News and Events of Importance in the World of Women

Katharine Mitchell

The University of Montana
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News and Events of Importance in the World of Women

by

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News and Events of Importance in the World of Women

Prologue

The dirt road your date turned onto is rutted out like a washboard, and the Packard fishtails and drifts. You’re outside of city limits and you haven’t seen another car since your date pulled off the two lane highway by the rundown Esso station. It’s dark out but the moonlight filters through the thick canopy of oaks and pines, casting quivering constellations on the windy road. Empty beer bottles clink under your seat and Glenn Miller blares on the radio. Your head feels light and your throat burns from that unfiltered Chesterfield and the small sips of whiskey you pretended to enjoy. You roll down your window and take a deep breath. The pine trees smell like gin and the humid sweetness of jasmine smells sexier than the rosewater you dabbed on your wrists and the soft skin between your breasts.

You feel your date’s hand slide up your nylons, inching under the silk hem of your red dress. He hooks one finger under your lacy black garter and tugs. You don’t particularly like your date, a tall, dark-haired man with a crooked jaw, the goofy smile of Gene Krupa, and a hangnail that’s sticking to your nylons. but he pitches for the minors and he’s reserved a special table for two at The Pines, where soon you’ll be nibbling on shrimp cocktail and sipping martinis and then waltzing across the dance floor that’s mirrored to reflect back the starry ceiling.

As you pass under a stretch of trees grown so close together they form a tunnel, you wonder if your date has accidentally turned down the wrong dirt road or chosen the wrong one on purpose. It seems impossible now that Poinsettia’s jazziest, most elegant nightclub is situated this far back in the wooded darkness.
The trees open up again and you hear the drum roll of car tires thumping over a wooden bridge. Your date cuts the engine and the car coasts to a stop. Two headlights float like luminescent lilies in the starry stream. With the radio off you can hear the cicadas hiccup and the bullfrogs belch like drunks. And then you hear the music: the ratta-tatta of drums, heartbeat of bass, the cocky smoothness of an alto-sax. Your date twists around and takes your face in his hands. Then his tongue is a snake trying to slither down your throat and his hand is heavy on your thigh. The smell of his cologne mingles with the boiled-meat taste of cigarettes and you try not to breathe as you slide your sweaty palms gently over his knee, so as not to wrinkle his trousers. You hold still while he cups one hand on your breast. You count to five and push him away. Tonight, if he doesn’t get jealous when you dance with other men, you’ll let him get a little more on the ride home.

You lean forward and place your hands on the dusty dash. You know that other folks drive in from hundreds of miles around to dine and dance at The Pines, and you, too. feel as if it’s taken you forever to make this holy pilgrimage. As the car crests the rise, gravel pings against the car like a drum cymbal announcing you’ve arrived. And then you see it—the heavenly glow of the city swinging on the hill.

The flashing “P” on the neon green sign appears first, and then the whole name “The Pines” magically appears out of the dark. From the exterior, the club looks like nothing but an old lodge, pine logs sawed in half and cemented together log-cabin-style. Your date pulls up to the entranceway and a valet wearing a sprig of pine in his small velvet hat helps you out of the car. The sidewalk is a lesson in dancing. Someone danced down the sidewalk while the concrete was still fresh. Your date takes you in his
arms, and he counts out loud as you follow the indented footprints of a foxtrot up to the front door. Your new red heels bite at your toes, but you don’t regret having worn them. You spent ten minutes before the shoe store mirror admiring the way the heels defined the shapes of your calves.

The doorman compliments your dancing and swings open the pine-planed door. Your date places his hand on your lower back and leads you in. The chandelier hanging from the pressed tin roof casts diamonds of light on the black marble floor. A mural stretches down the hall leading to the lounges—a green and black forest rising up the walls and extending onto the ceiling, forming a latticework of leaves above your heads. The other dark green walls are covered with large black and white photos of elegantly dressed men and women toasting and dancing and kissing each other’s cheeks. You smell the rich smokiness of grilled salmon and steak, the earthy undertones of sautéed mushrooms, and the greasy kick of hushpuppies and fried hot peppers. A girl dressed like a wood sprite in an airy chiffon dress and a wreath of laurels calls you honey as she checks your wrap and your date’s hat.

Your date takes your elbow and leads you through the silk curtain of leaves dangling from the archway leading into the dining room and ballroom. The leaves tickle your face and catch at your hair and your heels sink into plush red carpet. A sudden flash blinds you and then you hear the cameraman. Beautiful, he says. The most gorgeous couple here tonight. As the orange spots of the flash fade, a black waiter takes your elbow and escorts you to your table. The lights are dim and the music is soft and you feel like you’re floating as you pass table after table of good-looking men and women who smile and wave at you and your date. The plush, cushioned booths lining the walls are
empty, the red velvet curtains tied back with gold tassels. You wonder if your date has one reserved for a nightcap later, after you’ve spun yourselves silly.

Your waiter pulls out your red-legged dining chair. You sink into the zebra-striped cushion. In place of a vase of pink carnations, a goldfish bowl serves as the centerpiece. An extra wine glass is arranged at every place setting. In each wide-mouthed crystal glass, a single goldfish swims lazily in tight circles. The gold gills shimmer like sequins. Your date toasts you with his goldfish and pretends like he’s going to drink it. Over in the corner, near the mahogany bar, a woman screams. You look up in time to see a slick-haired man in a black suit pitching a fish down the V of her dress.

The NightinGals, the house’s all-girl orchestra, are lined up behind their silver music stands on the long stage. They’re wearing black feathery dresses and matching black hats. You’ve heard that after dinner they play the fast tunes everyone is craving, but for now they’re playing “Blue and Sentimental” and the large silver stars dangling over the stage reflect back the spotlights, and a warm, relaxing glow stretches across the empty dance floor.

Your date orders you a Pines signature—a dirty martini with four olives and a souvenir charm hung around the stem of the icy glass. The sterling silver musical note, small as a teardrop, tinkles as you take your first sip. Your date hands you his note. As you slide it into your bra for safekeeping, you promise to add it to your charm bracelet.

You recognize people from town and the newspaper. There’s Mayor Howorth and his Hungarian wife, the ex-trapeze artist, sitting with Thrush Lindal, president of Carolina Bank. And there’s Shoeless Joe Jackson’s second cousin sitting with Maria Pruett, Poinsettia’s next Hollywood hopeful. She’s wearing the same silver dress you
saw on the cover of *Vogue* and you wonder if it’s only a copy. At a large round table in the center of the room sit almost all of your date’s teammates. You recognize Powerhouse and Shag and all the shortstops and hard-jawed hitters that have folks betting on the new Dixie League’s hottest team, The Cleaners. They’re the odds-on favorite to win the play-offs this year. Everyone’s optimistic. Shag spots you and your date sharing the candlelit two-top and waves. The other players turn and lift their glasses and whistle. You know they’re only teasing your date, but you can’t help but blush. You’re sitting alone at a table with the Cleaner’s best player.

You smooth your hands over the linen tablecloth, smell the pine scented candles flickering in frosty white globes and help yourself to the chilled boiled peanuts served in a coffee tin. The watery brown juice dribbles down your chin and your waiter appears with a fresh white napkin and another round of drinks. Your date asks who to thank and the waiter points at a table of men who have called over one of the long-legged cigarette girls. You overhear them laying bets for the Cleaners. She folds their money into little green envelopes on which she jots down their betting numbers. Your date calls out thanks and the men raise their glasses and toast him.

Soon you catch sight of Riley Teller circulating among his guests. He’s hard to miss, the most gorgeous man in the joint. He has molasses colored hair and a square jaw and bright blue eyes you could drown in if you stared too long. You hold your breath as he struts toward your table. His tan linen suit is pressed up to his waistband and a white lily peeks out of his jacket pocket. Your date stands to shake Riley’s hand. They talk baseball for a minute and then Riley bends down and kisses your hand. His nose brushes your knuckles and he compliments you on your perfume. He draws the lily out of his
pocket and slides it behind your ear. And then he struts off as smoothly as he approached you and bends down to kiss another woman’s hand.

You wonder what special surprises Riley Teller has for his guests tonight. Insiders call him Daddy because of the way he continuously checks up on guests, offering anything and everything to make them happy. You’ve heard that sometimes the ceiling falls and green balloons rain down on the dance floor. Guests scurry after the prize-stuffed balloons, popping them with steak knives, hoping to find a rolled-up fifty-dollar bill. Most hold coupons for free drinks and dinners or one-dollar bills. You’ve heard that sometimes he passes out small bottles of champagne with the guests’ names printed on the label, or glass jiggers with The Pines printed on one side and on the other illustrations of drunk dancers matched with lines of degree indicating “clubfoot,” “happy foot,” or “Fred and Ginger.”

Your date orders a petite steak for you and a New York Strip for himself. He eats all of his and half of yours and requests another basket of bread that comes with chilled pats of butter shaped like trees. You’re so excited you can barely eat but you save room for dessert, a thin slice of rum pie dusted with shavings of dark chocolate.

When you get up to go to the powder room, your date stands and you feel the eyes of men follow you across the floor. You raise your chin and sway your hips a little, eyes cast demurely straight ahead. In the pink and white, softly-lit powder room, you relax and say hello to the ladies smoking on the white satin couches, their stocking feet propped on each other’s legs. You listen as the younger women retell the story of how Riley Teller opened The Pines as a gift to lure down his young bride from New York. He first saw Candy singing and dancing in those small clubs of the twenties guests needed
passwords and fur coats to drink in. The girls speculate that Candy spent the two years she was married trying to run back to New York and how Riley kept spending more and more money on her, trying to keep her home. He bought her all the dresses, shoes, and hats a girl could want. He bought her a 1929 Packard with leather seats. At The Pines he started serving oysters Rockefeller and pouring free champagne. He commissioned the mural for the lobby, and installed a constellation of stars, small white bulbs that glowed when the lights went down and reflected off the mirrored floor tiles. And although it's not a secret, the girls lower their voices as they mention the car wreck. They smile, and you know what they're hoping. Like all the single girls at The Pines, you'd love to be Daddy's next Candy.

You sit back down at your table just as desserts are being cleared away. The clattering of dishes stops and all twenty waiters line up on the dance floor. They each hold a bottle of champagne dressed in a white napkin. The spotlight follows Daddy as he dances out carrying the twenty-first bottle. Renny and the NightinGals play an intro and a drum roll. Daddy holds out his arms and the place falls silent. He squats a little, face as clean and excited as a boy's, and then he pops the first cork, setting off the twenty-one cork salute. The waiters follow suit and corks fly, popping one at a time. Waiters return to their tables, pouring more fruity-smelling bubbly. The lights dim and the stars burn on the ceiling, reflecting off the floor. When the music starts, "Sing, Sing, Sing," you smile and lift your eyes over the rim of your drink. There's someone waiting to ask you to dance.
Chapter 1

Pearl’s babysitter Molly sat down on the cushioned vanity bench and stretched out her long, tanned legs, modeling lingerie that had belonged to Pearl’s mother. At fifteen, Molly filled out the lacy black corset and sheer black panties that smelled faintly of lilac sachets. In the dim lamplight, the blond hairs on her stomach shone, and the mauve-colored chicken pox scar to the left of her belly button looked dark and mysterious as a beauty mark.

Pearl gathered the red silk skirt of her mother’s evening dress and knelt at Molly’s feet. The nails in the attic floorboards dug into her knees, and she shifted, inching closer to Molly’s smooth, bare legs. Molly had been babysitting for Pearl all summer. Molly’s father wouldn’t allow her to date until she turned sixteen, but Molly was saving her babysitting money so she could run away to New York and sing in a nightclub like Café Society or the Stork Club, a place where the movie stars kept tabs and the ladies tucked rose petals in their brassieres. Pearl picked a piece of black fuzz caught between Molly’s toes and blew it off her finger. Molly’s toes descended in perfect order, big to small, not like Pearl’s, the second toe longer than the queens. It was past midnight, and the fan whirled in the attic window, barely stirring the hot, stuffy air. Outside, cicadas shook steady as maracas and hard black crickets tuned their leggy violins. Pearl ran her finger along the arch of Molly’s dangling foot and outlined the tough curve of her heel, brushing off bits of dirt picked up dancing barefoot across the dusty attic floor.

Molly shifted her foot and giggled. “That tickles,” she said. “Make your strokes more firm.” Molly had been in tears when she’d walked over earlier that evening. Pearl knew without asking that Mr. McNaughton had been yelling at her again. He blamed
Molly for driving her mother insane. Molly’s mother had snapped one evening at their dinner table back in Florida. That’s the word Molly used: snapped. Pearl imagined a taller, less beautiful version of Molly breaking in two, clean and quick as a carrot or a stick of peppermint. Pearl tried to imagine Mr. McNaughton snapping, but his belly was too big to picture him halving. Sometimes he lashed out at Molly and told her cruel things—that she was vain, dumb, and crazy as her mother. He’d told her she sang like a bullfrog and danced like a crab. Some of the things Molly said her Daddy called her made Pearl want to laugh, but Pearl held in her giggles and pampered Molly so she’d want to go upstairs and play dress up. Usually, that meant sitting in the living room sipping 7-Up out of martini glasses and listening to all the records Molly picked out to hear. But that night, Pearl hadn’t been the one to cheer up Molly.

Daddy had still been home when Molly knocked on the door, face wet with tears. He’d smiled at her and offered her a sip of his martini. As Molly raised the glass to her lips, Daddy placed his hand on her shoulder and assured her that her father was an all-round good guy, even if he could act like a complete asshole. Daddy’s thumb had brushed Molly’s heart-shaped locket, and a rash of goosebumps had spread across her tan skin. Daddy had offered Pearl a sip of his drink, too, and Pearl held the cool sip of gin against her tongue, relishing in the fact that she, Molly, and Daddy had all shared from one cup. When Daddy left, Molly and Pearl stood in the screen door and waved Daddy off as he roared up Earl Street on his motorcycle. As soon as he crested the hill, Molly had raced up the stairs, yelling back to Pearl to hurry up before she missed the last train for New York.
Every night, the girls yanked the frayed white string hanging from the second floor hallway ceiling. The rusty springs of the trapdoor groaned and neighed and the rickety ladder fell down with a great clatter. The musty, nose-tickling smells of mothballs and closed-up space smelled like magic to Pearl. The attic was all theirs. No men allowed. It was a world for women and their dreams.

The long, skinny attic had windows on both ends and a sanctuary-like ceiling that rose ten to twelve feet in the center and sloped down at sharp angles to the floor. Daddy had installed plywood walls to cordon off that odd-shaped space, thus creating attics within the attics and the storage space for Candy’s wardrobe. Candy’s dresses hung from the aluminum pipes that ran the length of the attic. Her skinny boxes of heels and circular hat boxes sat on the shelves above them. Pearl had arranged the dresses by color so that they formed a rainbow, blacks and purples to the west and yellows and whites to the east. Pearl and Molly had transformed one end of the attic into their own nightclub. Four trunks arranged into a square formed a small stage.

Overturned boxes served as table and chairs for the audience. Yellow paper stars hung from the slanted ceiling on fishing line and an overturned desk lamp shone as their spotlight. Molly would sometimes nudge the makeshift stage with the pointy toe of her high heel and call the club childish. She insisted that they weren’t dressing up; she claimed they were practicing for their major life roles. But she danced around in costume just as freely as Pearl, and she’d even added her own touches to the nightclub: a poster of Fred and Ginger, a microphone fashioned out of an old floor lamp, and a banner strung across the bottom of the stage, proclaiming the club’s motto: The Attic—Where You Find Those Dreams You Thought You’d Lost.
Molly crossed her legs and dangled her other foot in front of Pearl. She slid one finger under her garter and stretched the elastic band. She said, "I want to know all about Candy. Your Daddy could have married anyone."

Pearl pulled back the pink tissue paper lining the shoebox she’d set by Molly’s feet. She ran her finger over the rough brown skin of her mother’s snakeskin heels and petted the pointy toes. She wished the heels had rattlers, a rhythmic percussion to warn: watch out boys, here I come. Pearl said, "Mama was part snake and all charm. She could mesmerize a man. Make him dance into her arms." She slid the sling-back strap over Molly’s narrow heel and held it in place with her thumb as she reached around her smooth, thin ankle for the strap. There was a tiny brass buckle, the catch the size of a needle. She pulled the strap through the loop and worked the metal needle through the pinprick hole. As she leaned in to smell snakeskin and the rose-scented lotion that made Molly’s legs shine. Pearl’s cheek brushed a golden bristle of hair on Molly’s knee.

"All the show girls could dance," Molly said. "Something had to make Candy stand out from all those other girls."

Pearl wet her finger on her tongue and wiped a smudge off the thin strap of the second shoe. More than anything lately. Pearl feared losing Molly’s attention, and being left alone again in a world of men. She slid the shoe onto Molly’s foot and said, "Mama loved peaches. Anything peaches. Sun-warmed peaches were her favorite. Straight off the tree." Pearl imagined her mother standing beneath the dusty green leaves of a peach tree, wearing a white sundress and leaning forward to bite into a juicy peach. She could see the grin on Daddy’s face as he caught the juice dribbling off her chin with a handkerchief drawn from the pocket of his seer sucker suit.
Molly said, “I bet your Daddy dated lots of girls.” Molly yanked open one of the vanity drawers. The swollen wood screeched, and the drawer released the smell of pressed powder, stale tobacco, and old cologne turned thick as rosin in its swan-shaped bottle. She fished out a pack of Chesterfield cigarettes. She lifted the hurricane glass off the lantern and lit the cigarette on the blue flame. The red glow of the cigarette and the blue of the flame met in the mirror and reflected a purplish glow. “What was it? Did Candy bat her eyelashes? Did she slide her foot up his pants leg?”

“You aren’t supposed to be smoking up here.”

“You’re supposed to be in bed.” Molly took a deep drag off the cigarette and tilted back her head to exhale. Two streams of blue-gray smoke danced around her head. She ran her hand over her flat stomach, and rested her fingers on the frayed edges of the black panties. “You don’t know anything about your mother. You’re no fun.”

Pearl felt the prickly heat of humiliation crawl across her face. Pearl wanted to please Molly, to tell her the type of story about Candy she wanted to hear, but secretly. Pearl held an ambivalent attitude towards her mother.

It was easy to love the idea of Candy—that wavy blond hair, the hard slim shoulders and firm, gartered thighs that powered her lithe, exotic dances, feather boa dangling between sequined breasts—but when Pearl thought about Candy as her mother, and not the movie-star persona she preferred to imagine, she felt a guilty anger.

Pearl knew that her own birth had been a mistake, that because of her, Candy had missed her big break in New York. She and Daddy had met in New York, and if it hadn’t been for Pearl, Daddy would never have persuaded her to move down to South Carolina with him, when The Pines was still as young and fabulous as a dream. Even Pearl’s
name bore the weight of that mistake. She was a piece of dirt that sneaked into Candy’s womb. Daddy had told her she was his treasure, a rare and spectacular jewel, but Pearl couldn’t help but think of herself as the intruder that had foiled her mother’s dreams.

Pearl was only thirteen-months-old when her mother hit the patch of black ice and soared through the windshield of the Packard, trailing the white feathers and sequins of a sheer evening gown behind her. But ten years after the accident that killed her mother, Pearl, who had been nestled in the backseat of the car, still swore she’d watched her mother fly. a phenomena she could prove by opening her scrapbook to the yellowed newspaper photo taken at the accident, and pointing at the dark-winged shadows of the bloodied angel her mother left in the snow. The sheriff who found Pearl in a pool of blood on the backseat took her for dead. It was the sheriff’s Scottish terrier that discovered Pearl had only been sliced by a broken bottle of hooch. The original scar was the size of a woman’s thumbnail clipping, but the scar had stretched and grown into a two-inch “c” branding the hollow of her right cheek. Daddy called it a beauty mark, or a dimple, but Pearl believed her mother had willed that scar on her only daughter, an ugly assurance that Pearl would never be as beautiful as she, Candy Teller, a New York cutie, and the premiere entertainer at Daddy Teller’s swinging supper club, The Pines.

Pearl worked the thin leather strap through the second buckle. She took a deep breath and imagined her mother—tall and slim, one eyebrow that arched when she flashed her impish grin. “I know. Here’s something,” she said. “Mama was unpredictable.”

Molly took a drag off the cigarette. The red tip glowed. “Unpredictable,” she said, stressing each syllable, as if examining it for clues. “How?”
“One night, before I was born, she and Daddy were listening to a new Louis Armstrong record. Halfway through the song, she threw a crystal clock out the window. She said they didn’t need clocks anymore. She said Armstrong had reinvented time.” Pearl looked into Molly’s face, awaiting the approving smile of surprise and dropped-mouth awe.

But Molly burst out in a loud laugh that turned to coughing. She leaned forward and beat her chest with her palm and drew a shallow breath. “Your Daddy loved her because she broke things?” She pressed her toes to the floor and lifted her heels. The square outlines of her calves bulged against the delicate curves of the bench legs.

Pearl sat back on her heels and crossed her arms. She was serious. “Mama went after whatever she wanted. She didn’t care what anyone thought of her—not even Daddy. That’s why Daddy liked her. She was the first woman who hadn’t thrown herself at him.”

Molly stubbed the cigarette in an ashtray and blew out the last stream of smoke. “So she played hard to get. I like that.” Molly picked up Candy’s silver-plated brush and ran it through her hair. Candy’s hair and Molly’s hair lay twined in the metal bristles.

Pearl finished with the second shoe and leaned back to admire Molly. Molly had long blond hair that turned brown when she twisted in up in a bun. She had a pale, oval face, a slender nose that curved perfectly at the end, and large chameleon eyes that changed colors with her clothes. Molly was beautiful. She’d never have trouble finding a husband. Molly had told her about ugly old maids who return from the dead as beautiful girls in long red dresses and glossy red lips. They haunt the men who ignored them, appearing as irresistible goddesses in red. The ghost starts dancing with the man,
bats her long black eyelashes, and kisses him with a tongue of fire. That flickering fiery
tongue melts the man’s mouth shut so he can’t scream while she waltzes him dizzily to
his death.

Pearl feared she might end up as an old maid. No man would ever love a girl with
such an ugly scar. On top of that, she’d inherited Grand’s high forehead and strong jaw.
Her only good quality was her eyes. They were the color of dirty ice, but the rings
around the irises were the deep blue of spring streams, a blue. Molly had told her, that a
man could fall into and drown. Pearl tried to stare into men’s eyes whenever she spoke
with them. She hoped that if she bound them in her gaze, their eyes wouldn’t wander
across her scarred face.

Molly jumped up and patted the stool cushion. “Stand up. You need stockings.”

Pearl stood and opened a vanity drawer. She pulled out her mother’s glittery
dragonfly comb. The two-inch-long body was encrusted with green and blue costume
jewels. The stones flashed in the lamplight. She slid the comb into her hair and told
Molly, “Every time somebody asks Daddy why he doesn’t go and get remarried, he says
he’s through with women.”

“He’s lying,” Molly said. “That goes against a man’s nature.” The lamp formed
a halo around her, a heavenly corona. Molly had the curves and hips and tiny waist of
models sketched in newspaper ads.

Pearl said, “All the stockings have runs. You poked a hole in the last pair.”

“Stand up,” Molly said. “Trust me.”

Pearl climbed onto the stool. Molly reached into the open vanity drawer and
rifled through eyelash curlers, tweezers, lipsticks, broken disks of rouge. She pulled out
an eyeliner pencil, slipped off the gold cap, and tested the point on the back of her hand.

"Steady now," she said. "Hold up your dress."

Pearl pulled up the red, silky yards of cloth and bunched the folds under her arms. The brocaded bodice sagged and Pearl could see one of her pale nipples reflected in the mirror like a bleary eye. A few wiry hairs jutted out around the nipple. She knew Molly didn't have any hairs. Molly had doubled over in fits of laughter the time Pearl had asked her if that meant she was turning into a boy.

Molly started with Pearl's left leg first, down by the ankle. She pressed the pencil against Pearl's Achilles tendon and slowly started to draw up her calf, the pencil cool against Pearl's skin. Pearl giggled as the pencil tickled up the back of her knee, traveled up her thigh. Molly stopped just short of Pearl's cotton panties, then she started on the other leg, reversing the direction of the line, thigh to ankle.

Molly said, "I always imagined that she kissed him first. What do you think?"

Pearl turned her head and looked at her legs in the mirror. The lines resembled the seams of silk stockings. She wished Molly could keep drawing, sketching an outline of how Pearl would look at twenty, the age at which her mother fell into the snow and turned into an angel. "The left one's crooked," she said. "It looks funny."

"Say." Molly said. "Who kissed who?"

"They kissed at the same time," Pearl said. She didn't see why it mattered. "They kissed on top of their secret castle."

"That's just like 'Wuthering Heights'," Molly said. "You wouldn't know about things like that in real life."
Pearl hated it when Molly led her to the cracked door to peek into the world of romance, and then slammed the door in her face. Pearl had never kissed a man but she’d danced close to men, and that was something most girls couldn’t claim. Molly didn’t know much more. She’d only had one boyfriend since she’d moved to Poinsettia, if she could call a man she sneaked around with a boyfriend.

“Come on,” Molly said. “Let’s find some information we can actually use.”

Molly grabbed that morning’s newspaper off the floor and sat down with it at the vanity. Pearl sat down beside her, their thighs pressing against each other. Molly flipped past the front page headlines—News of Hitler and Mussolini—and turned to their favorite section, the six pages most pertinent to them. “News and Events of Importance in the World of Women” was full of beauty tips, fashion rules, news of who had been where and why, and stories in which women acted extraordinarily—falling in love with millionaires, feeding starving children, playing Mozart in a bathing suit made entirely of sheet music. Every night, Pearl and Molly both silently reread the society column, scanning for news they might have missed that morning, and they studied the advertisements for department stores such as Ivy’s and Meyers Arnold and circled pictures of the dresses and shoes they would buy for imaginary dates they had with the uniformed men in the sports section. Usually, Molly dramatically read the daily doses of the serial novel, a predictable but dreamy romance about a secretary or nurse falling in love with a gorgeous movie star, sometimes a soldier. Pearl would read aloud the column on beauty tips—how to rub rouge on the bridge of the nose to deepen the mystery of the eyes, or how to hand-crochet a snood to protect curls during sleep—while Molly demonstrated the techniques in the mirror.
But that evening, Molly skipped straight to making up her own news of importance. “I’ve been thinking about mine all day,” she said. She tossed back her hair and addressed the mirror, as if delivering her news to a gaga-eyed audience. She spoke in a gossipy, know-it-all voice: “Mrs. Wonderful, nee Miss Molly McNaughton of Dogwood, South Carolina, was seen at The Pines this past weekend wearing a lavender dress and a cape glazed with rhinestones. She performed for two nights before returning to her own night club in New York, just in time for an evening with Benny Goodman.”

Pearl stuck out her tongue. “Benny Goodman?” she said. “You think he’s cute?”

“Musicians don’t have to be cute. It’s the way they play their instruments that’s sexy.”

“I’ve got news, too,” Pearl said. “Mine’s even better.”

“I’m making yours up,” Molly said. “Listen.” She cleared her throat and spoke in a slightly British accent: “Miss Pearl Teller hosted an afternoon tea while Mrs. Wonderful was in town singing at The Pines. The hostess greeted guests on the porch of her Charleston-style mansion wearing a dress made of magnolia petals. She served cheese and martinis on the lawn. A big band played ‘Stardust’ while Riley ‘Daddy’ Teller danced Mrs. Wonderful across the roof.”

“Stardust?” Pearl said. “That’s so predictable.” Pearl crumpled up two sheets of “News and Events” and stuffed the wadded paper into the toes of a pair of heels she found under the vanity table. She stood up and slipped her feet into the black stilettos.

“You wouldn’t dare dance on the roof. You won’t even climb out on the porch roof with me to sunbathe.”
“Oh yeah?” Molly snatched the dragonfly comb out of Pearl’s hair. Strands of Pearl’s hair snagged and Molly yanked them out quickly with the comb. “Then come and get me.” The single folds on Molly’s bottom jiggled as she ran across the attic floor, towards the part of the floor that was unfinished. She balanced on one of the single plywood boards leading to the ledge by the window and walked slowly to the center. Brown paper covered the gaps between boards but there was nothing below that skin surface.

“Come back with that,” Pearl demanded. She stomped her foot so hard that shards of pain tingled up her shins. Grand had forbidden Pearl from walking out over the unfinished floor. He’d tried scaring her by telling her about the ghost of a young lady who wasted away staring out the window, waiting for her true love to return from the Civil War. Pearl knew Grand’s story was a lie because the house had only been built in 1890. but she still refused to walk across the boards. She was superstitious. She didn’t fear disobeying Grand or encountering the opaque silhouette of a hoop-skirted ghost, but she did fear that she might one day end up wasting away waiting for a man and she didn’t dare jinx herself.

Molly slid the comb out of her hair and dangled it over a tear in the paper floor. She grinned and arched an eyebrow. “Candy would come and get it.”

“Drop it,” Pearl said. “See if I care.” She climbed onto the stage and threw her anger into dancing. She pretended that a gorgeous man was twirling her. She pretended that the tears in her eyes were diamonds.

Molly slid the comb back into her hair. She walked heavily across the plank, causing the board to quiver. “You’re such a dope. I’m getting dressed.” She paused in
front of the vanity and picked up the framed photograph of Candy cut from “News and Events of Importance in the World of Women.” In the picture, taken on the opening night of The Pines, Candy wore a dark, sleeveless dress with a chiffon scarf dangling from the crooks of her arms. She was bent forward, hands on bared knees, one foot cocked. The V-neck of her dress dipped into shadows, and her face was lifted to smile at someone behind the camera.

Molly hugged the picture to her chest and said, “I want to wear this one.”

“I’ve told you a million times,” Pearl said. She stepped off the stage and stomped over to the vanity. “Daddy won’t let me play in that one.” That was a lie, but Pearl had set that dress aside in the closet. She had never even slipped into the dress to see how it looked. She was saving it for her wedding, just in case. Pearl’s heels clacked against the wooden floor as she walked over to the closet. Metal clothes hangers squeaked across the metal pipe as she sifted through a section of light blue dresses. She pulled out a short sky blue dress with thin straps that she knew Molly liked. “How about this one?”

Molly turned up her nose and pouted but Pearl could see that Molly was pleased. She knew Molly liked the way the dress showed her cleavage. “Fine,” Molly said, “but you’ll have to do the buttons.”

Molly stepped into the dress and Pearl started fastening the four cloth-covered buttons running up the back. The dress smelled of moth balls, dried sweat, and stale perfume. Pearl yawned and goose bumps scattered across Molly’s tan shoulders. Pearl hooked the tiny silver clasp, and then she kissed Molly’s neck, “Done.”

Molly looked into the mirror, then turned and faced Pearl. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful,” Pearl said, but she could tell Molly wasn’t listening.
What Molly said next took her by surprise. “Show me what you were just doing on stage. Is that how Daddy dances with you?”

Pearl started to shake her head no, because she hadn’t been thinking of Daddy while she was dancing, but she realized she had the opportunity to tell Molly about something she didn’t know. She said, “Daddy spins girls really fast. He swings me over his head and under his legs.”

“She said. She held out her arms, poised to dance.

“I can’t swing you over my head.”

“I know that,” Molly said. “Just show me how he spins you.”

Pearl placed one hand on Molly’s back and took the other to lead. Molly’s hands were cool and smooth and she smelled of old Chanel and powder. Pearl’s head came up to Molly’s chest and she could see a single brown freckle on the top of Molly’s right breast. She stared up into Molly’s eyes, which looked blue in her blue dress, and said, “Keep your eyes on his eyes. They’ll tell you where to go.” She shifted her eyes and made a half turn left.

Molly dropped her gaze and looked at their feet. “What else?”

Pearl squeezed Molly’s hand as tight as she could. “Look up. Keep on your toes. You’ve got to be ready to twirl at any minute.” Pearl pressed lightly on Molly’s lower back and spun her out. Molly let go of Pearl’s hand and pirouetted over to the trapdoor. The green and blue costume jewels on the dragonfly comb sparkled in Molly’s hair. “It’s too hot up here,” she said. “Let’s go downstairs and dance in the living room.”

It was well past midnight, well past bedtime, and Pearl didn’t want to get in trouble if Daddy came home early. Pearl knew Daddy would yell at her and maybe take
away her movie money if he caught her up so late. "We can't. "Daddy will be mad when he comes home."

"You'll be asleep before then," she said.

"But Grand would be jealous if he knew we were dancing without him."

"Your granddaddy is eight hundred miles away. He can't hear us in New York, here in Poinsettia," Molly said. "You used to stay up late all the time during baseball parties. You never got in trouble then." She said this mockingly. Pearl knew Molly didn't believe her stories about the parties Grand and Daddy threw when the baseball boarders came in late spring.

"That's different," Pearl said. "Daddy has too much fun to care."

"Oh come on, Pearl." Molly's heels clacked against the steep attic stairs. She called up, her voice agitated and urgent, "Bedtime isn't 'til dawn for Cotton Club dancers like us."

Pearl yelled down after her. "You go. I'll stay up here."

"I'll sing you to sleep if you come down," Molly said. Her voice floated up the staircase. "But you'll have to pay to hear me sing one of these days."

Pearl and Molly pressed their foreheads against the cool panes of the big windows in the living room and looked for fires in the mountains of Oconee County. All they could make out were the purple-black outlines of the Appalachians. No red rubies glistening. No dragon eyes.

"Fire and ice," said Molly. Pearl thought their reflections in the window looked ghostly and beautiful. "That's what it takes to be a woman. Fire, ice, and a dash of spice.
And a voice,” she said, running a finger down her long white throat, “a voice that could melt the wings off angels.” She spun around and pirouetted towards the record player. Pearl spun after her, focusing on a mirror to keep from getting dizzy, but she lost her spot and she plopped down on the couch, dizzy and sleepy.

Molly went on. “Fire and ice both burn, but they soothe, too. As a woman, you must be the pain and the salve. Hot and cold, that’s what men want. You have to want and not want. Beg for love and pretend you never wanted it in the first place.” She motioned for Pearl to get up and stand beside her. “Pretend a man you like asks you to dance.” She held up her arms and Pearl slid off the couch and stepped into Molly’s lead a foot apart from her, as she might dance with a boy from school. Pearl hated the way Molly took what Pearl had told her about Daddy and acted like she was the one with all the knowledge of the world of women.

Molly said. “The music starts. Where are you going to look? Down?”

“I just told you. The eyes.”

“Not at first,” Molly said. She jerked Pearl’s arm, straightening out her elbow, “First you look at his lips. Then you look at his eyes.”

“I’m sleepy,” Pearl said. She disapproved of how Molly turned dancing into a way to get kissed. She broke away from Molly and plopped down on the couch. She propped her feet on the mahogany armrest and folded her arms behind her head. “Sing for me,” she said. “Use your angel voice.”

Molly flipped through the alphabetized stacks of records. Pearl buried her feet in the crack between the rose-colored cushions on the couch, wiggling her toes around for
loose change. Molly put on a record. The music opened and then Molly started singing, “All of Me.”

Pearl closed her eyes and listened. Molly’s voice was a bird flying around the room. Pearl felt light and sleepy and she was a star reflecting off the mirrored floor of The Pines. She cast light on a woman’s smooth ankle and the pressed cuff of a man’s pinstriped suit.

The screen door slammed, startling Pearl out of her reverie. The red and blue Italian cordial glasses rattled on the glass-topped cabinet. Molly must not have heard the door slam, because she kept on singing. Pearl hugged one of the fringed red pillows and scrunched up her eyes, pretending to be asleep. Daddy’s angry footsteps stopped. Pearl opened her eyes a sliver. Daddy stood in the doorway, jacket draped over his shoulder, one foot cocked against the doorframe. He was smiling. Daddy had the looks of a movie star: dark hair, blue eyes, smooth skin. He was thin and muscular with broad shoulders and manicured hands. And he had that smile, a sly, pleased look that made Pearl feel proud and beautiful, as long as it was trained on her.

Molly’s back was to Daddy. She lifted her arms and the small bulges of muscle in her shoulders and arms tightened. Molly sang loudly along with Billie, “Take these lips.” She spun around, eyes closed. She dramatically kissed the palm of her hand and flung it towards Daddy. She opened her eyes and her mouth froze open. For a moment, the rest of her body kept dancing, and then she held still. The dress slid down her shoulder, revealing the lacey edge of her corset.

“Mr. Teller,” Molly said. “Pearl couldn’t sleep. I was just...she asked me to sing her to sleep.” She pulled up the shoulder of her dress, but the cloth slid back down.
Daddy tossed his hat onto a chair. He was still smiling but his voice was gruff. “You girls are supposed to be in bed.” His pants legs swished against each other as he moved swiftly to the record player. “I know you’re awake, Pearl.”

Pearl snuggled down against the cushions and opened her eyes. She watched Molly rub her lips together, adjust her comb, and push up her corset.

Daddy abruptly plucked the needle off the record and said, “I never want to catch you girls up this late again.” Pearl knew a spanking was coming. Daddy was going to flip her over in front of Molly and pop her hard. But when Daddy turned around, he was smiling. “As long as you’re up, though, let’s dance.” The needle popped and crackled across the spinning disk like the sound of a freshly-laid fire.

Pearl shot upright and slid off the couch. She rubbed her eyes and stumbled over to Daddy, wrapping her arms around his legs. She pressed her face into his seer sucker pants, and ran her fingernail through the soft grooves between stripes. Daddy laughed. “I was talking to Molly, Pearl. You watch.”

Pearl felt her cheeks burning and she felt a deep itch somewhere below her stomach. She sat back down on the edge of the couch and watched her babysitter dance with her father. Daddy’s right hand rested half on a layer of Candy’s dress, half on Molly’s flushed skin. Molly’s hand rested lightly on his shoulder. She held her chin up, eyes focused on his lips. Daddy’s fingertips turned a pale white as he pressed against Molly’s back, spinning her out and in smoothly, catching her again with a firm hand. Molly let out a little yelp when Daddy dipped her. Her long blond hair brushed the floor. She laughed and Daddy leaned towards her, the tip of his nose inches away from the V of her neckline. Pearl knew what he smelled: Candy’s Chanel and cigarette smoke.
Pinkish-white heat lightning lit up the yard like a flashbulb. God taking pictures at night. They moved in a slow circle around the living room floor. Molly rested her weight on her toes and her calves looked cut and square. The song rose in a final crescendo, and then the music stopped. The needle popped and crackled like a dying flame. Daddy spun Molly for one last silent measure.

He dropped his arms and bowed towards Molly. “Thank you for that dance, Miss McNaughton.” He clapped his hands together once and addressed Pearl. “I think it’s time for goodnights.”

Molly crossed her arms over her chest as if she were cold. Her cheeks were flushed and she blinked two or three times, as if she couldn’t believe where she was.

Daddy said, “Molly, run on up and change. I’ll walk you home. But you, Pearl,” he knelt and beckoned her to come to him, “need to kiss your Daddy and run on to bed.”

Pearl slid off the couch and stood before Daddy. His shirt was wet under the armpits and his breath smelled of smoke, garlic, and whiskey. Pearl usually loved the smell of Daddy when he came home from The Pines, but that night the smell was stale and sour. She pecked Daddy on the cheek.

“You can do better than that, Pearl.” He gave her a light slap on the butt. “Run on now. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

Without looking back at Molly, Pearl passed through the kitchen and let the screen door slam behind her as she walked onto the sleeping porch. Pearl pulled off her dress and dropped it in a pool on the floor, the red ghost of a woman. She put on her cotton nightgown and climbed into her cot. She could feel the cool white sheets warm under her skin. She kicked the sheet to the end of the bed and tossed and turned.
The cicadas and crickets blended into one monotonous croaking. They sounded
tired and out of tune. The night was hot and still and there was no breeze. If she strained
her head, she could see

Molly’s bedroom window. She watched that window until it lit up. She saw the
thin, shapely silhouette of Molly dance across the room, and then the light went out.

Pearl thought about the looks on Daddy’s face: the dizzy smile as he watched
Molly fling her kiss, and the sheepish, apologetic grin after the music was over. Heat
lightning flashed again. The back porch lit up. Pearl saw her feet, blistered and swollen
at the end of the bed. Black smudges across her toes. Pearl tried to guess what news and
events of importance had rubbed off on her feet, but she could only imagine a picture of
Daddy and Molly dancing in the living room, his hand on the white of her back, the
iridescent dragonfly comb fluttering around in Molly’s hair, dipping and dancing in the
hot June night.
Chapter 3

The telegram sat propped against Daddy’s coffee cup on a green and white striped tablemat dusted with crumbs. Pearl picked up the telegram and held it to her nose as if she could smell Grand in the grayish pulpy paper—clove gum, cigarette smoke, and the medicine-smelling Listerine he rubbed in his thick white hair to fight dandruff. Pearl wondered how the telegram could wait so patiently for Daddy to wake up and come downstairs for breakfast. It had news to give them. It should be tearing itself open and throwing itself into Pearl’s hands. Read me!

Fern glared at Pearl from the stove. Grease popped in the cast iron skillet, splattering her white apron. The black seat of her cotton maid’s dress was wrinkled, and bobby pins stuck out of her hairnet like needles in a pushpin. Her hair was curled into tight spools of black thread. “Don’t even think about it, missy. Your Daddy will be up soon.”

Pearl propped the telegram back against the cup and saucer, a delicate bone china picturing a mermaid riding a sea dragon. She glanced at the clock hanging over the stove. “But Molly will be here in fifteen minutes.”

“So skip the movie. You’ve seen “MOVIE” two times.”

“Come on, Fern. You want to know what it says, too.”

Fern shuffled across the floor and turned off the cathedral radio sitting beneath a framed portrait of a Carolina Wren resting on a disembodied twig of confederate jasmine. The dial, glowing orange like a fire, died slowly. Fern said, “I’m fixing to make an angel food cake. You best shush up and read your paper.” Fern claimed that angel food cake got its name because of the prayer-still quiet it needed to rise. but Pearl knew Fern only
made it when she was hungover, or something was bothering her. That morning, Pearl suspected it had something to do with the telegram.

“We could say the envelope didn’t get sealed properly. He’s always calling the Western union people idiots.”

Fern placed her hands on her hips and glared at Pearl, just daring her to argue further.

Pearl sat down and drew her knees up under her nightgown, forming a tremendous bosom. “News and Events” lay spread out on the table. Brides smiled out of the front page. Long lashes lancing the white veils pulled down over their thin, rouged faces. But at that moment Pearl could care less about the frothy fullness of a tulle train or a white chiffon gown drizzled with fresh gardenias. That news didn’t seem nearly as important as the news from Grand.

The telegram whistled to Pearl with the urgent cry of a tea kettle. Grand was crying out to them from the sealed envelope. If they didn’t hurry and open it, the water might evaporate and Grand would be gone. She imagined them phoning the hospital too late, after Grand had already died. She would ask the nurse to hold the phone to Grand’s ear and she would sing. Pearl knew music still vibrated against a dead man’s eardrum but she wondered if it only echoed inside his heart.

The Teller’s only had one rule: privacy. But Daddy shared everything with Pearl—she knew The Pines was under a second mortgage for goodness sakes! She knew The Pines would fold if he didn’t start budgeting better! Surely he would share the contents of the telegram. Pearl stared across the table at the yellow and gray bell in the corner of the envelope. She imagined the bell ringing out a warning if slid her finger
under the flap. As much as she wanted to convince herself it was okay to open it, Pearl knew Daddy would be angrier than a bull with its balls caught in barbed wire if she did.

One of the soles of Fern’s flats was cracked and the split leather bottom clacked as it caught in the slats of the red-painted floor. The noise was sandpaper rubbing against Pearl’s nerves. Usually, Fern cooked in a pair of Grand’s old house slippers, a pair of light brown moccasins that held the shape of his large, wide feet. Every Saturday morning, while Fern was pouring his first cup of coffee, Grand would tug on Fern’s apron string and make her blush. He’d tell her she could wear his slippers or his cowboy boots or cook naked as long as her gravy still tasted like heaven. It upset Pearl that Fern wasn’t wearing Grand’s moccasins that morning. It was as if Fern had already forgotten about Grand. And it wasn’t like her to be so stern about the telegram. Fern was the one who’d taught Pearl to steam open an envelope.

Pearl counted as Fern cracked and separated a dozen eggs. She listened to the careful tap of an egg against the yellow mixing bowl and its tiny ringing resonance, the plop of white sliding into the bowl’s belly, the thud of the yolky shell collapsing against the side of the trash can. The oven ticked and hissed as it preheated. The metal beater with the red wooden handles butted against the glass as Fern beat the whites into stiff peaks. When the whites rose like snow-capped mountaintops, Fern folded them into the batter with a spatula and poured everything into a silver bunt pan.

Once the cake was in the oven, Pearl slid off her seat and crossed over to the stove. The floorboards were cool and dusty under her feet. She wrapped one arm around the back of Fern’s muscular legs and spoke softly. “I bet it’s a secret. That’s why you
don't want to open it. Maybe it's from Benny Goodman. He's coming to The Pines to play at my birthday party in September."

Fern shoved her aside with her leg and poured coffee from the percolator over the ham. She scraped at the bits of pork stuck to the bottom of the pan, making her red-eye gravy. When Grand was home, Fern sliced the ham thinly as pages from the Bible, but that morning the dark pink triangles were cut thickly as a 78 record.

Fern leaned over and whispered into Pearl's ear. "Maybe it's Roosevelt sending out a warrant to arrest all the little girls too curious for their own good."

"I'm not going to the movies if Daddy hasn't woken up yet."

"That'll be the day I see you turn down Molly McNaughton."

Pearl wanted to open the telegram more than ever. She went back over to the table and brought the telegram back to Fern. She held it over the steam rising off the ham and gravy.

Fern snatched the telegram out of her hand and stuffed it in her apron pocket. A drop of grease smeared pinkish yellow across one corner of the envelope.

"We should open it." Pearl said. Tears tickled the corners of Pearl's eyes. "What if Grand is dying and we miss the chance to call and say goodbye?"

Fern sighed and rubbed her hand over her jaw. Her wrists were freckled pink from a lifetime of cooking over popping grease. She drew the telegram out of her pocket and handed it back to Pearl. The paper was slightly warm. She said, "The Milk of Magnesia is under the counter. Hurry up. It's almost time for you to run off to your movie."
Pearl had found the ad for the perfect hangover remedy in “News and Events” buried between a photograph of a woman wearing a bathing suit made out of playing cards and a request from the hospital for blood donations for the victims of a tornado in Lancaster County. The ad prescribed two tablespoons of Phillip’s Milk of Magnesia and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. The woman in the sketch grinned knowingly as she handed her starry-headed husband the bottle of Phillip’s, one eye cocked in a wink.

Pearl took a deep breath as she bumped her hip against Daddy’s cracked door. She held her breath as she walked into his bedroom, as if she were diving underwater. Squares of sunlight filtered through the gauzy white curtains, casting hopscotch squares across the light blue rug. The room was hot and smelled of freshly cut grass and gasoline. Daddy’s seer sucker suit lay across the white chaise lounge and his tie dangled into the empty fish tank on the small white dresser. Once a month Daddy set an extra glass at every place setting at The Pines. In the wide-mouthed glass a goldfish swam in circles of colored water. He brought all the survivors home, and Pearl flushed them one by one down the toilet as they died.

Daddy was curled up in the four poster bed. His hair was rumpled and a crust of drool hung out of his mouth like a lure. He looked like a little boy with the sheet tucked up under his chin. It was easy to love Daddy when he was sleeping. He looked so cute and peaceful. Over the past year, Pearl had walked on pins and needles around Daddy. She never knew what kind of mood he’d be in. He might blow up at her if she said more than three words, or he might yell at her if she walked through a room without saying hello. If he had a lucrative night at The Pines, he might swing her over his head and give her sips of his martinis and make her feel like his treasure, his Pearl-girl number one, but
if his account books came up negative and Daddy came roaring home on his motorcycle, slamming the screen door behind him, Pearl wished she could climb back into a shell and dissolve.

Pearl quietly set the Jax beer tray on his bedside table between an alarm clock and a picture frame face down on the marble-topped table. Pearl knew the picture without having to look. Her mother stands in front of a car parked on the beach. She’s wearing a bathing suit with shorts and her breasts are pointy. She wears a large straw hat and glasses and one foot is cocked against her other shin, toes long and curled. Pearl set the picture frame back up. Daddy must have knocked it over groping for her in his sleep. Some nights, while they were dancing, and Daddy was drunk, he’d accidentally call Pearl Candy, a mistake Pearl loved.

Pearl leaned forward and kissed Daddy’s cheek. His skin was hot and moist, and she blew on his ear, ruffling his dark brown sideburns, damp with sweat. Pearl glanced at the telegram again. If Daddy was groggy when he woke up, he might not notice if the telegram was open. Pearl pictured Grand sitting in a wheelchair on the stone steps of the hospital porch overlooking the snowcapped Rockies. She imagined him bent over coughing, his thick white hair flipping forward as he coughed into a handkerchief. The telegram must be opened.

Pearl picked it up and held it up to the light streaming through the window. Shadows of words emerged. She lifted the telegram off the Jax tray and held it up the light streaming through the open window. She held the telegram still, allowing the light to shine around those typed words like a halo. She squinted but she couldn’t make out letters. She slid her finger under the seal and slowly ripped the paper open. The paper
tore quietly; it was a hissing. Finally, she pulled out the telegram and unfolded it. The first words, cut out and pasted on the paper, said all Pearl needed to know: “Coming home.”

Pearl threw up her arms like a gymnast at the end of her routine. Her elbow hit the bedside table and the blue bottle of Phillips rattled against the metal tray. Pearl laid her finger on the bottle and steadied it. The cling and clatter stopped. She furtively looked at Daddy. His eyes were half-open, and he was staring at her. Pearl gasped and clenched her hand to her mouth. But Daddy was still sleeping. Sometimes he dozed with his eyes half-open like that, the whites bloodshot the way a daffodil set in red food color will vein out pink.

But Pearl wasn’t going to take anymore chances. She’d read all she needed to know. She set the telegram back down again and tiptoed out of the room, looking back from the threshold and whispering, “Sleep on, Sweet Prince. Sleep on.”

She slipped out the door, and sighed with relief. She’d come close to waking the lion in his lair. She took slow steps down the hallway, lining up her feet with the floorboards. A black metal fan spun on top of the bookshelf in the hallway holding all of Grand’s telephone manuals from the Rocky Mountain Bell Telephone Company. She paused and allowed the breeze to cool her sweaty forehead. She was home free.

And then, as she hit the first slick stair of the wooden staircase, the telephone rang. She froze, terrified, and then her feet slapped the stairs as she scrambled down, two at a time. Fern caught the phone on the third ring. Pearl could hear Fern answer with an angry hello.
Pearl landed with a thud at the bottom of the stairs, short of breath, heart racing.

Fern reached into her pocket and pulled out a quarter. She pressed the quarter into Pearl’s palm. Grab your shoes off the porch and go out the back. Meet Molly by the magnolia.” She slapped Pearl on the butt, hurrying her on. Upstairs, the toilet flushed.

Pearl heard Daddy hock up something into the sink.

Pearl gasped for air, “I know what….”

“Get,” Fern said. She pushed Pearl running down the hallway. “Get out of here before your Daddy comes down. I know how to handle him, child. You get.”

Footsteps pounded down the stairwell. Pearl could quickly whisper the news to Fern, but she ran on, holding the news in her mouth like a new song only she knew. In just a few minutes, Daddy and Fern would be dancing with happiness across the red kitchen floor. They’d make that angel food cake fall.

Pearl grabbed her white sandals off the sleeping porch and ran out the kitchen door. She could hear Daddy cursing as she ran past the hydrangea bushes, their pink and blue pompons brushing wet drops on her sleeve. He must not have read it yet. He wouldn’t be cursing like that if he knew that Grand was coming home.
Chapter 4

The only way Molly’s father allowed her to go to the Saturday morning matinee at the Carolina was if she took Pearl with her. And the only way Molly allowed Pearl to go with her was if they didn’t sit together and left separately, meeting back up at Ivy’s department store to walk back home together. The girls would have had to arrive separately, too, if it weren’t for the fact that a tall, dark-haired usher named Chuck snuck them in the back door off the alleyway if Molly kissed him on the lips. And the only way Molly kissed him on the lips was if Pearl came with her and promised to buy her something at Ivy’s with the money she’d saved on a ticket.

A dime didn’t go far at Ivy’s, and Pearl knew that was only an excuse Molly gave for allowing her to sneak in through the back with her. Pearl knew the real reason Molly wanted her with her: Molly was too scared to walk down the dark alley where the black man had been castrated that Easter. The manager of the Carolina had caught the man holding hands with a white woman in the lobby and dragged him back into the alley, where he beat him, and broke his ribs, and cut off his wanker with a popcorn scooper. Pearl didn’t know what the manager had done with the black man’s penis, but she had imagined him dipping it in colored sugar like the candy sticks sold at the concession stand and sucking off the blue and red crystals. Pearl knew this last part couldn’t be true, but she still refused to eat the candy, which had always been her favorite. Molly told Pearl that the black man had only been beat up, not castrated, but Pearl knew there had to be some good reason why negroes rarely came to the Carolina on Saturday mornings. Pearl’s friend Henry Clay said it was because the concessions boys sprinkled rat poison on their popcorn, but Pearl didn’t believe that either.
It wasn’t because of the castration that Mr. McNaughton refused to let Molly go to the Carolina by herself. No, Pearl would be no protection against that kind of violence. But Mr. McNaughton was under the impression that if Pearl were with Molly, his fifteen-year-old daughter wouldn’t smoke cigarettes like the other high school girls in the theater and pour whiskey into her Cokes courtesy of seniors from Andrew Jackson High, such as Chuck the usher, who carried flasks in the front pockets of their shirts like badges.

And so every Saturday morning Molly and Pearl walked downtown together, separated at the first traffic light, and met back up at the edge of the alley that ran parallel to Main behind the Carolina Theater. The narrow, shadowy alley felt ten degrees cooler than Main Street. Pigeons fringed the tall tops of brick buildings like spikes, and bags of trash peeked out of overflowing tin trashcans like the gluttonous faces of sentries bedecked in silver helmets and armor. Wide shadows pressed into the damp asphalt, deepening the depth of pot holes, and darkening the black man’s blood stains, which Molly swore were only oil drips from delivery trucks.

The girls waited for each other in the cool shadow of the state bank, and then they sprinted down the length of the alley. The echo of their saddle shoes thumping asphalt sounded loud but hollow. Molly claimed they sprinted because Pearl was always making them late, but Pearl knew Molly was just as scared of the alley as Pearl was and of the ghost penis that kids said slithered in and out of trash cans like a thick black snake.

As soon as they reached the loading dock outside the Carolina they clambered up the rickety wooden stairs and pressed their backs against the cool, damp brick wall to catch their breaths while they waited for Chuck to come open the door for them.
The dull brick wall, metal door, and wooden loading dock on the back of the Carolina betrayed what faced Main Street—the doric columns and the marble façade with arched alcoves shielding granite statues of Roman gods and goddesses. The Carolina had been called The Palace back in its day, when the ushers wore togas, grapes and wine were sold at the concession counter, and guests frolicked in the running fountains scattered about the lobby. The Palace had closed after the crash and reopened years later as the less majestic Carolina. The fingers and fig leaves had been shot or knocked off most of the statues, and the royal red carpet in the lobby was threadbare where the concession line formed behind the velvet ropes, and the fountains had been turned into padded benches with dry wishing wells in their centers. But despite the loss of its empire as the most exotic theater in town, the Carolina still offered all a kid in Poinsettia might need for a Saturday morning escape: popcorn and Coca-Cola and Gene Autry in “Colorado Sunset.”

Molly wiped a mustache of sweat off her lip and tapped her foot against the side of the building. Her saddle shoes were always shined and unscuffed and she wore her bobby socks turned down in pressed cuffs. “I wish he’d hurry,” she said. “The show starts any minute.” If it weren’t for the shoes and socks, Molly might pass for a woman in her pink skirt and the new sheer blouse that showed the lace trim on her silk slip. Unlike the other high school girls, who’d all cut and waved their dull brown hair. Molly wore her long blond mane around her shoulders like a cape, even in the heat of summer. Molly claimed she liked the way the humidity made her hair curl up in wisps, but Pearl knew she wore it down to hide the pecan brown underneath. When the girls laid out on the roof to tan. Molly sprayed lemon juice all over her hair and when she flipped over
onto her back or stomach to even out her tan she flipped her hair too. but the underside never lightened.

Pearl also wished Chuck would hurry. She wanted to escape the alley, of course, but she was anxious to get inside and claim a seat with the other fifth-grade girls so she could wage popcorn wars with the boys who sat a few aisles behind them. Pearl had been practicing her throw in the backyard, and she wanted to nail Henry Clay Wallace, get him back for lodging a piece of popcorn in her ear two weeks before.

The metal door swung open and banged against an ashcan studded with cigarette butts. Chuck stood in the doorway blinking. He shielded his gray eyes and smiled. He brought with him the smells of popcorn, whiskey, and window cleaner. “Good morning, ladies.” He motioned the girls in. As Pearl walked by Chuck, he pressed his right arm against her breast. She shouldered past him, pretending like she hadn’t noticed.

Molly paused in the doorway, hands pressed against the frame, hip cocked, her body silhouetted against the dimly-lit brick background. She had the full breasts, thin waist, and slight hips of a model sketched in the newspaper advertisements. She stepped on into the long hallway with its black walls and sticky gray floors. The hallway smelled of damp cigarette butts and flat soda water. She smiled, lowered her head shyly, and clasped her hands behind her back. She raised her eyes and batted her curled eyelashes. “You got something for me, mister?”

Chuck slid his hands into his black-trimmed coat pockets. Pearl could see the shape of his long fingers press against the interior black lining as he flapped open his coat, shrugging his shoulders in a gesture of guessing. “I might just have something for a pretty little thing like you.”
“Is that right?” Molly crossed one long, tan leg in front of the other and placed a hand on her hip. Her nails were painted a pale pink to match her skirt. She tapped the finger of her other hand against her dark red lips. “I think you know what I want.”

It annoyed Pearl that Molly never just came out and asked for the tickets. They’d done this enough times to understand the agreement. Chuck gave them torn ticket stubs and Molly kissed him. Pearl wished they’d hurry up and be done with it.

Chuck withdrew his hands from his pockets and presented two balled fists to Molly. “Which hand?”

Molly shifted her eyes from fist to fist. Chuck had a man’s hands, broad and hairy. The hall was quiet and Pearl could hear the faint eruption of the popcorn machine in the lobby. Finally. Molly tickled her finger across the back of Chuck’s right hand.

Chuck grinned and opened the other fist, revealing a torn red ticket. Molly reached over to grab it, and Chuck snapped his hand shut over hers, quick as a Venus flytrap. “Not so fast,” he said. “What are you going to give me?”

“My sincere appreciation,” Molly said with an exaggerated drawl. She was from Florida and she didn’t speak with much of an accent. She slid one leg back and leaned forward in a curtsey. The neck of her blouse fell open, revealing the shadowy softness between her breasts.

Chuck lifted his thick shelf of eyebrows and whistled. He shook his head back and forth, as if he couldn’t believe what she’d told him. “I think I deserve a little something more for putting my job on the line for you.”

Molly rose back up and took one baby step forward. This was all part of the game. Pearl found it to be time consuming and nerve wracking. She expected the
manager to storm down the hallway any minute, wielding his popcorn scooper, smiling
diabolically.

Molly lingered. She spread her hands over Chuck's broad chest and straightened
his black bow tie even though it wasn't crooked. Molly's calves squared and her Achilles
tightened as she rose on the toes of her saddle shoes and leaned in to give Chuck a kiss.
Pearl watched as Molly kissed his bottom lip and slid her tongue over his top front teeth.

She lowered her heels and smiled up at Chuck. She started to pull back but he
grasped his arm tightly around her. The skin on her neck paled where his fingers pressed
against her spine. The ticket stub was wedged between his fingers, and it waved like a
tiny flag as he slid his hand down her back and fiddled with the clasp of Molly's bra
through the layers of fabric. He said, "I think you owe me more than that this week." He
cupped his other hand over her breast. The muscles in his forehead relaxed as he
exhaled.

Molly giggled. She spoke in a girlish, playful voice, "That's enough, Chuck."
She wiggled around in his grasp. The tendons in his hand defined themselves. Molly
spoke again, losing that girlish gloss, "Let me go, Chuck. You're not being funny."

Chuck dropped his arms. His smile faded. "Fine then," he said. "Just the ticket."
He placed the ticket in her palm, folded her fingers into a fist, and then punched his cheek
softly with her clenched hand. His dark hair was mussed and his smile was crooked.
"Silly me," he said. "Can't blame a boy for trying."

Pearl wondered if it were possible for him to have grown a five o'clock shadow in
the few minutes they'd been standing in the hallway. His face looked darker and less
boyish. Chuck dropped Molly’s hand and turned towards Pearl. His shelf of eyebrow furrowed into a frown. “So what are you going to give me?”

Molly said, “Come on, Chuck. Don’t mess with her.”

Chuck stepped closer to Pearl. His breath smelled strong as Daddy’s after a night out at The Pines. Chuck’s fly was halfway unzipped and Pearl could see a white sliver of his underwear. If he took one step closer she imagined biting down on his crotch and shaking her head like a dog wrestling a stick. “You got a little something for me, too, baby?” He reached down and brushed his finger over Pearl’s cheek. The tip of his fingernail brushed over her scar. Pearl slapped away his hand. It made a loud pop.

Chuck yanked his hand away and shook it as if it really stung. “Whoa, kitten. Watch those claws.” Chuck was a jerk. A cute jerk who thought he could get whatever he wanted. Every week, Pearl refused to kiss him, and every week, he threatened not to let her in free again.

Molly slid her hand over Chuck’s shoulder and pressed her lips against his pale neck. “Just give her the stub. She’s shy.”

Chuck’s eyes could see straight through to Pearl’s bones like the Fluoroscope in the shoe department at Ivy’s. He stared at her hard.

Pearl stared back at Chuck. “Your breath stinks.”

Molly giggled. “She’s right. You could light your breath with a match.”

Embarrassed. Chuck reached down into his pocket, pulled out a second stub, and threw it at Pearl. Pearl floundered for the fluttering stub, but it hit the floor before she could grab it.

“Whoops,” Chuck said. “Sorry about that.”
As Pearl bent down to pick it up she fought the urge to spit on his shiny black shoe. It made her mad to watch Molly flirt with him, acting as if he were the most wonderful boy in town. Pearl knew Chuck would be staring down the white neck of her dress, too, if she only had breasts.

“Let’s go,” Chuck said. His footsteps echoed against the black walls. When he reached the end of the hall, he peeked out the door, then turned and gave them the okay sign. “All clear,” he said. “See you back inside.”

When the door had closed, Molly dug her fingernails into Pearl’s arm. Pearl could see the edges of the crescents turning a deep red. “Don’t act up again,” Molly said. “Or I’m not bringing you with me next time.”

“He’s a jerk,” Pearl said. “I’ll pay my ten cents. I don’t care.”

“He was just teasing you, Pearl. Flirt a little, will you? You can be such a stick.”

“A stick?”

Molly waved around her hands. “A twerp. A dud. Whatever. Meet me down at Ivy’s after the show. And don’t be late. I’m not waiting around for you today.”

The air conditioning was broken and the theater was half empty. Pearl usually sat over on the left side of the theater with all the other girls who threw popcorn at the boys behind them, but their quadrant of the theater was empty. If it hadn’t been for the fact that she’d come with Molly, and Chuck let them in through the back, Pearl might have thought she had the wrong time or the wrong day altogether. She knew that most of the other girls were away on summer vacations to Myrtle Beach or Caesar’s Head but the missing boys were a mystery. She looked around the theater. She spotted two of the
boys down on the front row but she didn’t see Henry Clay with them. Pearl sat down in her usual seat by herself. She hoped Henry Clay would sneak up behind her later. Maybe, since she was the only girl, he’d dump a whole bucket of popcorn on her. Pearl and Henry Clay never talked at school, or in front of the other kids at the movies, but on some Saturdays they played out in the woods behind Daddy’s supper club, The Pines, while their fathers talked business. Mr. Wallace owned half of the state bank and he was going to own The Pines, too, if Daddy didn’t start paying off his second mortgage.

Daddy had told Pearl to be as nice as she could to Henry Clay, and so she’d taken him out to the abandoned cars in the woods and they had sat in Model T’s and early Oldsmobiles pretending they were stock car racers and taxi drivers. Pearl had danced the jitterbug on top of a Packard and Henry Clay had made her climb down because she made him nervous. Once, Henry Clay had caught a small blue butterfly out in the woods and strung it on a twine as a necklace for Pearl. The moth’s wings tickled her chest. She had called them angel wings and Henry Clay had nuzzled his mouth against her neck and pretended that he loved to eat angels, claiming they tasted like biscuits filled with molasses. One of Pearl’s greatest fears was that The Pines would close down before she had a chance to dance there, but each time Daddy mentioned an upcoming visit from Mr. Wallace, Pearl felt piano notes tickle up and down her spine. There was always the possibility she and Henry Clay might be forced to play together.

The lights went down and a cartoon came on. The theater was hot and Pearl’s chair squeaked each time she shifted her sweaty legs over the lumpy cushion. She kicked her toes against the seatback in front of her until a girl with a mop of red curls turned around and showed her a mouth full of chewed up chocolate and popcorn. Pearl wished
one of the boys down front would storm the old piano nailed to the floor and bang on the yel
glowed keys. Chuck or one of the other ushers would appear out of the shadows and nab the boy around the neck and escort him up the carpeted aisle, waving his flashlight over the audience as if to glue them to their seats.

As the opening credits of "Colorado Sunset" rolled across the screen, Pearl leaned back and settled in her chair. A pan of a Colorado ranch, a sunset, snow-capped craggy mountains. Pearl imagined that she was riding her grandfather's old horse, a palomino named Watson. The music grew louder and Pearl imagined she was riding through a snowstorm, fresh flakes grazing her neck and arms. The snow was warm and greasy, and it smelled buttery and fresh. Pearl opened her eyes with a start. Pieces of popcorn lay strewn across her lap. She'd fallen asleep and missed the part where Gene Autry was elected sheriff. His star-shaped badge now gleamed in the lamplight. Pearl felt another piece of popcorn hit her neck. This was the assault she'd been awaiting. She ducked down and peered through the gap between seats. She didn't see any of the boys, Henry Clay included. She glanced down at the front row. She saw the outline of the same two boys she'd seen before. She turned back towards the seat and pushed up on her knees, looking over the tops of the seats behind her, looking for Henry Clay crouched against the floor. But she saw no one. The theater was almost empty. She could hear the high school kids talking and giggling in the center. The theater was theirs that morning to smoke and drink all they wanted. Pearl followed the beam of the movie projector and looked up at the empty balcony. Up there, wooden-backed chairs sat in crooked rows and the floor was uncarpeted. She often wondered which movies the man who'd been castrated had seen there. She was certain about "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" and
“All Quiet on the Western Front,” but she wasn’t so sure about “Wuthering Heights,” and she knew definitely not “Snow White.”

Just as Pearl was about to turn back around, baffled by where the popcorn was coming from, she saw the hedge of a buzz cut rise up over the balcony railing and disappear back down. She hid her face behind the seat and stared up through the crack between seats. The figure popped up again and a wash of light bathed the face of Henry Clay Wallace. That little sneak. Pearl faced the screen again and slid down in her seat. She could throw popcorn far, but no way could she catapult popcorn up there. She wondered how Henry Clay had gotten up to the balcony. There was a door, of course, marked “Coloreds Only” in polite, cursive black letters, but whites couldn’t just march up there. It wasn’t their place. Empty or full, the balcony was for the colored. Henry Clay was sitting somewhere he didn’t belong.

Pearl peeked back over the seat. She thought she could see the tips of his buzz cut jutting up over the railing. She wished Henry Clay would come down so they could throw popcorn at the boys sitting at the front row together. She tried waving at him when he popped up to throw more popcorn, but he was too quick to notice her.

Pearl felt a special affinity for Henry Clay because he was motherless, too. His mother still lived with him and fed him and made him take his baths and read his Bible, but she wasn’t the same woman she’d been three years earlier, when Henry Clay contracted polio. She’d sworn she’d dedicate her life to Jesus if Henry Clay healed completely. Henry Clay survived without the slightest of limps, and his mother had devoted herself to Holiness Church, a small white chapel out in the country that raised hogs in the cemetery which were slaughtered and made into sausages that were sold to
raise money to give to the poor. Pearl had never understood why the church just didn’t
give the poor the sausages. Or the pigs. Henry Clay went to church with her some
Sundays, and he’d told Pearl all about the crazy member of the congregation who was
kicked out for killing one of the snakes to be handled and serving it up fried at a church
picnic.

Pearl plucked a kernel off her lap and popped it in her mouth. It was warm and
buttery. She considered getting up and buying some for herself. She was supposed to be
saving her money for Ivy’s, but she didn’t care. She hated the way Molly let Chuck put
his hands on her. Molly didn’t even like him. Pearl crept up the carpeted aisle and
slipped through the black swinging doors into the brightly lit lobby. She had to stand still
a moment and let her eyes adjust. The candy counter was freshly stocked with boxes of
colorful candy. The soda fountain gurgled and the popcorn machine rattled, buttery
blossoms piling up in the glass cage. A mirror behind the counter reflected back the
empty lobby, a wash of faded red and marble. Pearl looked at her face in the mirror. She
held one hand over her cheek to hide her scar and waited for the concession boy to ask
what she wanted.

The concessions boy was leaning against the back counter reading a magazine
with a woman on the front. He had loosened his black bow tie. Pearl tapped her quarter
against the glass topped candy counter. The boy looked up startled and dropped the
magazine. Pearl heard it hit the floor, and then the lazy slap of pages, and she thought
she smelled cigarette smoke. The boy was sunburned pink and his face was covered with
orange freckles—a nice pattern, Pearl thought, for a bikini.

“One popcorn, please,” she said.
The boy’s startled expression faded, replaced by a smirk. He used a metal scoop to shovel popcorn into a red and white striped bag. He looked up at Pearl through the glass and winked. He emerged and handed her the bag. She slid the corner across the counter and he slid it back with one sunburned, freckly finger.

“It’s on me,” he said. “Long as your promise to tell Molly how nice I was, looking out for you and all.”

She slid the quarter back towards the boy, but then she retracted and slid the quarter back into her pocket. “Thank you,” she said, remembering that Molly had told her to lighten up and flirt a little. If she didn’t have her own beauty to be taken advantage of, she’d take advantage of Molly’s. She ate a piece of popcorn in front of the boy and smiled. “You make it really good.” Pearl winked but the theater door swung open and the boy raised his eyes and didn’t see it. Pearl turned around. Two of the high school girls pranced in, shoulders and heads pressed together like Siamese twins. They wore the same style of pleated frock with tortoise shell buttons, and saddle shoes and bobby socks.

Pearl scooted down the counter and sat down on a velvet bench to eat the top puff of popcorn so it wouldn’t tumble off while she walked back to her seat.

While the concessions boy was refilling the girls’ popcorn, the girls talked.

“Those Florida girls are loose,” said the blonde with a potato-shaped face.

“I guess they have trouble keeping their blouses buttoned in all that heat,” said the other girl, a busty brunette with a red mark on her neck. Pearl immediately knew they were talking about Molly.

Potato face said. “Did I hear her correctly? Did she say that she danced with Daddy Teller after midnight?”
“Yeah right. And like he really fixed her a martini, too. She’s such a liar.”

The concessions boy handed the girls their bags. “A nickel a bag, please.”

“Come on.” the busty girl with the red mark said. “No one really counts all those kernels, do they?” She winked at him and fingered the top button of her blouse.

“That’ll be five cents total,” he said. He scratched his armpit and sniffed. The other girl tossed a nickel against the counter. It hit the glass and rolled off. He bent down to pick it up and the girls walked off without ever noticing Pearl sitting on the bench.

The concessions boy didn’t look at Pearl again before he disappeared down the hall. The lobby was empty. Pearl could hear the faint strains of Gene Autry starting another song. The popcorn popper had quit popping and the soda machine gurgled. She stared at the door leading up to the balcony. The popcorn felt heavy in her hands. No one would notice if she snuck up those stairs, just long enough to dump the popcorn on Henry Clay. Pearl stood up and walked nonchalantly towards the lobby, focusing on a lobby ad for “The Wizard of Oz” pinned to the wall. She stared at the Cowardly Lion. The movie hadn’t been released yet but she and Molly had read all about in the paper. Pearl worried that she acted too cowardly too much of the time. She wanted to be as gutsy and cavalier as Molly. Pearl knew that she could get into big trouble, but she wanted to test her female ability to do anything, go anywhere, as long as she smiled and flirted and used her charm. She took one more good look around the lobby and pushed through the swinging door.

She walked up a steep flight of narrow stairs. The stairwell smelled like an upset pantry, flour, sorghum, and rotten vegetables. She reached the top of the stairs and the
stairs descended back down again without any kind of platform, leading down to the rows of hard chairs. Gene Autry stared straight at her. Pearl saw the silhouette of Henry Clay’s head on the front row. Pearl moved quietly down the stairs, stepping on her toes so her heels wouldn’t clack on the bare wooden stairs. Pearl heard a high, strangled yelp, and a shuffling off to her left. She froze. Then she saw the outline of a cat wrestling with a paper bag, its head buried in the bag’s belly. The paper rustled and the cat backed up and emerged with a piece of fried chicken in its mouth. The cat disappeared down the aisle. The balcony was empty except for Pearl, the cat, and Henry Clay. She thought again about dumping the popcorn on Henry Clay, but she decided it might be more fun to sit down beside him and throw the popcorn at the audience together. That way, she could spend more time sitting beside him and their knees might brush or their shoes might nudge up against each other and stay like that for minutes.

She moved on down the stairs and slid into Henry Clay’s row, careful to enter from her left so that her scar faced away from him. She sat down next to him. They sat quietly for a few minutes. Pearl turned and smiled at him but he sat stiffly, mouth set and eyes fixed on the movie. Gene Autry rode across a plain, tumble weeds tumbled, and Henry Clay still didn’t look at her. Pearl wished she hadn’t come up and risked getting in trouble if Henry Clay wasn’t even going to look at her. She decided to show him her new aim. He’d be so impressed he’d have to say something to her.

Pearl spotted a woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat. She threw a piece of popcorn and it landed in the curved hat like a bowl. Pearl threw three more pieces. They started to cluster up. Henry Clay threw a handful. The popcorn started to build in the hat. The woman laughed and tilted back her head. Popcorn showered the lap of the girl
behind her. The girl turned and looked up into the balcony. Pearl and Henry Clay both
ducked. Their heads pressed together behind the wooden ledge.

Henry Clay must have been to the barber that morning. Fine black hairs stuck to
the rim of his ear and his hair smelled of tonic. Pearl blew one of the stray wisps off his
earlobe and Henry Clay clamped his hand over his ear. Pearl pried it away and
whispered, “You’re not supposed to be up here.”

“You aren’t either.” He was grinning.

“Watch this,” Pearl said. She popped up and located Molly in the group of high
school girls. She focused on the crown of Molly’s head and threw three pieces. Molly
brushed her hand over her hair.

“Good aim,” Henry Clay whispered. “Let me.”

Pearl fought back a grin. She bit down on the inside of her cheeks to keep them
from exploding.

Henry Clay pelted Molly’s head. Molly turned around and scowled up at the
balcony. Henry Clay and Pearl ducted. Pearl peeked back up and Molly was staring
straight at her. Molly’s scowl fell into a face of matronly disapproval. Pearl felt the
excitement seep out of her. She thought Molly would be impressed with her for breaking
the rules. Pearl ducked back down, and after a few moments. Pearl realized Henry Clay
was staring at her.

He said, “Turn your head.”

Pearl swiveled and looked behind her, expecting to see Chuck or the manager
sneaking up behind them. But she didn’t see anything. She spun back around. “What?”

“Turn your head.”
"I just did."

Henry Clay touched his finger to her cheek and turned her face towards him. His finger was greasy and gritty with salt.

"Can I?" he said.

Pearl eyed him dubiously. Pearl thought she must have an eyelash he wanted to brush off, or he was tricking her into holding still so he could thump her hard on the nose. She pulled back and batted his hand away.

"Hold still." he said. "It's okay." He reached back up and pressed his finger against her scar.

She knocked away his hand. "Stop it. Don't make fun of me."

"I want to touch it. I bet a cowgirl would have a scar like that."

"It's ugly," Pearl said. "I hate it."

"Come on," Henry Clay said. "Let me touch it." His finger was warm and soft against the scar. Pearl closed her eyes again. As he brushed his finger back and forth across the ridges, Pearl imagined he was rubbing it off.

Pearl heard the footsteps but she didn't open her eyes. Later she would claim she mistook them for the cat, but at the time, she didn't dare open her eyes and ruin that moment. Henry Clay must have had his eyes closed, too, because Chuck grabbed them at the same time. His hand was large and cold against Pearl's neck and his fingernails dug into her skin. He squeezed Pearl's arm hard. "I get you in free and you try to make me lose my job. That's no way to treat Chuck Hines, you little twerp."

"Leave us alone," Henry Clay said. "She was just watching."
“This balcony’s for coloreds only. I’d dump that popcorn on your head if I didn’t have to clean it up.”

Pearl pulled up to the railing to try and flag down Molly but Chuck yanked her away and hustled Pearl and Henry Clay down the stairs to the hallway. He grabbed the key hanging off the gold chain looped to his belt and wrestled them into a hall closet. Henry Clay tried to sprint off, but Chuck was strong. “I’m going to find my manager,” he said, filling the doorway. “He’s been looking for somebody to lick the floors clean around here.”

A single bulb shone on them. Bags of trash were piled up in the corner of the closet. The closet stank of rotting apples, stale popcorn, and wet hair. Brooms jutted out of an empty can like feathers on a giant turkey.

“It’s all your fault,” Henry Clay said. “I bet Molly told. That goody-goody thinks she’s better than everybody else.”

“Molly’s my friend. She wouldn’t get me in trouble.”

“She’s your babysitter. Pearl. You can’t trust her.”

“You’re just jealous. You wish you didn’t have a mom so a pretty girl could come over to your house and dance with you, too.”

Henry Clay kicked at an Electrolux on the ground. The white and blue striped hose snaked across the dirty concrete floor. Pearl knew it was mean to bring up Henry Clay’s mother, and that she was inviting him to snap back, but she knew that Molly would never rat on her. She didn’t appreciate Henry Clay talking bad about her babysitter.
“At least my mother didn’t try to kill me in a car wreck,” Henry Clay said. “At least I don’t have a big ugly scar across my face to remind me that she hated me.”

Pearl was furious. The hairs on her arms itched and she felt a bass drum thumping inside her fists. She was getting ready to take a swing at him when the door flew open. Pearl and Henry Clay both snapped to attention, as if they were prisoners caught goofing off. Chuck walked in with another usher, a stocky boy with a boxcar head and clownishly small feet. “You get him,” Chuck said, pointing a hairy finger at Henry Clay. The other boy lunged for Henry Clay. Henry Clay ducked and faked him out to run around him, but the usher caught Henry Clay with a blow against his chest. He pinned Henry Clay’s arms behind his back. Henry Clay’s face was red and the muscles in his arms quivered as he struggled to wrench free.

Pearl felt helpless. She obviously couldn’t physically fight against these men if they pulled something on her. If she was going to stop Chuck from being mean to them, she’d have to save them with her fire and ice. Pearl placed her hands on her hips and raised her voice at Chuck. “Molly’s not gonna want to kiss you after she finds out what you’re doing to us. She’ll never touch you again.”

“Oh, I’ve already gotten something from Molly. What’d you think took me so long?”

Chuck pulled a can of black Kiwi shoe polish out of his pants pocket. “I went and told her I’d found y’all up in the balcony. She gave me a little kissy kissy and I told her to wait out front for y’all while I finished up giving you a talking to.”

Chuck thumped his thumb against the tin lid and glared at Henry Clay. “So you want to be a nigger, huh? You want to sit up there with them coloreds and smooch a
white girl. Is that right?” Chuck opened the lid. He pulled a handkerchief out of his coat pocket. The black smear of polish clung to the stiff white cloth.

“Stop.” Pearl said. Pearl tugged on Chuck’s maroon pants. The velvet stripe running up the sides of his pants felt rough and sticky like a cat’s tongue. “I’ll give you a little something special if you let us go,” Pearl said. She lowered her head like Molly had and raised her eyes, smiling sweetly.

Chuck placed his hand on Pearl’s shoulder. His fingers dangled down over her flat chest. The very tip of his middle finger almost touched her nipple. The touch tickled and Pearl felt a strange tumble in her stomach. “Did you hear that, Clayton? The little lady’s got something for me. What is it, Pearl?”

“I’ll kiss you on the mouth.”

“You want to kiss, do you?”

“Yes,” Pearl said. “With my tongue and everything.”

Chuck rubbed three stripes over Henry Clay’s face. One on each cheek and one on the forehead. The shoe polish was clumpy and messy on Henry Clay’s face. The sharp, oily smell of the polish overpowered the smell of the trash. Chuck smiled and turned towards Pearl. Pearl covered her face with her hands. Chuck laughed. “Not you,” he said. “You ready to kiss now?” He threw down the can of polish. A chunk of black polish fractured and fell out on the floor—the black space between a smirk, an invisible presence mocking Pearl’s attempts to flirt her way out of trouble.

Chuck wrapped his arms around Pearl and she took a deep swallow in preparation to kiss him. She didn’t want to fill his mouth with spit and let him know she’d never kissed anybody. But Chuck slid his arm around and held her arms back from behind in
the same position the other usher held Henry Clay. She knew then he wasn’t going to kiss her, but she didn’t know what was going to happen next. She could feel Chuck pressing up against her. She wriggled back and forth trying to pull away, but she could feel him hard and pressing against her bottom. Henry Clay stared at Pearl, his face familiar and frightening, his eyes wide and angry. Pearl stared back at him, trying to send him messages. I tried to save us, she said. This isn’t my fault we’re in trouble.

The usher named Clayton pushed Henry Clay towards Pearl. “Go on,” he growled at Henry Clay. “Kiss her, blackie.”

Clayton shoved Henry Clay forward. The smell of the polish and his nervous sweat and the stench of the balcony clung to him like a useless shield. Henry Clay stretched out his neck towards Pearl. The shoe polish looked grainy and sandy and the peach fuzz on his upper lip looked thick and dark. When he was three or four inches away from kissing her, Chuck moved in and punched Henry Clay in the stomach. Henry Clay bent over, clutching his ribs. As he doubled over, his forehead brushed Pearl’s arm, smearing a black streak on her skin.

Chuck lifted Pearl off the ground and then dropped her. She landed with a thud. “Come on,” Chuck said to Clayton. “Let’s get out of here and leave these love birds alone.”

Pearl crouched down beside Henry Clay and rubbed her hand over his back. Henry Clay shrugged her off.

Chuck turned in the open doorway and looked back at them. His hair was matted with sweat and his cheeks were shadowy with stubble. “You’d better watch out. I don’t want to see you kids here again.”
Henry Clay had buried his head in his arms. Pearl nudged his elbow with her knee. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Let’s go get your Daddy down at the bank. He’ll take care of these guys.”

Henry Clay raised his head. Tears were streaming down his face, rolling over the polish like water over oil. “We will tell no one what happened,” he said. His voice shook with anger. “Don’t you tell Daddy or Grand. And don’t you dare tell Molly. What happened doesn’t leave this room.”

“But those guys are jerks,” Pearl said. “They can’t get away with that. Let’s go.” Pearl tugged on his arm.

“Go on,” Henry Clay said. “I don’t want to talk to you. You got me into this trouble. Don’t count on me being your friend ever again.”

Pearl knew enough about men to know that a woman couldn’t argue when the man had made up his angry mind. She would have to try and talk to him later, when he was cleaned up and he’d forgotten about how humiliated the ushers had made them feel.

The sun was hot and bright and blinding as Pearl walked out the front door of the theater onto the street. She felt dazed and nauseous. Molly called out to her. She was sitting on the curb smoking a cigarette.

“What the hell were you thinking?” She dragged on her cigarette and put it out under her heel. The stream of smoke disappeared into the day. “That balcony’s for coloreds, Pearl. You know good and well you don’t belong up there.”

“It was empty up there. We were being quiet.”

“Don’t you know the ushers go up there to smoke now?”
“But they don’t belong up there.”

Molly’s face fell with exhaustion. “Neither did you, Pearl. God, you can be such an idiot, I swear. Your Daddy would kill you if I told him what you did today.”

“You wouldn’t dare tell him anything.”

“Of course not. You’d never dance again.”

“I bet Daddy would have laughed. He would have told Chuck to go to hell and then punched his lights out.” Pearl knew that wasn’t true, but Chuck deserved it for what he’d done to Pearl and Henry Clay. Pearl ran her fingers through a rat’s nest in Molly’s hair. “What did you have to give Chuck to let us go?”

Molly spit on the sidewalk and wiped the back of her hand across her lips. “We’re never going back to the Carolina again.”

“What about all your friends?”

“Those aren’t my friends. We’re going to the Rialto from now on. I don’t care about spending a silly old dime. What’s that on your arm?”

Pearl looked at the black smear. She wanted to tell Molly everything, how Chuck was a jerk and a pervert and how the polish almost got in Henry Clay’s eyes and how Chuck had felt when he pressed up against her, but she kept her promise to Henry Clay, and she was too embarrassed to tell Molly how she’d tried to use her fire and ice, and how it had backfired on her. Molly held her head high like she did when she was trying to hold back tears, and Pearl knew that Molly would never tell her what she had done to Chuck. “It’s probably just grease,” Pearl said. “I had to reach under the theater seats for something.”
"Well don’t get it on your dress," Molly said. "That stuff’s hard to get out."

Molly stood up and smoothed out her skirt, brushing off bits of sand and dirt off the seat.

"Come on," she said, grabbing Pearl’s elbow. "Let’s pretend we’re on the yellow brick road."

Pearl wasn’t in the mood to skip or play but she wanted to be led away from Chuck and his big hands and his mean, foul mouth. Slowly, gaining speed as she went, Pearl started skipping down the fractured sidewalk with Molly, knowing it would take something as large and powerful as a tornado to lift away the queasy guilt burrowing in her stomach like some ravenous rodent bedding down for good.
Wade Teller heard the music first, distant and ghostly, a tired ragtime, the piano out of tune. And then the laughter, birdlike twittering and raucous roaring, wild sounds in that Colorado night. The music and the voices seemed to emanate out of the star-speckled blackness, out of the rose-gray boulders, and the dry, rustling shrubs. Five coyotes crossing the ridge ahead lifted their snouts and howled. They heard.

Wade pulled on the reins and steadied his horse. His friend Buzz rode behind him, doubled on the saddle. Wade didn’t turn as he spoke and if not for Buzz’s knees jabbing his hips and his painful-sounding hiccups and the sharp smell of whiskey they produced, Wade would have felt like he were addressing the darkness.

“You hear something?” Wade heard the bottle clink against Buzz’s teeth, the long gurgling swallow, and the sigh of relief. Buzz nudged Wade’s back and handed up the bottle. Wade took a swallow and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Well?” he said.

“Sounds like we’re in luck.” Buzz said. “Push on.”

They crested the hill and then they saw the tent saloon, phosphorescent and slightly pink, glowing like something dug out of the darkness and left in the meadow to run out of fuel. Wade led the horse across the ridge and down the switchbacks, rocks and clods of dirt tumbling under the horse’s tired feet. The night smelled of creosote and the ticklish ominous pang of coming rain and Wade was tired and half-drunk. They crossed through the meadow, columbine and wild asters and something sharp and sticky clawing at their ankles and feet. They snaked through the cottonwoods and quaking aspens, down to the slow, black river. They knelt beside the horse to drink along the muddy riverbank
and they washed the day off their faces and hands. Stars swam in the black water, tiny luminous fish that danced and disappeared when a giant rat slid down the bank and rippled the still surface.

“Come on,” Buzz said. He pulled his hat back on and stood. “She’s around here somewhere.”

“If you don’t find her here,” Wade said, “you’re out of a horse.”

“Shit,” he said. “I could care less about that horse.”

“That woman left you for the birds.” Wade said. “I don’t know what you’d want with her. Other than knocking her upside the head.” Wade’s serious face broke into a grin and he and Buzz both laughed.

“You take one look at this woman, Teller, and you’ll be hating that she ain’t yours.”

“She isn’t gonna have that horse,” Wade said. “That was a good horse.”

“Still is,” Buzz said. “Hurry on. It’s late.”

It was late, well past midnight, and they knew their chances of discovery were slim. The tent saloons usually cleared out early on Sundays. Men had to get back to camp for the morning’s work. Wade and Buzz weren’t any different. But Buzz was intent on finding that horse.

Wade staked his own horse under shadows of cottonwoods, hidden away from the makeshift tents. He was tired and drunk and about to run out of money. Buzz and Wade were members of a Rocky Mountain Bell crew reengineering high altitude telephone lines around central and western Colorado. Sometimes bears mistook the buzzing in the wires for bees and tore down the poles, but the weather was the biggest problem. High
winds, lightning, and freezing rains destroyed the lines. A summer blizzard had hit that June. They’d been driving twenty-four foot poles every sixty-four feet strung with two heavy gauge copper wires, but the storm had snapped wires as easily as spider webs or cotton thread, and broken the cross arms, clean as bones. They had driven more poles, decreasing the width in between. They had dug underground and buried the wires.

Finally, they had settled on trying to build H structures with number eight copper wire, but the load of logs they’d received was eaten through with termites. They were waiting for more.

Buzz had lied and told the crew that Wade and he were scouting coordinates on that Saturday in June of 1897, but Buzz was really hunting some charm named Charlee whom he’d met two weeks before, when he’d stopped by a travelling saloon on his way back from fetching supplies. She was a quadroon straight out of New Orleans and Buzz said she was the sexiest, smartest woman he’d ever met. He’d taken the gal to watch a show in the closest town and it wasn’t until they were eating fifty cent steaks in some saloon that this gal Charlee says she has to be back to camp by midnight. A few minutes later, the gal excuses herself, all ladylike, not bothering to tell Buzz she’s taking his horse and not coming back. Buzz told Vince, their crew leader, that the horse had been spooked by lightning, run off. Vince had given Buzz a day off to search, but Buzz couldn’t track down the travelling saloon. Two weeks later Buzz was still convinced he’d be able to find the horse, and the woman, too. Buzz was the closest thing to a friend Wade had on that crew and when Buzz asked Wade if he could borrow his horse to cover more ground, Wade told him he’d come along. He didn’t trust Buzz taking his horse. Buzz couldn’t even keep up with his own.
If it were Wade hunting his own horse, which he never would have lost in the first place, he would have checked the horses grazing in the shadows, and then moved on. He sure as hell wouldn`t have gone around flaunting his face in saloons so that every jack and john could testify against him as a horse thief when he finally rode off on the black and white thoroughbred. But Buzz had some crazy ideas about romance. No girls had come through camp in a month, and Buzz was in bad shape. Up there on the passes, where the snow turns pink with algae and wind can blow a man’s piss back onto his pants, a man feels mighty alone. That kind of alone was what Wade had sought by giving up his managerial position in Denver and donning the blue pants of the line crews, and he didn`t think any less of Buzz for wanting some female attention.

That April, Wade’s wife Laura told him that she needed her own space, and suggested he leave for the summer. He’d refused, promising to keep to his office, and that’s when she’d told him she thought she wanted a divorce, a request unheard of for couples of their stature and social grace. And so it was humiliation and not concordance that had finally driven Wade to leave Denver and go hang telephone wire across the mountains and plains. On the night before he left she’d called him into her room and undressed him in the faint glow of moonlight filtering through her stained glass window. patches of green and red mottling her beautiful face. “I want to be clear,” she had said, “I’m only doing this because I know you’re too faithful to sleep with a whore. You’ve been such a good sport about this whole thing I owe you at least a little something.” Even as he relaxed and let himself enjoy her lips, her long, smooth legs, and her dark pink nipples grazing his thighs, he had wondered how many other men had heard her say those same words, and how many more would hear them in that very room.
As Wade approached the noisy glow of the tent saloon, in search of a whore who’d stolen his buddy’s horse, Wade reminded himself he was only there to help out a friend and drink. He wanted a nightcap, and that was it.

Buzz and Wade walked on, past the wagons that pulled the travelling saloon from one mining camp to the next. Shadowy figures danced around a smoky fire. Water dripped off the roofs of smaller tents that stretched out behind the big one. Rivulets of black puddles laced the earth, smelling of sulfur and shit. They’d missed the rain although they’d been riding towards it all day—a streaked black curtain, a wall they might have passed through to reach some other, more perfect world. This wasn’t the place.

Buzz gave a man lingering outside the entrance a half dollar and asked him if he knew Charlee.

The man jingled a handful of coins. His thickly stubbled jaw was crooked and the right side of his lips curled up like an open tin of sardines. “I know lots of Charlees,” he said. He turned and pressed a finger against his nose, blew. The snot landed next to Buzz’s shoe. Buzz shifted his foot on top of the wet spot on the earth and gave the man another coin. The man pointed over in the direction of the tents. “You boys must have been doing some drinking tonight. Ain’t no other reason to be hunting a ngress.”

Wade could see Buzz’s shoulders tense. He was clenching and unclenching his fists. Wade knew the man noticed this, too, and he was enjoying it.

“How about you, cowboy?” he said to Wade. “What do you like?”

“I’m just here for a drink,” Wade said. “Excuse me.” He brushed past the man and the man moved forward like as to follow but then he rested his hand on Wade’s
lower back. Wade spun around, jaw clenched. The man said, “If you don’t like girls, you ain’t got no business in that tent.”

Wade wanted to knock the man’s nose into his skull, make him smell his own stupidity. Instead, he treated trouble like an unwanted telephone call. The phone rang, but he didn’t answer. He waved his hand like he’d heard a mosquito whine in his ear, and then he walked on inside.

The first thing Wade saw was a woman standing on a makeshift table gnawing on a strip of beef jerky. The woman turned to him and smiled. She glanced away and then she stuffed the jerky in her mouth and reached one arm around her back, her face screwed up into a wood knot. She unhooked the back of her corset and the black lace fell and plump breasts spilled out, nipples the size of silver dollars. The woman whipped the corset over her head, lasso style, and threw it across the room. It landed in the arms of a tall, slender black woman, whom Wade took to be a laundress, collecting clothes and sheets for the nightly wash. The half-clad woman waved at Wade and Buzz with the jerky, then went on gnawing, rubbing one hand over her paunch.

“Lordy.” said Buzz. He removed his hat and rubbed his wispy brown hair. “Take a look at that.”

Four men played cards around the table the woman danced on. The table was nothing but a giant wooden spool capped with an election sign. Buzz let out a chuckle and one of the men turned and faced Buzz and Wade. They moved on.

Smoke hung beneath the sagging roof of the tent. A professor played an upright Steinway in the corner, and on the black ledge of the piano sat a bowl in which a small silver fish swam around a cigar stub. Two girls barely old enough to hold up their
dresses danced around, making pouty-mouthed faces at the professor, who seemed to be half asleep. His song faded in and out. The girls' robes slid from their shoulders, and they flashed their girl breasts and slim shoulders. Wade wished he could feed those girls steak and buy them a good night's sleep. One of them reminded him of Laura. She was fifteen the first time they met.

"You sure this is it?" Wade asked.

"There's more out back." Buzz said. "I'm thirsty."

The bar was a long board set on two sawhorses. On the end sat a jar of what looked like mutant white olives floating in mescal. A handwritten sign propped against the jar read: "You look, you touch. You touch, you pay." Wade asked what was in the jar.

The bartender wiped his hands on the front of his red and white striped shirt and stared at Wade. His right eye was glass. It was scratched. "Them's eyeballs," he said. "You ought to have guessed that."

Wade gazed at that glass eye and wondered what would drive a man to cut out another man's eye. It wouldn't take much in a place like that, he decided. Nothing at all.

Buzz drank his whiskey and ordered another. He drank that one quicker than the first. "I'm going out back," he said. "You with me?"

"Go on," he said. "I'll have me another drink and meet you over where we first came up."

Buzz smiled. "I might be waiting on you, Teller." He nodded at a woman whose bare breasts were set up on the bar, a glass of whiskey magnifying each amber nipple.
“Goddamn,” Wade said. He turned and shook his head at Buzz. “I don’t trust this place,” he said.

“I don’t trust myself in this place,” Buzz said. “You be good.” Buzz disappeared through the muddy tent flaps.

Wade shifted his eyes and watched the laundress as she collected her rounds. He watched and listened as she stomped her feet and pointed at various girls and tugged on her skirt or her blouse or her neck, and girls threw clothes at her, dingy white ghosts flying through the dim light. The action was nothing much to look at, but something about the laundress’s precision impressed Wade. She wore a look of resigned determination mixed with sarcasm and he could see her muscular shoulders work beneath the sweaty backside of her shift.

Wade saw the woman reach her hand into a pair of men’s trousers folded over her arm and pull out a wad of bills. She glanced up at Wade, saw him looking, and she winked. She slid the bills into her bra and winked again. Then she turned, continuing to stuff sheets into a wooden bucket of steaming water. Rivulets of water rolled over the sides. Wade felt complicit and embarrassed and a bit guilty, although surely the guilt didn’t stem from having seen her steal. That didn’t bother him. A man has to expect certain tricks in a place like that. Hell, Buzz knew about that. A few bucks was no loss next to a horse.

Wade watched a redhead stagger about singing a song. The tune had no melody and the woman repeated the same droll verse. Wade thought about asking one of the girls sitting at a table if she wanted to dance, but he felt too drunk, and besides, he didn’t want to stir up trouble if the girl was already bought by one of the miners playing cards.
The place felt like it had emptied out. It was getting late, and Wade began to wish Buzz would hurry up and come back.

Earlier that morning, Buzz had shared what he knew about Charlee. She was working for a madam who was good to her, but the madam’s brother, a man named Pinky, was running the show while she vacationed in Spain. This Pinky was supposedly making all the girls miserable, demanding sex, shorting their wages, cutting back on their dinners. Wade had asked why Charlee just didn’t leave. Buzz said the madam owed her money, and Charlee was waiting until they returned so she could collect. Wade asked Buzz why she would have stolen a horse if she didn’t mean to get away, and Buzz shook his head at Wade and accused him of not listening. “She had to get back,” he said.

“Things don’t always work the way we want.” Buzz talked down to Wade in such a way that enraged and embarrassed Wade so much that he almost turned his horse around just then. Buzz went on to tell Wade that Pinky was rumored to have killed three men accused of messing with his favorite girls. Wade had asked Buzz how a man could come to have the name Pinky. He shrugged and said Wade would know when he saw him, and that if he saw him, he’d best get the hell out. At the time, Wade had boasted he wouldn’t be afraid of a man with a name like that.

Years later, when Wade told his son Richard this story, he wanted to say that the music stopped, or got louder, or that everyone cheered, or fell silent in awe or fear, but when Pinky entered the tent, ducking through the flap and rising up tall, the poker game went on, and the girls kept dancing, and the piano player, drunk as can be, dozed in and out of his tired songs. Wade Teller was the only fool staring at Pinky and Pinky stared straight back. Wade turned but he could still see the man clearly in his mind: a giant.
moon-sized face gouged with rabbit eyes and a big pink mouth. Pinky tipped his hat towards Wade and ran a huge hand through a head of thick white hair. The pink ruffles of his shirt fanned out over his white jacket which he wore with white pants and shiny white shoes. Pinky grinned, mouth open, and out dropped this swollen tongue, the color of a dead trout. His two front teeth were gold.

Pinky removed his jacket and hung it on the back of his chair. He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. His chest was covered with wiry white hair. He balled up the shirt and threw it at the laundress. Wade watched intently, trying not to directly stare. The laundress was busy stuffing clothes into a burlap sack. Wade had noticed that every time a girl threw another slip or skirt her way, she turned and held it up, almost as if to acknowledge receipt. But when Pinky threw his shirt, exposing his broad chest to the tent, the girl ignored him. Pinky took off his hat and tossed it. The brim caught the girl across the back of her neck. She reached up and scratched at her neck, as if a mosquito had bitten there, and kept on stuffing. Next, Pinky grabbed a glass off the bar and threw it at her back. The glass hit the girl on the butt. She turned around then. She gathered the clothes in her hands, walked up to Pinky, and spat on his shoes. She delivered one swift kick to his shin with bare feet, and continued stuffing clothes into the sack. Pinky giggled and stuffed his hand down his pants and scratched.

Wade ordered another whiskey and stared down at his shoes. It was about time he got back out to the horses. Wade took in deep breaths. He wanted to pay and leave but the bartender had slipped out the back and Wade didn’t have a bill small enough to leave. A sick feeling stirred in his stomach. He knocked back his whiskey and set the glass on the counter.
Pinky slouched against the counter next to Wade. “It’s on me tonight.”

“I need change,” Wade said. “That’s all.”

Pinky squinted at Wade’s bill. “I got something to even that out,” he said. “How about her?” Pinky nodded at the laundress.

Wade slid off his stool. He didn’t want to cause any trouble. He didn’t want to owe Pinky anything, but he didn’t want to wait around any longer for the bartender either.

“You alone?”

Wade stared at that tongue, unable to decide which would be the better answer.

“Once, over in Butte, I saw a son-of-a-bitch chained to a whorehouse wall. His eyes were propped open with toothpicks.”

“What did you do about it?” Wade asked. He didn’t know whether or not Pinky expected him to be scared, or impressed.

“I relieved him of his misery.”

“You took him down?”

“No,” Pinky said. He grabbed Wade’s hand and brought it up to his mouth like a lover or older man getting ready to kiss a girl’s palm. “I closed his eyes.” Pinky broke into a low chuckle and Wade looked at the laundress. She was on her knees, bent forward, scrubbing at a piece of cloth. The bottoms of her feet were the color of Pinky’s eyes.

“Watch this,” said Pinky. “This is how it’s done.”

With a quick flick of her wrist the woman threw a bucket full of hot water at Pinky’s bare torso. Steam rose off his chest. His skin reddened and wilted, crinkling like
a man suddenly growing old. Pinky’s moonlike face stilled, stunned, and then he laughed. Pinky grabbed the girl as she started to run, his huge hands covering and squeezing her breasts. His hands slipped under her shift and he brought out money.

“You bitch, he said. You give me that.” One hand still clutching her left breast, he thrust his other hand under her shift and grabbed at her crotch. She screamed, a loud, angry and pained sound, that of elks mating, or a lost gosling crying in the night. Wade was stunned. He looked around. The place had completely cleared out.

“Leave her alone,” Wade said.

Pinky tilted his head and pushed out his lips, face thoughtful and strained. “Did you say something?”

Wade shook his head. Nothing, he wanted to say. I didn’t say a thing. But there he was, saying it again. “Leave the girl alone.”

Wade tried to stand tall, as if he were encountering something angry but timid, such as a black bear.

Pinky's gold teeth glinted dimly in his cavernous mouth. Wade ducked, but not fast enough. Pinky caught him across the nose. Wade could feel the blood rush into his head as he stepped back and drew his hands up to cover his face. His eye was already starting to swell, but he could see that the girl had disappeared.

“It’s not polite to tell a man what to do.”

Pinky held Wade’s hand before his mouth and licked his lips. Wade yanked his hand and he heard a small crack. Pain shot up his arms and into his shoulder. Pinky bared his teeth and slid out that trout-like tongue. He bit down on Wade’s pinky finger and scraped his teeth over the joint and clenched his nail between his teeth. Pinky paused
and stared into Wade's eyes. The look he gave almost said I'm sorry. Then he clamped down on the nail, wriggled around his teeth, and tore it off, all the way down to the moon. He held the severed nail between his teeth and smiled. Wade's hand hung in midair. He stood there stunned. *It's only a nail.* Wade told himself. *It's not pain at all.* But Pinky already had him across the nose, and the night was exploding inside him. The piano started up again and Pinky was singing, "Isn't it jaunty, isn't love a jaunty thing." Wade lurched, stumbled out of the tent. The trees were laughing and the ground was spinning and he was running and tripping and crawling and then he fell down on top of the night and slept.

Wade woke in a field by the river. All the oceans of the world sloshed inside his bowels, and he sat up quickly, his head exploding as he vomited into the columbine and grass. In the moonlight, he saw this was not the first time. The world went blurry again and he thought he saw a ghost moving out over the river. Wade laid back down, the early summer earth cool beneath his shirt. He tried to focus on the stars, find a constellation, something he knew for certain, but the stars wouldn't sit still and he grew dizzy and his fingertip flamed with fire. He raised his hand to his face and saw the crusty blood, the blue-black tip where the nail had been torn down to the moon. The events of the night returned to Wade in fragments: the surprising softness of Pinky's hands, the smell of seared skin, and the bits of bark and splinter stuck under her fingernails. And then the stars were falling all around him and Wade was dreaming, half-sleeping. The steady
slosh of river against the shore lulled him, and the crickets sang their indecipherable secrets about the world.

The night before he left home, Wade encountered Laura sitting at the kitchen table. Long strands of blonde hair had fallen from her tight bum, and the muscles of her pale face wrinkled in concentration. She was ripping pages out of a book, lighting each page on a candle and dropping it into a blue bowl. Blackened wisps smoldered and stunk. Wade pulled out a wicker-bottomed chair and sat.

“What are you burning?” Even as he asked he had already recognized the gilt-edged pages, the heavy-set block letters curling up in smoke. She was burning the copy of *Hamlet* Wade’s mother had given him as a boy.

“You didn’t even miss it,” she said. She tore off another page. She smiled slightly as the page flamed and wilted. She blew on the blackened wisp, and it settled into ash. “It can burn and burn,” she said, “but it’s never gone. Someone will always remember. Some fool will always have another copy. We all have speeches tucked away in our heads. Even if everyone in Denver remembered one line, one small phrase, together we would remember the whole play.”

Wade took the book from Laura’s hands. She didn’t struggle. She started stirring her finger around the ashes in the bowl. Laura had a thin face and deep set eyes that appeared to be much larger because of the way she could stare so intently. Her nose was freckled with May sun. She’d spent her mornings out in the garden without wearing a hat. Wade had watched out the window as she’d stuck her fingers into the rows of dark brown earth, moving her mouth, singing or whispering to whatever lay beneath.
“Memory is a miser and philanthropist both,” she said. “It hordes and gives away whatever it wants.” Laura looked up at Wade. Her dark blue eyes looked flat as an afternoon lake. “Do you remember what you told me when we first met?”

“What?” Wade said. He knew, of course, but he wanted her to say it.

“You told me that you thought you’d read about me in a book. You told me that after you rode home from a visit, you thought you could still hear my heart beat, and then you realized it was your own.” Laura wound her hair back into a bun and let it fall again. “Is that how love works? Love is nothing but the passing palpitation of the heart?”

Wade had left Denver in an unseasonable freezing rain. Laura didn’t see him to the door. The purple and yellow pansies in the bed around the front door looked bright and blurry as a painting he’d seen in a museum in New York. He plucked one to wear in his hat, but as he circled the house on his horse one last time, and saw Laura looking out her bedroom window, he tossed her the flower and cried bravo, praising, in all earnestness, her best performance ever.

The second time he woke his shirt was gone. Wade felt around in the grass. He feared that as soon as he opened his eyes and moved around he’d be sick all over again. But he had to get up, get moving, find his horse. find Buzz, get the hell back to camp. The sick feeling passed and he sat still, breathing in the sweet cool air and columbine.

The haloed moon shone bright on the water. Something was moving along the riverbank. When the figure stepped out of shadow, into the moonlight, Wade thought he was watching a ghost. His head ached and he squeezed shut his eyes. When he opened them again he recognized the girl. She was dipping something white into the water.
pulling it up, dipping it again. His shirt. His ghost. She pulled the shirt up onto a pink rock. Wade watched as she pulled the white shift she wore over her head. He could see her silhouette in the moonlight, the upward curve of her breasts, the square cut of her calves, the slope of her stomach and the dark space below.

A hot breeze blew across the field and something rattled behind Wade. He flipped over, rock poised in hand to strike a snake, but the wind blew again and he saw that the sound was only grass. When he turned back, the girl was gone. The surface of the river was smooth, the quivering reflection of the sky. Wade’s boots sat in the grass near his feet but he didn’t bother pulling them on. He stood, paused to gain his balance, the whole world spun, and then he moved towards the river, calling out “hello, hello.”

Wade must have seemed some damned soul, bloody and shirtless, hands clawing through the air as he stumped his toe against a rock, stumbled, yowled. He hit the ground hard but climbed back up and ran on down to the water, sliding down the slight embankment and sinking into the sandy mud. And then, out of the water, she rose: bobbing up and down like a buoy, something set there to warn.

Wade froze in some childish gesture of tag. He felt caught, as if he had been running after her, instead of running to see if she needed help. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought you’d....” But she was underwater again, and again the water sat still as if she hadn’t been there at all. He waded in over his thighs. The current caught him and he started to tread, feeling through the dark water with his arms and legs, half an octopus flailing around for its symmetry. He dipped underwater. The cool water felt good and he was awake and annoyed and ready to get the hell out of there, find Buzz, forget the horse, get back to camp. But the girl was out there in the water, and he didn’t know if she were
drowning, or teasing, or trying to run away. When he came up for breath, eyes stinging, she was drifting two feet away from him. She trembled.

Wade held out his hands and she started to dart backwards, quick and swift as a giant water bug. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. “I thought you had disappeared.” Wade suddenly felt ridiculous and mad as hell. Here he was, chasing a black laundress around in a river in the middle of the night when his friend and horse were out there somewhere and he had to be back at camp and ready to work by eight. He cursed himself under his breath.

The girl smiled and raised her arms over her head and went under again, dropping quickly, as if some underwater nest of beastly reeds had yanked her down. Then he felt something tugging at his foot. He fought, kicking his leg, and then there she was behind him, bobbing. The sound she made was what he would later learn to know as her laughter, although it was a sound he’d never heard before.

“Are you alright? Where am I?” Wade said. “I’m not going to hurt you. Just tell me where to go.”

The girl bobbed in the water. Again, she ducked under and swam toward shore. a black snake of water rippling out in her wake. Then she was on shore, her toes curled over a rock, her body thin and solid in the moonlight. Wade stood with his feet planted on the slick rocks on bottom of the river. A cold spot flowed past him and he held still as the water numbed his feet. The water trembled, reflecting back the distant fire in the sky. He reached out and grabbed at one of those cold, trembling embers, wondering how the world would be different if man could hold fire barehanded.
Charlee sat in Buzz’s lap across the small fire Buzz had built down by the river. Mattie lay in the grass, eyes closed, toes pointed towards the moon. Wade sat close to the fire to dry out his shirt, close enough to pass his hand through the flames, which he did as Charlee explained why her cousin Mattie wouldn’t speak to him: she was deaf.

“Seems to me that a deaf girl would be top dollar,” Buzz said. “A man don’t have to put up with her sassing and carrying on.”

“The same could be said about her not having to listen to you,” said Charlee. She lifted her braids off her neck and flung them in Buzz’s face. She had olive-colored skin that shone in the firelight and a smile that belonged on some mythic creature, half woman, half snake. She had called Mattie her cousin but they didn’t look much alike. Mattie was short waisted and her skin was a lighter brown. Mattie’s knees dimpled when she stood. Her calves were cut and slim. Her curly hair hung down over her breasts.

“Listen, Wade. she’s deaf,” said Charlee. “But she has a mind of her own.”

Something splashed down in the river. Wade turned and watched a deer jump over a rock and kneel down in a pool formed by pale green and beige rocks. Wade took a drink from the bottle of gin they were passing and shook his head. “I don’t trust you,” he said. “This is all a trick.”

“I stole the horse so Buzz would come back.” Charlee said.

“Well,” said Wade. “We came.”

“I’ve got a big favor to ask.”

“I don’t have any money.”
“We need to get Mattie out of here. I’m still waiting for the madam to come back so I can collect our money. But Mattie’s in trouble with this guy. I’m asking if the two of you would take her back to camp with you. She practically grew up in the woods. She’ll be fine.”

“You still stole a man’s horse.” Wade said. “I don’t do favors for horse thieves.”

“Come on, Wade.” Charlee said. “Mattie is a great cook. She’ll wash out all your shirts.” She paused, raised her eyebrows. “I’m sure she’ll do more. You’re kind of cute.”

“That’s not it.” Wade said. He pushed a fallen twig back into the fire with the toe of his boot. He could feel the soles of his shoes warm.

“Well, then what the hell’s the matter?” Buzz glanced down at Charlee, who was poking a stick into the fire. “You’ll have a woman in the woods. Any of those boys found out and you’ll be king of the crew.”

“That’s one of the things I’m afraid of,” Wade said.

“Come on, pal.” Buzz said. “You can’t abandon a lady in distress.”

“She’s not a lady.” Wade said. He glanced at Charlee and didn’t say what he was thinking, “She’s a black laundress whore.”

“I’ll come check on her when I can,” Charlee said. “She’ll get along fine on her own.”

Mattie groaned in her sleep and flopped onto her side. Wade could see a welt and bruises on her arms.

“Shit,” Wade said. “This woman’s in trouble, ain’t she?”
Charlee pulled her stick out of the fire. She held it up so he could see, speared onto the glowing orange end, a blackened spider wiggling its spindly legs. “You might could call it that,” she said.

As they rode their horses out of the valley, Wade watched a pack of coyotes devour a dead cow. The coyotes pirouetted around the body as they waited their turn, leaping in and yelling like horny women. Mattie dozed, slumped against Wade’s back. He could hear her breathing steadily. Wade considered dumping her off there where her trouble would be through. He whispered out loud to himself, “Why does a man like Wade Teller allow himself to be talked into these things?” Mattie jerked in her sleep. She shifted and slid her thumbs into the waistband of Wade’s pants. Wade didn’t bother to answer himself out loud, but he knew, he knew.
Heyward Foley’s new button-down Oxford cost $30 on sale, $34 with his monogram on the breast pocket. His trousers, a linen/cotton blend, cost $59.99. The $84 cologne was a splurge but it came with a silver pocket knife, which he used to pry open a complimentary beer as he waited for his hairdresser, who cut and styled his hair for $28, plus tip. He’d easily spent over $200 on his image alone, $500 counting the Egyptian cotton sheets, the case of white wine packaged in fish-shaped bottles, and the mounted blue marlin he’d bargained for at a pawn shop. He’d be in debt for months, but cost didn’t matter when it came to impressing Khaki Hunter, the most beautiful woman on television. Khaki Hunter was back in South Carolina for the weekend judging the Lake Hartwell Fishing Frenzy, and Heyward was expecting her any minute.

Heyward wielded his new $12 spatula to flip the halibut defrosting on the grill. He jumped when car headlights swam across the garage door. His heart flopped when the gravel crunched in his driveway. A car door opened and a silhouetted figure hopped out, boots thudding on the concrete. The kids from the trailer-park next door jumped on a giant trampoline and imitated the sound of falling bombs. It was only Squirrel, and Heyward knew what he wanted: for Heyward to drink beer with him at Sorry Charlie’s and to tell stories to win over girls.

“Khaki Hunter isn’t stopping by,” Squirrel said. He helped himself to a beer and poked the spatula at the four fillets sputtering on the grill. The fish looked opaque beneath layers of ice crystals. The grill was Squirrel’s. It’s worth $120, $175 tops. He won it on the game show Price Busters before he won the $500 john boat and the Alaskan
fishing trip for two. Heyward used to tell Squirrel they’d take the boat out when he
finished building the pond in his weedy half-acre of backyard, but he hadn’t revved up
the borrowed Bushhog for months now and the pond was nothing but a ten-foot-wide
mud hole.

“I drove to Lake Hartwell to see her this morning,” Heyward said. “She said
she’s probably coming by after the bass tournament.” Heyward had sweated along
the lakeshore with spectators and cameramen watching Khaki pull up in a glittery blue
motorboat. He’d waved her down near the dock and asked if she was going to come pick
up the bed and boxes and other furniture he was storing for her. Khaki had asked
Heyward to ship her fishing trophies to Montana and to sell everything else he’d moved
out of her ex-boyfriend’s apartment and stored in his garage—a favor he’d offered her
that one magical night in Alaska that they spent together. As she climbed back into the
motorboat with a man the size and color of a giant halibut, Khaki had smiled and said she
might swing by if she thought of something else she needed. Then she’d put one finger
to her pursed lips. a gesture Heyward didn’t know to whether to interpret as a kiss, or a
plea for quiet.

“She’s not coming,” Squirrel said. He prodded the fish again. The fire sizzled as
more ice crystals slid off. “Khaki Hunter was on the rebound. She’s a professional
fisherwoman. You caught a big fucking fish in Alaska. Of course she slept with you.”

When Squirrel had asked him to go on the Alaskan fishing trip he won on Price
Busters five months earlier, Heyward had refused until Squirrel revealed that Khaki
Hunter, Squirrel’s local celebrity partner, was also going. Celebrities only played for
charity, but Squirrel said the producers made an exception for Khaki, seeing how she was
the star fishing and lake conditions reporter on WHAM TV. Heyward hated to fish, but
he couldn’t get enough of Khaki Hunter. Khaki had an one-and-a-half minute segment at
the tail end of the six o’clock weather that replayed at eleven if there weren’t enough
Little Miss Carolina pageants, Confederate flag rallies, or midget wrestling matches to
cover. Khaki would report from Lake Hartwell, jet skis zooming behind her. or she’d
walk along the Reedy River, pausing to peer into a black fisherman’s bucket or to pat the
back of a kid with a turtle hanging off a cane pole.

Before Squirrel even won the trip, Heyward had daydreamed about Khaki Hunter
wearing a sealskin bikini and a polar-bear parka and riding a dolphin across the Pacific.
What actually happened in the Alaskan fishing trip was hardly more believable. Minutes
after introducing himself to Khaki on the twenty-five foot boat, he caught a two-hundred-
and-fifty pound halibut, his first fish ever. Khaki had helped reel it in, and that night she
made rough love to Heyward in her hotel room bathtub. She had received a phone call
late that afternoon offering her a new job and she’d spontaneously taken it. As hot water
showered over them and Heyward’s butt squeaked across the tub bottom, Khaki told
Heyward that he’d been her inspiration. “This afternoon I wrestled an angel,” she’d said.
“I can do anything, go anywhere. I’m Khaki Hunter. I deserve this.” In the blinding
glare of morning, she had flown off to start hosting the new fly-fishing show in Montana,
and Heyward had rented a freezer truck to drive the filleted fish back to South Carolina.

Squirrel poured the rest of his beer over the grill and crumpled the can with his
fist. “You’re water under her bridge,” he said. “You’re a one-night stand.” Squirrel’s
girlfriend broke up with him because every time she told him she wanted to get married
and have babies he tallied up the cost of children and declared the numbers too
frightening. He'd stopped counting at $400,000. "C'mon, we're going to Sorry
Charlie's," he said. "The blonde from Florida thinks you're cute."

More than once, Heyward had told Rhetta, the blonde, and her friend, a busty
redhead, the story of the halibut and Khaki. Squirrel had encouraged him. He swore that
girls crave jealousy, that they turn it into a challenge.

"Come on," Squirrel said. "I'm buying."

"I have to be back by midnight," Heyward said. "Khaki might drop by."

"Quit wagging your tail and come on. We'll woo the ladies with our pricing."

For months before Squirrel's appearance on Price Busters, Heyward and Squirrel
went to Sorry Charlie's every night after work. They drank beer as they read mail-order
catalogues and looked up bids on E-bay using Charlie's laptop. They priced yachts, jet skis,
greenhouses, shower curtains, milkshake makers. They priced disposable cameras,
matching love seats, stereo systems, electric toothbrushes. They'd get loaded and drive
around to Wal-Mart, Big Buy, Lowe's, Target, and Pineridge Mall. They cruised down the
Motor Mile and priced Toyotas, Winnebagos, Humvees. They knew the price of bread
machines, chainsaws, tanning beds, ab-dominators, paddle boats, home computing systems.

They recorded the average prices in a sixty-nine cent spiral notebook and made
flashcards on lined three-by-five index cards, a buck fifty a package. Back at the bar
they'd quiz each other.

"Sixty-seven-piece power tool kit with plastic storage case?"

"$19.99"

"Rechargeable mulching mower with rear bag?"
“$350 most likely. $425 tops.”

“One carat cubic zirconia heart-shaped pendant?”

“$44 without a filigree chain, $63 with.”

Squirrel won so big that one of the judges accused him of cheating. Khaki Hunter got him off the hook but it cost him a hundred bucks and his new $48 Fry Daddy.

Now, at Sorry Charlie’s, Heyward checked his messages on the payphone. Khaki hadn’t called and Heyward thought his outgoing message sounded weak. He dialed back up and recorded a new message. He left Squirrel’s cell phone number and the address for Sorry Charlie’s. Then he headed over to the bar, where Squirrel sat talking with Rhetta and her redheaded friend. Squirrel had his hand on the redhead’s thigh. She was wearing a short black skirt and a cobra-skin halter top. Heyward mistook the print for fish scales.

“My name’s Ruby,” she said, touching the heart-shaped ruby hanging around her neck. $189 tops. “We saw you on the six o’clock news. You were talking to Khaki Hunter.”

“You’ve been here since six?” Squirrel asked. He ran a hand through his curly red hair and grinned.

“Aw, that was nothing,” Heyward said. He motioned to the bartender for a beer. “Who needs another drink?”

Rhetta said, “You were wearing a pink hat and goofy sunglasses. We pointed at you and said, ‘Hey, we know him.’”

“Those glasses cost forty-six dollars,” Heyward said. The clerk had said they made him look tough & tender.
"They panned the crowd," said Rhetta. "Then they zoomed in on you and Khaki."

"Her fiancé is cute," said Ruby. She giggled and kissed Squirrel on the cheek.

At the sound of that word, fiancée, Heyward’s mouth dropped open, and he knocked over an empty glass.

"Sorry Heyward," Rhetta said. "We figured you already knew." She ran a finger down his arm. "We’re still here for you."

"Oh, I knew," Heyward said. "I was congratulating her when you saw me."

Heyward gave Squirrel the hand signal for "let’s go," a thumb brushed over the bridge of his nose.

Squirrel ignored him. He shook the ice in his glass, ordered another round, and said, "Heyward, how about you tell us a story."

Ruby groaned. "He’s just gonna go on about that two-hundred-fifty pound halibut again. We’ve heard that story about a hundred times."

"I bet we could tell it," Rhetta said. She tapped a finger against her chin. "You used the same line on Khaki Hunter that you used on us."

Ruby fingered her necklace and said, "You jerks," but it’s obvious she doesn’t mean it.

Rhetta said, "You met Khaki on a boat. She was wearing a polar bear parka and a gold chain with a fish charm."

Squirrel made a sound like a game show buzzer. "Anh. She had on seal skin pants and knee high boots. I was there."
“It was raining,” Heyward said. “She wore blue jeans and a windbreaker. Who wants to play pool?”

“You sauntered up and told Khaki the necklace cost $263 dollars,” Ruby said, “and nineteen cents.”

“$280 with tax,” the girls spoke in unison and laughed.

“It was $385. And the fish eye was a real emerald,” Heyward said. He pretended to focus on the silent football game on the bar television. “How ‘bout them Gamecocks?”

“You heard whale songs,” Ruby said. “Then your rod jerked.” She winked at Rhetta and Rhetta slid out her tongue as if to say you-go-girl. Ruby said, “When you yanked on that fish, you felt like you were pulling a garage door off the bottom of the ocean.”

“Naw.” Squirrel said. “It was like reeling in a Volvo.”

“You thought you’d hooked the devil,” Rhetta said. “Right, baby?” She slid her bare foot up Heyward’s pants leg. Her toes felt cool and calloused.

“Oh I remember.” Ruby said. “Khaki said it felt like y’all were wrestling an angel.” She wrapped her arms around Squirrel in a bear hug and he pretended to struggle.

“It was magical,” Heyward said. He fluttered his fingers for emphasis. It felt so ordinary to say it that way. He tried to think of a better way to say how monumental it really felt. “I know,” he said, proud of himself. “It felt like we were pulling fire out of water.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ruby said. “Get real, HeyHey.”
"The guide shot the fish with a pistol." Rhetta said. She held up her finger like a trigger and said "Pow." "Blood splattered on Khaki's cheek," she said. "You wiped it off with a towel."

"He licked it off, 'member?" Ruby said. "And the blood was on her booby."

"That's impossible," Squirrel said. "She was wearing a parka."

"That's enough," Heyward said. "Story over."

"We're just getting to the good part," Rhetta said. "You fucked her on a waterbed."

"It was in the bathtub," Squirrel said. "My room was next to hers."

"Heyward, you tell us."

"No comment," Heyward said. "You're embarrassing me."

"You should throw out that fish," Rhetta said. "It's just not healthy."

"That shit is freezer burnt," Squirrel said. "You should ditch the freezer while you're at it."

Heyward grabbed a mushy maraschino out of the relish bin and thought about throwing it at Squirrel. He popped it in his mouth instead. The sickly sweet bomb exploded and he said, "You just don't get it. It was like nothing I've ever felt before. I changed her life. She wouldn't have moved to Montana if it weren't for that halibut."

"You believed that shit?" Ruby said. "I never did like her hairdo. Too big. And did you see those roots? Her blonde is fake as it gets." She glanced at Rhetta and forced a smile. "Heyward, your so-called love story is just another version of a fish story. Every time you tell the story of Khaki and the fish, your love for her just grows and grows."
Rhetta said, "You've told that story so many times you've started believing your own lies."

"What? You calling me a liar?" Heyward leaned back and shrugged, palms exposed. "I was telling the cold, spanking truth. Honest."

"All I'm saying is that it's real easy to tell a story about someone who isn't around to prove it. You don't have Khaki around to set things straight."

"Fine."

Heyward stared blankly at the television and thought about just how magical the halibut experience had been. The muscles in Khaki's shoulders had quivered as they reeled in the fish and Heyward had smelled the powdery scent of her deodorant. Salt stung his eyes. His arms ached, and he feared the fish was going to pull them overboard. Heyward's ears rang with the crack of the pistol. The fish's eyes swam on top of its flat head and blood poured out of its stomach. Khaki kicked the fish three times, and then she turned and kissed Heyward on the mouth.

Later that night, Khaki had looked like a fish on fire moving through the blue of the indoor hotel pool, her red bikini shiny in the underwater lights. They slept naked in her hotel room, the air conditioner on high, the television gone blue as the tropical oceans Heyward dreamed they would one day fish together. And meanwhile, just across town, the monstrous fish was being cut up and frozen by the Vietnamese fishmonger Heyward had picked out from the Yellow Pages because his name said quickly sounded like Khaki's laughter.

The bartender started lighting candles across the bar. They flickered in their red, netted globes.
Rhetta scrunched up her nose and said, “Do you still have her bed and photos set up in your room? I always thought that was a little weird.”

“It was just a few things.” Heyward said. “Nothing you wouldn’t borrow.”

After Khaki took the new job, Heyward had offered to drive his moving truck over to Khaki’s ex-boyfriend’s house, pack up all her things, and store them in his garage—a $1600 job, not even talking storage fees—for free. Heyward had taken the liberty of setting up Khaki’s king-sized bed in his room. He folded up his cot and hid it under the king-sized dust ruffle. Then one day, while rooting around in her boxes for a wrench, he started picking out little things he could set around his room: fishing trophies, a night light, a cotton nightgown with a tiny pink rose sewn at the neck. On his dresser he placed a photo of a teenaged Khaki holding a Northern Pike. She has the same girlish grin, small widow’s peak, and tomboyish stance that Heyward fell in love with watching her on TV. Heyward had cuddled up in the big bed with a fuzzy, stuffed trout and watched a videotape of Khaki on Price Busters, shouting out all the prices ahead of her. He had pretended Khaki was away on vacation, and he was awaiting her return.

Ruby slipped on her jacket, a short black thing that looked like it was missing its bottom half. “I’m bored,” she said.

“Come on.” Squirrel said to the girls. “Who has a story?”

Rhetta slipped off her shoe and nudged Heyward’s foot.

“I’ve got a story.” Heyward said. He blew into his palms and rubbed his hands together. He knew he had to tell a good one if he ever expected to have a chance with these ladies again. He tried to think of a story that he knew he hadn’t told in a long time. Finally, he clapped his hands and leaned forward. “I delivered a mummy once.”
"A mummy?" Ruby said. "Like on Halloween?" She was smiling, one hand slipped into Squirrel's.

"I was working for a high-end delivery company. I wore a brass badge and a gun on my belt. We dealt with jewels, art, ancient documents. Invaluable shit. One day me and Jimmy drove to the natural history museum to get this two-thousand-year-old mummy. It must have been worth fifteen million. Some Indians wanted to bury it. You know, tribal property."

Rhetta leaned forward. Heyward peeked at the faded rose tattoo blossoming on her left breast and remembered running his tongue along the blue marlin on Khaki's hip.

"The mummy was packed when we picked it up but I'd seen it on display," he said. "His toenails were yellow and curly. His ears were pierced. The little plaque said they found strawberry seeds in his stomach. Spinach in his teeth."

"Mummies don't eat spinach," Ruby said.

"Grass then." Heyward said. "Seaweed." He took a sip of his drink.

"Go on," Squirrel said. He leaned forward, looking hopeful.

Heyward pictured the glass case smudged with handprints and the curly toenails and the tufts of black hair on the body's brown skull. The mummy's eyes were closed and the mournful expression on its shriveled face was that of heartache. It occurred to Heyward that the mummy wasn't exactly a mummy. It wasn't wrapped in strips of decaying cloth or wearing a gold mask like King Tut. It was just shrunken. He decided not to mention this.

"Well?" Rhetta asked. "What happened?"
"When we showed up, I expected extra security and protestors. But it was just me and Jimmy and an Indian who sat in the back passing around a joint and telling us where to turn."

Both women stared doe-eyed at Heyward. Rhetta scratched her lip. Heyward noticed her fake fingernails and the wrinkles on the backs of her tanned hands, and it struck him why mummies are so spooky. Bodies are designed to decompose. Mummies go against the rules of nature. Heyward thought about people like Walt Disney who chose to rest frozen in peace in a freezer vault somewhere in Hollywood, in case science discovered how to raise the dead. He thought about his own halibut, which had been frozen for four-and-a-half months—much longer than the seafood cookbooks recommended. He’d been trying to hold on to something he should have long-since thrown out.

"Then what?" asked Rhetta. "Were you cursed?"

Squirrel coughed. He squirmed in his stool and kicked his boot heel against the footrest, creating a hollow, pinging sound.

Heyward knew his story wasn’t going anywhere. Whatever had seemed so mystical about the story before seemed ordinary and boring now. He said, "We dumped the body off at some bum-fuck burial ground, and then we made it here in time for happy hour."

"Is that it?" Rhetta asked. She jabbed at a lime in her glass with a pink straw. "That’s not a story." The girls slid off their stools and walked towards the bathroom, whispering and looking back over their shoulders at Heyward. Squirrel shook his head
and moved farther down the bar, striking up a conversation with the bartender, who had just finished lighting the candles.

Heyward stared at his beer and thought about how he'd driven the halibut thousands of miles across the country. The trip had cost over $2000 but the price hadn't mattered to him then. He hadn't wanted to risk flying the fish home, so he'd rented a freezer truck for $150 a day plus gas, which was going anywhere from a dollar twenty to one-fifty-seven. He broke down near Winnemuca and paid a grocer $200 to store the fish in a walk-in freezer until the $586 part could be delivered. At $14 campsites, Heyward pulled out pounds of halibut and lit a grill and other campers brought over macaroni and cheese, carrot sticks, homemade cookies, beer. He felt like the soldier in the stone soup story or Jesus when he multiplied the loaves and fish. He showed off the photo of Khaki and him and the halibut, which hangs off a hook behind them like a giant windsock.

"You two look so in love," the people said. "How romantic." As the campfire crackled and someone brought out marshmallows, folks didn't want the story to end with Heyward waving Khaki off at the airport in Anchorage, and neither did he. And so he told them how she would move back to South Carolina to live with him and that they'd raise fish in a pond in the front yard and if all went well they would one day have a little minnow of their own.

Heyward stood up to leave but Rhetta called out loudly from the other side of the bar. "Look Heyward!" She pointed at the television. "Here it is!"

Squirrel shouted, "Turn it up!" The screen shifted from the newsroom to a shot of Lake Hartwell. Khaki stood with her arms around her fiancé, who was holding up a largemouth bass. She leaned over and kissed the fish, then she kissed her fiancé on the
lips. A crowd cheered and the announcer said Khaki finally caught the best fish in the sea.

The camera panned the crowd and zeroed in on Heyward and Khaki. Heyward was wearing a pink ball-cap with "Alaskan Dreams" written across the bill and the $46 sunglasses that clearly did swallow his face. His legs looked sunburned and his Hawaiian shirt was soaked. Khaki wore a camouflage mid-riff that showed off the blue marlin tattoo jumping out of the low-waist of her cut-offs. Her tanned skin had an orangey tint and her blond hair showed dark at the roots. The camera zoomed in on Khaki's face as she raised a finger to her lips and said "shush."

Heyward chugged the rest of his beer. Across the bar, Squirrel and the girls giggled. They called out to him as he got up to leave.

"See you bright and early?" Squirrel said.

"Call me," Heyward yelled back. The cowbell on the door jangled as it shut behind him. Heyward had fished every Sunday since the trip with Squirrel. He still hated fishing but he went in order to have something to tell Khaki in the event she called or showed up on his doorstep. He did love the drive to the lake on those early mornings, fresh coffee steamy against his face, AM radio sputtering lake conditions. The world was pink and orange and full of hope and the mountains rose out of the horizon like giant fish leaping. In those moments, he imagined making love to Khaki on the Hartwell shore while their lines bobbed and trembled, rods planted in the soft white sand.

The hole of the pond in the yard reminded Heyward of a bloody fish mouth, the rotting hose dangling out of it like a hooked line. He gathered sticks and branches from
the yard and tossed them into the hole. He opened the top-load freezer in the garage and
filled a laundry basket with the remaining stacks of filleted fish. The Alaskan fishing
guide had told Khaki and Heyward that the lines on the inner ear of a halibut reveal the
fish’s age. Heyward wondered now what the two-thousand-year-old mummy’s heart
would have looked like if someone were to cut it open, if the fossilized tissue would
show rings for every time he fell in love, or told a story too many times.

It took two trips, but he dumped all the fish beside the hole. The pale white
moonlight flattened the yard, the trees, the fence, the house, and everything looked two
dimensional. Heyward squirted lighter fluid over the kindling, dropped a match, then
exhaled as the twigs caught. He fed larger sticks from his woodpile and the fire grew to
the size of a sailboat.

The wet fillets numbed his hands and he moved swiftly, with a paperboy’s
precision, tossing higher and fancier as he went. Heyward figured that if halibut was still
going *8.99 per pound at the market, he was burning up $500 per minute. He pretended
he was feeding the dolphins at Sea World. He was fattening the giant Shamu. He
whooped and yelled and threw some more. $1000. $1500. The basket was empty in
minutes. He looked around, wishing there were more. The fish smoldered and hissed on
the fire, producing clouds of white gray smoke. Heyward wondered if this was what
human flesh smelled like when it burned.

When Heyward and Khaki pulled the halibut out of the water, the sun hit its
silvery scales and it looked like a streak of fire. Heyward can say for certain now that for
one moment, he had thought he was performing a miracle, pulling fire from water, an act
he knew was no less fantastic, no less miraculous than winning a beautiful woman’s
heart, if only for a night. The fire continued to burn and the air smelled rich with smoke. Heyward knew that Khaki was never coming back. Next time he told the story—if ever—he'd keep it to the basics: I caught a big fish in Alaska. I set it on fire in my yard. He will not hum the Price Busters theme song, or mention sealskin or wrestling angels. He might not mention Khaki at all. And, yet, later that night, when he curled up in his own bed and closed his eyes, Heyward couldn't sleep. He couldn't help but imagine how the world would be different if a man like him could hold fire barehanded.
Barrier Island

Two girls in matching gold halter tops were doing spread eagles on the gravel shoulder of the two-lane. Their tanned legs flew out in perfect V's. Boots could hear them shouting "Victory! Vic-tor-EEE!" as she cracked the spine of Josh's English-Cambodian dictionary. The rotating bridge to Edisto Island was stuck open, and traffic was backed up through the marsh.

"Here's one," she said. Boots stretched her legs across Josh's lap. She'd stripped down to her candy-striped bikini, and she liked how tan her legs looked inside the car. She ran her finger down the list of words. "What's Cambodian for 'kiss me'?"

Josh clutched the steering wheel and shrugged. Just that week, he'd sheared his sun-bleached surfer locks and the whiteness of his scalp showed through his dark, coarse buzz. He crunched up a mint. "Ask me something I could use on my mission," he said.

For the past two months, Boots had been trying to rescue Josh from Mormonism. She'd deflowered him, drunk beer with him, and made him admit Joseph Smith was a chauvinist pig. But with one week left before his sendoff party, Josh had cut his hair, bought three black polyester suits, and declared that God had restored his virginity. Boots, who'd waxed her legs and popped in a diaphragm, wasn't buying any of it.

"Try this," she said. She fluttered her toes against the fly of Josh's cut-offs. A drop of sweat fell off her forehead, staining the thin page. "Say, I'm too scared to tell my parents they're idiots for believing that Jesus, Adam and Eve, and Lewis and Clark all walked across Missouri."
“Cut it out, Boots.” Josh shoved her feet off his lap and stared out the windshield. The spread-eagle girls were playing Frisbee with a college-aged boy in a Carolina Cocks hat, and a black lab was chasing an inflatable globe into the sharp green marsh reeds.

Josh turned to Boots, eyes pinpoints and said, “I wish you’d show me just an ounce of support. Other girls tell me I’m brave for going.”

By other girls, Josh meant Mormon girls. Boots had heard about the wanna-be porn the girls sent boys on their missions, as if those virgins knew anything about pleasing a man. They probably wrote about washing their milky-white breasts with Dove soap and knitting booties for the children in heaven yet to be born. The more daring girls might include a blurred close-up of their knee and claim it was one of their squeaky clean boobs. How pathetic. If it came down to it, Boots would send a photo of herself in the blue nightie she wore when Josh donned his white-feathered wings and they played Mary and the Angel in his bunk bed.

Boots dug her toes into the crevice between their car seats. She said, “What the hell are you planning on preaching to Cambodians? That Joseph Smith pulled those tablets out of his ass? That it’s okay to marry twenty women but not to drink coffee?”

Josh put his hand on the key and turned the ignition. His face was flushed. “We’re turning around,” he said. “This is bullshit.” He tapped the gas and the engine roared.

“Wait,” Boots said. She opened her legs and tugged at the strings of her bikini bottoms. She said, “I thought we’d go skinny-dipping.”
Josh sighed. He reached out and rubbed his hand over Boots's thigh. His palm was sweaty and he left a wet mark on her skin. "Well," he said. "We've already come this far."

The bridge groaned as the steel structure started turning on its concrete foundation. The operator high in his mesh cage waved a yellow flag in victory. The red lights on the striped roadblock flashed. Car engines revved and a blue cloud of exhaust rose over the marsh.

Before Boots met Josh, she'd been a member of a campus Christian organization that bordered on being a cult. College was her first venture out of the nest and she was searching for something to guide her. She had stumbled into a worship meeting in her dorm, drawn by the guitars and the glow of the cheery lyrics on an overhead projector. Christianity replaced her loneliness with a sense of purpose and a new boldness that forced her out of her shell. With her new friends, she took midnight prayer walks across the peninsula, praying for the salvation of bums and drug dealers while also praying for heavenly protection from them. At keg parties, she lured surfers away from the bonfire by promising them the ride of their lives, then asked them if they'd like to meet God. She worked Jesus into all her essays and squeaked a black marker across the metal stalls of campus bathrooms, scribbling Bible verses and pictures of the lamb laying down with the lion. She fabricated long, sad stories about her Methodist childhood just so she could ask for healing or a prophecy from one of the organization's venerated prayer warriors.
It was during a healing service in an abandoned Wal-Mart that Boots began to doubt. As usual, she cried through a string of testimonies and a fiery sermon. Then the praise band went acoustic, half of the fluorescent lights blinked out, and Boots filed to the front. The preacher, a plump man with a shiny head, smacked his palms against people's foreheads. Folks fainted, slain by the spirit. Three men wearing black suits and headsets followed the preacher down the line, catching believers before they cracked their heads on the concrete. Boots waited patiently, fervently praying for God to strike her silly. When the preacher placed his warm, dry palm on her head, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to imagine a bright light, or the bloody hand of Jesus beckoning to her. Nothing happened. The preacher palmed her forehead more forcefully but Boots remained standing. She was aware of a sharp pain in her side and a sour whisper in her ear. She tried to imagine it was an angel, but it was one of the black suits. "Fall, damn it," he whispered harshly. Boots opened her eyes and saw that every other person in the row had fallen out. Some were laughing wildly, others weeping. The man to the right of her roared like a lion. She realized the congregation was staring at her, and she considered falling down to avoid further embarrassment. But she stood tall, blinking back tears, removing herself from the stupid.

Weeks later. Boots walked into a coffee shop to study. She spotted Josh huddled with a highlighter over a thick, gilt-edged book, and she immediately recognized him. She marched up to his table.

Josh looked up and pointed the tip of his highlighter at her. "I know you." he said. "You tried to sell me a ticket to some Christian surf-band concert."
“I didn’t even go,” Boots said. “You were the only person I convinced to buy a ticket.”

“I felt sorry for you,” he said. “You were wearing a nametag that said ‘Jesus Loves Boots.’”

“I was brainwashed.” Boots said. She pointed at the glowing pages. “Are you studying?”

Josh closed the book. The gold letters on the red leather cover identified it as the Book of Mormon. Josh glanced at the fat, bright marker in his hand and said, “I’m marking out the parts I don’t like.”

“But it’s all marked out.”

Josh tucked a lock of dirty blond hair behind his ear and patted the orange tabletop. “Sit down.”

Boots slid into the booth. Josh’s feet were propped on the bench. Starfish and hands were inked on the strip of rubber around his Converse.

The café had once been a bicycle shop, and the neon bicycle sign in the window cast red and blue patches across his hands. Josh shoved his book toward the window, knocking aside a bowl of sugar packets. He said, “Sometimes I wish I didn’t have a brain.” He put the cap on his highlighter and set it beside the book. “I’m leaving for my mission this summer.”

“You don’t sound too excited.”

Josh smiled. “I guess I’m looking for a reason not to go.”

That night they drove to Edisto and walked down the beach. Along the shore, palmetto leaves clashed against each other and clumps of oleander waved their poisonous
pink leaves. The moon cast silver shadows on the ocean, and the waves raked over the carpet of shells, the tinkle of a million tiny wind chimes. As they walked, Josh talked passionately about loggerhead sea turtles. He complained about the owners of big beach houses along the coast who refused to extinguish their monstrous floodlights at night. He explained how hatchling sea turtles mistook the lights for the moon. By the time they reached the false light and realized they’d made a wrong turn, they were too tired to crawl all the way down to the water, where they belonged.

As the waves broke at their bare ankles, Josh tugged at Boots’s pigtails and told her that female sea turtles swam thousands of miles to return to their natal beach and lay their eggs. He told Boots that kissing her felt like rest after a lifetime of swimming.

And now they were back at Edisto and the beach looked smaller. It was low tide, and the hard, smooth sand was broken up by rivulets of water, miniature models of river drainage systems. A row of leathery women lounged on folding chairs under the shade of bright umbrellas planted in the sand like trees. The crashing waves brought in children riding floats shaped like alligators and rockets. An old man in a green visor walked a metal detector, pausing every few yards to kick at the clam and conch shells littering the beach.

On their first visit down, Josh had explained that Edisto was a barrier island. It was a buffer between ocean and mainland, an unstable thing made of constantly shifting sand. He had said that the state was trucking in sand to protect wildlife and real estate but they couldn’t keep up. This was clear to Boots as she and Josh walked. She could
see where high tides had nibbled away at the dunes, exposing the delicate, golden roots of sea oats.

Boots liked the beach, but she felt exposed by the open space and intimidated by the constantly crashing waves. This was Josh’s terrain. He loosened up as the beach flattened and the crowd thinned to a few stray fossil hunters collecting sharks teeth in plastic milk jugs.

Josh and Boots walked across a bed of shells. “Thanks for bringing me here,” he said. “It’s good to be back.”

Boots glanced at him and smiled. Her flip-flops crunched over the broken shells. “You feel at home here,” she said. “You’re gonna miss this in Cambodia.”

“Please,” Josh said. He stopped walking and dropped her hand. “Let’s not talk about that. Let’s just enjoy the afternoon.”

He bent over to inspect a green clump of sea lettuce and an antler-shaped piece of driftwood. Boots imagined him pausing in the shady green canopy of a Cambodian jungle to admire the bright red mouth of a giant flower, but when she added his plastic nametag and the shadow of his stodgy partner, she lost the image.

Boots looked up to count a flock of pelicans flying over the ocean. A fish fell out of the sky. A saggy-throated pelican dove after it. Josh had told Boots that pelicans eventually go blind because they don’t close their eyes when they hit the water. She’d wondered what happened if a bird went blind in flight, if it had some other radar to guide its landing, or if it kept flying until it dropped.

Josh was drawing in the sand, dragging his toe in a circle around a dead jellyfish. “Be careful,” Boots said. “Don’t get stung.”
“It’s already dead,” Josh said. “I could kiss it if I wanted.”

“Don’t even think about it.” Boots picked up a wet, brown reed and stepped inside the circle. She leaned over and poked the jellyfish. “You’re a jellyfish,” she said. “I can see straight through you.”

Josh crouched beside her, his leg resting against hers. The back of his neck was starting to burn. “What do you see?”

She pressed the stick against a dark-colored spot on the creature’s opaque skin. “I heard somewhere that jellyfish have two hearts.”

“Octupi have two hearts. And I told you that.” Josh took the reed from her hand, broke it in half, and lay the two pieces across the jellyfish in the shape of a cross. Then he reached up and placed one hand over Boots’s heart. Her pulse quickened. Josh licked his lips and she thought he was going to kiss her. But he slid his hand over her chest and dug his fingers into her skin, as if to touch something beneath the surface. Boots stared at his smooth, square jaw and ski-slope nose. Josh had never been punched in his life.

Josh leaned his forehead against hers and spoke softly. “I won’t forget the time I spent with you. You showed me what life is like without God.”

Boots grinned. “I knew you’d come around.” she said. “You love sex too much.”

Josh sighed, closed his eyes, then opened them slowly, as if scared Boots might still be there. “I wouldn’t be going on my mission if it weren’t for you.”

A strong breeze stirred up sand and stung Boots’ face. She should have known this was coming. “Fine,” she said. “Be a quack. Just don’t pray for me. I’m happy just like I am.” She flicked sand over the jellyfish. She could smell it starting to rot.
“I’m sorry, Boots.” Josh watched a crab run across the sand and disappear down a hole a fourth its size. An empty potato chip bag blew across the sand. “I’ve tried,” he said, “but I can’t live two ways.”

Boots watched him run his hands through his hair, waiting to see if he’d change his mind. His face looked older with short hair, more confident. His cheeks and forehead were sunburned. Boots hopped up. She stood too quickly and the world went black. When the dizziness passed, she felt a strange sense of relief.

“Let’s keep walking,” she said. She licked her lips and squinted in a way he’d called cute. “We haven’t even gone swimming yet.” She reached out pulled him to his feet.

Josh took off running, and Boots chased. He ran towards a huge pile of sea foam pulsing in the breeze. He raised his arms and ran straight through it. The foam billowed up around him, and he emerged looking like he’d fallen through a cloud. Yellowish-white globs of gelatinous foam clung to his hair and hands. He turned and chased Boots and she ran towards the dunes.

Josh yelled after her. “Stop! Stop!”

She thought it was a trick, so she kept running, and then he gained on her and grabbed her from behind. His arms knocked against her chest, almost taking her breath away.

“Stop, damn it,” he said. “Didn’t you see it?”

Josh pointed at a dune. Boots looked, but all she saw was sand and sea oats. Then she followed his finger to a small mound of sand. She hadn’t recognized the turtle
nest without the orange tape and diamond-shaped warning signs that volunteers planted to protect the eggs.

Josh bee-lined for the nest, dragging Boots behind him. They followed the sea turtle’s wavy path, the messy track marks of the turtle dragging herself forward with her flippers. Josh dropped to his knees, and Boots knelt beside him. Josh reached out and gingerly stroked the mound of sand the turtle had kicked up with her flippers to bury the eggs.

"Can you believe this?" Josh said. Dried sweat formed a white crust on his forehead. "Out of a hundred eggs, only a handful will make it. Some of the hatchlings get eaten up by predators. Some get confused." Josh talked about nature in the same voice he used in bed: confident, yet breathless. "The turtle who laid these eggs might be your age, Boots." He looked up at her and grinned.

"She has an internal compass," Boots said, recalling the mini-lecture Josh had given her on their first trip to Edisto. "She uses geomagnetic-navigation to return here year after year."

"That’s right," Josh said. He stood up and brushed off his knees. "Help me collect some reeds. I can’t believe no one else had noticed this."

Boots collected reeds and broken conch shells, and Josh built a fortress around the mound, arranging the seashore debris in an arc that might guide the turtles towards the water. When they were finished, Josh stood up and peeled off his green T-shirt. A silver St. Christopher hung against his tan chest.

"Come on," he said. "Let’s play evolution."
Evolution was a game they’d played when they were stoned. They started deep and swam up the species ladder to emerge, finally, on shore as a mermaid and merman. Boots loved those last few moments when her legs were still underwater and she could lift her face to the sun, her long wet hair streaming down her back. But without getting high, the game wouldn’t be the same. “I don’t know,” Boots said.

Josh tugged at Boots’s bikini bottoms. Goosebumps spread across her stomach and legs. Josh said, “I’m yanking this thing off if you don’t play.”

Boots examined the constellation of pale freckles on Josh’s nose. They seemed to have multiplied in that afternoon’s sun. She stepped out of her flip-flops and took off for the water, clutching the strings of her suit that he’d loosened. The shells were sharp and rough beneath her bare feet. She thought about new age zealots crossing hot coals to purify themselves. and Boots moved faster. She was the first to hit the cool, gray ocean. When the water reached her knees, the shelf dropped off and she swam through deeper water. She stopped swimming and treaded water to wait for Josh. He ducked under and rose up, water streaming down his face. He pressed his fingers against his eyes, blinked rapidly, then dunked under and popped back up a few feet ahead. He shouted, “Tadpoles!”

Boots dove in after him and moved her arms and legs in a frog-like breaststroke. She tried imagining herself as a nascent green frog with wide black eyes and a ribbon tail. But she couldn’t forget about her arms and legs. It was pointless to imagine herself as someone else. Boots rose out of the water. Josh was bobbing up and down, waiting.

“Dolphins!” he said.
Boots didn’t want to be a dolphin. Or a shark or a mermaid or any other creature of the sea. But she didn’t want to disappoint Josh either. She dove under the cool, heavy water and imagined she had a long snout and a gray back shiny as polished silver. She swam with her feet together like a tail, and she gave herself over to the current, the cool water, the gentle tug and push of waves. She hung suspended, weighing nothing at all.

And then a giant wave grabbed her by the ankles and dropped her headfirst into the crash and tumble of water rushing towards shore. Panic punched a hole in her lungs. Her heart tried to swim out of her chest. Her head roared and she breathed in bubbles and salt. Her elbow punched the sky. And then she hit the shore and the roaring was outside her. retreating like a monster in some fading dream. She gurgled as she grasped for breath.

The sun bore down and waves gobbled at her feet. Her knees and elbows stung as she crawled forward, then rolled onto her back to catch her breath. She opened her eyes and looked up into the bright sky, and for one terrifying moment, she thought she’d been born into a strange new world.

And then Josh flopped down beside her in the sand. “Hello, my mermaid,” he said. “You look sexy over here all sprawled out in the sand.” He ran his finger down her heaving stomach and hooked his thumb onto the elastic waistband of her bikini bottoms. Boots pushed him away. She leaned up and coughed deeply.

“A wave yanked me under,” she said. “I almost drowned.”

“You don’t drown if you don’t freak out.” he said. “The wave always brings you back up.”
Boots leaned back against the sand. Her breath came in short gasps. Josh lifted her elbow and inspected the scrape on her elbow. Tiny shells clung to the red skin. Josh planted a kiss on the soft pale place inside her bicep. He kissed her shoulder and nuzzled his nose against her neck. He sighed and his voice trembled. “I’m an idiot.”

Boots pushed him away and placed her finger against his lips. “I need to catch my breath.” She gulped in the damp, sticky air. She was thirsty and her head ached.

Josh pinched her slim hip and rolled on top of her. He gazed down at her and his blue-gray eyes made Boots dizzy. When he leaned down and kissed her, she kissed back gently. He slid his tongue into her mouth, and the kiss grew hard and fast. But after a moment, Boots pulled away and Josh didn’t persist.

The fingers of waves combed through the shells and tugged at the sand beneath Boots’ feet. She imagined it was midnight and the full moon was reflecting off the ocean, lacy with sea foam. She pictured a loggerhead, tired and spent, inching her way towards the luminescent water. Shells crinkled beneath the turtle’s great weight, and she smelled of sweet decay. Her hard green shell was covered with a white curd, and blue seaweed adorned her wrinkled head like a freak wig. The moon, as round and pocked as a turtle egg, painted the gentle waves a pale silver. Boots tried to imagine what it must be like to have that genetic instinct to march towards the brightest light. An instinct so unswerving, that even if she were led astray by a halogen lamp or a streetlight, she would still believe she was heading for the cool and salty water.