

SUNDAYS

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SUNDAYS

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Graduate Faculty

of Auburn University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the

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May 9, 2009

SUNDAYS

Tawnysha Greene

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THESIS ABSTRACT

SUNDAYS

Tawnysha Greene

Master of Arts, May 9, 2009  
(B.A., Auburn University, 2007)

56 Typed Pages

Directed by Judy Troy

This thesis is comprised of eight short stories that explore loss, whether literal or symbolic, and the consequences upon the stories' protagonists. In "Blue Dreams," "September," and "Fathers and Sons," a loved one has died. In "5<sup>th</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup>," and "Love," a marriage has failed or is in the process of failing. In "Almost Midnight," a friendship has been destroyed, and in "Andrea and Julia," and "Sundays," innocence has been lost. What the characters in the stories have in common is that they must attempt to bring order back to their lives, and in doing so, they make discoveries that enable them to better understand their losses. These discoveries, such as the meaning of home in "September," or the meaning of family in "Fathers and Sons" allow the stories' characters to move on to the next stages of their lives, wiser now than they had been before.

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## 5<sup>TH</sup> AND 53<sup>RD</sup>

The last time Liam and Tracey had gone to the Museum of Modern Art was their honeymoon twenty years ago. It had been November and they had planned a carriage ride in Central Park, but when it had begun to rain, they browsed through the art museums and the Metropolitan Opera House. *La Boheme* had been playing.

Liam was fifty now, his wife forty-seven, and they had flown in for their second honeymoon yesterday from Dallas where they had lived for twelve years. Their hotel room at the Radisson between Broadway and Fifth was the same room they had shared the night they had gotten married. The bed sheets and the curtains had changed color, the bed frame and entertainment center traded for a darker wood, but the bed's position outside the bathroom door had remained the same. The mirror on the back of the bathroom door still reflected their forms on the bed, now separate and with scars—Liam's, a series of pale patches across his knee and Tracey's, two deep lines where her breasts had been.

Now, at the museum, Liam gazed at his reflection in one of the paintings, the glass covering the portrait revealing his face back to him. His hair was windblown and his face unshaved, the suitcase carrying his razor lost during their connection flight in Chicago. Tracey's finger obscured his reflection as she pointed to the brushstrokes. She looked to him, her thin hair pulled back in a clip.

“You see?” she asked.

Liam nodded. He hadn't seen. The portrait was of a woman, her hair piled artfully on top of her head as she looked over her bare shoulder. The rest of her body was hidden under a blanket she had wrapped around herself and Liam imagined the texture of her skin, soft and firm. He wondered if the woman had smelled of lavender, as Tracey had until the cancer two years ago when she stopped wearing perfume, saying that it made her nauseous with the chemotherapy. She had stopped wearing make-up, too, and when she had lost her hair, Tracey had asked that they stop making love.

Tracey removed her camera from her purse, turned off the flash, and began to take snapshots of the paintings. Liam followed her, hands in his pockets as they strolled through the exhibits, Tracey capturing Picasso, Van Gogh, and Monet. Without looking at his wife, Liam knew that her shoulders were hunched, her mouth slightly open as she waited for clear shots. She had been an art major at the University of North Texas where they had met, and her paintings of their two daughters holding sunflowers hung in their kitchen and hallway.

Her last painting had been nameless, one she had done during her last round of chemotherapy. It was of a woman's face, his wife's, he knew, from the wisps of hair clinging to her head around her ears, but her features were hidden by a set of hands on either cheek reaching over her eyes. Her hands were dark, the fingers thin, and for moment when Liam first saw it, he had thought that it was blood that covered her face. The painting was stacked under Tracey's old cans of paint, but she hadn't thrown it away, nor had Liam mentioned that he had found it.



Liam wondered if Tracey was thinking of that particular painting at home as she looked now at a canvas layered with browns, purples, greens, and blacks. It, too, was nameless, and was of a man sitting on the side of an empty street. His hair was gray, wispy as hers had been, his clothes tattered, his feet bare. He held a small tin cup, both hands wrapped around it so that only the cup's brim showed, his fingers dark, almost black.

Tracey did not snap a picture of it because a woman stood close to the portrait, her blonde head cocked to the side. She was blocking the man's face. The woman was young, in her twenties, and Liam recognized her from the Van Gogh exhibit. Although the weather was cold outside, she wore a skirt that swayed above her knees. Her red blouse was snug around her slender frame, the first three buttons undone, and it matched the color of her open-toed heels that had clicked rhythmically and seductively across the floor. Now, she fiddled with the right one as she scanned the painting, her fingers pulling the shoe tighter on her small foot. As she did so, the hem of her skirt lifted and Liam could see the whiteness of her inner thigh.

He had never been unfaithful to Tracey, but in the last year—once he knew that the cancer was gone—Liam had found his eyes lingering longer on a neighbor's wife as she watered her lawn across the street, and twice in the last month, he and the new intern where he worked as a business consultant had gone for drinks after work. She was twenty-four and had red hair, but he found his mind wandering as he talked to her, her words often empty. Often, Liam slept with her in his thoughts, but then after a while, there even seemed to be an emptiness in his dreams.

The woman viewing the painting alongside his wife looked the same age as the intern. The woman's hair was blonde and matched the tan coat she held draped over her arm. She looked toward Liam and caught his eye. Hers were blue. Her skin was bright and although she did not wear make-up, her cheeks were flushed and her lips, full and healthy, were red. As she put on her coat, she looked down his body in a way his wife had not done in years. Her blouse shifted as she put her arms through the coat sleeves and Liam glimpsed the strap of a black bra. Moving toward the exit, she brushed past Liam and he could smell her. Jasmine, lilac, and skin.

The painting accessible now, Tracey raised her camera and snapped a picture, remaining silent as they left the museum. Outside, they started west down 53<sup>rd</sup> toward Broadway. Tracey held her camera and browsed through the pictures she had taken of the portraits at the art museum and the ferry ride to Ellis Island earlier that morning. She stayed close to Liam, their arms touching as she followed him across the cross-walks. It began to rain.

Behind him, the woman in the red shoes walked in the opposite direction toward Fifth. Turning his head, Liam spotted her quickly; she was the only person not carrying an umbrella. The rain had darkened her coat at the shoulders and Liam wondered if her blouse, too, was wet. He put a hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Let's get a cab," he said. "You'll be able to see the pictures better in the car."

Tracey nodded and Liam stepped into the street, raising his hand and looking toward the woman walking away. She was nearing the subway entrance at 5<sup>th</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup>, and Liam noticed that a homeless man in a green jacket watched her approach. He was

sitting against the iron railing alongside the subway entrance and held out a small tin cup like that of the painting in the museum. Although he wore gloves, Liam could see his fingers and that his jacket lacked buttons. He was barefoot.

The man reached up as the woman passed, his empty hands brushing the hem of her coat, as Liam's own hand, hailing a cab, brushed the air. The woman did not stop.

A cab pulled up in front of Liam and he and Tracey got in. "The Radisson between Broadway and 5<sup>th</sup>," Liam said, and on the way there, he imagined the sound of the woman's heels hitting the pavement, no longer sounding anything but harsh and empty.

## SEPTEMBER

Norah hadn't been sleeping. Not for three days. But she must have slept. Because she remembered her dreams. Fleeting images of a red patchwork quilt from her grandmother that she couldn't bring herself to put on her bed, a wooden banister whose splinters she still carried in her right thumb, and a white Toyota truck that smelled of her dad's cigarettes. It was September of her freshman year in college, and every night, she woke up to a darkened room in Leischuck Hall, the only light coming from beneath the front door—the hallway light. It was always on. She waited under her covers until morning each day, as the images of home in Ozark, Alabama, 124 miles away from her dorm at Auburn University, began to fade.

She could still smell her father's Camels when she woke up from her dreams. A pack, half empty, rested in the pocket of her jeans, slung over the back of her computer chair. She wasn't addicted, she kept telling herself. She had only started a month ago and smoked one or two each night before she went to bed, sometimes sleeping in her clothes. Often, the only way she could close her eyes at night was when she could smell the smoke on the sleeves of her blouse. It was a coping thing, she reasoned.

Norah was sitting at the Lupton Deli on campus at her usual table, long after the lunch crowd had gone away. But in front of her was a daily planner next to her diary.

Today was highlighted and circled. It was the one-month mark since she had started school. She had had to try it for at least that long before her parents would take her back home. So now she had tried, she told herself.

Norah was 18 and not one of 860 students like she had been at Carroll High School, but rather one of 24,137 here at Auburn. Her finite math class in Parker Hall had stadium seating, holding more than 300 students. The lights had dimmed for a PowerPoint presentation during one of the classes and Norah had fallen asleep. She startled awake halfway through the next class, a chemistry lecture in which the teacher was speaking in a thick Indian accent as he drew hydrogen bonds on the chalkboard. It was a graduate class, all the students around her dressed in khakis and button-down shirts. She had crept to the aisle and walked up the steps to the exit in the back, but no one had noticed. No one seemed to see her.

Her freshman composition class had only 25 students, but she sat in the back and never raised her hand. During the in-class writing assignments, her pen lay unused at her desk as she spent the class hour watching the other students. Audrey, the girl who sat in front of Norah, leaned to her right and twirled her hair with her finger—just as Norah’s mother did whenever she talked on the phone. Sometimes, Norah spent the entire class watching the way Audrey moved her fingers through the strands of hair behind her right ear. Norah wondered if Audrey’s hair smelled of mango shampoo, the way her mother’s did. Norah watched the boys, too, the way they checked their text messages on their phones, and she wondered if any of them hoped—the way she would have—that one of their messages would be from home.

In the late afternoons, she sat alone at one of the tables inside the Lupton Deli. She was always at the table near the Coke machines, the table farthest from the door. Sometimes she brought her diary, a leather notebook with lined pages. It was half full. The writing was different in this one than in Norah's other notebooks. Rather than her usual loose script, the letters were small, almost tiny. She put so much pressure on the pen that it hurt to write in the diary lately. She'd started writing this way, in her diary, after Sam, her cousin and best friend, was killed in a car accident in April of last year. He was 18, the same age she was now. For three months, Norah had stayed up late in her bed with a flashlight, writing hard in tiny letters through the journal's pages. Only a year old, the cover was already creased, the pages bent, from her reading it at least once a week. Her words were the only things she had left of him, so she held on tight to them. "You hold on too tightly to everything," Jenna, her roommate, had said. Jenna had only known her a month, yet Norah didn't understand how she'd known that about her.

In front of her today, September 16<sup>th</sup>, was a computer printout of her test results from Dr. Lishak's Biology 1000 class, asterisks over the questions she had gotten wrong. In the corner was the grade 62%. Four neatly filled-out drop slips were spread across the table in front of her. All of them had the teachers' signatures. Except for one. She had an appointment for the last teacher to sign it in 27 minutes. Norah looked at her watch, although there was a clock above the Deli's front door. 26 minutes now. She had not told her parents that she was leaving school.

Her left thumbnail scratched at the base of a Styrofoam cup holding Diet Coke. The cup was still full. Her nail imprints on the side of the cup formed groups of parallel

lines so by the time she had paused to look at her work, the Styrofoam looked like the side of a prison wall, scratched for each day a prisoner had lived inside.

Norah had been reading the diary entries she had written after Sam's death. In the pages, she could almost see the poster he had put on his wall after enlisting in the Army, the one he had put up just before he left for basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. It was a silhouette of a group of soldiers, some kneeling, some standing, their guns slung over their shoulders. Their faces were hidden in darkness, the soldiers nameless. It was hard for her to think of that poster and she focused instead on the cafeteria line in the deli. At home, the women working in the cafeteria at Carroll High had known her well, but here at the Lupton Deli, the woman behind the counter never spoke to her and she took Norah's ID card every day, an orange card with a number beneath her picture. No one looked at her face. The Coke machines looked the same as they had at home, except that there were more of them here, five instead of two. The chairs here were tall and empty, the windows painted shut, and the floor mopped, everyone's footsteps wiped away. Everything was in a different place now.

Norah went over in her mind what she would say on the phone to her parents. She would say that she wasn't happy and that she wasn't learning anything she couldn't learn while living at home. Then, Norah knew, her mother would pick her up in the morning. Norah's suitcases were already packed, her books, still sealed in plastic, refunded. She had kept their receipts when she bought them. She looked at her watch. Her appointment was in 2 minutes, but she didn't move.

Outside the window, the sun was hanging low in the sky, casting a glare over the pages in Norah's open journal. Norah reread the entry she had written today, and it was what Sam had said to her when she had asked him if he had missed home after his graduation from Basic Training. "Home is what you take with you," Sam had said. "It's pieces of everything you love."

Norah thought of her grandmother's blanket, the photographs of her home in Ozark, and her diaries, all in a box beneath her bed—the bed she slept in now, here, at school. They were still there, she thought. She had brought them with her from home. Everything that had belonged to her before, still belonged to her now. Closing her journal, she gathered her things from the table, keeping the class withdrawal slips in her grasp, and when she walked out the front door of the Lupton Deli and passed beneath the clock, the drop slips fell from her hand, some landing in the trashcan, some on the floor, still wet, as her path wavered, then continued, unbroken.



## ANDREA AND JULIA

The photograph was faded and creased, but the girl pictured was young. She was sitting on the beach at Gulf Shores in a sundress, her short brown hair pulled back by large sunglasses. Her hands were propped behind her, her neck craned, eyes squinting in the sun. It was Andrea, Julia's older sister. She had been fifteen.

The picture was taken a year before Andrea was killed in a car accident. Their parents' divorce had been two months after her death.

Julia had picked up the photograph from the stand next to her father's hospital bed and took it closer to the window, from where she could see the October sun low in the sky over Sacramento, where her father lived. Julia lived in Tennessee. Her flight had gotten in that morning, and it was colder here than it had been at home—cold for California, the nurse had said.

Julia flipped the photograph over. "Lana." That was Andrea's middle name, one that Andrea had hated. It was also their mother's middle name, something Julia had not known until Andrea had died, and her mother had mentioned it in reference to Andrea's death certificate.

John, Julia's uncle, stood behind her, glancing at the photograph over her shoulder.

"That was in his wallet and he asked for it," he said, then paused, looking at her. "You know, you look like her."

“I never looked like her,” Julia said.

Julia had sounded ruder than she had meant to, but she barely knew her uncle. When he had called to tell her about her father’s lung cancer a week ago, she hadn’t recognized his voice, nor had she asked why he had not called sooner. Julia last saw her uncle at Andrea’s funeral twelve years before. He had brought his girlfriend and her three-year-old daughter. Julia didn’t know where the daughter was now or what she was doing.

Julia studied the photograph of Andrea again. Andrea had been five years older than Julia. They had shared a bedroom in Gulf Shores where they had grown up. Andrea’s skin was pale, almost ivory, and her clothes, which had hung from her thin frame, had smelled of the cigarettes she smoked while sitting on the balcony outside their bedroom, legs dangling in the ocean breeze. Her nose was slightly too large for her face, and her smile, when she chose to smile, was closed. Julia was shorter than Andrea had been, her hair longer, and her body never as thin. But they had the same mouth and the same voice. No one could tell them apart on the phone—except their father. The way Andrea rolled her r’s was different, he said.

Julia’s father stirred on the bed. His brows furrowed then relaxed, his mouth open. The hair on the top of his head was thin, grey wisps that matched his eyebrows. His face and arms were freckled, and a dime-sized sunspot rested over his left eye. He had a dimple in his chin, one that was deeper than his brother’s but they had the same color eyes—green that became blue in the sun.

Julia's father and John were close in a strange way and had "boundary issues," her mother had said after watching an episode of *Oprah*. Her father and John spoke on the phone during Easter and Christmas and sent each other pictures of the fish they had caught. At 26 pounds, John's catch held the record; the picture of him holding the 47-inch Northern Pike was pinned on her father's bulletin board that he kept above his computer.

"Does he wake up anymore?" Julia asked.

John looked up.

"Not often. Not since his kidneys started failing."

Julia hadn't seen her father in the twelve years and two months since her parents' divorce. He had moved to California, Julia and her mother staying at the house at Gulf Shores. He had called Julia once a month for the first year, then on birthdays and Christmas, before stopping altogether when Julia was fourteen. Before that, he sent packages for Julia—stuffed animals, candy, and a glass sculpture with a carousel carved inside, gifts that were less personal than the ones he had given Andrea on her birthdays—a pair of ballet shoes, a velvet bathrobe, and a charm bracelet with the letters of Andrea's name. Julia's presents had been packaged in green wrapping paper, but he had never sent a card. Julia could smell her father when she opened each box, the presents smelling of his Old Spice cologne and Marlboro cigarettes.

"Your dad still loves you," her mother would say. "He's just not showing it in the same way."

Julia was twenty-three now, married, a research analyst in Brentwood, Tennessee. Her wedding had been small. Only family came, because by then Julia had stopped thinking of her father as family. "Your father should have been here," her mother had said. "Something happened with him when Andrea died, before that really. But it's just as well for you." Julia hadn't asked what her mother had meant. For some reason, she had been afraid to.

Julia looked at her father now. His face was so thin that his skin draped over his cheekbones.

"You know, I almost didn't come," said Julia.

"Why did you?" her uncle asked.

"I don't know," she said. "He's my father."

Julia looked out the window again. The room was three stories up, overlooking J Street and the parking lot of Mercy General. It was dusk and the street lamps were lit. Airplanes, their landing lights blinking, descended in the sky toward the Sacramento airport six miles away.

Julia heard John's keys scrape the bedside table.

"I'm going to get some dinner," he said. "You want anything?"

Julia shook her head.

She was hungry, but her father's bony hands and face made her not want to eat. His feeding tube had been taken out the day before.

"So, he's starving?" she had asked her uncle earlier.

"He doesn't feel anything," he had said.

Julia was relieved to hear the door shut. She was still at the window and in the parking lot below, a boy walked hand in hand with his mother, carrying a red balloon. Andrea's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday party came into Julia's mind. It was at the city pool, and Andrea had worn a green bikini. She used to jump when she talked, and on that day, her eyes had glanced down at her new breasts. Andrea had almost always spoken loudly, rolling her eyes as she talked, her eyelids blinking rapidly and her voice would grow hard when she was angry; her hands would ball into fists. She'd swear at Julia the way they had heard their parents swear at each other. But then there were days that she wouldn't say a word. That day at the pool on Andrea's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, the tag on the bottom part of Andrea's bathing suit had come out, and her father had tucked it back in.

Julia walked to her father's bedside and took out her phone to check her messages. There was a text message from her husband asking about her flight. As she typed a message back, her neck and shoulder began to ache, an old injury from playing softball in college, and she put up a hand to massage them. Her fingers worked absently, moving beneath her hair then running down the nape of her neck where her birth mark was. Otherwise, her skin was clear, free of the freckles that had peppered Andrea's face and body. Andrea had had two birthmarks: the one on her neck, a brown patch below her hairline extending to her ear; and a jagged splash across her inner thigh which had stood out from her skin in the winter months, blending in with the rest of her body when she was tan. Andrea had said that the skin covering these marks was warmer than the coolness of her body. She used to say those kinds of things, surprising things no one else

would say and Julia had envied her for it. Julia used to think of herself as the less interesting one. Sometimes, she still felt that way.

Julia heard a click as the door opened and a nurse in blue scrubs entered the room. The nurse turned on the light; Julia hadn't realized that it had gotten dark.

"How we doing tonight?" The woman had plastic gloves on.

"Fine," Julia said, then she looked to her father. "I mean, I think so."

She watched as the nurse set her clipboard down and raise a syringe with clear fluid inside. Julia got up to leave.

"You don't got to go. No needles or nothing."

Julia paused, uncertain whether to watch or not. As the nurse opened her father's mouth, though, the intimacy of it made her turn away.

"Has he had a lot of it, the morphine?" Julia asked.

"Just what we normally give them. He in pain?"

"How would I know? I mean, what would he do?"

The nurse glanced at her. "You'd know."

It was when the nurse moved the syringe to the side of her father's mouth and pushed the plunger that Julia went out into the hallway, leaned against the wall, closed her eyes, and exhaled. The clock above the nurse's station read 8:26, and Julia felt for the rental car keys in her pocket. Her plane back home was leaving in two days, regardless of whether her father had passed away or not; she was not returning for the funeral. She thought of her home in Brentwood, of the yellow house she and her husband

shared, and knew that their collie, Major, was sitting at her husband's feet as her husband watched *Lost*. Soon, they both would be asleep.

In front of Julia, the door was open to the room across the hall, where a man and a woman stood talking. The woman was gesturing angrily, and the man reached out to touch her, but she pushed him away. Julia could not hear what they were saying.

She remembered the night of her tenth birthday when Andrea had been 15. Their parents hadn't spoken to each other at dinner, and fought in their bedroom afterwards, their door half-closed. Julia and Andrea could see glimpses of their clothes as they moved, then their father reaching out to touch their mother and their mother slapping him hard across the face.

"They hate each other," Julia had said to Andrea.

"No," Andrea said. "She hates him."

Julia was startled when the nurse came out of her father's room. The nurse held the door open and Julia stepped inside where her phone and purse were still on the bedside table. She turned off the light and watched how the monitors in the room and the lights from outside the window cast shadows on the walls.

Her father stirred and Julia leaned forward. Reluctantly, she took his hand. His mouth twitched, and raspy exhalations came from his throat, then he breathed, making short sounds, his mouth not forming words, until he said, "Lana," and stretched his fingers not toward Julia, as Julia thought at first, but toward the photograph Julia had put back on the bedside table. She reached for it.

Once, long ago, Julia had called her sister, Lana, and Andrea had pushed her to the ground. “Don’t you ever call me that,” her sister said. “It’s what daddy calls momma in bed.”

Julia felt her father’s fingers on hers as he took the picture and she let go. The photograph in his hands explained everything.



## BLUE DREAMS

The taste of his birthday cake. The smell of chlorine and wet hair.

But never the crackling of the tarp as Ryder fell in. Not his voice or the sound of the splashes he made with his hands. Not the water spilling on the pavement when his mother heaved him out of the pool. It was always quiet in Chase's dreams. A deep blue quiet that frightened him. He awoke hot, although the day it happened was cold.

The Superman figure was still on the nightstand where he had left it. It was dry now, but smelled of the pool. Beyond it was Ryder's bed in the room they shared. The dark green sheets undisturbed. The dart board on the wall, unmarked since Ryder and his friends last played. His lava lamp, its bright orange insides moving next to the computer.

Chase had watched the lava move the last two nights until the colors faded in the morning. This morning, as he lay in bed, the orange globs moved in slow motion, touching, reaching, like those in his dreams.

Chase was ten. He and Ryder were two years apart, but they didn't look like brothers. Ryder had dark hair and green eyes, freckles across his face, and was skinnier than Chase. Chase was broader in face and body, and had his dad's blonde hair. The only thing they shared was the way their index fingers turned slightly inward.

Ryder had grabbed Chase's shirt with his hand when the Superman doll fell in the pool.

“I got it,” said Ryder.

It was within reach.

“Mom said don’t go by the pool.”

Then Ryder took the pool strainer from its perch, holding it by its long handle as he walked to the pool’s ledge.

The doll drifted farther away, the wind rippling the water, causing it to lap against the sides. This too, Chase never heard in his dreams.

The ledge was wet and his sneakers slipped. The tarp on the pool swallowed him, and Ryder emerged, tangled, his mouth opening and closing. He kicked and the tarp wrapped tighter around him. His head came up again, his voice in strangled gasps, words Chase couldn’t understand. The blue tarp again. Waves. Blue.

His friends were yelling. His mom had jumped in the pool. She carried him out, her clothes and his clothes clinging together. Her hair covered Ryder’s face. Everyone’s mouths were moving. Flashing lights. People reached for him. Pulled him, their mouths still moving.

They still moved now, but Chase could not hear them. But only because they were whispering. The room was quiet, except for a piano softly playing over the speakers. Everyone was dressed up. His mom wore the pearls his dad had given her on her birthday. Chase had taped the wrapping paper himself. He looked at the ground now, away from everyone’s stares.

At the front of the room was the casket. Flowers posted on stands on either side. His mother held his hand as they walked toward it. In the pews, people sat whispering.

They caught his gaze as he walked by. He felt his mother's hand let go of his when they stopped at the casket and she placed it around his shoulder. Chase looked up. He had never seen a dead body before. Ryder was in a suit, his hands folded across his stomach. His eyes were closed. Chase breathed. Ryder didn't look that bad. Not like what he had heard dead people looked like. His hands were the only things that looked dead, stiff and slightly darker than his face.

Sitting in the front pew, waiting for the others to file past Ryder's coffin, Chase looked to his own hands. He thought of the pool strainer, the last thing Ryder held. The blue tarp. Blue and white lights.

The night after the funeral, he sat at the top of the stairs listening to his parents talk in the den. His mom wanted to drain the pool. His dad wanted to keep it the way it was.

"Ryder loved the pool," he said. "So does Chase."

Silence. Blurted words Chase couldn't understand.

Then silence again, but one heavy with unspoken thoughts. The stair Chase sat on seemed wider, colder without the breath of Ryder next to him. They used to sit and listen together when their parents talked, Chase whispering questions as Ryder put up his hand for quiet. And quiet was all there was now.

Then a glass against the table. The broken pieces clattered.

"You don't understand. You weren't there."

Chase could barely hear it. But the way his mother said the words slowly, pronouncing each syllable, made it seem as if she were speaking next to his ear. He had never heard her talk like that before.

The back door opened and slammed. Chase retreated to his room and heard footsteps outside his window, rustling through the leaves. Beneath the window, his mother was draining the pool. Chase watched, placing his hands against the glass. She was alone. Unmoving, she stood, her arms crossed as she watched the water recede. The blue tarp bobbed and sank as it lowered. Her clothes darkened as she pulled the tarp from the pool and heaved it to the side. She knelt and for a long time, didn't move.

Chase stared at what remained in the pool. The liquid was blue. And white. Reflecting in the moonlight. He almost expected to see Ryder at the pool's bottom, staring up at him. But it was empty, the water leaving behind a blue crater in the ground.

He slept that night with the window open. The night was quiet. The pool was empty. And his sleep was dreamless.

## ALMOST MIDNIGHT

In Room 304 of Graves Hall, a leather jacket and heels lay strewn on the floor. It was a Wednesday night in Auburn, Alabama, and the room was dim, lit only by the flickering television and a reading lamp on the desk on the far side of the room. Cassi, in shorts and a black tank top, sipped from a cup of Red Bull and vodka as she flipped through the channels, the grainy screen flashing with each push of the remote.

Her fingers paused as a horse ran across the screen. A girl in a green and white dress followed, picking up apples from the ground and throwing them at the rider. The girl was Drew Barrymore.

“Oh, is this *Ever After*?” asked Shay from the bunk beds behind Cassi. “I love that movie.” Brooke was sitting next to her on the bottom bunk. The three of them were roommates.

“No shit,” Brooke said. “Because it’s *Cinderella*.”

Cassi set the remote to mute as the movie continued to play.

“It was on last night, too,” said Cassi, joining Shay and Brooke, her roommates, on the bed. She moved their Bibles aside, brought home from the free meal and Bible study at the Wesley Foundation where they had been earlier that night.

Shay’s black purse lay open in the middle of the bed, its contents—multi-colored condoms—in a scattered pile. Shay and Brook leafed through them, dividing them in sections.

“I can’t believe you had this many in your purse,” said Brooke.

“It’s more like my emergency stash,” Shay said. “I only keep, like, two in my real purse.”

Brooke snickered as she picked up a red plastic cup on the floor. It was empty.

“Hey, Cassi, pour me another one, will you?”

She gave the cup to her and Cassi pulled the vodka from the mini refrigerator.

Brooke peered closely at a condom’s white wrapper with green writing. Her face cringed as she read it.

“Lifestyles? Oh, God, those are crap.”

Shay snatched it from her. “I forgot that was in there. It must be an old one.”

Cassi returned the cup to Brooke, now full.

Brooke took a drink. “Wow, that’s strong.”

“Yeah,” Cassi said. “The Red Bull is getting low.”

Brooke took another drink as Shay picked up a condom with a green wrapper.

“This is the one I wanted to show you,” Shay said.

She held it in front of Brooke’s face and Brooke nearly choked.

“Glow in the dark? Where the hell did you get that?”

“Jake got them,” Shay said, referring to her occasional boyfriend who stayed over on the weekends. They had broken up twice, but had gotten back together a month ago.

“No shit. They really glow in the dark?” Brooke took the wrapper from Shay. “I bet that looks so weird—a glowing dick.”

“Yeah, he kept pretending it was a lightsaber.”

“Oh, God,” Brooke said. “So where’s your stash, Cassi?”

“It’s in the drawer,” Cassi said as she walked toward the nightstand.

Brooke quickly leaned across the bed, tipping her drink slightly, so that it sloshed on the floor. She opened the drawer. The condoms were still in their box, next to a set of fuzzy purple handcuffs.

Brooke held up the box.

“I don’t know how anybody can have sex in these dorms.” Brooke said. “The beds are creaky as fuck.”

“You don’t do it on the beds,” said Cassi. “That’s what the chairs and the desks are for.”

“Or your boyfriend’s house,” added Shay.

“True,” said Brooke as she took out the handcuffs.

Putting the cuff on her left wrist, she smiled.

“I had a pair of these once. Not a good idea.”

“Why? What happened?” Cassi said as she refilled her cup.

“You know when I had to go to the emergency room because I dislocated my arm?” She lifted up the cuffs. “Yeah.”

“Are you serious?” asked Shay.

“Yeah, well, originally, I had my arms over my head and the fucker falls off the bed and grabs me as he’s going down.”

“I never thought of Joey as the handcuff type,” said Cassi.

“Hell, no,” said Brooke. “Joey wouldn’t think of handcuffs. He thought saying ‘penis’ and ‘testicles’ was talking dirty. Made me feel like I was in a fucking biology class. This was some other guy.”

“And you said you fell down the stairs.” Cassi refilled her own drink, her eyes on the television.

“I wasn’t going to tell everyone I did it fucking my boyfriend,” said Brooke. “That would have been real classy.”

Brooke gave the handcuffs to Shay who returned them to the drawer.

Cassi knelt next to the refrigerator, still holding the bottle of vodka. She held it up, looking to see how much was left. “We should do shots with the rest of this.”

“I’ll do a shot. Give it here.” Brooke held out her empty cup.

“What kind of drinking games do you all know?” asked Cassi.

“We could do beer pong,” said Shay.

“With vodka?” Brooke said. “Yeah, right.”

“Never Have I Ever is a good one,” said Brooke, taking a long drink.

“Yeah, let’s do that one.” Shay took the bottle from Cassi and poured a small amount in each of their cups.

“All right, I’ll start,” said Cassi. “Never have I ever had sex in a car.”

“Oh, please, we’ve all done that,” said Brooke. “You have to do something good. Let me start.”

Cassi and Shay waited as Brooke proceeded slowly, enunciating each of her words. “Never have I ever made a sex tape.”



They all squealed.

“So, who’s done it? Fess up,” said Brooke.

Shay and Cassi looked to each other.

“I’ve done one,” Cassi said.

“Me, too,” said Shay.

“Now we’re talking.” Brooke raised her glass and Shay and Cassi met it with their own before drinking together.

Shay refilled the shots. “I’ll go next.”

“Never have I ever,” she paused. “Had a threesome.”

“Oh, yeah,” Brooke said as she raised her cup. “Spring Break, baby. And I wasn’t even drunk.”

“I think I’m a little drunk now,” said Shay, squinting at the digital clock above the television. “What time is it? I can’t see it.”

Cassi closed one eye to keep the clock from moving in her vision. “It’s almost midnight.”

Brooke drank her shot. “We have all night.”

“You may. I have class in the morning,” said Cassi.

“You never go to that class, anyway,” said Brooke. “Let’s do one last one. It’s your turn, Cassi.” Brooke took the vodka bottle and began to fill their glasses again. She missed one of the cups.

“Brooke, you are so fucked up. You shouldn’t do anymore.” Cassi took the bottle from her.

“Shut up, I am not drunk.”

“You so are,” said Cassi.

“Give us the next question,” said Shay.

Cassi hesitated.

“I’ll do it then,” said Brooke, swaying where she was sitting. “Never have I ever slept with a friend’s boyfriend behind her back.

Brooke looked at Cassi as she spoke, her words slurring.

“I think you’ve had too much, Brooke.” Cassi screwed the lid back on the bottle.

“Then drink your shot and this will be over with,” Brooke told her.

“You know I never did that,” Cassi said.

“Do I?” Brooke’s voice was loud. “You want to tell Shay about it?”

Cassi didn’t speak, her eyes still on Brooke.

“Yeah, tell Shay about how I walked in on you two,” Brooke said.

“Shay and Kevin were broken up then. He came over to talk,” said Cassi.

“The fuck he did.”

“Shut up, Brooke,” said Cassi.

Brooke pursed her lips. Shay was looking from one of them to the other, confused. “Yeah, tell her, Cassi. Tell her that the two of you did it in our room. That you and Jake did it on her bed. Tell her that you—”

Cassi pushed her, causing Brooke’s face to hit the side of their desk as she fell.

Brooke laughed, a deep throaty laugh, as blood trickled down her chin and onto her neck. She tried to sit up, but then lay back down.

“You’re just mad,” said Brooke. “Because I told your secret—that you’re a slut.”

Shay stood up from the bed. “Did you?” she asked Cassi. “I mean, really?”

Cassi didn’t meet her gaze, but instead looked at the clock above the television. It was midnight. The movie was still playing. Drew Barrymore was at the ball, dressed in white with transparent wings hanging from her back after her stepmother had exposed her for who she was. Cassi watched as the camera cut to Drew in a rainstorm, her dress soiled, her hair unraveled, the wings gone. Brooke and Shay were watching too. Drew was sitting on the steps outside, water streaming down her face and hands. The camera then began to pan out, before a long, slow fade to black.

## FATHERS AND SONS

Alex had his father's dog tags in his hand. They were dirty after being used by Corey's 10-year-old friends playing war games outside. Corey, Alex's younger brother, was 15 and developmentally challenged. But he wasn't playing with them when Alex had taken back the metal tags.

Alex clenched his fingers as he approached Corey's bedroom door, the raised name on the dog tags "Melton, Carl S." pressing deep into his palm. His fist pushed against the door as he turned the knob. It was locked. He pounded on the wood, the chain from the dog tags rattling against it.

"Corey!"

Alex could hear the theme of Corey's video game playing inside. It repeated after short intervals, the game paused.

He pounded again.

Corey's bed squeaked, his bunk bed shifting as he moved.

"Open the door, Corey."

Alex tried the door handle again. Still locked.

His fingers grazed the top of the doorframe. No key. He looked at the neighboring windowsill. No key. It was inside.

The other one. The key that unlocked all the doors in the house. It was on top of

the refrigerator. He stalked down the hallway, passing the framed photos without a glance—ones of Corey, Alex, their parents, and the latest family portrait they took every Christmas—the first one since his dad was killed last year. It was the only picture on the wall where Alex wasn't smiling.

Alex didn't look at the pictures anymore—not like he had when he was a boy—taking them down from the nails in the wall, removing the backs and sifting through the older photographs stashed behind the newer ones. He especially liked the frame closest to the den—the one of his father in Army dress blues, his medals shined, his eyes cold into the camera. Behind each picture, his father would grow younger, paler, his eyes softer, until Alex reached the last one and almost saw himself. The same green eyes with yellow flecks near the pupil, the large ears, and the crowded bottom row of teeth one could only see when he laughed.

Seventeen years and Alex had never dropped the picture when he took it down from the wall. The last time he touched it was fourteen months ago, the night his father died in Bagdad.

In the kitchen, Alex thrust his hand over the top of the refrigerator, his fingers grazed against the key. He grabbed it.

Running to Corey's room, the dog tags still in his fist, he fumbled at the lock. His fingers faltered. The key fell, clattering on the floor.

“Corey!”

Alex punched the door as he picked up the key, turning the lock and throwing the door open.

He saw Corey jump from the bottom bunk of his bed, quickly moving his pillow as he did so. His clothes—wrinkled and stained—hung from his lanky frame. Grey sweatpants and a light blue shirt, the words “Operation Iraqi Freedom” lettered across the front. His hair was uncombed, standing stiff over a head slightly too large for his body. Corey’s mouth was closed, his lower lip slightly jutting from his mouth, his droopy eyes staring at Alex. He raised his eyebrows as he jerked his neck forward, a habit Alex had seen in him since Corey was a child.

“Hey,” Corey said, waving while keeping his two forefingers together.

Alex held his fist to Corey’s face, the dog tags’ chain hanging from his fingers.

“What is this?”

Corey was silent as his eyes slowly looked to his brother’s hand.

“Wha?”

Corey usually spoke without using certain consonants, and when he did, he spoke slowly, his flat mouth awkwardly forming them through his teeth. He was deaf—another thing that separated him from Alex. Corey was homeschooled, two grades behind others his age, and spent the majority of the day playing video games, while Alex ran track at Hewitt High School, was third in his graduating class, and worked nights at the Winn-Dixie near their house. They were two years apart, but Alex felt that it was twenty. Not because they were different, but because his father had loved them differently.

His freshman year, he missed the state meet after making the top qualifying time in the 400-meter hurdles race. Alex had his stuff packed in the car, but his mom drove to the movie theater instead. “Your dad wants us to go to a movie,” she said, referring to a

letter his dad had written to Corey while he was in field training. He only wrote to Corey, although Alex and his brother both wrote to him during the weeks he was absent. So they saw *The Rugrats Movie* while Alex missed the meet. It was the second time they had seen the movie. He told his coach that their car had broken down on the freeway. But they both knew it was a lie.

Lies were all Alex told since his dad had died, to his mom, his friends, and his girlfriend. Lies that Alex was okay—okay with his father’s death, the move to civilian housing, the fact that Corey got the dog tags his dad had promised Alex before he left for Iraq. Ordinarily, Corey kept the tags hung on the corner of the shelf where he kept his Bionicle toys. But today, they were gone.

They clinked in Alex’s hand as he shifted them so that Corey could see.

“Did you give these to Jake?”

Corey shook his head quickly, his eyes moving to his bed.

Alex followed his gaze.

The bed was unmade, the black-and-white race-car comforter pulled back, revealing the sheets that Corey had soiled the night before. A brightly colored comic book peeked out from under his pillow. Alex threw the pillow off the bed as Corey darted behind him, pulling him back by his arm. A weeping woman holding a bleeding hero stared up at Alex. *The Death of Superman*. Corey had been talking about the comic for weeks since Jake down the street had gotten it.

Alex grabbed it, crumpling its pages.

“No, give it back!”

Alex closed his eyes as he struggled to control his breathing.

“Mom said I’m allowed!”

Corey grabbed for the comic book, but Alex held it out of his reach.

“There’s no curse words. I’m allowed.”

Corey gave a little shake of his head, raising his eyebrows as he spoke, something he did when he knew he was right.

Alex clenched his teeth as he pushed Corey away from the book in his hand, holding him there by the collar of his shirt. He put the dog tags in front of his face again.

“Did you give these to Jake for the comic book?”

Corey watched him through droopy eyes. His eyebrows twitched again.

Alex pushed him away.

“This is the only thing we have left of him! You can’t just throw it away for shit like this.”

He stood to his full height, two inches taller than Corey, and ripped the book in half, watching Corey’s face as the torn pages fell from his hands to the floor.

Corey sucked air through his teeth as his fingers curled, bent and outstretched, then relaxed. He pushed his lower lip out as his head jerked forward, a tic Alex recognized whenever his brother was irritated. Corey gazed at him, his arms loose at his sides.

“You’re just jealous,” he said, his mouth whistling as he forced air through his teeth.



His head wiggled slightly from side to side as he continued, confident. “Because I was his favorite.”

The last word was drawn out, the syllables slow and deliberate.

Corey raised his eyebrows as he finished, his mouth slightly open.

It was the facial expression that did it, the confidence that each of his words spoke the truth.

Alex didn't feel the dog tags drop from his hands. He didn't feel Corey's shirt clenched in his grip as he slammed him against the wall. All he felt was a hot flood spreading through his body. The same flood he felt five years ago, watching his father sell the savings bonds his great grandmother had given Alex for college. The same flood when two days later, Corey received a Playstation 3 for Christmas. Hot hatred beyond words.

Alex's arms shook as he held Corey against the wall. He had never done that before. Corey's expression changed, his eyes darkening as they watered.

“I hate you,” Alex hissed.

For a moment, they both breathed, their faces almost touching. Alex could smell Corey's sweat—sweet, almost milky like a baby's.

He released him roughly, the shirt around Corey's neck still bunched where Alex had held it. He slowly walked backwards, his gaze not leaving Corey's face. His foot shifted as he stepped on the dog tags. His eyes lowered then he picked them up.

“You don't deserve these.”

Turning around, he left the room, ignoring Corey's protests behind him.

Striding up the stairs, he rushed toward his mother's bedroom. Corey was three steps behind him. Alex used the rail to catapult himself to the top of the stairs and slipped into the room, locking the door. He could hear Corey scratch at it, his voice cracking as it rose to a painful pitch, his words slurring as they did when he was upset.

The room was dark, the curtains drawn. The dark cherry wood of his parents' waterbed gleamed through the crack of light between the curtain's panels. In the dark, he knew the bedspread was designed with small brown rocking horses over a pattern of tan squares. It was the same one on the bed 14 months ago, on the day of his dad's funeral. That morning, Alex had come into his parents' room and Corey was asleep at the side of the bed, the dog tags clutched in his fist. His mother was stroking his hair, whispering words Alex couldn't understand.

She had put her finger to her lips when she saw him, motioning to Corey's sleeping frame.

The hot flood again.

"Dad promised—"

But she raised her hand toward him, then put a finger to her lips.

"Shh, he just fell asleep."

"He can't hear me."

"But I can hear you." She looked back to Corey then to the floor. "Just let it lie. He's having a hard time with it."

"Those are *not* his."

"I know, I know. But just let him have them."

Alex knelt where Corey lay and extended his hand to Corey's closed fingers.

"Alexander."

Her voice was firm.

Alex stopped, turning. His mother's lips were tight.

"Leave them. Your dad gave them to Corey. It's in the last letter he sent."

She pointed to her dresser. "It's in there."

She opened the top drawer and removed the folded letter from the envelope. The pages were dirty and smelled of sand. She handed them to him.

Alex took the pages, his vision blurring when he saw the sharp script of his father's writing. Some of the letters were smudged, but his words were unmistakable.

"I know I promised them to Alex, but Corey needs them more. He's not as strong as his brother. Alex will understand."

His mother put her hand on his arm.

"You can keep the letter if you want."

Alex was silent as he carefully folded it back.

"No, I don't want it."

Alex didn't speak to her during the funeral, but sat silent in the pew. He didn't hear the trumpet, the gunshots, his mother's choked cries, or the wind that blew against him as the casket was lowered to the ground. He only heard the tinkling of the dog tags that Corey wore around his neck. They swayed when he walked and clanked together as he played with them—the same sound they had made when his father had left for the war.

The tags clinked together now as Alex grasped them in his hand. He opened the top drawer of his mother's dresser where she had kept the letter. It was still there, next to his father's Purple Heart. He took out the envelope, removing the letter carefully. The words were written as before and Alex read them again, his eyes pausing after each word. They said the same things, expressed the same thoughts. The last page was inscribed with his dad's name—the first letter large, the later ones growing smaller and smaller until his signature became a straight line.

Alex turned the page over. More writing, but words he had not read.

He walked closer to the window to see the paper more clearly.

“Alex has always been a strong boy and makes me proud of the way he handles himself. He is patient with Corey and loves him even when Corey makes it difficult. He is a good example of what a boy should grow up to be. Tell him I am proud of him.”

Sitting on the bed, Alex lowered the letter to his knees.

The words repeated in his head.

*He is patient with Corey and loves him.*

But he didn't love him. When Alex was six, Corey had broken his Darth Vader figure and apologized, their father kneeling next to them, his hands on the backs of each of his sons.

“Now, Alex, say you forgive him.”

He did, staring at the floor.

“Now say ‘I love you.’”

He had said that, too.

Alex folded the letter and replaced it inside the dresser. The dog tags were still in his hand. He unlocked the bedroom door, but Corey was no longer there.

Alex could hear him downstairs, moving things in his bedroom. He felt heavy as he walked down each step, Corey's movements becoming louder as he neared his room. Standing at the doorway, he waited until Corey jerked, frozen as he stared at Alex. Neither of them spoke.

Alex looked away as he held out his hand, dropping the dog tags into Corey's palm.

Wordlessly, he turned and walked back down the hallway, hearing Corey scurry behind him.

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"I'm sorry, too."

This time, he told the truth, but for what, exactly, he didn't know.

## LOVE

Tom had been sitting in his white Lexus for two hours now. His hands were on the wheel and the keys were in the ignition, but the car's engine had long since cooled.

He blinked as three men walked past his window. Tom turned his head, but their images were a fog, the window blurred from his own heat. He took his hands from the steering wheel and flexed them. They were stiff. Using his fingers, he wiped a spot on the window.

Pink lights.

He squinted. "Sammy's," the sign read in neon pink over the side of the building. Music blared from the inside and he could feel the beat faintly course through the car. He angled his watch so that it reflected in the pink lights. 10:30. It had been dark outside for some time now.

Unbuckling his seatbelt, he glanced to the passenger seat. His Bible rested there, the faded black cover contrasting with the tan leather seat. His name, Tom Parrish, was printed in gold lettering along the bottom of the cover. It had been a gift from his wife. She had given it to him close to their second wedding anniversary when he had been appointed associate pastor of the Brook Hills Methodist Church, twenty miles away. Her writing was still on the inside cover in black ink. "Congratulations on a position well-deserved. I love you. Patricia." Her signature was in small tight letters. That was 15 years ago.

Tom turned the Bible over so that the front cover was facing down. The leather felt cold in his hands. His notes, written for “A Perfect Love,” an unfinished sermon on 1 Corinthians 13:4-13, rustled inside the book. When Patricia had left him three weeks ago, he had stopped writing the lesson. He had come home to find her things gone, her clothes missing—the only thing left was a stray bobby pin near the bathroom sink. That and a note stuck on the refrigerator that she was leaving him. In the same tight cursive written inside the cover of his Bible.

Tom took the keys from the ignition and got out of the car. The music was louder now. Closing the door, he pocketed his keys then walked up the steps to the entrance. Cigarettes littered the corner of the bottom stair. The windows were barred shut with wooden planks painted black. Tom wondered what Patricia would say if she saw him at a place like this. He had gone often with his friends to strip clubs long before he became a minister, before he had met Patricia, before the Billy Graham Crusade in which she had led him to the front of the crowd to accept Christ when he was twenty-three, and before his seminary school soon after to please her and her family. But blaming his choice on her wasn't entirely fair, he knew. It had been his choice too, and it was one he wasn't sure he regretted.

Tom paused on the top stair.

She would say nothing. Just as she had for the last three months that they were married. She had given up talking to him—the only messages between fights were her irritated sighs and the sounds of her scrubbing the counters when they were already clean—things he had never noticed until after she left.

Tom pulled the door open. Stepping into a short hallway, he was bathed in red light and in the glittering rainbow from a disco ball on the ceiling. As his eyes adjusted, he glimpsed figures dancing on stages, twirling around golden poles. Framed pictures of topless women, their eyes half closed, their lips parted, lined the small hallway.

“Five bucks and your ID.”

Tom turned.

A man with a splotchy gray beard looked at him from behind a wooden stand.

Tom pulled his wallet from his back pocket and pulled out \$20 and his driver’s license.

“I think I’m old enough,” he said.

The man glanced at the license then gave him back his change. Tom stood there for a moment, looking at the dancers. There were six of them, all topless, on different stages around the room. One woman wore black chaps and cowboy boots, another a black body stocking, while others wore white or bright green g-strings that glowed under the black light. Dollar bills swayed with their hips, tucked in green bundles under the g-strings. A black girl danced close to the side of the room in a corner, watching herself in one of the mirrors that lined the walls.

The last time Tom had been to a place like this was when he was twenty-seven, after he had met Patricia. It was for a college friend’s bachelor party; he and Patricia had been engaged by then, and he was to start seminary school that fall. Tom had never told Patricia where the party had taken place. He hadn’t told her a lot of things.



Two weeks before Tom and Patricia had married, she had left several handwritten pages on his desk with an underlined verse from Philippians 4: “Whatever is right, whatever is pure...think on these things.” She believed it was easy to know what was pure and what wasn’t. For her, it was black and white; for him, it was shades of gray. Therefore, strippers for Tom’s own bachelor party had been out of the question. He and his friends had gone golfing instead, Tom taking Patricia’s calls as she checked up on him throughout the day.

Tom felt a rush looking at the women now—the dancers in bright skimpy costumes, the music, the flashing lights. Walking haltingly to the bar, his eyes still on the stages, he made his way over to the back. The bartender, a balding heavy-set man, approached him.

“Can I have a beer?” Tom asked.

“What kind?”

The music quieted and the DJ in a booth near the main stage spoke into his microphone. “All right, let’s give it up for Shanna. Let’s make some noise.”

There was scattered applause around the room as the next song began and another girl took the stage.

“What kind?” the bartender repeated.

“Oh, um,” Tom glanced at a couple’s drinks nearby. It had been fifteen years since he had last had a drink.

“Coors Light, please.”

The bottle was placed in front of him, and as he paid he slipped a dollar in the tip jar. Spying a few chairs open near one of the stages—there were four in all—he seated himself. A girl in black high heels and a red and black mini-dress stepped up the stairs onto the platform. The music was fast paced, the beat steadily pulsing, but the girl took her time, seductively approaching the pole while her audience waited.

Tom glanced at the other stages. The girl with the bright green g-string was on her back, shaking her feet as she spread her legs for a man who stood in front of her. He dropped a dollar bill on her bare breasts and she grasped it, moving it up and down her body. On another stage, a girl in white was bent over on her knees, looking back while stroking the path of her thong with her fingers as faces watched inches away.

The stages were raised two feet from the floor, like the platform in his church. The seats surrounding him were filled, except for one, and Tom thought of the empty seat in the front row of his church where Patricia used to sit when he preached. Her attendance had waned during the last few months of their marriage, when she had started staying with her sister, sporadically at first, then regularly. The house became bigger, the bed colder. Tom cleaned out everything under their bed, after she left, and found a highlighter. It was Patricia's. She had been looking for it for months. It was the only one that didn't bleed through the Bible's pages, she had said. He still had it on his dresser—he couldn't bring himself to throw it away. It would still be there when he got home tonight, but he knew that he would never use it.

The man next to him now put money on the stage as Tom watched the girl. She was topless now, in her shoes and a black thong. She looked familiar. She was young—

not more than 25—but her eyes were old. She danced with them closed, but opened them at intervals. The make-up around her eyes was dark and heavy, matching the color of her hair, which hung past her waist. Her body was pale and thin. Her breasts were small, like Patricia's. His wife had been self-conscious about them. Almost always, when they made love, she had worn a bra. In order to see her naked, he had had to ease her hands away from covering herself.

Tom said she could get implants if they made her feel better and at first, she had just looked at him. “God doesn't want us to be vain, Tom,” she then said. “Besides, beauty doesn't last.”

Watching the girl on the stage, Tom stared as her breasts flattened when she lay on her back. Her head was close to Tom and he could see her entire body as she arched it on the stage. When she put her hands behind her head and flipped her hair into his lap, he could feel the weight of it on his jeans. He didn't move, but watched as her hands went to her breasts, pinching her nipples to make them hard. Her eyes were closed.

She turned over, slowly rising, and Tom glimpsed tattoos—a barbed wire circling her right arm, a small Irish cross on her hip, and writing between her shoulder blades. He squinted and thought he saw numbers before she turned to face him again. She opened her eyes briefly and caught his gaze. He didn't look away.

The song came to an end and the dancer gathered the dollar bills on the stage. Her purse was on the side of the stage and she placed the money in it, while slipping out a cigarette. Tom tried to keep his eyes on her face as she walked to his table.

“Got a light?”

Her voice was airy, and crackled like in an old black and white movie.

He looked back at her. She was still topless.

“I think so.”

Tom reached into his pocket and found his yellow lighter. He had started smoking again last year. Lighting it, he held it out to her, but she leaned in close. Her hair fell over his arm as she bent over and he could smell the shampoo she had used that morning. Pomegranates. The pink shampoo bottle his wife bought when it was on sale.

The dancer stood.

“Thanks.”

Her eyes flickered toward the base of his neck, and Tom put his hand where her gaze rested and hid the cross he wore, tucking it inside his shirt. She watched him, half-smiling, and stepped away behind the stage for a few minutes, coming back wearing the red and black striped tube dress.

“You still at Brook Hills?” she asked.

“What?”

He could see her nipples through the dress’s fabric.

“The church. Didn’t you used to pastor there?”

Tom tensed. “Have we met?” he asked.

She took a drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke over her shoulder.

“I’m sure you don’t remember me.”

The music got louder and Tom leaned forward. The girl was standing still and the hem of her dress was high on her thighs.

He studied her face, her mannerisms, for a clue as to who she was. His gaze kept returning to her lips—full and pouty. Only one person had ever had those lips—a girl he had spoken with five years ago during a pre-marital counseling session with her fiancée. “Angelina Jolie lips,” he had kept thinking during the 30 minutes he had spent with the couple in his office. She had had short hair then, brown with blonde in it, and had had an eyebrow piercing above her left eye.

He was not surprised by how well he remembered her. He had thought of her that night while watching *Tomb Raider 2* with his wife. Angelina Jolie had lured a man into her bedroom and then handcuffed him to the bed before making an escape and Tom had nudged Patricia, whispering, “We should try that.” He had nervously fiddled with his wedding band as he spoke, knowing that she was judging him. “It’s just not Christian,” she had said. “It wouldn’t glorify God.”

“Do you?” the dancer asked.

Tom blinked.

“Do I what?”

She took another drag of her cigarette.

“No, I do remember you,” Tom said. “You came for a session at the church.”

“Yeah.” She blew the smoke away.

Tom looked on her fingers. There was no wedding ring.

She caught his gaze.

“It didn’t work out,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he told her.

"It's ok." She shouldered her small purse with the dollar bills. "It happens."

She stepped closer to him and put out her cigarette in his table's ash tray. Her dress was so short that the hip strap of her g-string showed as she bent over.

"You remember what you told me that night?" she asked.

"I don't, really. I don't say the same things to everyone."

"You said that love was beautiful. I'd never heard anyone say that before."

She looped her hair behind her right ear. There were no earrings.

"I got a tattoo of it, so I'd never forget." She turned and pulled down her tube top. "Beautiful" was written in Gothic script between her shoulder blades.

"You gave us a verse when we met with you," she said. "Something from the New Testament. It said that love was everything."

Tom looked at her face, but her gaze was focused on a girl in fishnet stockings, dancing. "Well, what did you think love was, if not everything?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about it, but what he and I had together wasn't everything."

"What was it?" Tom asked.

"It was nothing." She took another cigarette from her purse and offered him one.

"So what about you?" she asked. "Is love everything for you?"

Tom wasn't sure if it was a real question, one that she expected an answer to.

"No, I guess not," he said. "I guess it's never been."

They made eye contact for just a moment, then the next song began to play and she was striding to the stage near the front door. He watched her climb the stairs and slide down the striped tube dress. He watched her dance until midnight.

Then, he left the strip club and walked to his car. The air was colder now, and the stars were out. The clouds were gone and the moon was almost full.

## SUNDAYS

Momma's hands smell of vanilla. Except on Sundays, when they smell of honeysuckle stems and garden soil. Branches scrape the bathroom window from outside.

It is morning. It is May, because her tulips are blooming.

Mamma wears a white camisole and slip. Her feet are bare. She puts white lotion on her face and leaves the blue container open for me to play with. Her earrings are silver hoops with blue leaves inside, like peacock feathers.

Daddy's in the kitchen. It is loud. Dishes clatter in the sink.

He's making pancakes.

Mamma holds a curling iron in her hands and I hear its click as it opens and closes on her hair. She turns and does the same to mine.

Momma gets out the hairspray. She tells me to close my eyes and I do.

When I open them, hers are still closed.

The strap of her camisole has fallen, the hand holding the hair spray still in the air. The mist falls and my face feels sticky. I touch the bruises on her arm. Some are red, some are blue.

"Daddy didn't mean to."

When we eat breakfast, Daddy puts bacon on my plate and sprinkles powdered sugar on my pancakes.