

Iniquities

by

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March, 2015

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This thesis is a representative collection of short stories that I have written as part of my Master's requirements. The four pieces included demonstrate the overarching style, length, and major themes of much of my recent work, and are, thereby, connected in these areas. The main purpose of the selection is to show the culmination of two years of study and practice in the broad category of creative writing. These sample works also exemplify the type of fiction I hope to market to various literary outlets in the near future.



Iniquities

A Thesis

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Masters of English

by

Rose Nelson

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## Wreckage

Dad came back and it was a miracle. Dad came back again and it was a promise kept. He won't be coming back again. I'm standing at Whitefish Point, clutching the bronze urn that houses his ashes, watching the furious black waves of the bay hurl themselves onto the beach like distressed whales. My lungs breathe in misty melancholy. Lake Superior is named because of its size, the fact that it's the largest freshwater lake in the world. But what impresses me is its strength and ferocity that surpasses the other Great Lakes.' Even here at the southern edge, in the fresh days of winter, the wind and waves are wild, as if cast by a sorcerer's spell.

This is no coincidence that Uncle Kevin has brought me to the same bay that claimed twenty-nine lives in 1975 on this tenth anniversary, November 10. The *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank a year and a half after my father returned from Saigon. It sank two days after my father, legless, jobless, and suicidal, took a journey here to Whitefish Bay to find some kind of direction and peace.

I remember begging to go the Upper Peninsula with him, starry-eyed from the stories about scuba diving and shipwreck exploration with which he had regaled me. Before Vietnam. I was six when he went to war, and I didn't cry for a whole year because I didn't know how long a tour of duty was, and I believed him when he told me, "I'll be back before you even notice I'm gone."

I spent my seventh birthday bawling. Mom had told me to expect a wonderful surprise. When she led me outside that August morning, blindfolded, I just knew that I'd open my eyes and see Dad's beaming face, his outstretched arms waiting for me to jump in them. Instead I kicked over the shiny red Stingray, complete with the cool, black-striped banana seat, the bike I'd been wanting forever, and ran to my tree house.

Uncle Kevin had only been fifteen when his older brother, my dad, left for Vietnam. Mom told him he was lucky he was too young to fight. But he was not too young to be my surrogate dad, even though he was more like my big brother. A few months after Dad left, Grandma Jansen insisted Mom and I get out of Kalamazoo with all its bittersweet memories, and move into the big Decatur farmhouse with them. I tagged after Kevin all summer picking strawberries, and later corn, from our grandparents' fields. I became bronzed and strong. And cross. I loved Uncle Kevin, but I thought it unfair that he got to stay home while my dad had to fight in a far-off war. Kevin didn't have a son. I hated the Army for making dads have to fight. Years later, I found out Dad had volunteered to fight even though he could have gotten an exemption for being a father. And then I hated *him*.

I have brought his remains to Whitefish Bay, not because of any wish or request of my father's, but because I need to let him go. I'm twenty-one, still living with Mom and my 11-year-old brother Jeff. My whole life I have spent planting and harvesting crops, alongside the Mexican migrants, with nothing to show for it. My winter job is just as futile—selling stereos at Radio Shack. A northwesterly gust slaps me across the cheeks like a rebuke, and I wonder why the wind has direction and I do not.

When I first started high school, my parents had high hopes of me going to Western Michigan University, where Mom had earned her teaching certification. In high school I made all A's freshman and sophomore year and even part of junior year. Then some so-called friends met my dad when they came by after school one fall day. Out on the driveway shooting hoops they wanted to know what had happened to his legs, why he was raking leaves from a wheelchair. After I explained about him fighting in Vietnam, they started in about what a stupid war that was

and how we never should have gotten involved. The new guy, Tom Somebody, went too far. “Your dad got played by the U.S. government,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I felt my innards growing hot.

“I mean the draft. It’s such a crock.”

“My dad was proud to fight,” I said, making my voice rise. I didn’t expect the snickers from all four of them.

Tom said, “Your dad shouldn’t have gone. He had a responsibility to his family. Now look at him, trapped in that cart the rest of his life. I bet he can’t even hold down a real job.”

I grabbed Tom by the collar of his Polo shirt. “My dad works and he works hard, probably harder than your dad.”

Tom’s hot, rancid breath felt like fire on my face. “My dad is a top human resources manager at Upjohn. What does your dad do? Nap all day?” He said this with a smirk.

Still clutching his collar, I slammed him into the trunk of the enormous elm that shaded the driveway. “Take it back!” I growled into Tom’s pimply face.

“Not a chance.”

I jabbed him in the gut with my knee, yelling, “Take it back, jerk!” He tried to wriggle free, but I had twenty pounds on him, all muscle from working the farms. Though he didn’t take it back, his eyes had widened like an expanding puddle and I could feel him shaking. After a minute, I let him go. “Get outta here, all of you, get outta here!”

Without another word, all four tramped down the driveway and hopped in Tom’s new ’85 Mustang convertible. Mike slammed the basketball into my head before following the others. I hated those guys and never hung out with them again. That day I also started hating my father.

I hated his disability; I hated that the only job he could get was as parts manager at Harvey Ford in Paw Paw; I hated that he had fought in a hopeless war for a hopeless cause. I grew cold and distant. Like the icy waters of the Gitche Gumee, I would not give up my dead.

“It’s too windy,” Uncle Kevin calls above the surf as he shields his face from the maelstrom of wind-blown whitecaps. “Maybe we should try this tomorrow.”

I shake my head. “It has to be today.”

Uncle Kevin doesn’t understand. I haven’t bothered to explain the connection between the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* and the death of my father. Dad’s been gone a month and the whole family wants him put to rest, especially Mom. Jeff was born after Vietnam, and he was only a year old when the freighter went down, just seventeen miles out from where I stand today. No one sees Dad’s death like I do.

“I’m going back to the car!” Kevin shouts.

I watch him turn and head back up the sandy hill toward the parking area. Holding on to the metal urn, I bow my head to keep the churned-up sand from gusting in my eyes. Statistics about the accident whirl in my mind: the *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank in 530 feet of water, a 730 foot long ship, carrying over 26,000 tons of iron ore from Superior, Wisconsin, on her way to Detroit, Michigan. At 7:10 PM, her captain reported, “We are holding our own.” Minutes later the *Fitzgerald* could not be detected by radio or radar.

I didn’t hear about the ship until the next day. I was eating my usual school day breakfast of Quaker oats, listening to radio 590 AM, when I heard the news of the sinking. I had been hoping school would be closed for the day because of the heavy snowfall. Actually I was mad Decatur Elementary didn’t have the day off. It was Veteran’s Day and I knew lots of schools

around the country shut down for parades and stuff. Dad always complained about how nobody had respect for veterans and it made me mad too.

A special news bulletin reported that the freighter *Edmund Fitzgerald* was lost on Lake Superior and hadn't been heard from since early the previous night. Another ship, the *Arthur Anderson*, had directed the *Fitzgerald* into Whitefish Bay after the *Fitzgerald* lost both her radars Monday evening. The only information the *Anderson* captain had about the *Fitzgerald* was that her captain, Ernest McSorley, had reported that he was taking on a lot of water, and that the storm was one of the worst he had seen. McSorley had also complained that the ship had a "bad list."

My mother was seated with me at the table, sipping coffee. When she gasped, I knew she was worried about Dad. I dropped my spoon in my cereal bowl. "Isn't Whitefish where Dad was going?" I asked, suddenly feeling like I might lose my breakfast. She nodded trying not to show concern in front of me. "But he wasn't on the freighter, Jim."

"The news said the conditions are dangerous on the lake with winds like 65 miles per hour. What if he's caught in the storm?" I said, feeling panic chill me like a rush of cold air.

My baby brother Jeff, sitting in his high chair, began to wail. Of course his crying had nothing to do with the news, but it made my eyes tear up. Mom pulled Jeff out of his seat and began rocking him. He was almost a year old, a hefty child that looked like a baby giant in my skinny mother's lap. After a second of silence, she suddenly snapped at me to finish my breakfast. I told her I wasn't hungry, so she said to get my things packed for school.

"They might close it today, Mom," I said.

"You have school, Jim," she said in a tone usually reserved for post-delinquency lectures.

I remember I couldn't concentrate all day. I kept staring out the classroom window watching the flurries fall, wondering why my mother let my father leave us. Didn't she care he might never come back? He had been depressed, and I worried he might kill himself.

The art teacher came to our classroom and showed us how to make Mayflower Pilgrims out of corncobs. We were supposed to cut their clothes out of black felt and glue them on, but as usual, I couldn't squeeze any Elmer's from the defective orange nozzle. I found a rubber band in my desk and used it to secure a scrap of material around my Pilgrim man. Todd and a couple of the other boys made rifles out of sharpened-down pencils and stuck them into the sides of their Pilgrims. I copied them, thinking of my dad and the powerful weapons used in Vietnam. He had lost his legs in a booby trap grenade. In third grade I thought his missing legs made him a real life hero, way braver than the silly Pilgrims we learned about year after year.

At ten in the morning the sky is a grey tent pitched over the sand and sea as far as I can see. Since Uncle Kevin left the beach, I'm the only one out here. No birds or fish or any life is in sight. Standing here I feel like I'm the only one who exists and who has ever existed. Is this what Dad felt like when he came here in '75? Even though I asked him many times what he did on that trip, he wouldn't answer. And of course the only important thing at the time was that he returned.

I'm clutching the urn, feeling its smooth metallic surface, so cold, so dead. Mom had it custom-designed to memorialize Dad's life. On one side a purple heart, with its depiction of a stately General George Washington etched into the bronze. On the opposite side is the outline of a freighter and the words: "The legend lives on." Gordon Lightfoot wondered, "Does anyone know where the love of God goes / When the waves turn the minutes to hours . . ." I wonder, does anyone know where the love of God goes when defeat turns the heroes into scapegoats?

The pressure from the wind and the waves is sapping my strength. I let a big gust bowl me over and I collapse in the sand on my knees. I feel like God is forcing me to bow down and pray. I slip the urn under my left arm and force my hands to fold together. My mind is going numb as my wool hat is blown off my head. I don't even bother looking for it—I just tighten the strings of my Detroit Tigers hoodie. I close my eyes, watering from the stinging air, and I try to pray. I can think of nothing to say to God though. Nothing that isn't angry and profane and disrespectful and unchristian and hostile and lacking in faith.

Then, suddenly, I feel someone hovering over me. God? My next thought is Kevin, but when I tilt my head up, I see a woman, silver-haired, holding out my hat to me. She bends down and looks me in the eye despite the sand swirling in our faces. I gaze into her blue-gray eyes, and see motherly kindness, and empathy, in her face. She sets the hat in my hands and asks if I'm all right.

I clear my throat and find I cannot speak. I nod as hard as I can against the forceful air currents.

She is eyeing the urn sheltered under my arm. "I thought maybe you were here to honor the shipwreck victims," she yells through the wind. A moment later she adds, "I lost my father in the disaster."

I nod again, but I must be frowning because she says, "You know about the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*?"

"Yes," I manage to say.

"Exactly ten years ago today."

“I know all about it.” I look at her, noticing faint wrinkles around her eyes and across her brow. I somehow believe I can trust her, but I cannot say anything for a long while. Finally I tell her I’m out here to let go of my father.

Her eyes are wide with expectation so I feel compelled to say something more. “He came up here just a couple days before the *Fitzgerald* went down. I don’t know why he took a trip here alone,” I say. “I guess he just had to get away and find himself. I was only a kid, eleven.” I look into her eyes, seeing that they are glistening. Forgetting myself for a moment, I ask, “Do you come up here every November 10?”

She mouths, “I do.”

“My father lost both legs in Vietnam. For a long time I was proud of him. Then when I got older, I started feeling ashamed to be his son.” I say this avoiding the lady’s eyes.

“My father was a Marine,” she says. “He fought in the famous Iwo Jima battle during the Second World War.”

“Were you proud of him?”

“Always.”

I drop my chin and stare at the lumps of sand encircling me.

After a while she says, “It’s okay to be proud of your father.” She pulls the collar of her cloth coat up over her mouth.

“I want to be proud again. I just don’t know how.” We are silent for a minute. Then I add, “I don’t even know what I want to do with my life. I’m twenty-one and still living at home.” I bow my head into my chest to hide my face from the wind. My real fear is that I’ll be like my dad and never get to choose what to do with my life.

My legs are getting stiff so I stand and stretch. The lady rises too. I see Uncle Kevin making his way back to the blustery beach. She reaches out and touches my arm and says, “Put your dad to rest, honey.” Then she gives me a hug and moves on down the beach, her gray-striped hair lashing her face.

I wait for a respite in the wind and dash out into the lake. When the waves retreat, I hold the urn right at the water line, tip it down, and open its hinged lid. Gray grains mixed with bits of bone fall onto the churning surface. I watch them spin and spin until they disappear into the froth. A few ashes, weighted with frigid water, get blown up into my face. I close the lid and stand still a moment, thinking about how death and life recede and surge in an endless cycle. Finally, soaked and shuddering, I slog up the beach as fast as the surf allows me, holding on to the urn that is both empty and filled with Dad. Uncle Kevin is waiting for me. He puts his arm around me and we plod back to the car.

## The Scar

As soon as the youth pastor and his wife left, Christi rushed to the living room and collapsed on the couch. She couldn't shake the image of that scar out of her mind. From the corner of her eye she saw Keith come in and snatch the last guacamole wrap off the plastic food tray.

"Great couple, huh, honey?" he said, sliding into the beige recliner across from his wife.

Christi listened to the buzz of the remote as the ottoman pulled out. She had closed her eyes so she saw her husband's muscular legs stretched out only in her mind.

"Amber loved the chicken enchiladas you made—did she ask you for the recipe?" Keith said.

"Uh, no, I mean yes," Christi said. She wrapped her arms around her waist to stem her uncontrollable trembling.

"Did you see Mike outside playing ball with the boys? He's amazing with kids. I think he'll be Oro Valley Church's best youth leader ever. He can totally relate to them. I think the church committee was right on the mark offering him the position."

Christi frowned and opened her eyes just enough to view her thin, veiny hands clasped in her lap. She was only half-listening to Keith as she stared at her silver wedding band. How could he have become a youth pastor? And had he recognized her? Christi wouldn't have identified him except for the scar.

"Oh, I told Zach and Connor they could hang out with their friends at Pizza Place until nine," Keith said, yawning. "I let Zach take the Pilot."

Christi sat up straight, took in a long breath and exhaled slowly. She could taste refried beans creeping up her esophagus.

“That’s okay with you, honey, right?” Keith said, louder.

Christi studied her husband. She liked how fair and round and childlike his face was with no hint of stubble because his hair was so light. She liked the crinkly lines around his eyes that made him look kind and trustworthy. His eyes opened and he looked at her with deep blue irises. “Christi? Did you hear me? The boys are out with their friends.”

“Yes,” Christi said.

“What’s wrong? Didn’t you get along with Amber?” he asked.

“She’s lovely. Much younger than he is.”

“Maybe a few years. She’s a former teacher like you,” Keith said. “She told me this is her first time seeing the Southwest. She grew up on the east coast same as Mike.”

“Mike . . . Mike Miller. That’s not his name.”

“Mike’s not his name? It’s probably Michael.”

“No, Keith,” she said, her tone suddenly agitated, “it’s Jerry—Jerry Houseman.” She tried to stop the tears she had been fighting back, but she couldn’t. The terror from that suffocating night started to replay in her mind. Jerry had slammed her down in the bed of his pickup, tearing her gown, her body, her mind, and her soul.

She heard the electric buzz again and then Keith was kneeling on the carpet at her feet.

“Mike reminds you of Jerry Houseman?”

“No, he is Jerry!” Christi said, salty water gushing down her cheeks and onto her neck and collar bone.

Keith wrapped his arms around his wife, but she didn’t feel comforted. “Mike is tall and thin and has black hair like you described Jerry . . . ,” he said.

“And the scar.” Seeing the skeptical tilt of Keith’s eyebrows, Christi felt her body flush with heat. “Didn’t you see the scar? On his wrist, Keith? It juts up, up his arm; it’s an inch long and faded—it was darker before, rawer. When he shook hands, when he shook your hand, you had to have seen it. Didn’t you see it, Keith?” She bored her eyes into his.

When Keith shook his head, Christi wanted to slap his face. “It’s jagged, a bit, white almost, it looks like a cross or the letter T,” Christi said, her volume rising.

“That’s what you said Jerry’s scar looked like.”

Christi’s frown deepened the lines already embedded in her forehead. She pulled Keith’s hands off her. “How can you be so blind? He shook your hand. Your hand. That’s when I saw it. Didn’t you see it? When he shook your hand? His sleeve pulled up—you had to have noticed the scar.”

“Honey, you’ve got to get a grip. This man is a youth pastor—has been for 20 years. He’s from North Carolina, not anywhere in Arizona.”

Christi stood up. Keith had been so compassionate and supportive years ago when she first told him what Jerry had done to her teenaged life. He hadn’t accused her of being stupid, naïve, sleazy, careless, immoral, anything, except a victim. He had embraced her in strong if impotent arms, shaking, almost convulsing in sympathy. And he had cried. Real tears. Tears that wet his whole face and dried on it leaving the skin a blotched red. Afterwards he told her, for the first time, that he loved her. Where was his compassion now? Christi wanted to know. Wasn’t she the same woman whom he claimed to love? She plodded to the front window and looked outside. The evening sun had begun to descend behind the purple Catalina Mountains, making the sky blush in pinkish orange shades. Christi could appreciate the beauty in the deep, restful hues, but ever since that May night when she was sixteen, she had viewed dusk with distrust.

“Honey, come on,” Keith was saying, “Mike Miller has been background checked several times; his character recommendations go back to his high school days.”

“He obviously lied and somehow forged the recommendations,” Christi said.

“That’s highly unlikely. And if he had a criminal record, that can’t be erased.” Christi heard her husband’s words, but the sounds produced no meaning. Her mind was a spinning scrapbook of scenes from her life. She was every age at the same time—pouty, parochial school girl in plaid pleats; beaming new mother coddling an infant; anxious sophomore learning to drive in wedges; boastful fourth-time spelling bee winner; eager first year teacher; mock-cheerful McDonald’s cashier. Baseball mom. Finance professor’s wife. PTA President. Rape victim.

Through the bay window, Christi could see the Martinez girls jumping rope at the end of their driveway. They kept tripping and giggling. Christi didn’t like how close they were to the prickly pear bed. Zach had gotten cut at eight when he fell onto a cactus trying to catch a football. Nine years later, he still had scars on his calves and back.

Suddenly Keith was behind her and Christi felt his firm, tender grip on her shoulders. The gesture seemed superficial and unreal, though, and she shrugged him off. “I’ll clean up the kitchen,” he said.

Still at the window, Christi noticed a teenager from the next block riding his skateboard down the paved road. She couldn’t remember his name, but she thought he was the kid Zach and Connor often grumbled about, the kid who bullied younger children. She watched as he zoomed into the cul-de-sac and did a flip, landing near the little girls.

“Go away!” Christi heard the children shout. She couldn’t hear what the bully was saying. He was pointing to his skateboard like he was trying to get them to ride it. On instinct, Christi rushed through the hallway and out the front door. When she reached the yard, she could

hear the Martinez girls still shouting at the boy to go away. He was holding out his hand to the older girl.

Christi raced across the cul-de-sac to the Martinez property, crumbling the pebbled asphalt with her sandals. “Leave these girls alone!” she yelled. All three kids turned to look at her.

“Go on home,” Christi said, eyeing the teenager. She didn’t like how much he looked like Jerry, with the black sprouts of a mustache growing under his long, pimply nose and the ragged mass of sweat-soaked hair screening his face. She wasn’t close enough to smell him, but she imagined a phantom musk that made her nauseous.

“I was just showing them my new skateboard,” the boy said, his dark eyes widening.

“We don’t want to ride your dumb old skateboard,” the taller girl said, planting her hands on her hips.

“Yeah, roller skating is funner anyway!” the little one said.

Her voice like a growl, Christi said, “I told you to leave.”

“Whatever,” the boy mumbled, “thought this was a free country!” He stepped onto the skateboard and started off, bumping into Christi’s left arm.

“Excuse me!” Christi shouted after him, “Come back here again and I’ll get the police on your back!”

The boy kept moving back up the long, inclined road. Christi followed him all the way up until he turned right on the intersecting road, heading into the silhouette of the now blue-tinted mountains.

Christi turned around and walked back home, breathing hard and relieved she had the downward slope. The sky had turned violet by the time Christi reentered the circular street end.

She felt a graze of comfort viewing the familiar setting, her house set as the center of five, red-roof tiled, stucco homes. For over a decade Christi had lived behind the prickly protection of three green-branched palo verde trees and the sturdy barricade of barrel cactus. Passing the Martinez property, Christi saw Jose helping his daughters collect jump ropes, balls and Frisbees off the palm-lined driveway.

“Good evening Christi!” he called. “My girls told me you chased that Thompson boy off.”

Christi nodded his way but didn’t answer.

“He’s a little off, harmless though. I think my niñas were taunting him.”

Christi gave him a tiny wave and increased her pace, half-jogging to her house. She inhaled the comforting scent of the pink-flowered bougainvillea that edged the walkway. This home was supposed to be her Eden, the paradise that protected her from her past. She teetered a bit as she began a slow ascent up the steps, catching herself on the adobe wall. She saw Keith flick on the porch lights. “Go for a little walk?” he said, holding the screen door open for her.

“No, I was chasing that bully away from the Martinez babies.” Christi leaned against the door and scanned the foyer as if Jerry might be lying in wait for her.

“What bully?”

Christi stepped into the house and made her way to the kitchen. She sat down at her computer in the corner nook. Keith followed her and stood at the desk. “What bully, Christi?”

“I don’t know his name. Jose Martinez said his last name is Thomas or Thompson, something like that.”

“You mean that poor kid down the road with Asperger’s?”

Christi shook her head and began typing. “I don’t know. The bully kid that Zach and Connor talk about.”

“He’s not a bully, Christi; he has autism.”

She didn’t look at Keith because she couldn’t tolerate seeing his judgmental grimace right now. “I didn’t know he had autism,” she mumbled. The Federal Bureau of Investigation homepage appeared on the computer screen and Christi began to study the search options.

“What are you doing, Christi? He’s just a kid.” She could hear the exasperation in Keith’s voice.

“Keith, please, just leave me alone. This is something I have to do.”

“I told you the kid isn’t a threat to anyone.”

“I’m not worried about the kid!” Christi screeched. She began beating the keyboard with her fists. She felt Keith grab her arms from behind and pull her up. Twirling her around to face him, he held her hands in a vise-like grip. “Christi, I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Let go of me!” Struggling to free her hands, she felt Keith relax his hold.

“What is going on? Who are you looking up? Mike? Is this about the new youth pastor?” he asked.

Christi stared into her husband’s wide, blue eyes. “You won’t believe me, but I’ll prove it, Keith. I know he’s Jerry and I’m going to prove it.” She flopped back down on the vinyl chair and laid her head on the desktop.

Keith rubbed her back. “Christi, you’re jumping to conclusions and getting yourself all riled up,” he said.

She sat up and looked him in the eye. “What does it hurt if I investigate him? You always hear about horrific things happening because people don’t believe it when someone recognizes a

criminal. If it's him he could rape the girls in the youth group. Like Anjelica. Do you want to risk your son's girlfriend getting violated or murdered?"

Keith didn't answer.

"I mean it, Keith. I don't want this hanging over me. That I knew he was someone else, a rapist, but I said nothing because I didn't trust my memory. Or I didn't speak out because my husband wouldn't believe me."

Christi watched her husband's face flush red, then white. After a minute, he said, "Okay, Christi. How about this? I'll get a hold of Tim Freed since he headed up the pastor search committee. I'll ask to look over the background reports the committee collected on Mike Miller."

"And what would that prove?" Christi said. "Obviously nobody found anything or they wouldn't have recommended Jerry to be our youth pastor. Keith, we have to start a fresh investigation. "

"You need to start with the information that's already been gathered. Maybe the committee overlooked something. It'll just waste time reinventing the wheel."

"All right," Christi said, "good idea." But she had suddenly changed her mind about investigating Mike Miller.

At Keith's suggestion, Christi took a warm bubble bath. It didn't calm her, though, and she couldn't fall asleep until after 2:00 in the morning. Even then her sleep was sporadic as she suffered a continuous stream of nightmares about Jerry Houseman. Christi watched in horror as Jerry climbed into her open bedroom window, bragging about having locked Keith in the pool. She tried to slam the window onto his hands, but she couldn't stop him. He got in and jumped on the bed and tried to lure her to him with promises of being her bodyguard. She ran downstairs and outside in her bare feet, singing them on the pavement that had caught on fire.

Christi limped toward the Martinez house under a dark, starless sky, trying to scream for help but then realizing she had laryngitis. She tripped over two children who were asleep on the driveway, resting their heads on rubber balls that substituted for pillows. Then Jerry was behind Christi. He bound her arms with a jump rope and dragged her to his car where Amber sat in the front passenger seat. Jerry ordered Amber into the trunk so Christi could sit up front. He started backing up the car and hit something—the autistic boy on his skateboard. Jerry ran right over the kid but he got up and started skateboarding on top of the car. The boy peered into the windshield and right into Christi’s eyes. She mouthed, “Help me!” to him, but he said he was going away like she wanted. Then he flipped off of the car and seemed to vaporize. A few moments later, the car slammed into a mountain and Christi rolled out the side door. A hot dust devil blew her clothes off. Jerry climbed on her . . . Christi woke up screaming. Keith took her in his arms. He rocked her for hours until she fell into a dreamless slumber.

The next morning, Christi yelled at her two sons when they missed the bus. They hadn’t been late to their stop all year, and now, the day she had the most important mission of her life, the bus left them behind. Christi speeded home after dropping them off at school. Then, shaky and nauseous, she made the call to the church office.

Fifteen minutes later, as she dressed, she felt sweat forming under her arms even though she had just showered. She dabbed under her arms with a tissue several times before she gave up and pulled on a white blouse and a navy pencil skirt. She sprayed antiperspirant under her arms through the cotton sleeves and then a quarter bottle of cologne.

Christi could feel her heart palpitating in her left arm as she made her way downstairs. Grabbing her purse, she headed into the garage, tripping on the brick steps in her high-heeled

pumps. Sitting at the wheel of her SUV, she saw that her hands were quivering. She took a deep breath. "I've got to do this," she said aloud.

Outside the church, Christi slammed the car door shut and forced herself to stand straight and tall. She jutted her chin in the air and flung her medium-length hair behind her. Entering the office, she greeted Ann Waters, the soon to retire secretary, in a cool and collected manner.

Ann gave Christi a curious look. "Are you interviewing for a job today, Christi?" When Christi shook her head, Ann said in her usual, lively tone, "You can go right in. Pastor Mike's door is open."

"Good morning, Christi!" Mike greeted her. He stood up and motioned for her to take a seat on the leather chair across the desk from him. "I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you again for your hospitality and the delicious meal last evening. Amber and I really enjoyed ourselves."

Christi nodded, feeling like she might vomit.

"Our boys had a lot of fun with your Zach and Connor," he continued. "They felt so special having the big guys shoot hoops with them. Your boys are great with kids."

"Thank you," Christi said. She glanced toward the open door, an involuntary safety check, and clutched her purse tighter. She could hear Ann answering the office phone.

Pastor Mike settled down in his swivel chair. "Would you like some coffee, Christi? Ann just brewed a fresh pot."

The mention of coffee made Christi's already nervous stomach churn acid. "No, thank you."

"Water? A can of soda?"

Christi shook her head. "Nothing, thank you."

“So, what’s on your mind, Christi?” Mike said, leaning on the desk with both elbows supporting his chin.

Christi felt perspiration forming under her arms again. She wondered if her face was red. She studied Mike’s face. His eyes were such a dark blue she suspected he was wearing colored contacts. Jerry’s eyes had been almost black. The man across from her was clean-shaven, with only the outline of a five o’clock shadow, and his graying brown hair was cut military style. Christi tried to imagine the thin, creased face plumper and unwrinkled with red pimples and a starter mustache, the forehead hidden behind greasy cords of hair. She wondered if he’d had a nose job too—she thought she remembered that Jerry’s nose had been slightly bent. Sitting up straight, Christi took a deep breath. “Look, I don’t know how to say this, um, especially because it looks like you have your life in order now.”

She watched as Pastor Mike’s eyebrows bent inwards. He crossed his arms that were thick with black hair, exactly like Jerry’s.

She inhaled and exhaled and then said in the most neutral voice she could muster, “I recognize you from your scar.”

He held out his right arm, palm up, and pointed with his left hand. “This?”

Christi nodded.

Pastor Mike chuckled. “Ah, my red badge of courage so to speak. I thought I was being a hero. The Goliath of new kids was picking on my little brother and I just knew I had to be his David. This fifth grader was teasing my second grade brother every day. Well, one day this kid pushed my brother into a ditch and I lost it. I jumped him and the fight was on. Only it wasn’t much of a fight since he had a hundred or more pounds on me. And he pulled a knife. It was just

a Swiss Army gadget, but that thing slashed my flesh but good. Fortunately two male teachers got on us before he hit a vein.” Mike stopped talking and Christi saw him eyeing her.

Christi’s brow furrowed inward and an automated voice came out of her throat. “How you got your scar isn’t why I’m here. I know you. We met at my high school, Phoenix Central, sophomore year, 1982.”

“I’m afraid you have me confused with someone else.”

Christ felt her body temperature surge. “No. You’re Jerry Houseman. You were visiting your cousin, Trevor Hansen, over the prom weekend. You met me and some of my friends at the dance. You were attending Casa Grande High at the time.”

“Sorry, Christi, I’m not Jerry Houser or whoever you said and I have no cousin named Trevor.”

“I don’t know how long you’ve gone by Mike Miller but that doesn’t erase who you once were.”

Pastor Mike stood up. “Okay, Christi. I can’t make you believe me, but I am not this Jerry man.”

Christi stood up too. “This isn’t going away. You raped me and I’m not going to remain silent now that I caught up with you.”

“Rape?” Pastor Mike’s face turned bleach-white and Christi thought he might pass out.

“Yes,” Christi said, “I’m not here to reminisce. I’m talking about a crime you committed. Against me.”

Pastor Mike stood silent, his lips parted and his brow folded into a single deep line. He collapsed into his chair and said in an even tone, “Christi, you can’t just accuse somebody of a horrendous crime without any proof.” After a moment’s pause he added, in an affected

sympathetic voice, “I may look like the man who raped you, but that doesn’t mean I’m the same person.” Christi was looking at his arms and shoulders, noticing how rigid the muscles in them had become.

She tossed the hair out of her face and raised her chin. “I suppose I should have known you wouldn’t admit it. I guess I thought you had been born again and would be able to admit the truth. You know you can’t hide under the cloth, Pastor Mike,” she hissed. “God sees right through it. And I’ll make sure His people do too.”

Christi didn’t like how Pastor Mike was looking at her with eyes filled half with panic, half with concern. “Christi, I am so sorry to hear you were raped. If you haven’t had it, I can find faith-based counseling for you.”

“Pretending to do your pastorly duty won’t save your hide. I came to you first instead of Pastor Mark and the elders to give you a chance to confess. I was fully prepared to forgive you, especially for your wife and children’s sakes. If you admit your guilt now you can save yourself and your family a lot of unwanted embarrassment and pain.”

“Christi, I don’t know why you refuse to believe I’m not Jerry . . . .”

“Mouths can lie but scars can’t.” She turned and marched out of the office, ignoring Ann, who sat at the desk her mouth agape.

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“How could you have done such a wicked thing?” Keith yelled. He and Christi stood outside on the deck where she had escaped when he confronted her. She had just finished changing into shorts and a t-shirt when he arrived home furious.

“Listen to me, Christi!” Keith said, pulling her hands off her ears. “Mike called me as soon as you left his office. You’ve got an innocent man fearing for his future and his family’s

future, all because you've gone psycho over another psycho. What is wrong with you? I told you I was handling it. Today. I already got the information from Tim Freed. But that wasn't good enough for you. You had to take matters into your own hands and screw with a poor man's life."

Christi refused to answer. She leaned against the wooden railing, letting the heat from it sear her folded arms. Her eyes looked out over the sand and scrub yard to the half-empty pool. She saw that dozens of prickly palo verde branches were floating along the scummy surface and wondered if swimming among them would hurt like being raped. "You need to get the pool cleaned. It's almost May."

"I don't know what to do with you, Christi," Keith said. "Maybe you should get some help again. Dr. Martin from church is an expert in trauma recovery."

Christi turned and narrowed her eyes at her husband. She noticed that beads of sweat had formed on his upper lip. "Oh, so now you're on the rapist's side," she said. "That's what he suggested, that I get counseling. For your information, Keith, I don't need psychological help. I need justice and closure. My rapist has been running loose for decades—it's time for . . . ."

"You don't know if he's loose," Keith said. "He could have been arrested and convicted on other charges or he may have died in prison . . . ."

"I always thought you were so reasonable," Christi said. "We don't need to speculate about Jerry Houseman any more. We know he's free and living a phony life as a youth pastor named Mike Miller."

"For God's sake!" Keith muttered. He went back inside the house, slamming the sliding glass door behind him.

After she heard Keith drive off, Christi went back inside the house. She grabbed the manila folders Keith had left on the kitchen counter and retreated with them to her desk. A

couple hours into reviewing the documents, she had found nothing suspicious. She heard the school bus squealing to a halt out front and looked at the clock on the computer. Christi grabbed her purse and rushed outdoors to greet her sons. She had pulled out a twenty dollar bill and the car keys by the time the teens reached her in the carport.

“Hi, guys!” she said. “Listen, I’m working on something important right now. Can you go hang out at the Family Fun Stop? Grab some tacos, play some games for a couple hours?”

Zach grabbed the money before Connor could. She took their backpacks from them and moved onto the walkway so Zach could back the car out. Squinting in the blinding afternoon light, Christi waved to them, shouting at Zach to slow down. She turned back to the house. She didn’t hear the vehicle as it followed her up the driveway. She was about to enter the carport when a truck door slammed. She felt her heart turn over.

“Christi!”

It was Jerry’s voice, low, husky.

She turned around to face Pastor Mike. “You have a lot of nerve coming here,” Christi said, trying to steady the quiver in her voice. She felt her underarms moistening.

Standing in place, he held out a legal-sized envelope. “You need to see this information.”

Christi shook her head. “I’ve already seen all the fake references you compiled. Keith got everything from Tim Freed.”

“Nothing in here is about me,” Pastor Mike said. Christi noticed that his face was ashen and that his eyes had become slits inside swollen, red flesh. She fought off the urge to push him into the saguaro.

“For your own peace, I urge you to look at what I have here.” He took a step towards her, still holding out the envelope. Christi’s eyes sought out the cross-shaped scar on Mike’s wrist. In the hot light it looked blood red—his scarlet letter, Christi thought. T for tormentor.

“Leave it on the ground,” Christi said, backing into the carport. Her eyes followed Mike as he set the manila envelope on the driveway and walked back to his Dodge pickup. She continued watching him as he backed out of the driveway, turned out of the cul-de-sac, and rumbled down the street. She didn’t move until even the truck’s exhaust had disappeared. Christi stepped toward the envelope, but she didn’t pick it up. Her whole body shuddering, she knelt down on the scorching cement and wept.

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The joyful jingling of the neighborhood ice cream truck roused Christi. She got up and dried her eyes as she watched several children dash out of their houses and into the street. Christi snatched up the envelope off the driveway and went inside. She felt listless, as if she were recovering from a long illness.

She poured herself a soda, and despite the high temperature, wrapped herself in her favorite plush blanket, heading upstairs to her bedroom. Safe on the canopied bed, Christi withdrew the contents of the manila envelope.

There were three photocopied items—two news articles and a photograph. She read the caption under the photo, a mug shot: *Jerry M. Houseman, former Casa Grande High School student convicted of selling marijuana, was released from jail today on a plea bargain.* Christi noted that the date, June 29, 1983, was just thirteen months after he had attacked her on May 21, 1982. In the black and white photograph, Jerry had his dark hair shorter, though it still hung limp over his forehead. He also had the beginnings of a mustache growing over his lip. Christi

had to hold her stomach to keep from retching when she looked at his eyes. There was something sinister in them. How could she have trusted him? Left the chaperoned prom with him?

She moved on to the articles. She started reading the one from the *Arizona Republic* dated April 20, 1990. The two-paragraph story reported on a twenty-two-year old-man shot in the leg by his live-in girlfriend. The twenty-year old-woman claimed he had tortured and raped her. Jerry Houseman was taken to and treated at St. Joseph's Hospital after someone called for emergency help. The article concluded: *No charges or arrests have been made. An investigation is pending.*

The second article was an obituary from June 30, 1998. *Jerry M. Houseman of Casa Grande, Arizona died Friday night in an apparent drowning at Lake Mead. He was thirty years old. Memorial services will be held at St. Matthew Catholic Church on Monday at 10 a.m.*

Christi slid the articles back inside the envelope. This new information should have convinced her of Mike's innocence, she knew, but it didn't. If it was the same Jerry Houseman who had died in 1998 then of course Pastor Mike couldn't be him. But how would he have the same scar as Jerry? The same exact scar? Or had time blurred Christi's memory? She suddenly noticed that her head was throbbing. Yawning, she closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. The warm sunlight passing through the bedroom window was making her drowsy.

When Christi awoke, the bedroom was dark. She could hear her sons outside shooting hoops, the basketball pounding the concrete. Disjointed dream images prickled her fresh consciousness and she found herself trying to remember something significant. She sat up straight to defog her mind. She had been dreaming about the prom she had attended the night Jerry raped her. This jarred her memory of the real event. Christi and several girlfriends had decided to go to the dance without dates and hang out together. They had bought formals

together, all the same royal blue satin, and their own corsages. Christi's dress was the only one with sleeves and a high neckline—the other three wore spaghetti straps and low-cut bodices.

Jerry had come up to them at the refreshment table several times to try to sweet talk them into driving up Camelback Mountain with him. Christi remembered his exact words. “Come on, ladies, I'm a real gentleman,” he had said. “I'll protect you from the wily coyotes. We can sing together, under the stars, the ancient songs of love.” Christi recalled that one of the girls had commented on how wily Jerry was.

When her friends moved on to the dance floor, Jerry grabbed Christi by the elbow. Even with the live band banging out Springsteen songs, she could hear his husky voice luring her outside. “It's so stuffy and loud in here. Let's get some fresh air.” She agreed without knowing why and climbed into Jerry's black Dodge Ram. Through the windshield she saw the scorpion, tail up and ready to sting, painted on the hood. She mentioned to Jerry how creepy the mural was. Jerry explained he had bought the truck used with the artwork already painted on, and she felt better.

Jerry drove higher and higher up the mountain, moving quickly past the stucco-walled mansions built into the rocky ledges. Under the thin shaft of lunar light, he pulled the truck up to an isolated overhang and deadened the engine. Christi watched as he pulled off his jacket and tie and rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, exposing arms forested in black hair. On the underside of his right wrist, Christi noticed a cross-shaped scar. It was jagged and red at the ends where the wound was still healing. Christi asked how he got it. “From beating off a bully who was hassling my little brother. He attacked me with a knife. But I wouldn't let anyone hurt my brother.” He paused, and then in a smug, sinister voice said, “And I won't let anyone hurt you, Sweet Thing.”

## As We Forgive

The great metal doors of the cathedral slammed shut behind Esther, sealing its sacredness inside. Even after her confession, guilt ravaged her like a pernicious infection. *As we forgive those who trespass against us.* With her arthritically knobby fingers, she reached inside her coat pocket and grasped the glass-beaded rosary Daddy had given her thirty-five years ago. She carried it everywhere, and had carried it everywhere, since the day of Aaron's funeral. She was thinking how she had been widowed for such a long time. Gripping the icy railing with gloved hands, the frail woman descended the snow-dappled steps to the walkway below. She trudged over the empty parking lot, crunching the hard-packed snow with her boots. A dozen thick-needed blue spruce lined the wrought iron fence that separated the lot from the graveyard. A sign hung from the filigreed gate: St. Joseph's Memorial Gardens. Lincoln, Nebraska 1894.

Hard, stinging gusts like raps from a ruler slapped Esther's cheeks as she fumbled with the latch. Her breath fogged her vision, and she felt her fingers go numb before she finally sprung open the gate. She was here at the young priest's urging, to make peace with Thomas Gardner, a seven-year-old she had never met, a seven-year-old who would never grow up. Because of her. Father Leon's well-intentioned yet ineffective counsel frustrated her psyche. "Esther, you have to forgive yourself. God already has. Visit the boy's grave and accept God's mercy and grace." *As we forgive those who trespass against us.* This was the tenth time since the accident that Esther had come to the priest for spiritual guidance. But how could she expect a 30-year-old man to understand an 81-year-old woman? An old lady who had lived so many lives before he was born? Could he know what it was like to be born and raised during the Great Depression, or to be a little sister whose brother didn't make it back from Normandy? Or a woman who lost three babies before she became a mother? Of course he couldn't. For a moment

she allowed herself to wish that her old mentor, Father Murphy, had lived another year to help her through this. Mostly she wished this was a nightmare from which she would soon wake.

She breathed visible swirls and entered the graveyard under a natural arch made of several interlocking, snow-laced branches. Esther didn't like to see the majestic oaks and elms stripped naked, even though she knew they would be resurrected in leafy glory come spring. The forest trees in February seemed as inanimate as the stones they guarded, their skeletal limbs whittled by wind and time.

Once she reached the tombstones, Esther felt her heart palpitating and stopped a moment. Thomas was buried in the newest section, with only four neighbors, down a slope that had yet to be leveled. Esther had only been down there the one time, after the funeral. She grew light-headed thinking about the little boy's burial service last year. Her mind replayed Susan Gardner's soul-gutting words: "You killed my only son! I hope you know you've destroyed my whole world!"

Of course Esther had expected that kind of reaction from the child's grieving mother, and she had contemplated forgoing the funeral. She knew God expected her to be present, though, and that her absence would have been taken for cowardice and remorselessness by Thomas' family. What most haunted Esther now was the image of a mother in black sobbing so hard her whole body convulsed. *As we forgive those who trespass against us.*

The sudden tolling of the cathedral's bells startled Esther and she turned around to face the . She stood motionless, absorbing the pounding vibrations into her soul. Twelve tolls, then silence. Esther noticed that without the sun's radiance, the church's stained glass windows appeared gray, hopeless.

Despite Father Leon's assurances to the contrary, deep inside her, Esther felt that God hadn't forgiven her, couldn't forgive her. Not this time. God could have prevented her from running over Thomas, but He hadn't. He could have sent his angels to delay her at the apartment or stall the engine or flatten her tires or make Thomas slip on the frosty grass so he hadn't run into the road. Just a few seconds, that's all she had needed from God. The Creator of all time couldn't have spared a few seconds to spare a little boy's life and a faithful follower's soul.

Esther knew why Susan Gardner couldn't forgive her and why she couldn't forgive herself. *As we forgive those who trespass against us.* An icy wind tried to nudge her on, but she wasn't ready for Thomas yet. She took hold of a single glass rosary bead and rolled it between her forefinger and thumb as she walked toward the biggest oak in the cemetery. The tree sheltered a dozen or so haphazardly placed memorial markers. She crouched down in front of a flat, rectangular stone that was connected to a second identical stone by a heart-shaped bridge of granite. Esther dusted the snow off of her father's name: Jonathon Edmund Collier.

She fingered the letters on the headstone as if they were written in Braille. Her colorless upper lip quivered and she stretched the corner of her scarf over her cheeks to wipe off the already freezing tears. She murmured aloud before she realized it. "I'm so weary. Papa, I must come home. Please speak to God on my behalf. Her mind tried to recall her father as he had been when she was a child, the ruddy-skinned, thick-muscled farmer who carried Esther on his shoulders while hand-plowing the corn fields; the dutiful breadwinner who walked rain, snow, or shine to the high school to teach history and coach football during the school year; the patient parent who sat on Esther's sick bed every winter crooning "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" until her fevers broke. The only picture that came to Esther, though, was of a haggard, wasting mannequin of a man stretched out on his bed, gasping in his final bubbles of oxygen.

Esther reached over to the other side of the granite heart and wiped the snow off her mother's etched name: Mary Francis Lewis Collier. She closed her eyes and tried to remember her mama, Mama who died just after Esther's seventh birthday. The picture that emerged was of a slender woman, dressed in a floral dress and a white, gravy-stained apron, pounding dough with flour-speckled arms. But Esther's mother was faceless and headless. Esther pressed her eyelids tighter. She smelled lilac perfume and heard the melodic humming of "Immaculate Mary," her mother's favorite hymn. Esther mouthed the lyrics, "Ave, ave, ave Maria. Ave, ave, Maria!"

Her woolen hat pulled over her ears, Esther began moving toward another row of tombstones. She soon came to an upright marker hewn out of limestone. The inscription read: *David Aaron Morris*. Esther's head was starting to throb from the cold, and she felt dizzy. Somehow she couldn't remember what her husband's face had looked like or what his voice had sounded like. She felt snow flurries grazing her cheeks and saw that they were falling from close, gray-white clouds. Esther had one more family stone she needed to visit, but she knew she must go to Thomas now before the weather worsened. Six more inches were forecast before sundown.

Esther gazed out over the vacant meadow below from the top of the snow-covered slope. Glassy white, even on this sunless day, the earth here seemed to reflect the purity of the innocent children it had swallowed. Esther eased her way down, slipping anyway, and twisting her left ankle. "I should have brought my cane," she scolded herself. She made it without falling, though, and forced her stiff legs to keep moving.

Esther cleared the stone of snow. It was made of marble, and a band of chubby, winged cherubs had been sculpted into a decorative frieze at the top. Tiny hearts were etched into the stone between the words.

Thomas Michael Gardner  
Born January 8, 2005  
Died February 22, 2012  
“Our angel lives forever in our hearts.”

The last line made Esther’s heart shudder. She closed her eyes, tucking her chin between the wool of her scarf and her coat collar. She felt she should cry. She felt she should pray. She felt she should feel remorse. She felt nothing. The priest’s words echoed inside her head, “Esther, you have to forgive yourself. God already has. Visit the boy’s grave and receive God’s mercy and grace.”

Esther felt tears bubbling in her eyes. She reached into her coat pocket, pulled out the beaded rosary, and studied the tiny glass globes in the gray light. It was the last gift Papa had given her. During her son David’s funeral she had clutched it in one hand and Papa’s large, still-strong hand in the other. A year later she had clasped it in both hands during Papa’s funeral.

Esther kissed the sterling figure of Jesus on the crucifix and then hung the rosary around one cherub’s tiny marble neck. She knelt at the base of the headstone and folded her hands, reciting the Lord’s Prayer. Then she added her own prayer. “Dear Merciful Lord, help me. Bring me home, I beg you.”

The cold had penetrated her body such that she was experiencing a temporary sensation of warmth. Feeling drowsy, Esther lowered her slight form to the ground and lay on her side. Closing her eyes, she pretended she was wrapped in a thick fur blanket. She had pretended this as a child. While her friends made snow angels and snowmen, Esther would curl up in the snow with her invisible polar bear and pretend to hibernate in a den warm with fluffy fur. All she wanted now was to hibernate.

When Esther awoke, she was curled up and shivering. She saw a smiling, kind-eyed lady leaning over her, and she smelled sweet lilac. “Mama?” she whispered.

The woman took both of Esther’s hands in her own and pulled her to her feet. “Come, we must get you out of this cold,” she said. Esther felt too weak to protest.

Inside the sanctuary, the woman helped Esther into a wooden pew. The high-ceilinged space was drafty but much warmer than outside. Esther sneezed twice and the next moment she realized the woman had slipped off her coat and was wrapping it around Esther’s shoulders. “It’s a miracle I found you out there,” the woman said, sitting down next to Esther. “I had thought of not coming today because of the sub-freezing temperatures.” Esther felt the heat from the woman’s gaze but she couldn’t look up.

“I’m Marilyn Matthews, Thomas Gardner’s grandmother,” the woman said, smiling. “I, uh, I saw you at the funeral last year.”

Esther nodded, finding she couldn’t speak.

“Do you visit him often?” Marilyn asked. Then, as if she regretted her question, she quickly added, “It’s his eighth birthday today, well, would have been his eighth birthday, that’s why I came.”

“I didn’t know that,” Esther said in a trance-like voice. She looked into the woman’s glistening eyes a moment before turning away.

“No, you wouldn’t. I crocheted him a teddy bear; he always loved stuffed bears,” Marilyn said. “He has a collection of 20—all given to him by Gramma. His bed is covered with them—his parents have kept his room the same.”

Esther looked over at the younger woman to be polite.

“So of course that’s what . . . ,” she paused to sniffle, “that’s what he’s getting this year too. I wonder how much longer he would have appreciated them—the bears. You know with all the electronics kids are so fond of these days. I didn’t wrap it. Would you like to see it?” She reached in her tote and withdrew a bear made of white yarn. Sewn into its face were three black buttons, a triangle for the nose and two smaller circles for the eyes. An over-sized red bow was tied about the neck under the chin.

“It’s lovely,” Esther said. “Polar bears were my favorite animals when I was a girl.”

The woman nodded and packed the stuffed bear back in her purse. “I’m stopping by my daughter’s house to give it to her this afternoon.”

The two women sat in silence. Esther looked up at the vaulted ceiling and felt small. She let her gaze drop to the altar behind which hung a ten-foot tall wooden carving of Jesus on the cross. The eyes, looking heavenward, and the gaping mouth, both seemed to be pleading for relief. The sculptor had carved sunken cheeks that made the Son of God appear vanquished.

“That’s not right,” Esther said, her sharp voice fracturing the fragile silence.

“What’s not right?” Marilyn said.

“The crucifix. Jesus looks pathetic. He shouldn’t look pathetic, should he?” Esther didn’t like to see the splendid Savior stripped naked, even though she knew he would be resurrected in white-clothed glory.

“I’m not sure,” Marilyn said. “He *was* dying a terrible death.”

“But it was his choice and he was glad to do it.”

The woman bit her lip and then asked, “Are you feeling any warmer?”

Esther realized she did feel much warmer. She took the coat off and handed it back to Marilyn with a whispered, “Thank you.”

Marilyn reached over and placed her hand over Esther's. "Thank you for going to his funeral. I know that must have been difficult." They sat in silence for a minute and then Marilyn said, "Thank you for visiting him today." Esther shook her head as if she were eschewing undeserved praise.

"Mrs. Morris, I know my daughter hurt you. Grief affects people in different ways. But I know she's sorry and regrets yelling at you and intimating you killed Thomas on purpose."

"I understand." Esther was thinking about another dead son.

Marilyn nodded and stood up. She held out a gloved hand to Esther. "Let me walk you to your car."

Esther glared at Marilyn. "I don't drive, anymore," she said in a tight voice.

"Oh . . . of course," Marilyn said. "Let me drive you home. The snow is already coming down and the temperature feels like it has dropped in the past hour."

Esther sat up straighter in the pew. "Oh, no thank you. I have someone else I need to visit, and if the weather worsens, the church secretary can get me home."

Marilyn's forehead creased into temporary grooves. "You're sure you'll be okay?"

"I'm positive. Thank you for your kindness." Esther smiled a closed-lip smile. Marilyn smiled back and headed out of the church, toting her jumbo-sized purse.

Esther stood up and headed back to the cemetery. She noticed that Marilyn was sitting in her car in the otherwise empty parking lot letting the engine run. Esther waved but she was too far away to tell if Marilyn saw her.

At her son's tombstone, Esther read and reread the inscription:

David Aaron Morris Junior 1958-1979.  
"Forgive us our trespasses  
As we forgive those  
Who trespass against us . . ."

"David was your son?"

Esther turned to face Marilyn who had come up behind her. "I thought you were going home," Esther said.

Marilyn walked up to Esther so that the two women stood side by side in the snow. "I think God re-directed me," she said. "He was young. How did he die?"

Esther felt a jab of pain in her stomach. She saw that Marilyn was looking at her with wide, compassionate eyes that begged an answer. "He, uh, he was killed," Esther said.

Marilyn gazed at her with eyes that were filling with tears.

"It was a drunk driver. Maxwell Helmond." Esther paused, hoping the contempt in her tone was apparent only to herself. "He had lost his license for previous DUI's. He wasn't supposed to be driving."

Esther paused. She searched Marilyn's eyes for permission to continue and seeing approval, spoke again. "David had just bought the Harley and he was so proud of it. He was driving it to work for the first time. The pickup just came out of nowhere at top speed." Esther visualized the hunter green truck railing out of control, and she felt the familiar carnal craving to run over Maxwell Helmond with his own vehicle. Esther's face flushed underneath her scarf. *As we forgive those who trespass against us.*

"You should tell my daughter about your son," Marilyn said, taking Esther's hand in hers.

Esther shook her head and pulled her hand away. “I never forgave him.” Thirty-five years ago and she still couldn’t forgive him.

“It’s okay,” Marilyn whispered.

“No, it’s not. I want God to forgive me when I can’t forgive.” Esther had tried but she just couldn’t forgive him. She couldn’t forgive a man who died of cancer in prison after serving twelve years.

“Mrs. Morris,” Marilyn began, but Esther interrupted. “He asked me to forgive him. Begged me. Wrote me a note every year on the anniversary of David’s death.” She couldn’t forgive a man who was truly sorry.

“Mrs. Morris,” Marilyn said, “I’m not asking that you guilt my daughter into forgiving you. I’m asking you to share your story. This is about two mothers losing their sons. You need each other’s empathy and compassion.”

“Don’t you see, Marilyn?” Esther said. “Thomas is my penance.”

Marilyn’s brow wrinkled in thought. “What about the crucifix?” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You want Jesus to look triumphant, joyful, right?”

“Yes.” Esther answered in a voice that sounded like it had been drawn from a deep well.

“You believe that Jesus was victorious, that He conquered sin, don’t you?”

Esther nodded.

“Then you must believe he has forgiven you. He wants you to forgive yourself.”

Esther shook her head. “How can I? I have to forgive Maxwell Helmond first. I’ve tried, but I just . . . .”

Marilyn pulled her cell phone out of her purse. “Talk to my daughter.”

Esther held her hand up in a stop gesture, but Marilyn punched in a number on the screen. “Susan? It’s Mom. Honey, I have someone here who needs to talk to you. Hold on . . . .” She held out the phone to Esther. Esther felt her body quivering and found she was paralyzed. Marilyn set the phone in Esther’s gloved hand. “She’s waiting.”

Esther stared at the phone, watching snowflakes fall and melt on the glass screen. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.* Somehow her arm lifted the phone up to her mouth and she was able to speak.

## Anne's Struggle

Paul was out of town and Anne was hiding in her art studio. Not hiding like working in private, but hiding to escape. She had bolted the door and was cowering underneath the drafting table, her body squished between boxes of new canvasses, cans of turpentine, and various other art supplies. Her heart was pulsating in her throat, and she felt like the conductive tissue had been torn off all her nerves.

“Mommy! Mommy! Open the door! Please, Mommy!”

Anne tried to ignore the seven-year-old's pleas and the pounding on the door. Her daughter's growing hysteria had activated Anne's primal fears, ones she had developed in childhood as an unconscious defense. Anne didn't understand Meghan's overreaction—she had nicked her thumb playing with Anne's sewing scissors—but the wound was barely visible. Running cold water over it had stopped the bleeding, yet Meghan wouldn't stop crying and screaming. That was why Anne had locked herself away. She had learned in one of her ongoing parenting classes that if your child was making you crazy, you needed to get away from the situation. Anne didn't want to end up so angry that she would hurt Meghan. She couldn't let that happen, wouldn't let that happen. She would not be like her mother.

Through the studio's picture window, Anne noticed that snow had coated the highest peaks of the Santa Catalina range. This was rare, especially in late February, and the sight made Anne shiver with both cold and fear. Snow, even a sprinkling, brought up feelings of desolation in Anne, which is why she and Paul had settled in Tucson. To Anne snow meant danger. And Daddy dying. It also meant beatings. Anne's mother had first hit her on a blizzardy Nebraska day when the sky shut them inside like a steel vault.

Paul and Anne had agreed before they were married that they wouldn't have children because of Anne's past. Anne feared she would abuse a child like her mother had her. Even though the couple took precautions, Anne ended up pregnant. Abortion wasn't an option because of Paul's Catholic beliefs; and something deep within Anne needed to protect the child inside her. Paul promised to be the primary caregiver and he had. He was the one who had stayed at home until Meghan went to school. Later his mother, Rachel, a widow and professional child care worker, had moved out to become Meghan's full-time nanny. In the child's seven years on earth, Anne had never been left alone with her for more than two hours. Until this weekend. But Rachel was recovering from knee surgery, and Anne's best friend Celeste had moved away a year ago. And Paul deserved this opportunity. Anne knew he had put off his business venture to parent Meghan and she truly wanted to support him. She convinced herself she could do this. Now, though, with Meghan's fit on their first evening alone together, she began doubting herself.

The sound of Meghan beating and kicking at the door, in between air-sucking sobs, made Anne's head throb. She slipped headphones into her ears and activated a song on her i-phone. Soon *Journey's* "Don't Stop Believing" drowned out Meghan's nerve-rattling tantrum. She couldn't remember a time when Meghan had over-reacted like this. Meghan wasn't squeamish or one to be mollycoddled. She had sustained far worse wounds without shedding a tear.

Anne closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. She still felt weak and wobbly from a weeklong bout of flu. She wished now she had called in sick to the gallery today. She had gotten faint giving her last school tour this afternoon. Yawning, she felt herself nodding off. The tight space reminded her of her childhood hiding place. Suddenly horrifying memories started swirling in her achy-headed mind.

Her mother had started getting drunk and hurting Anne soon after her father died. For months, Anne hid anywhere she could only to be found and beaten by her mother. Then one day she found a secret space under the floor in her room. A pencil had rolled under her bed. She crawled underneath to get it, and her fingers hit something hard. Anne knew it was a tiny hinge, like the ones on her room door. Anne felt around it and found the edges of a hidden door. Pulling it open she discovered a square hole, just big enough for her, and her favorite bear, Charlie, to fit inside. Anne remembered that whenever her mother started yelling, she would run to her bedroom and squeeze inside the space, pulling the secret door shut. Anne couldn't recall how many nights she had cowered in fear waiting and praying for morning. She would wake sore and cramped but at least unhurt. And every morning Anne would find her mother passed out on the couch as she poured her own cereal.

Anne sat up with a start, banging her head on the underside of the drafting table. She couldn't keep reliving her past. She crawled out from under the table, suddenly realizing it was late. She watched the violet-edged darkness clamber into the valley and cloak the tiled rooftops of the neighboring stucco homes. She glanced about the studio and felt frustration building inside her. Due to her sickness, she hadn't been able to finish the wolf painting she wanted to show at next week's exhibition. And with Paul gone, she would have no time at all to work on it this weekend.

Craggy shadows slid into the art room through the window as if they were hostile creatures on the prowl. Anne touched the glass with her fingertips. It felt icy. Just a few minutes earlier, the desert sun had been streaming through it. Now she saw that the thin ribbon of sky above the mountain tops had turned purple underscored in magenta: desert twilight. Anne pulled the plugs from her ears—silence. She could hear no noise at all, not even a whimper.

Her maternal instincts kicked in and she headed to Meghan's bedroom. She found her daughter curled up on the bed engulfed by a menagerie of cozy critters. The little girl's eyes were closed, but Anne could tell by her uneven breathing that she wasn't asleep. In the incandescent light, her daughter's narrow face looked sallow. Anne could make out a single tear pooled on her cheek, half-concealed by a loose curl. "Meghan?" she called out in a whisper.

Meghan opened her eyes and stared at her mother with glazed blue eyes.

"Let me see your finger, honey."

"No!" Meghan squeezed her stuffed giraffe and scrunched up her face to look angry.

"Do you want a bandage for your cut?"

"I want Daddy!"

Anne tried not to let that comment sting. "I know. So do I. But Daddy won't be home until Sunday evening."

"I want Daddy!"

Anne felt her muscles tighten. Don't get mad. Don't get mad, she cautioned herself. She sat down on the lavender comforter and motioned for Meghan to hold out her thumb. When Meghan looked away, Anne went to the bathroom to retrieve a box of bandaids.

Meghan allowed her mother to bandage her invisible wound. But Anne hated how she looked at her with eyes narrowed and brimming with resentment. At least she hadn't hit her, Anne thought. Meghan didn't realize how fortunate she was, to have a mother who didn't hit her. To have a mother who went through Herculean hoops to make sure she didn't.

Anne tucked Meghan in after reading *Thumbelina*, Meghan's favorite fairy tale. Meghan just lay under the covers pretending to sleep. Anne kissed her on the forehead and turned off the bedside lamp. The unexpected blackness assaulted Anne. She had forgotten Meghan's nightlight

had burned out, the nightlight that was for her, not Meghan. She made her way out to the lighted hallway as fast as she could. But out in the hall, Anne's head started whirling. Horrific images began attacking her mind as if from a direct feed off a video recording. She shook her head and paced the hallway, but she couldn't stem the flow of the nightmarish memories.

She was remembering the terrifying night not long after her daddy had gone to heaven. Gram and Granny had left for their faraway home that morning, the last relatives to leave. That evening Anne's mother served leftovers that neither ate. Then she took Daddy's last six-pack from the refrigerator.

Anne watched her mother lug the beer into the living room and plop down on the red recliner, Daddy's. Then her mother pulled one can off its plastic collar, tore off the tab, and gulped the gold-colored drink. While Anne did her homework, her mother drank all the beer.

Anne had been dreaming a long while when her mother woke her. At first Anne didn't know what was going on. The room was black. Anne wondered why her nightlight had gone out. Her mother started yelling, and she yanked Anne out of bed, hurting her arm. Anne tried to pull her hand out of her mother's, but she couldn't.

"You're hurting me, Mommy!" she cried.

The next thing Anne knew, her mother pulled down her underwear and began hitting her bottom. Hard. Tears squeezed out of her eyes and down her cheeks. She started shaking. Her mother had never spanked her before. She tried squirming away, but her mother grabbed her around the waist. Then she tied her up against the bed post with the belt from Anne's robe. She took something hard, Anne didn't know what, and started beating her bottom with it. Sometimes she missed and got Anne's back. The little girl screamed and screamed. Finally her mother

stopped. Anne listened to her mother's heavy breathing in the dark. She held her breath, hoping her mother would forget she was there.

Suddenly light from the hall blinded Anne, then the door slammed shut, and the darkness came back. She cried. Some of her hair stuck to her wet face. Her hands were tied around the bedpost. She worked her way out of the knot and lay down on the bed. A cold draft from the window made her shiver. She couldn't find Charlie in the dark, and she couldn't stop shaking. Or weeping.

Anne couldn't take the memories anymore. She rushed into the bathroom, blew her nose, and washed her face. Her sinuses hadn't completely drained from the recent infection, and she still felt dizzy. She sat on the toilet lid and let the tears flood down her cheeks. She wondered how she could get through another two days with Meghan—she hadn't anticipated how antagonistic Meghan would be. Anne knew Meghan wasn't used to her father being away, that she had probably become too dependent on his always being around, but Anne was her mother, not a stranger. She looked at the photo of her and Meghan hanging over the toilet. Meghan was about a year old and had just taken her first steps. Anne was hugging the chubby-cheeked baby, pride and love radiating from her smile and eyes. When had she stopped cuddling her precious daughter? Anne couldn't remember exactly. But as Meghan got older and needed correction, Anne pulled back from much physical contact, afraid she might be tempted to strike the little girl. She took a deep breath. At least Meghan would be spending tomorrow morning at a friend's, and a teenager from church was helping with her in the afternoon.

Soft, spring-like sunshine awoke Anne just minutes before her cell phone rang. Minutes after answering, Anne wished she hadn't. Gabby was sick and couldn't play today. Now Anne had to find a way to fill up the morning with Meghan. She hoped Meghan would sleep in a bit so

she could make her favorite breakfast of French toast and sausage links. But when Anne got downstairs, she found Meghan lounging on her bean bag watching cartoons and gobbling Frosted Flakes from the box.

Anne tried to sound cheerful. “Good morning, Meghan!”

Meghan didn’t answer.

“How would you like it if I made your special breakfast?”

When Meghan didn’t answer again, Anne shut off the television. Then she repeated her question.

“No thank you,” Meghan said.

Anne took the cereal box from her. “Come on, then, I’ll get you a bowl and milk.”

After breakfast, Anne sent Meghan outside to play. She hoped some neighbor kids would be out and about. Meghan came back in after only 15 minutes claiming no one could play. Anne suggested they go for a bike ride together, so they pedaled to the neighborhood park. The February day was chilly with occasional gusts of biting wind, but the sun felt warm on their faces. At the park, Meghan refused to play on the equipment, even when Anne got on one of the swings and slid down the tornado slide.

Back at home, Anne announced to Meghan that she was going to show her how to paint an oil painting. She made a big deal of making Meghan seem like a real artist. She tied an art smock on her and got out a small easel and canvas. Then she showed her how to make up a palette of oil colors. She demonstrated some of the more simple painting techniques on her own canvas. Finally, Anne showed her daughter some of the paintings she had been working on for the past few months.

“This is my favorite, Meghan,” Anne told her, holding up the near-finished work. “It’s a mother wolf guarding her pups. See their little faces poking out from the den?” Painting it had been cathartic for Anne, and the image reminded her of the promise she’d made to herself: to always protect Meghan. She had spent half a year on it, trying to portray the mother wolf’s expression as simultaneously instinctive and caring. Anne thought Meghan would like it because the baby wolves were fluffy and sweet-faced.

Meghan just mumbled that it was “all right.”

Anne encouraged Meghan to try different strokes and had her experiment with color. Finally she asked her to paint her own picture while she worked on one of hers. Meghan complied but with no enthusiasm. The only thing she said to Anne all morning was, “What time is my sitter coming?”

After a while, Anne asked to see Meghan’s picture. The little girl had painted a creature of some sort, with the body of a green lizard and the head of a long-eared wolf baring long, jagged teeth. Though the lines were sloppy, made with little effort, the painting demonstrated a raw talent for proportion and spatial awareness. Anne asked her what kind of animal it was.

“It’s you.”

Anne’s forehead puckered into two vertical lines. She wanted to know what Meghan was getting at, but she refused to give her permission to insult her more. Trying not to cry, Anne told Meghan to start cleaning up.

After they had washed up, Anne suggested they make a pizza together. Paul had done this several times with Meghan, and Meghan had always enjoyed “cooking.” Today, though, she just sat on the barstool at the counter watching her mother roll out the premade dough and spread the tomato sauce and cheese onto it. When Anne insisted Meghan add the black olives and pepperoni

slices, she just tossed them on haphazardly. Anne felt her temperature rising. Why was Meghan being so obstinate? Taking in a deep breath, she slid the pizza in the oven and sent Meghan off to play in her room. She glanced at the clock: 11:00. The sitter wouldn't be here until 1:00. Anne hoped Meghan would just amuse herself until lunch, and then maybe they could read together. She made a salad, but after that, it was still only quarter past the hour. Time was ticking away too slowly.

Anne went to check on Meghan and found that the child wasn't in her room. She looked in the bathroom and the backyard. Finally she checked the art studio. Looking in through the open door, Anne felt every muscle in her body stiffen. Meghan had defaced a half-dozen of Anne's works in progress. Right now Meghan was standing in front of Anne's wolf painting, dipping the brush in a can of black paint.

"What do you think you're doing?" Anne said, her voice more shrill than she meant. Startled Meghan rotated around sharply and dropped the brush on the floor.

Anne tried to modulate her voice. "Why did you ruin all these paintings, Meghan?"

"They were ugly."

Anne felt shaky. She knew she had to discipline Meghan, but she was struggling to figure out what would be appropriate. A rush of helplessness coursed through her body, and Anne wished she hadn't gotten herself into this situation. What had she been thinking? She had no idea how to care for Meghan by herself. Paul and Rachel always handled the discipline. And now Meghan was acting worse than she ever had. Anne inhaled a deep breath and said, "Meghan, you know what you did was very naughty and very wrong. I can't allow you to wreck my things. You know I work hard on my paintings."

Meghan's eyes looked dull as she stood silent and still, her blackened hands limp at her sides.

"Do you understand? You're going to be punished."

"Cause you're mean," Meghan said under her breath, but loud enough for Anne to hear.

Anne felt her chest growing hot. She wanted to scream that Meghan was the one who was mean. "Go wash off your hands," she ordered.

At first Meghan didn't move a muscle. Then she pivoted around and wiped her hands on Anne's wolf painting. Before Anne could stop her, Meghan had covered over a huge swathe of the canvas with black imprints of her hands. The pups' faces were now clotted gray masses and the mother wolf had become a blob of black. An image of her mother burning her very first sketch of a wolf reeled through Anne's mind. She grabbed the brush out of Meghan's hand and yelled, "What a terrible child to do such a terrible thing!"

"I hate you!" Meghan screamed.

Before she could stop herself, Anne grabbed Meghan and turned her over her knee. With a stiffened palm, she hit the child's rear end as hard as she could. Meghan didn't cry. Anne whacked her again and then let her go. Meghan stood up, and with enormous eyes, stared at her mother.

Anne growled through gritted teeth, "Get to your room."

Meghan left, slamming the door behind her. Anne collapsed in the swivel chair and looked at the ruined painting, letting tears flow from her eyes like a sudden downpour. She cried until her hair and shirt were soaked.

Anne wiped her face with a clean rag. She knew she had to deal with Meghan. Guilt was pervading every nerve in her body, and her right hand throbbed with guilt from having spanked

Meghan. Paul wouldn't have spanked her. Paul would have taken Meghan's privileges—favorite toys, playdates, or television and computer time. But that didn't seem like enough for this offense. She wanted to call Paul and ask him how to remedy the situation, but she didn't want to pester him. And she didn't want him to know she had hit Meghan. She tried to remember how Rachel handled Meghan. Nothing seemed appropriate to this situation. She needed advice and someone with whom she could confide. Celeste.

Celeste and her husband had lived next door when Anne and Paul first moved to Tucson. Her youngest child had just moved out to attend college in Flagstaff, and she had been struggling with empty-nest syndrome. She befriended Anne, who was just a few months pregnant, often making meals to help Anne out, and taking evening walks with her. Even though Celeste's oldest daughter was Anne's age, Celeste became Anne's best friend. When her husband died a year ago, Celeste moved to California to be closer to her children. Anne had cried for days.

Talking to Celeste was always like taking a tonic for Anne. She would know exactly what to say to Anne. Shaky with shame, Anne punched in Celeste's phone number. Anne tried to sound upbeat, but Celeste could tell immediately that something was wrong. Anne broke down and explained the whole miserable day. "I felt in my heart I wasn't ready to do this all alone," she said, "And now Meghan thinks of me just like I thought of my own mother."

"Nonsense," Celeste said, "Meghan is trying to manipulate you. She's upset her father left her for the first time in her life, and she's taking it out on you. You did the right thing, Anne. You did not abuse your child. Did you hear me? You did NOT abuse Meghan." She explained to Anne that lots of parents spank their children when no other discipline works. The spanking was not done in anger and it didn't injure Meghan, and Anne needed to let it go.

"What next though? Should I apologize?"

“No. Meghan knows in her heart she did wrong. She knows she was out of control, and she will feel safe knowing you didn’t let her get away with it,” Celeste said.

“What else should I do?”

“Make her pay for the damage done to the paintings. If she doesn’t have any money, make her do chores until she pays off the debt.”

Anne smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. “You know I love you, Celeste.”

After hanging up, Anne washed her face and changed her clothes. Then she pulled the charred pizza out of the oven. When the babysitter rang, Anne was waiting with her pay. “I won’t need you after all, Katie, so go to the mall or to the movies, enjoy your afternoon.”

As she closed the door, Anne noticed Meghan standing in the foyer a few feet away. She turned toward her and looked her straight in the eyes. They were red and moist, and her nose was running. Meghan opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again. Anne saw that the child’s upper lip was quivering.

“You’re going to have to do chores to pay for the damage you did,” Anne said, keeping her gaze on her daughter’s eyes.

Meghan nodded, bowing her head.

“You will start by cleaning up the art room.”

Meghan followed her mother down the hall to the studio, but she stopped at the door. Anne beckoned to her as Meghan stood rooted in place. Anne noticed she was staring at the defaced wolf painting still propped on its easel. Suddenly the little girl marched inside the room, picked up the dropped paintbrush, and dipped it into an open can of white paint.

Anne glared at her but said nothing. She watched as Meghan, her face bright with determination, whited over the nasty black smudges. Of course she didn't know the painting couldn't be fixed. But she did know her relationship with her mommy already was.