that was my mother. Needless to say these calls all went unanswered. I wondered how long it would be before I answered my cell phone again. If it became just a glorified watch perhaps I could stop carrying it around with me. But then the threat of breaking down on some long abandoned road, or trapped in an inescapable mountain crevasse filled me with

panic. These were the kinds of situations we used in the 90s to argue for the necessity of cell phones.

The next morning was Saturday and I woke late. My head hurt and stumbling around the apartment in my underwear I was startled at how an evening of apparent inactivity had managed to wrought havoc upon the once clean rooms. It was already two in the afternoon by the time I had showered, shaved and driven my Plymouth most of the way to the old yellow house on Elmtree Avenue. From some destinations you can draw a sense of tranquility by merely following the well-known paths that lead to it. I had not traveled these streets in over a decade and might have believed their memory occluded or replaced by some other triviality, but each passing yard unearthed buried treasures of remembrance. I saw things long-forgotten that were brought instantly to the fore of my mind. I followed the path absent-mindedly, wrapped up in reminiscing, so that when I eventually parked outside the house, and began walking the pansy-lined path to the white front door, I could not exactly recall the drive over. The whole neighborhood felt like my grandma's bathroom. When I was a child, the family had moved a couple times, new homes, new schools, new zip codes. My grandma was the only person I had known all my life to have never moved house. In fact, she'd lived at her house over twenty years before I was born, which put her at over half a century under the same roof. As I have gotten older I have seen less and less of this house, my visits are more infrequent, the family gatherings more problematic to arrange; that is how we justify it to each other at any rate. The house is small, narrow, condensed over two floors, but my mind does not really

recognize it in this way. My perception of this house is strongly bound to that of my infant self, the dimensions viewed on a different scale. No single room resonates this more than another but I think of the bathroom first, perhaps because it carries the most idiosyncrasies; the tasseled pull rope light switch, the perversely opposite placement of the hot and cold faucets, the abundance of pink, the collection of ornamentals on the window sill, the pervasive smell of perfume; or maybe it is just the only room I get to view in private and consequently the one in which I indulge in sensory nostalgia. That room is a time capsule I get to open every three years or so, and right then I felt like I was driving right through it.

I had woken up from my day dream of reclaimed childhood memories and found myself outside my destination. I wonder, from a scientific point of view, what difference there was between this and driving under the influence of alcohol. How lethal is a wandering mind behind the wheel? These thoughts and a dozen others buzzed happily around my head as I rang the door bell. Pressing the button produced a loud chime in the upper register that in turn producing a cacophony of dog barking. When the door opened I discovered that what had sounded like a dozen dogs was in fact two King Charles Spaniels. The hand holding them at bay belonged to a middle aged woman in cream pants, a coral blouse and a white cardigan. She had pearls around her neck and in her ears, and enough pins in her hair to keep every lock in place as she fought to restrain the two spaniels. I had known this woman, Betty Meyers, my entire life. The great thing about the elder generation is they never change. By the time they hit middle age all their radicalism has either escaped, eroded or been used up. There is nothing left to fuel



any more changes in their lives. So by the time they reach seventy years of age, they're still wearing the same clothes and fashions they wore in their fifties, two decades prior. They still listen to the same music, and pine for the films and television they can no longer find. They are developmentally frozen in time, their bodies age but virtually imperceptibly, yet everything about them, their souls remain impervious to change. This phenomenon was even more marked in Betty's case because when I was a child she was in her forties and already losing the taste for change. Betty had always been the woman I saw before me now. Perhaps a little whiter now where grey had rested before; the hands perhaps were a little thinner, the shoes a little flatter, but it was mostly unnoticeable, in almost every aspect, she had never changed.

'Beckett! What a lovely surprise. He never told me you were coming. Please excuse the girls – Girls! – I was just getting them ready for their walk and they get a little excited. Oh just wait there one moment.' And off she shuffled, claiming two dogs by the nape of their necks and forcing them into an adjoining room, to which she then closed the door, reducing the yapping to a slightly less piercing muffle. She returned noticeably more composed, it was apparent she preferred not to mix the role greeting visitors with lion taming. 'Beckett it really is wonderful to see you again. It has been positively ages. I cannot believe he didn't tell me you were coming over.'

'Oh, I didn't call, Betty. I suppose you'd call this something of a whim. I hope I'm not imposing on anything.'

'You know you're welcome to see us anytime.'

'If he's expecting company I can always come back another time.'

'In another ten years? Certainly not.' There was a look in her eye when she said this that evoked the scourging my grandmother would issue in response to any moral infraction she were witness to. 'Come inside, come inside.'

I crossed the threshold while Betty shut the front door, as if afraid afforded with such a route I would be inclined to escape through it. I was ushered into a white hallway covered with family photographs, all in wooden frames, all hanging on the white wall, nothing candid, all professional; confirmations, senior year, the occasional family portrait, and at end of the hallway a pair of sepia headshots of faces resembling nothing born in the last fifty years. People just do not look like that today, as if a significant genetic alteration has taken place that separates us from our antecedents. Betty had climbed the staircase to let her husband know I was here which left me alone among the photographs. The collection was dominated by children and grandchildren. It was the preserver of eternal youth. It was Neverland. No one aged on this wall. Graduating from college, it seemed, also removed you from the camera's lens. As far as the wall was concerned you no longer existed, or were fit only to sire the next crop of subjects. One result of this age restriction was to produce a rather unflattering representation of the Meyers brood. Barring a few cute toddler shots most of the portraits captured the more awkward stages of their maturation.

Betty returned to tell me I could go up and see the Pastor. Before I was half way up the stairs she had donned a red raincoat and was being pulled through the front door by the two eager spaniels. The staircase was the type that turned back on itself at the half way mark so upon ascending it I was facing the front of the house. The pastor's study, where I was told he would be found, lay to the right of the upper landing. The door was not closed but kept ajar by a couple of inches so I paused before it and knocked lightly before opening it slowly. The room was gloomy, especially compared to the rest of the house, as if the themes that governed the design of the other rooms stopped short at this door. This room had a different master and his tastes were somber. At first my eye penetrated little of the new environment save that it housed a great collection of books; books on shelves, books on tables, books stacked to form unstable looking towers. Pastor Meyers was a well-read man but it looked unlikely he had ever read the books scattered around his study. I doubt he even knew which books comprised the many literary stalagmites about him. Despite their number, the columns of books did allow for unhindered passage across the floor to the maroon armchair to which the Pastor was motioning with his hand. The Pastor was sat behind a large mahogany desk lit by a green glass desk lamp. The lamp was the only source of light in the room and while it burned brilliantly upon the desk, the pastor's figure and everything else about us was veiled by an obscure darkness. As my eyes began to adjust and penetrate the gloom I could see he wore a grey jacket, a pale yellow shirt and a navy bow-tie, making him most probably the only man in the state to still own one. His moustache, a dense crop of bristles that had forever

adorned his lip, had worn out the coal black color I remembered, leaving mottled-grey whiskers that matched his tweed jacket.

‘You’re looking well Pastor,’ I said, which wasn’t exactly true, but then again nor was it untrue, but it seemed like a suitable introduction. He looked old if you want the truth. Not sickly or unwell or frail, just old, older than I had anticipated, foolishly perhaps. It now seemed quite understandable that the man should be seeking retirement. For the first time it occurred to me that the decision might not have been his after all. ‘My mother mentioned that you were retiring. It must be exciting, I imagine. Are you looking forward to it?’

‘Oh, I probably am. I plan to try and keep myself busier than when I was working, that way I’ll either not notice the change or welcome it. So I gathered all these books, you’ll have to excuse the clutter,’ and he gestured in a way meant to take in the leather bound infestation about us, ‘most have been up in the attic since we moved in, that’s over 40 years ago.’

‘What’s that your reading?’ I said, pointing at a thin volume that lay open on the desk.

‘That is Huckleberry Finn, have you read it? I nodded yes, not remembering if that was the correct answer or not and hoping I was not about to be tested on my knowledge of the text. ‘I must have read this over fifty years ago. This very copy, too. It has the old school stamp in the cover. Do you know we actually banned

this from the school library? I think that was around '82, 83. Can you imagine, banning Mark Twain.'

'Are you planning on reading all these books?'

'Heavens no. Donate probably, burn possibly – there are some terrible things that I'm ashamed to discover I own. You're welcome to look for something you might like.' I did not like the idea of leaving that house with one of his books under my arm. Although he had mentioned donating them it still felt, so long as they remained under his roof, like I would be leeching off an elderly man. The cliché is you can't take it with you, it is part of the small print of your mortality contract, but I did not want to be the one profiting from it. There was not much rational about that line of thinking but I never said my mind made sense, regardless, I declined the offer to take a book.

'I haven't seen you for some time, Beckett. Are you still living in the city?'

'That's right, I've got an apartment on Monroe. Keeping it clean.'

'You found a church down there? I could recommend a few if you are looking.'

'I thought you were retiring? You don't have to worry about your flock anymore.'

'I don't look worried, do I?' and he smiled in his avuncular way that up to that point I feared had slipped away over the years. 'Beckett, I have become old. I cannot seem to do anything as well as I once could. If it wasn't frustrating me all the time I might pause to get angry about the whole thing, the tragedy of getting

old. It really is a tragedy to not recognize yourself, Beckett. What I'm trying to tell you is that the older I get, and I am definitely getting older, the more I need to feel I'm not alone in this. Never underestimate the fortitude of my generation, Beckett. We've seen and endured and overcome as much as any before us. We have been resilient because we have always held faith in our future. You will be amazed at one can be accomplished when the mind is certain of success, and that is what God gives to me. He doesn't just assure me, he confirms to me without question that our path is the right one, and the only one that will lead to the gates of heaven.'

'It must be a great comfort to have that.'

'You believe that?'

'Of course.'

'Yet you stay away from God, knowing this comfort he brings?'

'I had an uncle, my Dad's uncle actually, who was never without this silver hip flask he owned. The story he told is that he had been presented it for long tendered services to his club, rotary or masonic or something. Anyway, he carried it about him everywhere because, he said, it was his proudest accomplishment. Few doubted his real treasure was what he stored within that flask. I can't say it killed him, he smoked too I think, but it didn't help. That kind of comfort I can live without.'

'Christians aren't drunks, Beckett. The Lord is not liquor. What you are describing is a false comfort that carries only the illusion of solace. Let me ask you, was this uncle a happy man?'

'I don't think you could have called him happy, no. But who is? Most people are content at best.'

'You think so? But let's say you're right about that, was your uncle then a content man?'

'He probably wasn't that either.'

'But he found comfort by drinking?'

'Yes.'

'But it did not make him happy, or content.'

'No, it didn't. But that was just the kind of man he was. He could have won the lottery and still been unhappy.'

'Was he so irascible?'

'No, he was just a little miserable. I don't think he liked himself much. He was truly proud of some club giving him that flask, but at the same time I think he realized that this great achievement wasn't so great after all. I think he got to the point where he looked back on his life and what he had to show for it was an engraved hip flask. It depressed him but it was still his greatest achievement so he

clung to it. I don't think he liked the life he had led, and I think he blamed the man he was. So I can picture him winning the lottery and saying he didn't deserve it or something, that it wasn't earned.'

'These are not uncommon emotions you're describing. No one is immune to such thoughts. What separates us, what ultimately defines us is how we respond to such challenges. Your uncle did not confront his doubts but chose to immerse himself with alcohol, which is perhaps a more human reaction, a more natural reaction to a problem. It takes something extra to stand up to fear, and very few of us have what it takes to do so alone. But I am not afraid because wherever I walk, I walk with Him. Death, Beckett, is the great universal tragedy. Each life on Earth has born some trial of tragedy; some lose loved ones, some lose fortunes, some lose liberty, some live without ever knowing any of these things. But every single person shares the same ultimate fate. The only choice in the matter available to us is whether or not we take that journey alone.'

'I don't think I believe in God, anymore.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. Is there a reason for your loss of faith?'

'Is there a reason to keep my faith? I think I woke up one day and asked myself why I believed in God, and the answers weren't very forthcoming. I was believing in God because everyone else was. I asked my mother why she believed and do you know what she said, "you have to believe in something." Is that what it boils down to, casting your lot with one group, doesn't really matter which one, so long



as it's cast somewhere? It made no sense to me. So I began to see all these religions under the same light. I saw them as equals, the whole lot of them; Jews, Muslims, Mormons, everyone the same, a thousand different religions existing under the same sky. And I concluded that, since their doctrines conflicted with each other's, that one of three things must be true; A – one religion is true and all the others are false, B – all religions are false, but there is still a God, or C – all religions are false and there is no God. If A is true, there is no way of proving which religion is the correct one, it could be a tribe in Borneo who worship frogs for all we know, so adopting a religion under such circumstances is not a basis for strong faith. If B is true the only solution is to discover the true religion yourself, which would brand me a cultist maniac. If C is true, and to be honest when I look at the world around me it's looking more and more likely that it is, then,

'Then what, Beckett? What do you do if there is no God? Are you happier now without God?'

'Why do you keep bringing up happiness? Sure I was happier when I had faith, but what's it really worth? You know who I think about, I think about Adam and Eve. It is just about the very first story in the bible, it's on page 2 for Christ's sake. I mean, well I mean it is right at the front of the book.' I felt a rush of blood fill my head and I could sense my emotions beginning to run beyond my control. My blasphemous remark had both thrilled and shamed me. The latter proved the more enduring so I hurried on with my topic. 'Adam and Eve are happy but ignorant. Ignorance is bliss, right? Well they're the poster couple for "ignorance is

bliss." Until they eat the fruit from this tree of knowledge, become more self-aware, and receive God's punishment, which is no slap on the wrist; banishment from paradise and painful labor for woman. So what's the message here?

Acquisition of knowledge is a sin?'

'Why do you think God forbade Adam to eat from this tree?'

'I don't know – that's the point. I don't understand the motive, no, I don't recognize the benevolence behind the motive.'

The pastor leaned forward into the light, allowing the lamplight to crown his head. 'I see three possibilities for you to consider here, Beckett. Firstly, that God used the tree to tempt Adam, to test his obedience. The tree in itself was not special, he might have forbade their drinking from a particular stream, or entering a certain cave, the point being to test Adam's resistance to temptation, or more precisely, his adherence to God's word. The second possibility, and the one I believe you were hinting at, is that the fruit from the tree was beneficial to Adam but not in God's eyes. God is therefore selfishly trying to prevent Adam from eating the fruit. The last possibility is that the fruit from the tree was actually harmful to Adam and God is trying to protect him. The scripture would appear to support this version above the others as God explicitly warns Adam that he will surely die if he eats from this fruit.'

'But Adam doesn't die. God lied to him.'

'Adam does die.'

‘Nine hundred and thirty years later. And if mortality is the punishment does it mean that God planned us to be immortal?’

‘Paul says death came from sin, from which you could say that before sin there was no death.’

‘Can I be honest, Pastor?’

‘I imagine you mean to ask whether you can speak frankly, and of course you can.’ He spoke those last two words with a gentle force; kind, polite, but resigned to losing me to what he could see I was about to say.

‘My problem is that whichever possibility I end up with, God comes across as, well as a prick.’ I think my mother might have suffered an embolism if she had been witness to that comment, made in this company, but I could see I was on my way out now, that I was irrevocably beyond their persuasions and theorizing. They had lost me long before I engineered my own liberation. It had been too long. I was rotten to the core and I was to lay it out bare. ‘In your first suggestion He’s a prick for lying about the threat of death and for over-aggressively punishing disobedience of a ridiculous rule. In the second He’s a prick for denying Adam understanding, I’d say wisdom. Before eating the fruit he’d never even considered the fact that he was naked. He eats it, he understands the concept. It’s growth, it’s acquired knowledge, it’s wisdom and God punishes Adam for getting it. And in the last example He’s a prick for banishing them from paradise. Even if the effects of the fruit, the painful labor, the subjugation of woman and

the mortality of man, even if they are beyond His control to revoke, which seems implausible, add to that the expulsion and instructions to toil the land, it's all too aggressive. He's not a loving father, He's an intolerant disciplinarian. He's just another bastard that hits the roof when he doesn't get his own way.'

'He is not your father.'

'You always told me he was.'

'No, I mean He is not like your father.'

'One abandoned his children, the other banished them. I don't see the difference. I'm sure my dad would have sent us packing if it had been convenient. The option wasn't available to him so he left instead.'

I left soon after that. We spoke a little about his family, the children I had known who were now starting families in other states. He had politely allowed me to drop the Theological debate, and the quest for my Faith. I felt ashamed of everything I had said as if I had betrayed every kindness he had shown me. I saw myself in his eyes as a pitiable product, a wasted spirit. I began wilting beneath the judgment I imagined being pronounced in his mind. My agitation grew as did my eagerness to escape. So I told him how sorry I was that I had not visited him for so long, by which I meant that I would not be returning. I could not doubt he knew that. We said our goodbyes at the front door, but just before I walked away from that yellow house for the last time I said to him, 'My girlfriend left me yesterday.' And I quickly turned away, went straight for my car, unlocked it with

the key, got inside, fumbled with the safety belt, turned the ignition and drove off, never once casting a glance back to the pastor's house. Why I had said it I do not know. I have thought about it obviously, but I do not know. A man who is blind to his own motives, who is unable to explain his actions might well be called mad.

The next day the phone rang early. It was Pastor Meyers.

'Good morning, Beckett, I hope I haven't woken you.' He had, I naturally told him otherwise but I thought my voice betrayed me. 'I was thinking' he said 'about our conversation yesterday, and that I might be able to do something for you.' He had taken me by surprise with this step. I had assumed both parties would agree to never mention the outburst of the previous day. My experience told me that was how such matters were conducted, one more shameful memory hidden out of sight by mutual consent. The follow up phone call came from a different school of thought which made me uncomfortable, and perhaps explained the passive silence I kept while the pastor paused between sentences, a detail I troubled over afterwards.

'Beckett, I've been a pastor my entire adult life and I can tell you everything I have done, and everything I attempted to do was centered on the idea of trust. To be accepted as pastor by a congregation it is necessary to earn their trust, but to be effective as pastor it is essential to deserve their trust as well. It is not so difficult to earn a person's trust, most churchgoers are eager to unburden themselves upon their pastor, it is a welcome relief to them, but to be deserving of such faith is a different matter. Deserving trust means never betraying a confidence. That might

sound simple but you don't know the things my ears have endured over the years. I can assure you my will has been tested. But I have so highly valued this faith placed in me that I was never once unworthy of it, until today. I am weakened to find myself reflecting this much at this point in my life. I am finding the need to make amends for actions and decisions that might have been called into question had I just taken the time to consider them. Why must we wait till the end, when the chance for rectification is at its slimmest? I think sometimes I have spent a lifetime delivering sermons and yet learned nothing.'

It appeared the pastor had slipped into a meandering soliloquy. I began to consider the possibility he was losing his mind, and that it was actually the onset of dementia precipitating his retirement, and the longer I listened the more convinced I became, until, of course, he got to the point he had been dancing around.

'I wanted to talk to you about your Father, Beckett.'

'There's nothing to tell, I haven't seen him in twenty years. You'd be better off speaking to my mother, though she's seen just as much of him as I have, which is zero, since he walked out on us.' Friends knew better than to try and engage me on the subject of my father. I became irritated with the pastor suddenly, blaming him, and not my self-imposed exile from his church, on his unfamiliarity with my caprices.

'You misunderstand me. Actually, I misspoke. I am not seeking to discuss your father, *pe se*. I wish to unload a burden of mine own. I wanted to tell you where he lives. I wanted to give you his address.' There was a long pause, for which I felt entirely responsible. He was waiting for me to respond. In my head I 'ummed' and stuttered, but my lips were silent. Eventually, after what seemed like an age, the pastor spoke again. 'His address, Beckett. He sends me a Christmas card each year, his address is on the envelopes. He's been at the same place for a while now.'

'And you never thought to tell me?'

'Oh, he asked me never to tell you or your mother where he was. I didn't agree with it, Beckett, but I was his pastor. I was bound to keep his confidence.'

'And you're betraying it now?'

'Yes'

'Why? You've never felt the need to do it before, why tell me now?'

'I have felt the need, although it's beside the point. I was never happy keeping it from you but it was a duty I kept to for twenty years and I consider that enough of a service rendered.'

'You've done your part and now you're washing your hands of it, is that right?'

'I'm sorry, Beckett. I'm not certain what I did was wrong. I'm not certain I wouldn't just do exactly the same thing if it were asked of me today. I'm not really certain of anything these days, which is probably the reason I'm calling today.'

'Calling today twenty years too late. Do you think I have anything to say to the man who abandoned me when I was a child? Wherever he is he can stay there and rot.' I hung up the phone, went into the kitchen and poured myself an unhealthy measure of cheap cognac from an old bottle I'd inherited when I moved into the apartment. It was still early and the alcohol made me nauseous. Either that or it failed to alleviate the sickness the pastor's phone call had inflicted. I decided I was just out of practice. I am a social smoker and a solitary drinker so my years with Nancy had drawn me out of the custom of drinking. I drank quickly and with purpose, so much so that my head began to throb numbly. My throat burned, my teeth felt coated in liquor and my left foot suffered a debilitating tingling sensation that I could not convince myself was unrelated to the alcohol.

I finished the bottle and was enthused by having done so, as if I had accomplished a long postponed chore, like painting the house or organizing the garage.

Invigorated by my victory I went looking for more good deeds of this nature to perform. The obvious candidate for my philanthropy was an almost full bottle of Galliano, purchased untold years ago in order to make one or two cocktails, and left to collect dust ever since. The drink was strong and bitter. The taste was so foul to me that I slowed the pace of my drinking dramatically, something I was



thankful for the following day when, unshaven and unsure I drove out towards the address the pastor had given me.

The town my father where my father apparently lived lay about 240 miles to the northwest, about a four hour drive. I was surprised to find he was not living on the coast. I had always assumed he had moved by the sea. That perhaps assisted me in blaming him less, though I always blamed him severely. The coastal life seemed like a better one, and even if leaving for a better life was no more forgivable, it was at least on some level understandable. But moving to where he did, Greendale, a microscopic dot on the map with a population under five thousand, the kind of town you could drive right through the heart of and not know it, moving to a place like that I could not understand. I certainly could not see my mother living there either. Were they then too different?

With a stop for gas, another to eat and delays in traffic along the way it took me just over five hours before I caught sight of the powder blue water tower emblazoned with the name Greendale, and underneath 'Home of the Hogs'. I got off the highway and began following the directions I had printed out that morning, driving cautiously and slowly, prolonging the 'car journey' portion of the trip as much as possible. When I reached his street I slowed even further and read the numbers off the mailboxes. After reaching his house I drove on, turned the next corner, parked, switched off the engine, and waited.

I do not know what I waited for, but it never came. However long I sat in my car, ten minutes, thirty, an hour, afforded me not a single benefit. I felt wretched

throughout and not the slightest bit rewarded by the postponement. The walk to his front door was, and I am sure will ever be, the longest I ever took. Each footstep seemed to grind my stomach into the sidewalk and I realized with a panic that I had no idea what to say. I had spent a five hour car journey considering little else but without any real purpose and thus no real conclusion. I had been thinking about what I would say but never actually deciding on anything. And then, when I walked up the front path that dissected the front yard I saw a small red tricycle, turned over on its side, and it dawned on me for the first time since I had been given this address, that herein might reside something more than a father. Here I might find a brother, a new sister, or even little nieces and nephews. It was while contemplating the enormity of this new idea that I knocked on the door and stood in dumb expectation. It was a young woman who answered the door, much younger than I had anticipated. I placed her around thirty years of age, maybe late twenties; too young I thought to have been my father's partner but perhaps not too old to have been his daughter. Yet she bore such little resemblance to me that any idea linking my blood line with hers was dismissed as inconceivable. I had two plausible assumptions left to me; that she was a daughter from a previous relationship that my father had inherited with his new life (though why he would have abandoned one family for another was still unresolved), or that this was the latest in a series of partners my father had been involved, this latter option seemed the more likely. She was an overweight fleshy woman, her clothes bulged and sagged morbidly, her hair was brown, greasy and hung formlessly about her ears. She certainly did not appear to possess any wealth so her only discernible asset

was her comparative youth. She was just the type of person I could imagine moving in with a man 25 years her senior.

‘Good evening, Miss,’ I began, ‘I’m sorry to bother you,’ because by the look on her face my arrival at her front door was a bothersome intrusion into her day, ‘I am looking for Mr. Thorne.’

‘Thorne died last year. We moved in in November.’

‘He died?’

‘Yep. Cancer it was. He went to see the doctor about something else, got told about the cancer in his stomach and died a week later.’

‘Do you know if he left any family? A wife, or any children?’

‘No, he lived alone as long as I’ve been in this town, which is all my life.’

‘He never had anyone living with him?’

‘Not that I knew. It ain’t exactly the smallest town, but I grew up on this very street. I think I would have known if Mr. Thorne had been keeping someone. You know Mr. Thorne?’

‘No. I knew him, I mean we met, a long time ago, but I didn’t know him.’ I stood silently at her doorstep. I was puzzled. I could see she expected the interview to end now, but it felt all wrong to me to have it end so soon. I was supposed to be in this house hours from now, discussing the last two decades with the father I had

thought lost. Of all the many scenarios I had played out in my head, leaving within a minute was never one, but, as ever, I was not to be given a choice in my fate.

'If there's nothing else I have to get back to my baby.' And she began to close the door.

'One more thing, could you tell me if, was he happy?'

'I wasn't there when he died.'

'No, but just through the years you knew him, or saw him, was he a happy man?'

'I don't know what you mean. He didn't look unhappy, but he didn't go out much. I'm sure he was just like anybody else, a little bit happy one day and a little down the next.'

With that I thanked her, removed myself from her front door and walked back to my car. I had considered pressing her for more information, trying to squeeze every last drop I could out of that uninformative sponge but not only had she convinced me utterly that any such illumination was quite beyond her, I had decided that all information on the subject was trivial. When I heard my father had died my reaction was most noticeably devoid of regret. My pendulum did not swing to the opposite emotion, relief, but there was no cursing fate that I had not been privy to his location just 11 months earlier, so we could have spoken, just

once, before he died. The loss of a father, one I really never knew, was astonishingly easy to bear.

I drove home through with the setting sun behind me, contemplating what it was I had missed in Greendale. My father had passed without whisper regarding the family he had abandoned. He left us all and maintained his exile for twenty years, and even a terminal prognosis could not bring him to reconsider. This was not a man I had anything to learn from, any reason to talk to or any love to bestow upon. I looked for the difference his death had made on my world but saw nothing. Every road and landmark I passed looked the same as it had that morning. My father dead, alive, dead again, none of it made a difference to the world I lived in.

I have long defined my world by absences. My father's absence dominated my adolescence, Nancy's absence permeates me now. Love eludes me. I move through one door, it escapes out the other. When I heard my father had died I waited for this feeling of absence to well up once more, and in a way it did, but not as expected, not at all as expected. This was an absence of regret, an absence of remorse, an absence of guilt. I felt nothing but absence about me, and it was glorious. Troubles and burdens fell about me and the wheels of the car I drove seemed to fly above the road. I felt newly unfettered, reborn free, so I abandoned the steering wheel and allowed destiny to choose a new road for me.

## A Visit

*In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*

Judges 21: 25

### Prologue: Home

At some particular point east of the Pacific Ocean and west of the Atlantic, a fair distance north of Mexico and a pretty equal distance south of Canada lies a small patch of farmland, which Corporal John Tyler called home. If the land had any other name it was just a generic eponymous title used by the locals, the other farmsteads whose acreage accounted for the environs, to distinguish it from another such plot; but for the Tyler family it was just 'home.' That name can hold different meanings for different men. John Tyler went to war with one idea of 'home' but soon encountered the multitude of definitions the word held for others. For some it covered entire nations, for others a region. A person could simultaneously hold a state, a county, a city, and a borough as his 'home' without feeling the slightest dint of inconstancy. Throughout this war he heard people speak of the 'North' and the 'South'. He felt the expectation thrust upon him to supplant his view of home with one of these indeterminate areas. While others around him happily conformed to the new ideology of 'regionhood,' happily

allowed the 'home' for which they were told to fight for to be redefined as a single point on a compass, John Tyler found he could not. Not that he tried. Perhaps the taking up of the new banner, the one named 'The North', was the product of determined effort to conform to the proper order of things, as laid out by officials, superiors and circumstances. Perhaps it was equally achievable for John Tyler to view the world this way, to fall in line with everyone else, if only he spared it the little effort needed. Whether this malleable definition of home, used by the commanders to instill a sense of unity in the ranks, or used by the infantry to combat isolation in the barracks, or used by the homesick to bridge the gap that otherwise seemed impassable, was already present in the minds of his fellow soldiers, was compliantly welcomed by them, or assumed after strenuous effort was irrelevant for John Tyler. He could not equate his home with the generic terms they used. In his mind no man could share the same home as he, unless he was kin and none of these men were kin to him. If two men from Connecticut met they would act like long lost brothers and demonstrate increased camaraderie. They would clasp each other's hands and make believe that within all the chaos that enshrouded them with this chance encounter each had witnessed a portion of their soul being hurled across the cosmos to the beautiful land of their birth. The fervent desire to experience this taste of their origin led these men to dilute their definition of it, expand their image of it, they extended its borders. The war collected many thousands of young men and threw them together to endure hell as one. Disparate ages, varying religions and ethnicities grasping for a common thread that could link them to the homes they left behind. For these men home

ceased to be a two story brick house, it ceased to be the town they hailed from, it grew to incorporate as many fellows as a man's reason could stand. It was a common enough occurrence in the ranks, which meant that Corporal John Tyler must have suffered from some deficiency, for he could not share in this liberal attitude interpretation of home. He saw his home every night in his dreams, calmed himself to sleep with its image and woke up every morning with its residue imprinted like a receding wave on a beach. He had no choice in the matter. This would have to be enough for him.

In this manner he saw his home every day, knew it as intimately as man can know any patch of land, and refused to butcher it to accommodate a passing acquaintance whose church lay 80 miles to the east of his, or whose father had kin in the next county over. John Tyler knew unequivocally what home was, needed no assistance in restoring the image to his mind's eye, and felt no palpable improvement in sharing the image with others. He saw it best at night, eyes shut, ears closed to the sonorous hum of men sleeping. It was then that John Tyler knew best what home was.

Home was a green hill, adorned in blossoming flowers and crested by a row of trees, with broad branches that would shelter you from the sun while you sat and gazed at the expanse below. He nearly always pictured it in summer, even during the coldest months when he knew that it too was under a blanket of snow, and even though he had last seen it in the fall. It did not matter if the land around him was winter white or autumn auburn, home was always green.



Home was always a green hill with steep banks you could tumble down in summer and sled down in the snow. Home was a steep green hill blanketed with daisies and buttercups with a farmyard at its feet; a small red barn, a coop for chickens, a farmhouse, a large oak tree and a wooden cross adorned in fresh flowers, all encircled by a red picket fence. Home was a pale yellow farmhouse with a red roof and white shutters at either side of the windows. Home was a porch-swing rocking lazily against a pale yellow backdrop while the earnest eyes of his wife's mother scan the land before her. Home was a farmyard with two adjacent fields that ran down to the river, though little more than a creek in his summer image, and beyond that, to the crop of hackberry trees that marked the limits of one's view from the house.

Home was a white wooden cross adorned in fresh flowers. The cross he had never wanted to make, never expected to have needed. The spot, beneath the shade of the oak tree, was beautiful, or at least it had been made so. His wife had liked that spot above all others and the serenity she brought to it seemed to linger about the grave. She had so often sat beneath it, her pale skin protected from the summer sun, reading her Hawthorne and Thoreau. She always chose that spot upon which to rest so when the need came to find a permanent resting place the choice was obvious. Remarkably there was little about the site that could be described as mournful; melancholy perhaps but in a brightening way that would remind him of the life that had once seemed brightest upon that very spot. He hoped the flowers were still being placed in his absence. They had promised him they would. It was the last promise he had elicited from them when he left.

Home was a red picket fence that he had helped his daddy erect many years earlier. It took him a whole two weeks to paint the whole fence, young as he was back then. He had hated that fence then. For those two weeks he cursed at it and swore to tear it down when he grew to be man of the house. Of course he had long since overcome that anger. Now, so far from his home he longed to return in time to that summer of red paint. How eagerly he would trade his current lot to spend three months painting and painting that fence. He remembered how brightly the fence had been then, brilliant red against the lush green grass. He could not help feeling proud of the work he had done, as if this was his Sistine Chapel. Today the color had faded, the paint was cracked and peeling. He promised himself he would repaint the whole thing once he got back, once he got back home. Yes, he would paint the whole fence. Make it brilliant once more, because that fence was as much his home as anything else.

Home was a creek whose gentle peace is broken by the play of children, running barefoot through the cool clear water. A creek where he had played as a child, where you could still find the wooden plank suspended by a rope his daddy had hung from an overhanging tree. He can remember that swing as if just yesterday he was a child upon it.

Home was those same children being called home to supper, running breathlessly up the field. First is Clara, ten years old in this memory, but he knows she is over twelve now. She easily outruns the other two. She has a thirst for exercise and competition the others do not share. Next is May, the youngest, only seven years old when last he saw her. She'll be ten soon. Her 'run' is a serpentine skip

through grass that covers her knees. Lastly, no longer running, but walking slowly as if every step taken is a pleasure, laughing with the others, but louder so that hers is the only voice this memory has preserved, is Grace, at fourteen his eldest daughter.

John Tyler remembers his daughters and the image is so bright it eclipses the others parts of his home. Gone is the steep banked green hill, gone the crest of trees, gone the farmhouse, the coop, the small grave and the picket fence. In this instant for them to mean 'home' is as preposterous as those other fellows butchered concepts of the word. At these times, when he is most at peace with the world, John Tyler knows what home is, and its names are May, Clara, and Grace.

## Chapter One

### The Approach

"How many do you see, child?"

"Three, Grandma."

"The Lord take my eyes. You're certain there are three? I thought I saw two."

"Yes, Grandma, there's three."

“Makes no difference, I’m sure, three or thirty. And they’re headed for the house?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“Where are the girls? Where is Grace?”

“She and Clara are both on the hilltop.”

“Then run there and bring them hither – quick, now!”

To the best of May Tyler’s knowledge there were two activities at which her grandmother could not be said to be without equal, her sole deficiencies, as it were; the first was seeing, particularly over distances like that between their front door and the Hackberry-topped hill that marked the southern boundary of their land, and upon which the three figures had been descried; the second was running, and having proven her worth at the one the girl threw herself into the other with alacrity. Dashing through the house and bursting out the rear door she blazed a path between the pen, coop, barn and outhouse that lay circumjacent to the farmhouse. Beyond these structures lay a pasture where the family’s ox grazed within the confines of a wooden fence. The girl ran alongside the fence due north towards the horizon, which, due to a rising inclination, lay just a few hundred yards away. Within the last steps the girl’s legs tired and, overlooking the urgency of her grandmother’s command, began walking the final stage. Prudence had its hand in her deceleration, too. Here, at the hill’s apex, steep slope met sheer rock face as the land dropped vertically 30 feet, before continuing its progress into the great beyond, apparently devoid of undulation. The family had lost a dog to this

sudden drop off after it abandoned discretion while chasing a rabbit. Though death on the farm was a seasonal reality, the untimely passing of the dog has a keen effect on the young girl and she had learned to step carefully around that ledge.

Grace was seated at the foot of a large Elm tree, one of a dozen or so planted in a line along this hilltop. Her sister, Clara lay at her feet, her head lain in her older sister's lap. Both were motionless save for a slight brushing of a hand over Clara's forehead. Clara's eyes were shut while Grace stared westward. All was still save that which obeyed the will of the wind, the leaves of the trees, the grass around them, the frill of their clothes, and the few strands of unclasped hair.

May's ascent had rendered her too short of breath to call out to her sisters; that, her slow steps, and the rush of the wind about them had allowed an undetected approach to the foot of the Elm, but once there the shadow she cast announced her arrival.

"Hello May, I thought you were helping Grandma with dinner, have you proven more trouble than your worth? My goodness, you're so flustered. Have you run the whole hill? You simply mustn't exert yourself like that. You'll do yourself an injury. You know, I can't see how anyone could find the notion to exert themselves in that manner on a day such as today. I suggest you study Clara and I and,"

"Grandma sent me to fetch you. There's men coming."

The elder sister turned to cast her glance down the hill towards the farm.

“Is it Papa?”

“Papa? I don’t think so.” The question had jolted the young girl. Where before had been a distinct purpose was now replaced with indecisiveness. “It might be Papa, I suppose. I never considered. But Grandma said he wouldn’t be back till next year at least.”

Clara had risen to her feet and had begun the descent down the hill, followed by her two sisters. “Wouldn’t he have written to say he was coming home? Why would the army send you home without letting you write first?”

“And Grandma said he wouldn’t...”

“I know what Grandma said. But still...”

Grace’s eyes fixed forwards began increasing her speed with each step, while May, still worn from her recent rapid ascent, and incapable of matching the stride of her elder sisters, fell further and further behind. By the time she reached the house May found her Grandmother frantically ushering Grace out the rear door.

“Take this bread, and this flask, too, and Clara’ll bring you some more if we need to,” and she thrust both items into a cloth sack which was handed to Grace. “And take your Granddaddy’s gun, too.”

“I’m not taking that gun, Grandma. It’s too heavy. How’ll I get up the ladder with all this?”

“Alright, child, leave the gun but go – hurry, hurry, hurry!” And so saying she shooed Grace away as the latter made an obedient bee-line towards the barn.

May followed her Grandmother into the house through the kitchen and the common room to the front door. These two rooms, and a third on the eastern side which had served as the girls' father's bedroom, comprised the lower level of the house. A staircase ascended from the common room to the second floor and the two bedrooms and bathing room located there.

Through the tiny window on the southern wall of the common room, May could see that the men had encroached to within 50 yards of the farmhouse, and, much to her disappointment for she now doubted the superiority of her eyesight, that there were only two men. She also noticed the absence of Clara.

"Grandma, where's Clara?"

"She's upstairs, and listen carefully, we're not going to make the slightest peep about either of your sisters. Clara's going to stay as quiet as a mouse up there, your sister Grace is going to stay holed up in the barn and you and I are going to make sure that no one suspects they're here."

"Yes, Grandma" Having not yet acquired a taste for rebellion May readily accepted the importance of an instruction when it was truly warranted.

"Now I'm going to open this door. You stay out of sight, you hear?" May nodded earnestly, shuffled off to the dark recesses of the room's corner and watched her grandmother open the front door and step forward onto the porch.

"That's close enough, boys."

From her vantage point peeking over the sill of the window, May could see the barrel of her grandfather's rifle leveled in the direction of the nearest man, who, venturing further than his companion had encroached to within fifty feet of the house. He wore a gray pants and a dark red shirt that fell open at his chest. Even from a distance May could see that his hands and clothes were thick with grime, and that his face had not been near a razor in some time. The appearance of the grandmother, and particularly the muzzle loader in her hands, checked the man's advance. He removed a broad hat from his head and holding it playfully before him met the old lady's glare with a wide smile.

"Good Evening, Ma'am. Would you care to level that rifle of yours elsewhere? You'll get no trouble from us, we're just looking for a bite to eat – fill our flasks and be on our way."

"If it's water you want there's a river t'other end of that field yonder. Might find an apple tree there, too, but I've got nothing to spare here."

The man broadened his grin, "Truth be told, Ma'am, my friend here is sick – real sick. We've been walking for days and he's getting worse. Hey Daniel," he yelled over his shoulder, smiling eyes rooted on the grandmother, "tell this nice lady how sick y'are."

May passed her furtive glance to the concomitant figure who presented a pitiful enough sight, though, as both indigents showed signs of elemental living, it was difficult to discern much difference between them.



“I’m real sick ma’am” the second man called from his position in the rearguard before looking towards the ground as if ashamed of the fact. His clothes were even dirtier than his friend’s. Dried mud in great quantity covered his shirt and arms, arms that hung heavy by his side. May could not but feel concern for the man. He did look the very figure of death and in grave need of some shelter and food if nothing else. She wondered at the cold defiance of her grandmother, so different than the loving neighbor one would have expected her to be. It was enough to send her shrinking away from this new character she did not recognize but such doubts were tucked away as she remained riveted to the scene before her.

“I’m sorry for your friend, but that ain’t my concern.”

“Now, ma’am, that ain’t Christian. This here fellow’s a war hero, we’re all war heroes. We really would be very much obliged if you could stop pointing that thing at us. Perhaps if your husband is around I might explain to him?”

“My husband is dead.” She spoke the words like a judgment. “Ain’t no one here but me, now leave my property or I’ll shoot you and your friend.”

Despite being impressed by the gravity of the situation by her grandma’s stern warning, May could not reconcile her mind to seeing these visitors shot. Luckily for her, the threats just made the man’s grin widen.

“Ma’am I’d say it’s good for a man to have a woman level a gun barrel at him from time to time, keep his mind from wandering too much, but my friend and I are hungry, we haven’t eaten a decent meal in a week, and we ain’t seen the inside

of a roof in as long. Besides, if you shoot us, what would the little lady in the window think?"

May fell away from the window and caught an admonishing glare from her grandmother who turned those same withering eyes on the suppliant man, he rejoining with his affable smile.

"Smile all you want son, there's nothing for you here and every reason for you to leave, so take your friend and git before you make me waste a bullet on you."

The man didn't move and both parties faced off without the slightest murmur. May felt the weight of one foot like it was a 30 pound sack so she shifted it slightly creating a creak that seemed to her to echo and reverberate around the room.

To May's relief the stillness was broken by a shuffling noise from around the west side of the house. Neither the lady or the man removed their eyes off the other but both noticed the shift in power.

"Luke? That you, Luke?"

An indiscernible response came from around the corner, out of sight.

"D'you find anything round there?" Eyes joyously fixed on the grandmother. The retort was louder this time, closer, and intelligible to the grandmother.

"Sure did, Jacob. Found me a real pretty fox."

The man called Luke emerged from the side of the house holding Grace by the wrist. She, disorientated on her family's own property, seemed unsure of each step she took. Upon the couple's appearance Jacob resumed his approach to the farm house, slowly, casually, but with impunity.

"Hear that, ma'am. You've got foxes in this farm. Bad things for a farm, foxes. You oughta thank us."

The old lady still stood rooted in the same attitude, though the expression in her face had dropped to despair, and the gun, still leveled at the approaching man hung loosely in her hands. When he reached the door, Jacob took the rifle kindly from the grandmother, as if he were relieving her of a great burden, and smiling his broadest, threw a fist into her abdomen that seemed to expel all the air in her lungs. She fell to the floor gasping. Stepping over her bent figure, all three men entered the farmhouse.

## Chapter Two

It took little time for the obtrusive trio to make themselves at home in the farmhouse. However, as it was near dusk when they arrived, it was dark by the time they sat down for their first sample of the grandmother's cooking. Jacob and Luke were the only diners as the man named Daniel was, it transpired, genuinely sick so had been sequestered in the downstairs bedroom, with a flask of water for company.

Clara's presence in the house had been discovered as soon as Jacob crossed the threshold. Contrary to her grandmother's instructions, the girl had ventured away from her hiding place and was following the exchange from the top of the staircase. When she heard her grandmother's body drop from Jacob's blow she as much fell down the stairs as he walked in. Thrown in his path she stood fearfully rigid before darting past to assist May raise the grandmother to her feet.

Since then the girls had remained ensconced in the kitchen while their grandmother, who had aged visibly since being hit, stood in the main room with the men. Her head hanging lower than before, her eyes veered away unable to remain in one place. She coughed occasionally and the pain it caused in her abdomen took her breath away each time. Whenever the men seemed low on food or coffee she would shuffle into the kitchen for more, trying not to allow her frailty to alarm the girls. The pretext offered was that the girls were all needed in the kitchen to handle the cooking, the normally tidy grandmother lending

legitimacy to this claim by causing as much disarray about the kitchen as she could; thereby also keeping her charges occupied and not so free to reflect on their current plight.

The men appeared to have forgotten about the girls, and about many other things save for the need for food and drink. It was sometime before either spoke about anything not concerning the satisfaction of their appetite. It was Jacob who was the first to look up from his plate. "I'd like to apologize for hitting you ma'am", he said through a ball of bread that filled one cheek, "it's not in my nature to hit a woman."

If the lady heard him she made no indication of it, but after a pause he continued. "Three years men been pointing guns at me, men been firing guns at me, been killing my friends, trying to kill me. I never saw any of them; their faces, I mean. You'd think a man shoots at you, wants to kill you, you expect to see his face. All I've got in my memory are blue uniforms and puffs of smoke. All I remember is being shot at by some Yankee phantom wants me dead. It will drive a man crazy to be hunted like that, every day, by a man he don't even know. But I left the army. Me and Luke here are done with being shot at and we're done having guns pointed at us, and I ain't planning on putting myself back in the position of allowing other folks to point guns at me. I tried asking you kindly but you wouldn't listen. "

"Can I get some more coffee, Ma'am?" Luke's words roused the lady and she disappeared into the kitchen. "Can't you shut up?"

"I've hardly said a word since we got here"

"Leave the woman alone, she doesn't need your apologies. Not that you gave her much of one."

"She didn't threaten to shoot you. Who are you to judge apologies?"

"We're eating aren't we? We're drinking and we've got a roof and some walls for the night, try just being thankful with your lot."

"I ain't thankful?"

"You know what I mean."

"I don't think I do, best if you explain yourself I reckon."

"You ain't satisfied, Jake. I've been drinking out of a creek like a dumb animal for weeks, and every time I'm drinking that river water I'm dreaming of a coffee pot just like what that lady there keeps bringing out. But you ain't satisfied. Now leave the woman alone."

"But I feel bad about hitting her."

"You don't feel bad about nothing. Let it alone. Eat your food and shut up."

The coffee pot returned as did the general silence in the room.

The two men had given little attention to the trio of girls in the kitchen, much to the old lady's relief. For their part, the men did not perceive much need to shepherd the girls. They did not know the exact distance to the nearest farm, but

knew it exceeded what the girls could cover on foot under dark. Secondly, any attempt to escape that did not incorporate all four women would jeopardize the safety of those that remained. Finally, the apparent condition of the grandmother should have put to bed any thoughts of absconding from the house. The lady herself appeared in no condition to leave the house, let alone cover the distance that escape would require, and the girls could be relied upon to remain by her side in order to provide the care she might need.

The scene in the kitchen was unnaturally quiet. This room was ever the noisiest in the house, the site of the most commotion and the work that marked the break and close of each day. Now the three girls were petrified in their stillness. May, the youngest, had found some solace in sleep, curled up on an old overcoat of her father's that had been laid on the floor. Clara and Grace, too scared for sleep, tried to occupy their hands and minds with whatever chores they could find to do in the room. The light was too dim to see but they cleaned and cleaned regardless.

"Where will they sleep?" whispered Clara, "they'll be off tomorrow don't you think?"

"I expect they'll move off tomorrow, yes. It's clear they're deserters or outlaws or something else that will mean they can't stay anywhere in one place. They'll get some food, take some water, probably some clean clothes and then they'll be off."

"You think they'll take some of Papa's clothes?" The idea seemed as much a violation as the intrusion into their home.

“Well I can’t see them being satisfied with anything of yours.”

“I hope they don’t take that hat of his, the one from Momma, you know? We should have hidden it; I should have when I was hiding up there earlier, but I didn’t and now it’s probably in plain sight. Do you think I should try and get up there before anyone else?”

“No, I don’t. Just forget about the hat. Forget about it till tomorrow, for now, let’s just clean.”

The cleaning motions continued uninterrupted for a while longer before Carla again broke the silence. “I wish Papa was here.”

“Well then nothing much has changed has it, because you were wishing he was here yesterday, too. Barely a day goes by without you telling someone you wished Papa was here.”

“Well then I wish Grandma was here. She’s been gone a long time. Do you think she’s OK? Perhaps we should just check?”

“She told us to stay put so you better stay put. Them men are still at their supper, you can hear ‘em eating loud as they are. She’ll be back in soon just you see.”

“They eat like pigs,” said Clara, “pushing beans and potato into their mouths and washing it all down with coffee. I think it’s vulgar.”

“Clara Tyler, I told you not to peek in that room.”



“I was just checking on Grandma, but I still saw them two in the corner of my eye and I don’t think either of ‘em’s had an empty mouth since they sat down. You don’t think Papa’s going to be like them when he comes home, do you?”

“Just keep cleaning, Carla, or see if May’s comfortable.”

The girl’s conversation was dropped by the return of their grandmother to the kitchen. “Clara,” the words came with great effort “the men want some food and water taken to the other one, the sick one. He was sleeping when before they even laid him down so I can’t see his being awake. Take May with you, and put a plate into him. Leave it by him and get yourselves upstairs to bed. Can you do that?”

The girl nodded emphatically. She did not wish to be found wanting in the face of any appeal from her grandmother. “Of course, Grandma, but May is still asleep, should we not leave her be?”

“No, I’ll feel better about the two of you if you’re together. You both need to get some sleep and you’ll find it easier upstairs where you belong. Grace and I will watch over them other two. They’re getting tired, too, won’t be long before they starting thinking about sleep.”

“Will they leave tomorrow, Grandma? I don’t like having them here. I wish they’d go.”

“Of course they’ll be gone tomorrow, probably before you even get up. Won’t be safe for them to stay here much longer, whoever’s been chasing them probably on

their trail as we speak. Now don't you worry about nothing. Just take that food into the other one and then get yourself and May off to bed."

May was gently roused by Grace, and, having been apprised of the instruction and equipped with the water jug, while Clara was handed a plate of bread and beans, she followed her sister to the bedroom where the sick man lay.

## Chapter Three

The room that the girls crept into was shrouded in darkness. Nothing could be seen of the inhabitant, but his presence was evident by the sonorous sound that escaped with each breath he took. The candle the girls carried radiated little light, illuminating nothing outside a little circle of floorboards on which they stood. The door they closed behind them feeling better to have placed a more tangible barrier between them and the two intruders who were still awake and still dining in the main room. There was something instantly disarming about the sleeping man that they showed in their preference to being shut up in the room with him rather than exposed to the sight of his friends.

After shutting the door the girls remained cautiously still while their eyes adjusted to the gloom and they gathered the courage they discovered was wanted to approach the bed. After a time, May turned slowly to her sister but was cut short before she could speak with a sharp hiss from Clara and a pinch on the arm. It was enough, however, to rouse Clara from her position. She was the elder here and as such should be expected to take the lead. Her grandmother had entrusted May's care to her, not the other way around. So she slowly stepped forward, May following close behind. It took about a dozen steps to reach the bedside, each one trodden with deliberate caution and a silent prayer not to disturb the silence with a creaking floorboard. The man had been laid on the bed, fully clothed, his boots still on and it was in that unchanged position that he still lay.

“Is he asleep?” whispered May, who sheltering behind the body of her sister and not aided by a deficiency in height, could not see the bed so well and was in need of some reassurance on the matter.

Clara said he was, and that fact being established both girls took to completing their tasks in the room as quickly as possible. As the man was asleep, and as neither girl felt any inclination to wake him, the food and drink was left on a little table beside the bed. Having delivered their burdens both girls turned to leave when a hand dropped down the bedside and grasped May.

“Please, where am I?” The man’s head had turned to eye the little girl whose own head barely rose above the bed. The shock of being caught by his hand stole her wits so May just stared at the two red eyes that searched her, that looked so confused and so desperate for clarity amongst the darkness in the room. “Where am I?” he asked again.

“This is my daddy’s room. You’re in my daddy’s bed. We just brought you some food. We didn’t mean to wake you. You’ll let us be, won’t you?”

“Let us be.” He repeated the words as faintly as an echo. He looked far worse now than he had done outside the house, when the party first arrived. He was sweating, his hair lay in damp mats against his forehead and the red rings around his eyes looked sore to the touch. He seemed completely without strength and May soon discovered that the hand that held her was easily repelled. Once May was free Clara grabbed her by the hand and dashed to the door, but before they opened it May pulled free and turned back to the bed.

“Your friends are in the other room eating.”

“My friends? Where am I? I don’t...”

“He’s delirious May,” hissed Clara, “come away upstairs like Grandma told you to. He’s got the food now let’s leave him be.”

“Yes, we’ve brought you food.” And May went back to the table and the plate and tearing off a piece of the loaf, offered it to the man. He took it gingerly in his hand and in a very slow motion put the morsel in his mouth.

“That’s right. There’s water too if you can sit up a little.”

Clara stood defiantly at the door, refusing to make the slightest step back towards the table. She would have yelled at her sister, if she was not so fearful of attracting attention, that of the two men on the other side of the door, or the man on the bed before her. She wanted to yell at her sister and she promised she would at the next opportunity; yell and holler and a lot besides, but for now she was kept silent, unable to leave without her, and unwilling to venture any closer to retrieve her.

“My name is May. I know your name, too. It’s Daniel. I heard them say so. Daniel’s a bible name, like my daddy’s. His name is John.” The man finished chewing the bread May had given him so she broke off another piece and held it out to him.

“I like bible names. My name isn’t in the bible. Papa says there aren’t as many girls in the book as men but I say there’s still enough, like Rachel and Mary. I

wish my name was Mary. That's not so different from May and it's in the bible which is where the best names are I think. Do you know the story of Daniel? It's one of my favorites. My sister Grace reads it to me as often as I like. Everyone I know has heard the story of Daniel, I'm sure you must have. It's about the man who could interpret dreams, but other people got envious about his interpreting dreams so much better than they and they had him put in a cave with some lions, but they didn't eat him because God protected him and told them not to."

"May, I don't think he can hear you. Look, he's asleep again." Little May saw that it was so and, feeling a little foolish to be caught chattering away at a sleeping man, went back to her sister and left the room in the same peaceful state they had found it.

## Chapter Four

When she heard the two youngest girls climb the stairs to their room, the grandmother set to making up a fresh coffeepot for the men. She did so absent-mindedly as such a simple task permits, and turning in her mind the possibilities of their position. Most men she had known had three basic needs; food, drink, which was oftentimes liquor, and a third that had so far not been mentioned, but she wondered, if the intruders were to stay for the time-being, how long they could be expected to remain content with food and drink. Sooner or later it was likely that Grace and even Clara might be threatened, and she could see little motivation for the men to depart any time soon. The farm was remote enough for them to be certain of privacy and it was largely self-sufficient. The grandmother's train of thought was broken by a sharp pain at her fingertips for her hand had accidentally brushed against the coffee pot. As instantly as it had arrived, the pain subsided and was replaced at the forefront of her concentration by a new thought, violent, murderous, but born from desperation. She swiftly began boiling a second pot of coffee, filling it to capacity, and likewise topping up the first pot. When both had reached boiling she called Grace to her side and whispered instruction into her ear. The chores of the farm entailed some gruesome acts but Grace still recoiled from her grandmother's words. The old lady took her by the hand and offered her warm yet strong words.

“Now, we need you to be strong, child. The girls upstairs are counting on us to be strong for them. Do you understand me?” Grace nodded but was visibly shaken and fearful. “I cannot do this on my own, Grace. I am going to need your strength, otherwise we’ll be lost.”

“But you told Clara that they’d be gone ‘for we know it. Won’t they leave tomorrow like you said?”

“I don’t know. They’ve got food a plenty here and it seems this is the first roof they’ve had over ‘em in a while. More they get used to it, less I can see them leaving. But what I do know is that this side of their sleeping is the best opportunity we’re going to get at this. As long as they stay here they ain’t going to get any more tired and weak than they are right now.”

“But this is murder.”

“There’s plenty of butchering on this farm so you’ve not excuse for being squeamish. Whether the Lord will look kindly on us I haven’t the luxury to consider. This is our home and our land and I’d say we held the rights to deciding who stays and who goes.”

The words did not persuade Grace but she was not rebellious in nature; though she protested she could not disobey.

Each woman grabbed a pot of coffee, moved into the common room and stood beside the dining table. Both men were now sleeping soundly, still sitting in their chairs, resting their weary heads on crooked arms. Grace stood over the man



called Luke, who had foiled her hiding attempt earlier; her grandmother stood over Jacob. Without hesitation the old woman emptied the contents of her steaming pot over Jacob's head. It hit him with a hiss before he began screaming into his hands, eyes screwed tight. The grandmother then grabbed a knife from the table dashed behind Jacob's chair and pulling his head back opened his neck with one stroke.

Grace, rooted to the spot when her grandmother made her attack, had panicked and dropped the coffee pot down Luke's back rather than onto his head. She, too, had picked up the knife but a weak-hearted attempt and a not-so-incapacitated foe turned the balance against her. Luke disarmed her with ease and pushed her to the floor with one hand. Across the table, the grandmother was facing him, his friend, ashen-faced, crimson-breasted sat between them, gargling his final breath. With a scream the man uplifted the table, tossing it to the side and threw himself at the old woman. She swung her knife at him but far too slowly. Luke grabbed her arm with his left hand and, holding the arm aloft, prized the knife from her fingers with his right. He flung it away angrily, sending it clattering against the wall. His two hands closed about her neck and squeezed until his knuckles turned white. When he withdrew his hands the grandmother's body fell lifelessly to the ground. Grace had crawled her way into the corner and sat there, her back pushed against the wall, staring at the man beside her grandmother's body. He was panting heavily as he turned towards her, his fingers still locked in the same attitude that had drawn life from the old lady, as if he was throttling the air between them.

“Why? Why did you have to kill him?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please...”

“You didn’t need to kill him. He wouldn’t have done nothing to you. Neither would I, so long as he was around. Kept me in line you might say. About the only man I’d allow to direct me. Reckon I owed him that much.” He inched closer to Grace and she backed up into the corner of the room.

“A man like him has no right dying like this, by some Grandma’s blade. And it will take more than just her death to set things right. He would have stopped me from hurting you but now he’s gone I’ve got no one to answer to. And you’ve just got to answer to me. Yes, that’s right. You and your sisters are going to answer to me for killing Jacob.

Behind the slowly advancing man, Grace could see the family rifle laid on the table, the same gun her grandma had wielded earlier that day. But now Luke was between her and the table, to reach the gun was beyond her and, with that fact accepted, and her ensuing fate imagined, she found herself unable to make any move to evade him. Luke saw the lack of flight in his quarry and smiled. Placing two large and rough hands around Grace’s neck he closed them tight around her windpipe. Grace’s body lurched to fight for air but her mind had resigned itself to death. She had been party to murder; this, then, was God’s due judgment. Yet still her body fought for life, her hands vainly clutching Luke’s arms as his grip tightened and lifted her light frame clear off the floor.

Then the room was filled by an eruption of noise that reverberated in Grace's eardrums. Luke's head fell forward towards her, his grip on her neck loosened and he collapsed to the floor. Behind him Grace could now see the slumped form of Daniel holding the family rifle, its smoking barrel wavering. The gun fell from his hands and clattered on the floor. Daniel followed it as his legs surrendered to the weight they were supporting. The last thing Grace saw before she passed out was Clara and May arriving breathlessly into the room.

## Chapter Five

When Grace awoke the first thing she noticed was the pain around her neck. She was lying in her bed in the room she shared with her sisters and when instinctively she raised her head to study her surroundings a blinding pain stopped her short. He made a low groan which brought a new face to the bedside. It was Clara.

“Good Morning, Grace, how do you feel?”

“My neck hurts.”

“I can imagine it does, it looks ghastly. Grandma’s neck doesn’t look half as bruised as yours and she says it hurts like the devil.”

“Grandma? I thought she...”

“Oh no, Grace. Never think such a thing. She’s not doing all that well to be honest. She hasn’t left her bed since it happened either. But she’s still living that’s for certain. You see I know it hurts, your neck I mean, but isn’t that hurt better than the other thing? I’m sorry, I’m just happy we’re all fine.

“Fine? What happened?”

“Oh, well you’ll have to thank that Mr Daniel for rescuing yourself and Grandma.”

“But he’s one of them.”

“He arrived with them, that’s true enough. But he says he hadn’t known them longer than a day or two. Just met them on the road and being in as bad a shape as he was it was best to have their company. I think they thought it might earn them a little more sympathy having him along.”

“But where is he now?”

“Somewhere downstairs, I imagine. One thing’s for certain, wherever he is, your sister May will be too. Two days you been up here and she’s left his side barely once. Girl’s smitten I tell you. So if you’re thanking him for rescuing you from that other man, well then be sure to thank me for caring for you since.”

“You’ve been nursing me Miss Nightingale?”

“I surely have. Of course, I don’t mean that May and that Mr. Daniel have been entirely idle through your convalescence. They handled the... the burials. And I was never so happy to have escaped a chore.”

“Little May did that?”

“Well no, of course not. But as I said, they’re inseparable those two. So where he goes she follows, even to dig a couple of graves.”

“Is it safe for him to be left alone with her?”

“I can’t say I’m opposed to a little caution around him, more so than May’s been showing, but the fact is he’s been ever so good, and I figure if he meant us any harm he could have done it a dozen times before now. But listen, now this bit’s important, you must not tell Grandma that he’s still here. When she woke up in

her bed she was nigh delirious. I feared it might send her crazy to tell her one of them was still in the house. So I kept it from her. I lied to her. Oh Grace I never felt so shameful as I did then.”

“And rightly so, Clara. How could you lie to Grandma?”

“Oh but you didn’t see her. I never seen her eyes look like that, so wild and on fire. The only thing that seemed to calm her was me telling her they’d all gone. So he’s agreed to keep a little silence around the house. I’m not past fearing what would happen to her if she realized he was here with us.”

“But you can’t keep it from her forever.”

“I know that silly. But for now she’s still in her bed and I don’t think she’ll be well enough to come out any time soon. And until she gets a little better I don’t want to risk letting her find out about him.”

“But Clara, lying to Grandma. It can’t be right.”

“You haven’t seen her, Grace. At least hold judgment until you visit her in her room. If you think there’s no risk of any harm, then tell her. But try not to get me in too much hot water when you do. I did nurse you back to health after all.”

Clara beamed a smile that in Grace’s eyes lit up the room.

“Oh please don’t make me smile, it hurts my neck when I do.”

“Now what kind of request is that to make? I’m sure I’m utterly incapable of complying with any such fool request. Now you stay here while I go get some food for my patient.”



## Chapter Six

The hill behind the farm had been neglected since the men first arrived. In more normal circumstances, certainly from spring through fall, the girls could be expected to make a daily visit to its summit; sometimes as early as dawn, to catch the rise of the sun and watch the darkness dissipate over the fields; oftentimes, if the day was not too hot, they would run up in the afternoon when the eye could reach the furthest; but usually they ascended the hill in early evening, after supper. The three sisters would sit and lie under the trees and talk, swapping stories, or reading to each other until the light failed. In fair weather, rarely would two days pass without the girls visiting their hilltop, yet a full week had passed since they last were there. If the trees were capable they might have expressed concern for their frequent neighbors kept away so uncommonly. It was on the eighth day that one of them returned; the youngest, May, and with her a man, named Daniel, the first man to stand atop that hill since the sisters' father had left for war.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"That it is, May."

"I told you it would be."



“That you did.” The sight was indeed a pleasant one, particularly to the newcomer, but there was a melancholic touch to Daniel’s words that tempered the enthusiasm of the listener.

“Clara says you can see twelve miles. Do you think that’s true? Papa says the stars are thousands of miles away and we can see them. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a lovely sight whatever the distance.”

“It will make a lovely drawing, won’t it? I wasn’t wrong.” The man had brought with him a large sketch pad, one that had belonged to May’s mother, and sitting down he placed it on his lap. Then he drew a dark pencil from his breast pocket, put the tip between his lips and then rested it on the paper before him.

“I can’t make this look any better than it does already,” he said while squinting out over the sun drenched land.

“Well that doesn’t matter. If people worried about that they’d only draw horrid dull views. You can’t refuse to sketch something because it’s too pretty.”

“Just so you won’t be disappointed if it doesn’t end up looking as nice as you can see with your own eyes.”

“That drawing of the house you did was lovely and this one will be too. Now stop talking and start drawing; you know if you talk I will, and you can’t be concentrating on your sketching if I’m nattering in your ear. I brought you up here and I intend to afford you the proper environment for artistic success. I learned that from Mother who could draw a picture as prettily as any you ever seen.”

“I’ve no doubt she could, but you won’t bother me my talking. I’m not the artist she was,” and saying so he drew his first stroke on the page, nevertheless, May remained silent until Daniel spoke again some minutes later.

“You know, I really cannot draw. Trouble comes when you draw something that someone likes, or they’re polite enough to say they do. It’s too easy to believe them and you convince yourself you can do something that you can’t. I convinced myself I could draw but the more I do it the more I realize I can’t. I’m certain I’m supposed to enjoy this, but seeing this mess form on the page is almost depressing.”

“I’m sorry, Daniel. I didn’t want you to be upset by it, I thought your other drawing was lovely and I’ll be ever so pleased with this one if you’ll let me keep it.

“Of course I will, May. I just think that after I finish this one for you I’ll stop. It’s been awhile since I last had the chance to draw but doing it now just makes me realize it’s not for me.”

“Well I do think that is a shame but so long as you finish this picture for me I guess I’ll accept it.”

“Right you are, Miss May, and what say you to that,” and he presented the sketch book to her.

“Now, see, it’s wonderful. Why’d you say all those silly things about not being able to draw? It’s, why it’s beautiful. I’ll show it to Clara and you just see if she

doesn't think it's as pretty as a lily." May was staring deeply into the fresh picture, her smile gradually fading as her thoughts left the scene between her hands. "Clara says Grandma is getting much better."

"That sounds like good news, May"

"She, Grandma that is, says she feels well enough to be leaving her room soon."

"Oh, aye, of course. It's past time I was moving on anyway."

"But you needn't go."

"Best I should. It's been nice to rest here awhile but your sister's made it clear it won't do the old lady any good to find me on her property."

"But I was thinking, perhaps, we could move you into the barn. It's not at all as bad as it sounds. Papa's always kept it clean and dry and it'll only take a blanket or two and you'll be as warm and dry as if you were still in the house."

"I can't stay in holed up in a barn, May. It's very nice of you, but it's the right time to be moving on."

"At least can you stay till Sunday? That's only two more days."

"It's best I leave, May."

"But Sunday... it's my birthday. You will stay for that won't you?" The appeal made by her eyes exceeded that of her words and Daniel's will proved no match for it.

“Alright, May. I’ll leave Sunday morning, after I’ve wished you a happy birthday. Will that do?”

“Oh thank you, Daniel. It will do, it will do most splendidly. Maybe, if I’m especially good I’ll get a new picture for a present.”

“A *new* picture? And what then will become of this fine specimen I just labored on? Just cast aside like yesterday’s bread? Here, pass it over and I’ll inscribe it with a fitting birthday dedication. There now, you won’t be bettering that.”

“Thank you, Daniel, it’s wonderful. I’m going to show it to Clara right away. Come on, first one down the hill is the winner.”

“And that will be you because I have no intention of breaking my neck running down that slope. I’ll see you at the bottom little lady.” May gave him her broadest smile and took off down the hill as fast as her legs could take her.

## Chapter Seven

The following day Grandma was declared well enough to emerge from her room and descend the stairs. Accordingly, and in plenty of time beforehand, Daniel and all notice of his presence had been removed to the barn. The conditions in the barn were certainly livable, especially when compared to the many fields, ditches, banks and copses he had been required to use for overnight rest. Nonetheless, he could not escape a feeling of degradation brought on by this recent reduction in circumstance. He felt like the family dog, banished from the house, considered unfit to reside there. Yet even a pet could depend on being acknowledged by his owners, Daniel on the other hand had been secreted away with no mention made by the sisters lest their Grandma catch wind of it. It made him feel embarrassed, forsaken, and ashamed, but he told himself it was only for one night. He would be leaving the next day, continuing a journey he dot much care to complete but was compelled to regardless. For May's part, she also regretted sending her friend to the barn and had argued about the necessity of having to do so. Clara had argued her part too and though May's conviction was not swayed by her sister's words she had ultimately conceded the point; after all the natural order of such disputes greatly favor the elder sibling. So when Grandma came out of her room and returned to the main part of the house there were no men to meet her there.

She came down the stairs aided by Clara and a great fuss was made about seating her comfortably in the dining room. "May I get you a cup of coffee, Grandma?" was May's inquiry. "Let me fetch you a blanket for your legs," suggested Grace. Even her recent convalescence had not accustomed the old lady to being waited

on so, but her weakness persuaded her it was needed, so she thanked the girls for their assistance as they made her comfortable in a chair and brought her enough food and drink for three people.

“I am glad to see you well, May,” spoke the grandma after a few bites of lunch, “I’ve seen far too little of you recently, though I understand a sick old woman isn’t much company for a girl like you. I trust you’ve been keeping yourself busy.”

“Yes Grandma, I have.”

“I’m glad that all the, um, trouble we had didn’t worry you too much. I must say I couldn’t be prouder of the way you girls handled everything, particularly after I..” She could not find the words she wanted so took a sip from her coffee cup instead. When she put the cup down on the table she said, “you father would not be happy to know what you girls endured here, but it would warm his heart if he knew how strong you were when it was needed. I’m sorry I was not there to help with the burials.”

“Clara and I did it fine on our own, Grandma,” said May, “we honestly did not need any help at all. We had both graves dug before lunch.”

“Both? Only two graves?”

“Um, well, I...”

Clara came to her sister's rescue. "We, ah, dug the first two, and it was real hard work, so we figured we'd fit two of them men in one grave. So we put the smaller two in together, didn't seem to matter much."

"Don't matter how evil ye be, a man deserves his own grave. We'll need to put it right eventually, but I can't fault you on what you've managed to achieve. I mean it, I'm proud of the lot of you." May's cheeks burned to hear her grandma's praise follow a lie and she prayed for relief from this position.

"I'm so very sorry I didn't do a better job of protecting you girls."

"Oh, you needn't worry about us," urged the emphatic Grace, "we were fine. Weren't we, girls?" And she turned her eyes upon her sisters who responded with similar assertions, but their grandma was unmoved. "Lying in my bed these past days I could not help thinking I could have, should have done more. I should not have allowed them near the house. I'm just glad the Lord chose not to punish us for my foolishness."

"But Grandma, there was nothing you could have..."

"Quiet. I could have done plenty. We had the house and the rifle. What did they have, save for thirst, hunger and fatigue? I should have shot the lot of them right there and then. Instead I panicked and it almost killed us."

"Grandma?" ventured May, "I'm glad you didn't kill them then, they hadn't done anything wrong and you shouldn't kill someone who's done nothing wrong."

“Maybe so, May, but you listen to me,” and she beckoned the youngest sister to stand before her. “You remember when your daddy shot that fox last year?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“And what had that fox done to your daddy to get himself shot?”

“Nothing, Grandma.”

“But you’ve seen what happens to the coop when the fox isn’t shot?”

“They get at the chickens.”

“So we know, that when we see a fox we shoot it, because what a fox does, given the chance, is to get at the chickens, correct?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“Them men, May, were foxes, as much as if they had red fur, tails and sharp teeth. They tried to hide it but I seen it in all of them. Each one showed it in their eyes. And on a farm, there ain’t but one way to treat a fox, you have to kill it quick before it gets the chickens. Your Grandma made a mistake, May, but it ain’t one I’m likely to make again. Next stranger comes here and wants in the house is getting shot at, mark my words.”

May disliked her grandma’s words. She felt her friend was being threatened. She wanted to jump to his defense, to argue his true virtue, but the only response she foresaw from her grandma was marching to the barn rifle in hand, so she



swallowed her words and demurely sought her leave. "May I go outside, Grandma? I would like to play in the barn."

"Of course, you don't need my permission, play where you like, my dear."

## Chapter Eight

The next day was May's birthday and the family breakfast was taken in her honor. Clara had decorated the table with freshly picked crocuses and Grace had adorned May's chair with a yellow ribbon tied in an abundant bow. May basked in the attention afforded her this morning but once breakfast was concluded she promptly excused herself and dashed over to the barn.

She found Daniel towards the back of the barn, behind a few hastily stacked bails of hay, the same spot she had left him the previous day. He was sitting on the floor with his back against the bail cleaning his boots with a rag, and by the look of them May believed he must have been cleaning them for some time.

"Good morning, Daniel, I'm sorry if you've been waiting for me. I know I said I'd come right away, but Grace and Clara decorated the table for me and then grandma made pancakes and I didn't want to be rude. I am sorry you've been stuck in this smelly old barn."

"The barn's been fine, May and don't go apologizing for anything. I'm glad you've had a nice birthday morning."

"I did. And look, I brought you some things for you," and she handed him a basket she had brought with her. "There's two more of papa's shirts, I thought it would be nice to have a change; and there's a small piece of bread, probably only good for a day or two anyway; and I put in a canteen, it's empty, don't know why I didn't put anything in it, but you can fill it up at the creek. I tried to think of other things that might be useful but I couldn't."

“It’s very kind of you, May. They’ll be a lot of help. I have something for you, too. I drew another picture, can’t say it will be any good, I was drawing from memory and the light in this barn ain’t the best, but I hope you like it. I didn’t want to not give you anything on your birthday.”

“But you already gave me a birthday picture.”

“Well I guess you got two, now.” He gave her a small piece of paper, five inches square, that bore a woman’s portrait. “It’s my mother. Guess, there’s no reason you’d want a picture of her, but when I sat down to draw she was all I could think about.”

“She’s beautiful, it’s a beautiful drawing Daniel. I’ll treasure it alongside my other one.”

May heard Grace’s voice calling her from the house and gasped.

“It’s alright,” whispered Daniel, “I should be leaving anyway, want to make sure I get a good distance before sundown, especially on the first day.”

“Oh Daniel, I will miss you so very much,” and sobbing she threw her arms around him.

“Don’t you make it hard on me, you just run off home now. Go on, they’re still calling you, run off home and don’t waste any more thoughts on me.” Still sobbing, May, clasping the portrait tightly to her chest, ran out of the barn and back towards the house, never once looking back.

She ran into the house, burst through the kitchen, dashed up the stairs, went straight into the girls' bedroom and threw herself upon her bed. Grace and Clara soon after appeared in the doorway. "Please," said May, "I would just like to lie alone for a moment." Neither sister moved, yet neither did they speak until Clara faintly began, "May, Grandma... she found... your picture." May raised her head slowly from the mattress and saw in Clara's outstretched hand the picture Daniel had drawn for her atop the hill, crumpled slightly, but still bearing the legible inscription 'To May, for her birthday, Daniel.'

"Where is Grandma?" she asked, but at that point the crack of a rifle shot rang out and May screamed. She jumped from her bed and pushed past her sisters ran down the stairs and out of the house. She was just ten steps outside the house before she was arrested by the sight of her grandma emerging from the barn, the rifle delicately cradled in her arms.

May stood rooted by a fear she'd never experienced before, a fear that by far surpassed any she had felt when the men first arrived. Each step her grandma took seemed to echo like a tolling bell that made May want to run away but her legs would not obey. The grim set features of the old lady came closer but she never looked at the little girl, rather staring directly at the house. May remained paralyzed as her grandma walked past her and the only thing she heard her say was, "Gotta shoot the fox on the farm."