

LAST WILLS

by

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This short story collection, *Last Wills*, portrays four individuals' transitions into late adulthood. "Dan's Man Otto": an aging, socially estranged man attempts to cope with later-life struggles due to another man's fatal decision. "Yardsticks": a solitary woman confronts aging, for whom late adulthood becomes a sentence of life imprisonment with no possibility for parole. "Balance Notification Nine": a career man encounters young buck against old stag workplace competition. "Deathbed Testament": an aging daughter's struggle to develop, at last, a way to cope with a lifelong identity crisis.

LAST WILLS

A Thesis

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dan's Man Otto	1
Yardsticks	16
Balance Notification Nine	29
Deathbed Testament	39

Dan's Man Otto

Otto hung out by his lonesome in the cold, clammy alley waiting for any action Friday night might throw at him. He'd long given up hope but was too let down and weary to go elsewhere.

A cherry-red car poked its long hood across the alley, slipped under a street lamp cone spilling light onto the Ghent Street sidewalk, and idled against the curb on the wrong side of the road. The driver's window rolled down. Dan the hick white dude whistled from the red Lincoln car. "Yo, Otto," Dan hollered, "what's up?"

Otto pushed off the dark alley from an abandoned ice cream freezer leaned against the concrete block wall between Paschki's Tobacco and Convenience Inn's back door and a wood phone pole hanging a busted-out doorway lamp.

"Badda nada, man," Otto said.

Dan's usual five o'clock shadowed chin and cheeks was whitewash slick. His black hair cut Norfolk Navy crisp was slicked down with hair gel. Old Spice aftershave blasted out the car a wave of man musk. Dan was on his binge wings, Otto figured, weekend-spreeing a carpenter's Friday paycheck. The Lincoln Towncar rental was different. Dan's old Dodge station wagon, beat by sea salt and sand and hard street life, more rust red than white paint, probably was broke down again.

"Looking to par-tay?" Dan said. "Or your niece on you for staying out nights like you did when you were a young fool?"

"Taquisha don't run me."

"Get in the back." Dan nodded toward the passenger door behind him. "Take me to where the ladies are. I want a long leg, strawberry blonde, skinny white chick."

Otto leaned over the seat back. “Crack and crank first off?”

Speeding away from the alley, Dan screeched tires on dry asphalt. “Yeah, first, then a farmer crank gal in from the sticks.”

“Mabrey’s holding blow and ice over to the Burl tattoo parlor.”

“Does he got Oxies too?”

“Man, you in for the full mind fuck, huh?”

“Yeah, party like it’s 1999 and the end of the universe.”

“Yo, don’t be old white shithead like that around Mabrey. He takes you for a Five-O man he just as easy pop your ass as—you know. Whatever.”

“Burl’s on Seventeenth Avenue?”

“Corner of Shipyard Boulevard, out behind the Dunkin Donuts beside the Misty Baton Club.”

“Girls there, too, right?”

“Naw, man. They’s chicks is big-woman strippers. The skinny vanilla tricks work out of East Ocean View Avenue near those rich folks’ new palaces.”

Otto was a musical chair token—back seat for the drug score, for window shopping Ocean View street walkers, front seat when Dan did the heavy-breathing disco to the wrinkled and street-worn blonde crank fiend in the back seat, and in the front seat while he and Dan huffed and puffed blow and ice and Oxie.

Dan let out the blonde back at her streetwalk on East Oceanview. They parked outside the

Overnite freight truck terminal beside train tracks. The handgun Dan pulled from the glove box was only a spitball shooter .22. Dan's last words mumbled around the gun muzzle echoed in Otto's mind, "Nobody loves me." Otto's head rang like some sick-ass had hard-boxed his ears. Red blood and greasy brains splattered onto Otto. He bolted from the car and fled into the closed-down night.

Twilight dawn. Black blood spots stained the thighs of Otto's blue warmup suit. A crumpled plastic trash bag poncho over the warmup suit hid the worst stains and cut cold gusts ripping across marl gravel. Brittle blows punched through cypress limbs hanging beard moss above the swamp the road dead ended into.

Head stuffed with the steel wool fuzz of a wicked drug hangover, Otto rattled his head partway clear. He rubbed his hands above hot fumes rising from a rusted oil drum on the desolate freight trucker turnaround.

"Man, that was the ugliest ever, last deal ever," Otto said. "Gotta get on another routine for I wind up alone and sleepwalking dead inside like Danny boy. First things, score a clean outfit, scrape up some legit cash, get the fuck out of Norfolk."

He tossed a rolled-up cardboard box into the fire drum. Thick ash flakes shot up from the drum, floated into the blueing sky.

A siren wailed across the intersection up the road into Norfolk. Otto ducked behind the fire drum. Shiny-new white and black, a seven-point gold star on the black door, a sheriff's pickup truck carrying three fat white goobers crammed side by side on the pickup's seat, wearing red

flannel shirts and John Deere green ball caps, barreled through the crossroads' four-way stop. The light bar on the truck roof flicked cold blue flashes onto the warehouses and loading docks crowding the road as far as Otto could see.

"Sick," Otto said. "They's easy living makes us common living folk look so simple we live lies." He thought, what you just think? You tongue and mind's twisted up by knotted wires.

Marsh crows cawed mockingly above the swamp. Gusts whipped beard moss shushing under the cypress trees. Otto thought they spoke to him, said ha-ha and never mind; laugh at your own self and let go your troubles, things is what they is.

"Dan, you should've gone off and done your lonesome ass-head self alone. Why in hell's you needed me to witness?"

Marsh crows cawed. Beard moss shushed.

A battered panel truck coming on from Norfolk stopped at the four-way stop. Its driver looked left and right then settled onto Otto. The truck crossed the intersection and stopped alongside the fire drum. The door opened, the driver flicked a cigarette butt at the fire drum. The butt bounced off the drum and landed near Otto's feet.

"Looking for work?" the driver said.

Otto's gaze swept the trucker turnaround, taking in flattened cigarette packs, crushed drink bottles, dusty rags, ripped plastic baggy corners, and broken injection needles littering the gray marl pavement. Day laborer stand, he thought. "Uh-huh, work. I'm looking for work."

"It's breakfast, lunch, and seventy dollars for six hours picking up building scraps."

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. All right."

"You're not high, are you?"

"No. No. No. No."

"You're not holding, you know, any drugs or guns, knives, stuff like that?"

"Huh-uh. No, none of that stupid junk."

"All right. My regular helper's supposed to have called by now. If I don't hear from him in a few minutes, we'll just go ahead on. Okay?"

"Uh-huh. Yeah, uh-huh."

The driver shut off the engine. He climbed out and held out a hand. "I'm Mike Trip. Everyone calls me Country, because I dress country, I guess."

Goober ball cap, flannel shirt, blue jeans, white socks, black shoes, he's country all right. Otto shook the outstretched hand. "Tercel Jones like the Toyota car, but they calls me Otto. You know, auto like a motor car but I spells it with two O's and two T's. O-T-T-O."

"Pleased to meet you, Otto." Country's eyes measured Otto, his hand the firmness of Otto's handshake. He nodded.

"Me too. Good to meet you too, Country," Otto said.

"It's not that hard a job. I need to finish up the project and get scraps picked up so they'll pay me off the last draw today. Me, you, my helper, we'll get her done right quick. And it's more pleasant to work with company."

"Good enough. I'll get done like you want."

"Yeah, it's no big deal."

Flapping wings beat the air. The murder of crows labored up the road into Norfolk.

"Just a few more minutes," Country said.

"Uh-huh, no problem," Otto said.

Country lowered and raised his ball cap's brim. The sun was peeking red through the trees. Otto dropped torn cardboard strips into the oil drum.

"Here," Country said, "I've got some two-by-four scraps in the truck. Better than cardboard."

"Cardboard's done right by me," Otto said, "but suit your own self."

Country turned from the panel truck door. "Sorry. It's your fire. Cardboard's fine." He rubbed his hands above the oil drum. "Where the hell are you, Dan?"

"Dan?" Otto said. Shit, he thought, Country goddamn knows Dan. Can't be the same Dan.

"You know Dan?"

"No. No. I don't know no Dans. That's your helper?"

"Yeah. He's usually at home when I go by. But it's Saturday, his worst day. He's an all-right guy when he's straight sober, though. You'll like him."

Dan wasn't all right no more, Otto thought, if it's the same Dan. "Can't he meet us where we're working?"

"Dan's car gave out. He had a cell phone," Country said. "He's not answering it."

Ah shit. What the fuck, is it the same-ass Dan? "How long he work for you?"

"Off and on for years, when his head's in the right frame of mind. Sometimes he'll go off on a binge and he's no good to me. He gets back on the wagon and I'll take him on again. He doesn't have friends, I guess, except his drug connections."

"Uh-huh," Otto said. "Good friends are hard to come by."

"Girlfriends," Country's eyes dulled, drifted upward and off to the side, "are harder."

"Uh-huh, girlfriends," Otto said, "harder to come by. You have women troubles?"

Country sneered. “Troubles about any mother-loving anyone who gives a good goddamn shit about the important fucking things in life.”

“I didn’t mean no disrespect,” Otto said. “I only meant, you know, people who care about you through fun times or hard.”

“Dan's been pretty reliable recently,” Country said. “I paid him a huge paycheck, cash, yesterday. Maybe he's gotten off on another binge. He swore he’d hold out till tomorrow.”

Fucking hell, Otto thought, is it the same Dan?

A brown car with yellow lights flashing on the roof and the driver driving from the passenger side came down the road. The car turned at the crossroads and sped off toward the rising sun.

"Paper delivery." Country looked at his wristwatch. "It's getting late."

"I'm on you-all's time," Otto said.

"Right now I'm on Dan's time just a minute more."

"We both of us on Dan's time."

Taking a sidelong glance, curious as much as suspicious, Otto guessed, Country reexamined Otto. He lingered on the black spots staining Otto's blue pants. Country shrugged and shaded his nose beneath the ball cap's brim.

"Taking time off without letting me know isn't Dan's worst thing. He barks swear words all the time. I don't mind except when he does it in front of a lady customer. Damn Shit Fuck Ass Cunt, every time he hammers a nail. Says it's from Tourette's caused by the damage drinking and drugs did to his mind."

Otto remembered Dan cussed a blue lightning streak after he snuffed a spoonful of crushed Oxies from some book or novel or some such junk. As the watery rush caught up with Dan in a head-rattling shudder, he pulled the handgun from the glove box. "Help yourself. Finish it off." He pointed the gun's muzzle at the white powder residue on the book. "I don't want, like, to die high alone."

"No, man, I'm high as shit," Otto said. "I done had enough. Hey, what the fuck you doing with the gun? You crazy? Don't wave that shit at me."

Dan waved the handgun in Otto's face. "Do I have to insist?"

Otto snorted up thick rails of Oxie dust. The rush dampened his panic at the handgun's menace.

Dan placed a worn business card on the dashboard. The card was for some construction contractor, much as Otto could see or care to know. Dan then stuck the gun muzzle in his mouth.

A hangover spasm racked Otto's temples, crept across his skull, burned down his neck. Looking around for baggy corners, hoping one or two might have a trace of powder in them, he curbed his craving for a holdover taste.

Country's cell phone rang. "Hello?" He turned away from the fire drum. "Yes, I'm Mike Trip." He draped his spare arm over the panel truck's hood.

Otto strained to hear the other side of the conversation. He stepped closer to Country.

"Oh God, no," Country said. He turned and stared Otto to a standstill.

"Yeah, I'll come down right away. Fifteen minutes or so. Bye." Country clipped the phone

onto his belt.

"Sorry, Otto, I won't need you today after all. I got an emergency in town."

"Could you give me a ride?" Otto gritted his teeth, trying to hide hangover jitters cracking his teeth. Between pinched lips, he said, "I need to get some food."

"Yeah, man. Really, I'm sorry. I'll pay for your breakfast. It's the least I could do for getting your hopes up."

"That'd be decent."

"You from Norfolk?" Country said.

Otto settled into the panel truck's passenger seat. "Pittsburgh." Dunkin Donuts coffee cups and Little Debbie snack cake wrappers threatened a landslide from their precarious resting place on top of the dashboard.

"Dan was from Pittsburgh."

Otto caught the *was* Country said. It was the same-ass Dan.

Country turned the pickup onto the road into Norfolk. "Where you going?"

Otto needed sugar for the jitters. He said the first sweet shop place that came to mind.

"Dunkin Donuts up the road by the Misty Baton Club."

"Kootchie girls love donuts as much as cops," Country said, "don't they?"

Otto nodded. "Don't everyone?"

"Did the Navy bring you here?" Country said.

"Naw, Mom and them said get out of their place. My niece Taquisha let me come live with

her. She was born out of Norfolk.”

“I didn’t care that Dan did drugs,” Country said, “long as he showed up regular for work sober. I done some myself back when I was young. Maybe if Dan had gone to rehab . . .”

Warehouse scenery turned into commercial outskirts. Smaller and more buildings, the rundown and eager for retail business outside and sleepy inside kind, less loading docks and less swamp. They passed through a green stoplight. The intersection signs said MacAdams Street crossing Little Creek Road. Getting near to the Dunkin Donuts, Otto thought.

“Maybe what?” Otto said.

“He might have been okay. Drugs didn’t help. They made his life . . . If I’d made him go to rehab . . . He wouldn’t be dead.”

“Dude wouldn’t have gone.”

Otto didn’t see Country’s face full on front. Country didn’t look over at Otto’s face but looked at his warmup pants. Otto saw the black blood spots on the blue cloth and guessed they didn’t mean nothing to Country. He didn’t know if the curl on Country’s lips was a grin or a smirk or the sparkle in his eyes of confirmed suspicion or was tears or what.

A city cop car was parked behind the Dunkin Donuts. Street clothes customers were visible through the front windows. Otto didn’t see a cop’s uniform walking around the donut shop. The cop car was just parked there while the cop was doing business somewhere else, Otto thought.

“Here’s a twenty,” Country said. “Help yourself. I’m going on downtown.”

Otto took the bill and stepped out of the truck. “We cool. You all right, man.” A Jackson was good to get a sugar and coffee fix.

“Hey, Country,” Otto said, “I’ll pray for your friend Dan.”

“You knew him?”

“I think we might have met once or so.”

Turning to the donut shop, hand on the truck door about to close it, Otto looked over to the Misty Baton Club. Little Tone was out on the corner peddling Mabry’s wares.

Otto closed the door and Country backed out of the parking lot. “Yo, Tone,” Otto said. He thought maybe a taste of something-something would see him through the hangover tremors.

Yardsticks

On the street below the barred second-story window two lively boys tilted the Volvo station wagon owned by the yuppie couple who lived up the street. The car alarm blared.

Bleep, bleep, bleep, Chloe thought. Lambs bleating for their mommies and daddies.

Her one hand held up as a scissors, the other pretending to measure a string, she made cutting motions toward the boys. “Snip, snip,” she said, “your lives will be short.”

A street lamp Chloe Moira put out with a slingshot marble the prior week, and the month prior, and every once in awhile when she got angry at the orange light, bathed her apartment room with a garish glow.

She fed Japanese beetles to her Venus flytrap. The ugly light gave the Venus flytrap’s leaves and spiny mouths a sickly snakeskin pallor. Around the flytrap, gray sod lichen, puffy ping-pong ball shapes, lined the edges of the fish aquarium she picked up alley shopping and did up as a terrarium.

The lichens became treetops, their twiggy filaments tree limbs and branches and leaves. The flytrap’s dozen hungry heads giants hungry to devour an army of young derelicts. Chloe wondered if the flytrap liked boy meat. No, the instruction manual she bought at a swap meet said fatty meats killed flytraps.

The boys tilted a pickup truck directly below her window. It sounded no alarm.

Those boys’ talk was all one voice to Chloe. “Motherfucker said shit, you know, like fuck, fucking around, talking shit about every fucking thing I fucking ever fucking done. Yeah, man, shit fucker done dissed you the last fucking time. Pop a fucking new asshole in this fucking shithead. Put the fuck to the shit, man, yeah.”

Forgive us our trespasses, Lord, Chloe thought. Forgive these boys. But send them

directly to Hell.

Chloe fed the last open flytrap mouth a beetle. She tickled one of the spines with a wood sliver cut from a yardstick. The mouth snapped shut. You are the best-est ever pet, Chloe thought, living on the Richmond Fan's polluted air and sips of water, a few pests and neglect.

Another car alarm down North Shields Avenue blared.

"About blessed time for a break," she said. She pulled her folding chair away from the window. Leaning on the backrest, she pushed the chair to the folding table she'd measured strings on earlier. She sat down to plait a key chain she'd sell to the Hookah Head Shop.

Her hands grew stiff and she thought to take her medicine. From the wall above the mantle shelf, she took down a big scissors, gold plated, four feet long, mounted on a wood plaque. A brass nameplate in the lower corner said Grand Opening, Tunnelman and Sons, Personal Restraints, Richmond, Virginia, 16 June 1957.

When they closed for business December 2012, she was out of the only wage job she'd had, after she dropped out of high school, stitching leather elbow patches onto straightjacket arms. Better than staying on the folks' farm and their dreams of her marrying a farm boy. She left when she was sixteen. Her parents passed on into grace. The bank took everything and left her a cardboard box of mementos: family picture album, a chipped butter crock and tea set, and steel tableware missing the knives.

She was going to live a better life in the big city. She'd work and prosper and meet fun guys. The guys who liked her didn't like her anymore after they won over her charms. The guys she liked wouldn't give her a second glance. The job became a dead end she couldn't get away from. She was just a farm girl become a mill girl and stuck for life stitching away in a sweat shop.

No insurance. No savings. No pension. A pitiful good-riddance paycheck—she stole the big scissors from the bossman for what little payback she could carry away.

She laid the big scissors on the folding table. The back panel came off and exposed her hiding place, her manilla envelopes with money and private papers and precious pills. She counted eight dollars and ninety-six cents. Not near enough for medicines she had to buy.

The disability check was spent on doctor bills before she got it. Social Security covered her rent and household expenses. Medicare was a trial getting healthcare covered and left her owing anyway. It got her a little free clinic doctor care and discounted medicines.

The Neurontin pill she didn't have to take, but the neuralgia pained her hands, legs, and feet bad. She had to take the Lipitor for cholesterol or her arteries would clog. Half a pill will have to do. Accupril for blood pressure she could let go till the next week.

The hydro . . . hydrozide . . . the water pill she didn't like to take. The Main Street clinic doctor said she better take it or her heart would bust an artery. They were cheap. If she didn't take the metformin for diabetes she felt like a soggy dishrag. She'd take half a pill of it too. Take With Food, screamed the labels on the pill bottles.

She pushed the folding chair over to milk crates against the wall she kept canned and jarred food in and her clothes and craft supplies stacked in.

Her stupid roommates stole the food if she put it in the kitchen cabinets. She won't keep nothing in there or the refrigerator or the bathroom they could steal. She wouldn't ever use their front sitting room or the den in the back with the TV. Become friends—they'd be in her stuff helping their own selves.

Low-salt crackers, mostly crumbs. A tin of smoked sardines with a passed expiration date.

A dented can of baby peas. Instant decaffeinated coffee she mixed with milk powder into a mug, and tap water from the Coke jug she refilled when she had to go out into the hallway and fill it at the bathroom sink. A can of fruit cocktail.

After dinner, she put up the folding table and rolled out the futon. She leaned against the folding chair to get down onto the futon. Curtains, she thought. Buy blackout curtains for the window. Something better pay off right soon.

Monday morning sunrise turned off the orange street lamp. Chloe rolled up the futon and set up the folding table. She changed into a flower-print coat dress. She set out dark glasses and a pork pie hat she'd bought at the Jewish League thrift store. A brown wig pulled on over her short gray hair—she adjusted it while holding a cracked hand mirror until she was satisfied she didn't look too horrible.

She pulled out a string bin and picked a yardstick from the plastic elephant foot umbrella stand in the corner by the window. She measured lengths of colored string and commenced to cut them to length and braid them into a lanyard for a skull and crossbones amulet she'd found in a trash bin.

The morning sun fully risen, Chloe thought it was time for Monday morning alley shopping. Mondays were alley shopping days for the weekend housecleaning discards and leftovers from partying. Mondays were the best.

On the cement stoop beside the alley, leaning on a cane, Chloe looked down the alley, up the alley, at the wooden privacy fencing backing a row of family homes, counted up it'd been

eight months since she found a yarn mother lode in a neighbor's trash bin, full skeins of snow white and fuscia pink and baby blue yarns. She guessed a home hobbyist had given up on learning how to knit and pearl. Weren't no knitting needles. She wished to find as good a cache this morning.

She used to knit when her hands were younger. Pencils—she can use them for knitting needles. She had them or something similar on her shopping list, wishing she'd find real knitting needles

She stepped down to the alley carrying a linen shopping bag picked from a garbage can. A beige BMW sedan cruised up the alley and stopped. The driver's window rolled down. "Missy, please, will you take money for doing me a gracious favor?" the dark-skinned driver said.

"I don't do windows," she said.

"No, I'm not asking you to do windows." His voice was deep and musical but the accent was foreign. "I ask for no housekeeping. Please deposit a few checks in banks for me."

Her foolishness sense sounded alarms. "I don't need nobody putting a check into a bank account I don't have." Like drawing blood from a old prune pit. She didn't hold money long enough for it to sit in a bank.

Oh, the Nigerian check scam she heard about. You put a check into your account, she thought, take out most of it in cash, hand it over to the needy person who apparently didn't have a bank account, and you keep the rest for your troubles. The check wouldn't clear and you would be out the cash you'd given away. You were born at night but not last night.

The Nigerian— already she thought of him as the Nigerian—tapped the car door invitingly and smiled a feral grin. "These checks will go into my accounts. This will be no trouble for you at

all. Please. I will pay you generously.”

Her foolishness sense was clapping at the back of her head. “Is this legal and all?”

“No. No. Not a single trouble for you. You put the checks into my accounts. Walk away. I will generously give you the money. That is all.”

“Why can’t you do it for yourself?” Healthy young man, she thought, big and tall strapping muscled man, clean white teeth, and dark skinned as ebony. “I’m an old cripple woman.”

He held up a black hand, a fleshy, lip balm colored palm turned up, and shrugged the shoulder nearest the car door. “I am scarey-looking for the tellers. They will make trouble for me. This is easier asking others to do the deposits and will take you no time or trouble at all.”

Some foolishness you could maybe use, she thought. The alarm clapping her head eased up. “Yeah, and it’s illegal somehow. Be honest and maybe I say yeah.”

If his smile could get any wider he’d crack his face, Chloe thought. He figures he’s got you on the hook.

“For me, this is just a little bit shady. Not for you. Do this favor for me and I will then bring you home. Pile of cash in your purse. No troubles.”

“Quit the hard sell already. If I get caught, will it mean I was stealing or doing fraud or conspiracy, whatever? Jail?”

“Do you want get to caught? This is crazy talk. No. No. No. You are no good to me.” He backed the BMW up and turned out of the alley.

“Yep. Illegal like I thought.”

Continuing along her shopping route, crossing Shields Avenue and into the Strawberry

Street block, she rooted through garbage can top layers shopping for discarded strings and scissors and yardsticks, and doo-dads and gee-gaws she might tie onto a key chain or lanyard. The neighborhood folks kindly put the better goods on top so she and other shoppers could help themselves. Probably so shoppers wouldn't turn out the contents on the ground and make a big mess.

In jail, she thought, they have to give you care. Healthcare. They have to feed you. They have to give you a room and a bed and such. It couldn't be too much worse than living in a one-room, dead orange, barred apartment and living on stale air, cracker and sardine nibbles, and neglect. Could it? She'd be a Venus flytrap living in the pokey.

The Nigerian parked at the end of the block, glaring a thousand-knives stare at her. He can wait, she thought. If he's still there when you get up to him, make him ask you again like it's the first time.

"Okay," he said. "This is illegal but you do not get caught. Please say yes."

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "What's illegal?"

"You are teasing with me, yes?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will come with me, please." He reached back and opened the rear door behind him.

"You put these few checks in the banks for me, yes?"

She crossed her arms, leaned back in a pose she thought looked skeptical and meditative.

"For how much money?"

"The pay is good."

"How much?"

“Plenty.”

She stepped near the opened door. “A tenth?”

“Like maybe a half a tenth.”

“Like? Or is?”

“Okay, like a half a tenth it is.”

A hand on the door, she said, “How many dollars?”

“I will pay you five today.” He held up his fleshy palm showing upright fingers and thumb.

“I will pay you another five next time.”

She stepped back from the door. “Only five dollars?”

“No. No. No. Five hundreds dollars.”

She’d be heeled with that kind of money, she thought, or caught. Either would do. She sat down on the back seat and swung her legs inside the car, laid the cane on the seat. “You’ll bring me home after?”

“Yes,” the Nigerian said. “And I will give you a cell phone so I call you for the next time.”

“We’ll see about next time.”

Parked at the Bank of America Branch on Belvedere, the Nigerian opened a briefcase. He handed her a check and deposit slip. The check was from Cigna Health made out to Elizabeth Ngume for \$2,300. “Give this to the teller named Joe Taylor,” the Nigerian said. “He will be the tall brown man with a bald head and wearing a red dress shirt. Go only to him.”

Depositing the check was as easy as the Nigerian said, though she was sure a security

guard would grab her any moment. After she'd been in and come out, she didn't see how he made money from this.

The Nigerian driving, seated in the back seat, Chloe said. "How does this work?"

"You will be safer if you don't know."

"No, really, I don't see where the profit comes in. That was an insurance company check. Isn't that for healthcare you already paid for, for your wife maybe?"

"The check and these others for today are not my mine or my wife's."

"Are they stolen?" She thought that was just great; she'd committed a major felony for sure.

"That is all you get to know," he said.

He said it like questioning him more would mean trouble for her, like if she pressed he'd hurt her. She would figure out on her own how the scam worked.

Wells Fargo, Bank of Virginia, BB&T, Peoples Bank, SunTrust, branches and main offices, uptown, downtown, West End, down in Shockoe Bottom, Northside, Southside, seven banks later, seven different health insurance company checks paid to the order of seven different women—she was exhausted from walking back and forth to the car, from the strain of fearing she'd be caught. She tried to total the amounts as she went along, but the numbers wouldn't stick in her mind. They stopped once for a McDonald's lunch and she ate a Filet-o-fish that upset her stomach.

Coming up on dinnertime, the Nigerian left her at home with a cell phone and a fold of ragged bills. "I will call you for the next time a few hours before, like within a couple days, yes please?"

She felt too sore and tired to feel eager about having money or to say yes. “Call me and we’ll see how I feel.”

“You do this beautifully. You are a sweet and harmless old lady the bank people respect.”

She waved goodbye halfheartedly, her mind on supper. Order a roast beef delivery dinner, she thought, mashed potatoes, gravy, string beans, salad, and cherry pie. Splurge for a change.

Digesting the heavy meal turned her mind to the check scam. Each check she’d looked at was from a health insurance company; each person paid had first names like Elizabeth or Mary or Sarah, good Apostle names but African last names she couldn’t pronounce: Mbtono, LInge, Swazkce, Gpedde. Something like that; she couldn’t remember exactly. African for sure. The tellers the Nigerian told her to go to didn’t have African names: Taylor, Wainwright, Cooper, Smith, Cobbler— Oh, she thought, British names for trades and, of course, Apostles’ first names. She guessed all the names were made up. The Nigerian was stealing insurance checks and forging them somehow.

She pulled out her strings and worked on tying a key chain. The cell phone beside her hands, she wondered what the phone number was. She knew how to answer and how to place a call. She didn’t know how to find out the number. The battery had to be charged but the Nigerian hadn’t given her a charger. Clever and wary. That was how he would see if she used the phone on her own. She thought to count her money and her pills. At least she could stash the money the Nigerian gave her behind the big scissors.

She thought to feed the flytrap. The spiny mouths were open. The instructions said to wait a few weeks between feedings. Too much food killed the plant.

The street was quiet. The orange street lamp not yet lit, she sat at the window and tried to

still her racing mind. She was tired from the day's excitement and feeling sleepy but it was too early to go to bed. If she tried, she wouldn't be able to sleep. She knew sleep would have to come to her.

She lay down on the futon at her usual ten o'clock still weighing the day's events in her mind. She'd done wrong. She had money and more to come if she kept her head, but the Nigerian frightened her. He seemed nice enough, but she sensed a meanness lurking under his pleasant face. She didn't mind stealing so much, not on her own, but someone else being in charge and knowing about it meant trouble.

The Nigerian took her depositing again Thursday. Taking back the cell phone, he let her out at home with a different phone. "Some of the Monday deposits were spoiled. The accounts were flagged and frozen by the banks. You get three hundred."

"But I did nothing—" Chloe said.

"No buts," the Nigerian said. "Give me no arguments. I can hurt you." He slid a jagged knife from under the seat onto the floorboard. "You take what I give you and be happy. Period."

The Nigerian's BMW rolled down the alley away from the apartment stoop. Chloe held up her hand like a scissors to the departing car. Her other hand measured an imaginary string. She snipped the string close to her fingertips. "That," she said, "is the end for you." She wrote down his license plate number.

Sitting at the the apartment window, Chloe wished she could measure her own string, weigh the balance of her life the way Three Fates, her Moira namesakes did. Clotho spun a life's

thread with her distaff. Lachesis measured the thread's span. Atropos cut the thread its allotted length. She knew the end was before her but how close she couldn't guess. Close enough, though, she could afford to take a few chances.

The Nigerian called again Monday morning.

"I'm sick," Chloe said, holding her nose and wheezing.

"You get better today. Take medicines. I will come for you tomorrow."

"Can't it hold off til Friday. Old people don't get better overnight, you know."

"Wednesday. No later," the Nigerian said.

"Maybe Thursday. Or I'll see how I'm feeling Wednesday."

Tying a key chain at the window, Chloe talked to the flytrap. "You don't like man meat anymore than boy meat. Bet if I fed him to the police he won't trouble me no more." The flytrap mouths widened. The spines tickled dust motes shimmering in the warm sunset light.

She boarded a city bus to police headquarters. The desk clerk Chloe told her story to acted skeptical, asked her questions about her awareness of reality: did she know the date, did she know who was president, did she know her address and name. Detectives came and took her into a grimy interrogation room. They asked her questions about the Nigerian, the scam, what her part was. She gave them the Nigerian's license plate number and the cell phone. They insisted she set him up, wear a wire.

“Okay,” she said, “if I can get a deal for my cooperation,”

“You watch too much TV,” Detective Owens said.

Detective Roland said, “What do you want?”

“Prison time—” Chloe said, “I know I did wrong. A light sentence at a prison for—what do they call it? Minimum security?”

“Yeah,” the detectives said.

“Afterwards,” Chloe said, “someplace that fits my medical needs?”

“Let’s get the assistant district attorney over here,” Detective Roland said. “I think she can accommodate you.”

Chloe sat alone in the interrogation room until the ADA came. About blessed time, Chloe thought.

Balance Notification Nine

Cubicle peckerwoods weakly chorused Good morning, Mr. Whitmier, when I came through the firm's main door. I felt a reserved undertone of glee in their greeting this morning, more enthusiasm than usual. A game's afoot, Watson, I thought. Cubicle rumor probably spread by gossips that I was losing my office to ass-kisser Malcolm Brawn again.

I thought to say to them, Staff floggings will continue until morale improves. No point, though. Irony is lost on the young. Business major dropouts, if you don't tell them what you exactly mean, they get confused, upset, bitter. More bitter than usual anyway.

Across the Fallon Tower, Fourth Floor West—it's a six-floor stump of a tower—my corner office and its two walls of windows was beside Malcolm Brawn's single-window office. In charge of bodyguard, civilian security, and embassy support personnel staffing contracts, Brawn did his work mostly on golf courses.

Placing bureaucrats with counties, small cities, and towns was my job. We're headhunters; that says it best. Slave-driver Collicky didn't like anyone using that term, though.

An open bay of windows between the two corner offices, mine and firm manager Collicky's, overlooked Charlotte's high-rise skyline, tallest and foremost, the majestic Bank of America corporate cubicle castle. I shuddered thinking of the faceless bank drudges toiling away their lives in those windowless skyline cubicles.

Collicky Staffing's cubicle drudges worked on hospitality, retail, and general labor client assignments. They could see out the windows from their desks. If they were caught looking, not to mention unauthorized, actually standing nearby looking out, they got docked privileges. Demotion to a viewless desk, more caseload and tedium, disinivited to cake and Kool-aide parties and team-building recreational crap—they didn't look if they wanted to. Knowing the windows

were there was enough for them. Milquetoasts.

Collicky Staffing chief bottle washer and ass-head, Mitchell Collicky, Jr., son of firm owner Mitchell Sr., his spacious office was the other side of the ceremonial windows. Cubicle staff supervisor Hazel Mermin's office closed the U shape of the Collicky salt mine.

No phone messages waited in my wire inbox, unusual for a Monday. I pulled up e-mail. Routine replies and requests for bids, estimates, proposals; a few counteroffers begging for lower rates, contract rejections, cancellations and rescinds, approvals; junk mail, conference and professional association membership invitations, adult entertainment advertisements—an hour's worth of garbage and spam to wade through.

At the end, I read my personal messages.

Hi, Poppa David, Photos of our kids, your grand babies attached. When are you and Ruby coming to see them? Love you, Barb and Kenneth.

Little Sidney and Desirae were cuddly cute, candyfloss pretty in their matching pink terrycloth coveralls. Ankle biters the pair of them. Babies should be seen and not heard.

Dear Dad, I have to postpone our visit for next weekend. Caroline has a piano recital later that week. Best, Joseph and Abby.

Good. Them coming was Ruby's idea. I didn't want to see them anyway. Taking a nap in front of the TV on Memorial Day was more my speed.

BALANCE INFORMATION

Account: Nine

Balance: \$0.00

This automated message has been sent to inform you of the account balance notification you requested.

I checked our joint account to see if Ruby had withdrawn the allowance I kept there for her spending. Loaning money to Kenneth and Joseph again, I expected. I topped up the balance from my individual account.

The beep and bop noise of new email chimed.

BALANCE INFORMATION

Account: Nine

Balance: \$2100.00

This automated message has been sent to inform you of the account balance notification you requested.

The doorknob jiggled noisily followed by an insistent knock. George Brawn making his Monday morning window-shopping visit. After counting four Mississippi's, I tripped the electric door release from my desk.

Brawn had his eyes on the view the moment he stepped in. "Morning, Dave. Keeping my windows clean I see."

“Morning, Brawn. You got a nice dark tan staining your nose. How come your face is white?”

“Is it?” he said. “Partnered a tournament with Senator Burr up in Northern Virginia over the weekend. The Arlington Army Navy Country Club scholarship open. Do you know it?”

Of course I knew it. I used to play in the tournament for the firm. Started winning against duffer clients and lost the choice assignment to Brawn. “Golf’s a middle-age crisis game. I’ve got more responsible work to do.”

“Right,” Brawn said. “Handholding politicians’ handmaidens. Someone’s got to do it. Tell me, what do they really want?”

“The pols want cheap and hard-working bureaucrats. The bureaucrats want good pay and little work, like you.”

“Ha hah.” Brawn air-swung an imaginary sand wedge, a little chip shot. He watched the imaginary ball fly up and onto an imaginary green into an imaginary cup. “Good one, Dave. Old fossil like you, you still know how to zing them. I’ll give you that.”

Young stag thinks he can take the old stag. Not if I’ve learned anything about challengers over the years. Give them enough scope and they beat themselves.

“The way I see it, Dave, your problem is your clients are old men hanging on longer than they ought to. The people want eager, bright, and lively young men and women serving their civic interests. Young politicians, too.”

“Sure, sure, Brawn, greedy, lazy, naysaying automatons.”

“You’re out of touch, old man. Headed for the glue factory sooner than you think.”

“If you’re still around when I retire in five years, you can take my office then.”

“Sooner than you think, Dave.” Brawn opened the door. Speaking over his shoulder and to the cubicle peckerwoods, he repeated, “Sooner than you think.” The peckerwoods giggled.

Incoming e-mail chimed again.

BALANCE INFORMATION

Account: Nine

Balance: \$0.00

This automated message has been sent to inform you of the account balance notification you requested.

Last time Ruby needed a lot of cash she asked for it directly. She refurbished the kitchen when the boys married and went off on their own. I thought to call her and confirm she made the withdrawals, not some criminal. One thing I couldn't do, we agreed after a rough argument about the kitchen work, was make her ask for money. We were well off. Why should she have to ask me for money?

Incoming e-mail chimed again.

Dave, see you in my office now. Collicky.

Calling Ruby put on hold, I went to see what new spur Brawn had put up Collicky's ass.

Brawn sat on the inviting leather couch beside Collicky's sparsely accoutered glass acre of desktop, back to the common wall and absorbing Collicky's broader, bigger, better than my view of the downtown skyline. Brawn wore a just-skinned-the-cat grin across his mouth. Collicky was red-faced. The vein on his prematurely bald temple was a throbbing rope. The fool-headed young boss jackass stabbed toward a hard chair set in front of the desk. "Sit down," Collicky spat.

The fifth-degree chair, ripe torture hot seat for a Collicky tongue lashing, for my bony, chew-scarred butt—this wasn't my first time on the Collicky pillory. Never in front of Brawn before, though.

Collicky gathered up his thoughts. He massaged the throbbing temple, damped the boiler firebox blowing a full head of steam. "The county manager you placed with Vance County, what was his name?"

"Loomis. Morrey Loomis, I believe." A good man, Loomis. He'd been a county manager out of state, Brook County, West Virginia, before an accounting discrepancy and a righteously outraged assistant took him down. Highly suspicious and downright hypocrisy. The assistant probably botched the books himself. He replaced Loomis, and promptly closed the investigation upon Loomis' termination.

"Well," Collicky said, "did you catch the morning CNN news?"

What in hell did Loomis do? What could he do? Vance County was a postage stamp of a county. Not much of anything important Loomis could mess up. It was a cake-walk county, for Pete's sake. "No, I didn't watch the news today. It was a rough morning. The wife, she had a bad night, kept me up tossing and turning."

"Brawn," Collicky said, "you tell him. You took the calls."

“Loomis exposed himself to Baptist school kids, drunk, at the NC City and County Management Association conference. One of the teachers recorded his act on a cell phone.”

For Christ’s sake, Loomis, you moron. I didn’t know if I thought or said moron out loud. Brawn chuckled, though, and Collicky snarled.

“The phone calls started late last night,” Brawn said, “everyone in Vance from the Henderson mayor to the county dog catcher, ministers, principals, retailers wanting our heads on a skewer.”

“Why the hell don’t they just fire Loomis?” I said.

Collicky choked on his spleen. He spit out a warm gob of phlegm that barely missed my head. “You negotiated the contract, dammit,” Collicky said. “He’s entitled to a full severance package if the county fires him, remember?”

“Not for crimes of moral turpitude. That’s standard contract language.”

“The contract is right here.” Collicky chucked a thick file onto the glass desk. “Show me that language.”

I flipped to the pertinent clause. “Page fifty-seven, section XIV(b)(iii), In the event of any acts involving lying, cheating, stealing, crimes of violence against people, immoral acts against nature, sexual misconduct of any kind, including crimes or infractions involving sexual misconduct of a character inconsistent with the community of Vance County’s normative mores, values, and ethics, the County Manager contractee, Morey Frederick Loomis, shall be subject to immediate termination, and loss of any and all salary payments and benefits not yet disbursed at the time of the violation.” I was covered. I was fine.

“Further, And any and all pending or active payroll or salary disbursements, benefits,

retirement accounts, severance packages; and any and all privileges accorded to said County Manager in the performance of his duties shall be rescinded and legal action undertaken to recoup, recover, and reclaim any monies, materials, vehicles, etc., or other County property retained in his possession.”

The lawyers hadn't left out a tick, I thought.

“The contract is clear,” I said “They can fire him.”

“Loomis had a city-slick Raleigh lawyer,” Brawn said. “Waited on Loomis to get to the county jail. The lawyer claimed Loomis couldn't be fired. That he is sick. That he has a right to emergency medical leave. That he needs to sort out a problem with alcohol addiction toxicity.”

Brawn punctuated each pause with a thump on the glass desktop.

“Meanwhile, the lawyer filed for an injunction against wrongful termination. Filed papers claiming Loomis is entitled to a hearing and conviction on the charges. Before he can be lawfully terminated. Filed a trunk-load of papers with the court asking for psychiatric, medical, disability evaluations, for pain and suffering, for heck and libel, insisting the county pay for all Loomis' medical and legal fees, as his contract requires. Your contract.”

“Not my fault,” I said. “Our lawyers signed off on the contract. You did too, Mr. Collicky.”

Collicky's temple vein throbbed a particularly angry beat. “On the full faith and assumption you, Whitmier, had done your due diligence vetting Loomis. The goddamn lawyer named me and Dad's firm in a civil lawsuit. Me and Dad. The lawyer claims you as an authorized agent of the firm negligently hired and retained Loomis for the county.”

“That will never hold up,” I said. “The jackass lawyer is fishing for deep pockets.”

We'd been down this road before with the pregnant gal who claimed she was sexually harassed by the owner of the restaurant we placed her with. There was another one, something about placing a disabled boy who couldn't do the job and couldn't be fired making bedframes at the mattress factory in . . . Goldsboro? Greensboro? Malingerers. Were there more? Maybe another one or two . . .

"The jackass lawyer has the county wanting to settle already," Collicky said. "They don't want the costs of a drawn-out court fight."

A black cloud waited to strike lightning between us, hung in the air above the glass desktop. Collicky wanted me to make the first overture. I knew what was coming. They all wanted a scapegoat to hold out as the blamed party. Me. I was losing my office to Brawn. Brawn just sat back in the couch's deep leather with the skinned-the-cat grin pasted on his smug mouth.

I must have said "me" out loud.

Collicky pounced. "You have until the end of the week to clear out your office. Hand over your business book to Hazel."

"Am I being demoted to her job? I won't do that labor staffing crap again."

"No, thickhead," Collicky said. "You're fired."

I took a longing look out Collicky's windows. The big leagues I dreamed would one day be mine to win, a lifetime ago, were a distant and long since faded mirage. Reading the contract—I'd held my breath and forgot to breath. The room swam. Collicky's glass desktop broke my headlong faint from the hard chair.

"Are you going to cause trouble?" Collicky said. "Do I need to call security?"

Brawn roughly helped me to my feet. I pulled my arm from his painful grip. Trying to

provoke a struggle, I imagined. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"Brawn," Collicky said, rearranging the file folder I'd smeared with my head, my blood. "See Whitmier to his car, please. Whitmier, you can send a neutral party to pick up your personal effects. No relatives. Do not come back. I'll have you arrested on trespassing charges."

I'd heard that trespassing song and dance before. Collicky meant what he said. Hell, I'd said it myself once or twice to upset clients.

"Wait. I just fainted; that's all. Can't you give me the rest of the week? Please?" I heard the begging tone of underlings and clients I'd let go coming through my lips. I was not a beggar.

My immediate departure was what Collicky had wanted, so he could tell the world Loomis' meltdown was my fault. Collicky had a bloodless heart. He was on the phone and immune to my plea. "Vance County? May I speak with the county commissioner, please?"

Brawn couldn't resist a final dig in the parking lot. "See you on the soup line, Davie boy."

"I was ready for retirement last year, Brawn. I'm set for life. Me and the wife."

Brawn pushed me toward my car. "Right. And I'm the king of the penthouse suite. Don't speak to me if you see me on the street."

"Not if I see you first." *Phhbtt!* I sprayed the raspberry around my tongue stuck out like a playground sissy's.

I drove home thinking Fallon Tower's windows mirrored the empty fish bowl eyes of its cubicle warrens.

Deathbed Testament

Tall gray wave crests and blowing spray ravaged the main boat channel. Pressing low overhead, a blanket of pewter clouds roiled, threatened rain, yet felt unlike rain to Tabitha. The boat pilot steered to the leeward of a tall dune island, out of the choppy channel and into a calm stretch. Dredge spoils, she thought, her mind stuck on shop talk, grounded on work routines. She needed the lighthouse getaway for more than relieving work stress.

The pouch she gripped around her neck under the windbreaker Ma would have called a medicine bag. It contained a smooth brown stone with cream stripes, shaped like an arrowhead, a quartz crystal ceremonial arrowhead she'd found in the homestead field of her and her man's place, where her children had grown up, and a silver and turquoise eagle feather charm and chain she'd stolen from Dad's keepsake chest. And a zip-lock baggy with Ma's ashes.

She'd come to the Cape to scatter the ashes, spoonfuls anyway, the rest scattered here and there over a decade, and a few spoonfuls yet left at home. Ma's last wishes asked her, Tabitha, not one of her siblings, to spread the ashes far and wide. According to her mother's people's ways, Ma wished she could have been laid out under the stars, dried and scattered by the four winds. Cremation was as close as the law allowed.

When it was Tabitha's time, she wanted burial in a plain cotton shroud and a simple pine box out in the back yard. The law wouldn't allow that no more either. Dad, of course, so fully assimilated into Anglo U.S. traditions that he denied his Native people's ways, wanted an elaborate modern funeral. Embalming, casket, lying in state, viewing, church services, cemetery, good and sturdy Christian marble cross headstone, the works.

The pilot wove the small passenger ferry through a sand bar and shoal maze, passing close-by, flat, grassy islands awash from high tide and water backed into the sound by the

North'easter gale. The other passenger, a young man, light and lean, the easygoing sort who slouched like he took life in long strides, sat across from her on the starboard bench. He held his hand out to sweep the cord grass.

She wondered if he knew the grass had sharp blades that could cut off his fingers. He didn't half reach far enough. A tight-lipped grin lined his face. The impish spark lighting his eyes when he looked at her said he guessed her thoughts, that he was only showing her they weren't going to run aground. He probably thought she was a landlubber.

"I work for the state," she said, too loud to her ears. Blasting winds carried down the skiff's open deck blew her words away. She spoke louder. "DENR, the natural resources department. I been out on the water before."

"No doubt," he said, his deep voice gently quiet, carrying easy across the wind. "I can tell by how your body takes the swell you been on worst waters."

She wished she knew that trick of speaking in a normal tone in spite of all the noise.

The impish spark brightened in his eyes. The grin she'd taken for a wicked pleasure at her expense seemed less menacing and more simple delight at the thrilling weather and boat ride.

"Will it rain?" she said.

"No," he said. "This is a dry gale."

She nodded without thinking, feeling like a stupid bobble head doll.

"You feel it, huh?" he said.

"What, the low humidity?"

"What you think I mean?"

She thought maybe he meant the quick change in her attitude toward him. "That's what I

thought.”

“What brings you out in this . . .” His hand waved across the unsettled sound and sky.

“Getaway from life. New horizons. I haven’t been here before.”

“You a lighthouse visit collector?”

“Yep. This is my last one.”

“Been prettier days for it.” His eyes looked up at the sky, past the calm waters ahead to the main channel’s dancing peaks. “Kind of a dark day. People wanting to think, looking for sacred meaning come out to the Cape days like this.”

Cape Lookout lighthouse, the last Carolina light on her life list, the hardest to get to from dry land, loomed ahead, a beacon lighting the dark for ships at sea.

“Having troubles in your life?” he said, his look on her gold wedding band.

“You dare too personal, mister.”

“No, not that, I mean . . .” He slouched down on the bench, a scowl across his temples. “I meant no disrespect. Women when they come out on unsettled days like this, they’re looking to find some kind of peace in the turmoil to ravel out their troubles.”

That he saw through her into her troubled soul felt both disturbing and like a sign she’d come to the right place. That’s what she came for, after all, a sign she would be all right. She’d come to the Cape a hurt and frightened girl wanting a dark closet to hole up in until she healed.

“Me and my man are fine. What else troubles me is too personal for a stranger.”

He shrugged, like he was hiding hurt he felt from her words. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll let it be. Just. . . “

”Just?”

“I thought you might like to talk. A stranger is sometimes better than a loved one.”

The phone call from sister Ronnie the day before said Dad was living his last days. “You should best come on out to Arkansas quick, Tabitha, if you want to say your goodbyes.” Tabitha thought she’d rather not go. The troubles Ma and Dad and their divorce had put her through messed up her life. They could have been less selfish, more supportive when she was a girl.

She and her younger sister Laurel went and lived with Ma in Carolina. Big brother Garland and sister and Ronnie lived with Dad in Arkansas. She’d needed Daddy most when Ma remarried and Ma encouraged her stepdad, thinking his clumsy groping was cute, turning to Ma for help that Ma wouldn’t give.

“Get used to it,” Ma said. “That’s how men are and what you have they want.” She locked herself into a closet and cried for Dad. Laurel, damn her, welcomed Leonard’s attention. He didn’t bother her as much because of her willingness.

Not going, though, would upset her other kin. Dad might be disappointed, if he cared, but not going wouldn’t hurt him back. At least for her own satisfaction. Maybe going would hurt him more if she could ask him the questions she’d held back all her life.

The boat grounded on the shore. The other passenger who’d dug into her troubles picked up a gas can and a day pack. He jumped off the bow and helped her off the boat.

“You my driver?” Tabitha asked the passenger.

“This is me,” he said. “Simon D. Lewis. Simon D kin and them call me. You want to visit the keeper’s quarters while I get the truck started?”

“I’m Tabitha.” They shook hands. “Anything special in keeper’s house?”

“Not really, unless you want to see whale bones and shells and whale bones.”

Tabitha walked beside Simon D into the sand parking lot. “Seen them. Where’s the ladies’ room?”

“So I figured, DENR and that.” He held up and pointed with the gas can. “Outhouse across the island over to the ocean beach.”

The strength in those young arms impressed Tabitha, like she suspected they were supposed to, probably from hauling nets by hand. “I’m ready when you are,” she said, wishing she didn’t sound like she was flirting.

She climbed in the back of the rusted pickup truck, its bed removed and replaced with 2-by-6 wooden floor and benches. The gas can set in the truck cabin, Simon D checked under the hood. Satisfied, he slammed the hood closed and jumped into the driver’s seat.

They stopped beside a tall and boxy plywood shack set alongside a low boardwalk crossing the grassy swale from the lighthouse. The turbulent ocean surf was visible beyond a dune ridge the on other side of the sand road— both dune ridge and road winding to distant north and south destinations.

One room labeled for men, one for women, she entered the men’s room. Why not, she thought. No one to tell her no. No sign to tell her what she should do.

The door locked behind her, a single enameled steel toilet set above a hole open to the room-sized septic box below. The smell wasn’t near as foul as she expected.

“Perfect,” Tabitha said. She sprinkled a handful of ashes down the hole. “Far and wide, Ma, you asked for it.” Then she went on top of the ashes.

They drove south along the sand road, breaking through the dune line at a weather station's metal tower. Riding along the strand—sea foam ghost bunnies blowing under the truck—the sand of the beach shelf was wet and firm.

A thump hit the top of her head. Bird poop, she thought, Karma's quick on the uptake. She dug a tissue from her pocket. Rubbing her head with the tissue, she touched a live bug, a big bug. She grabbed it with the tissue. Pulling hairs out along with it—it squirmed in her fingertips. Black marked with yellow hieroglyphs, arcane runes, a grasshopper. "Where did you come from?" she asked it. "This isn't your place."

"Huh?" Simon D said, his head stuck out the window like a sightseeing dog.

"A grasshopper." Tabitha held the insect over the side of the truck beside Simon D's window.

"What? Oh, a locust," Simon D said. "Look up ahead."

The sky-blotting swarm swept the turbulent heavens, dove to the ground scrambling for a grip on loose sand, the weathered wood of the truck's bed, on Tabitha's windbreaker and her hair. Scything legs and wings scraped and clung tenuously onto uncertain safety from the gusting winds. Truck tires crunched bugs.

Tabitha swatted locusts away and brushed them off her clothes. This is a Biblical sign, she thought. She felt lightheaded from instinctive anxiety about the smothering press of the locusts' frantic panic.

They passed beyond the dune line topped with sea oats bent by the wind. A flat expanse of peat-stained, gray sand rutted by tires crisscrossed white sand drifts spread before them. Black and yellow locusts flew every-which-away, like roof tiles in a hurricane.

Simon D stopped the truck. “Do you want to sit inside?” he said.

Tabitha thought being inside the truck cabin would be less troubling, though if she stayed outside she might understand the locusts’ meaning. “How much farther to the end of the point?”

“Another mile, five minutes.”

“Maybe I best,” she said.

Inside, windows closed, Tabitha was mesmerized by the locusts battering the windshield. The gas can between her legs, Tabitha wrestled a lone locust from tangled hair. Holding the creature in her closed hand, she felt an urge to crush it. The bug sat still in her opened hand, its eyes big and ominously black saucers. Its hind legs pinched her palm. She said, “Where did they come from?”

“Somewhere west,” Simon D said, “solitary grasshoppers ran out of feed on the crops. They rose into the sky, crowded into a swarm, rubbing legs and tentacles. They turned into locusts—the gregarious grasshopper phase, what happens when they pack tight as a Tokyo subway. The Jet Stream caught them up and blew them where it willed, dumped them out here.” His hand pointed to the raging ocean surf beyond the eastern shore, swept across crashing surf meeting at the cape’s shallows shoals, and waved toward the western ocean’s turbulent surf. “At the end of the world.”

The bit about “Where the wind willed” and “At the end of the world” echoed in her thoughts. The locusts had no control over where they went once they took flight. They were at the whim of nature. There was meaning in their lack of free will, if only she could connect it to her own decision. Even no decision was a decision.

“They’ll be dead in the morning,” Simon D said.

“Yeah?” Tabitha said. “Why?”

“The sea grasses are too coarse for them,” Simon D said. “They came to find food. They become food.” Chuckling, he said, “The seagulls are going to be so fat they won’t be able to fly.”

“You seen this before?” Tabitha said. “I mean, how do you know about all this?”

He stopped the truck along a narrow sand spit, waves colliding above offshore shoals beyond the pickup’s hood. “I have folks out west where locusts are trouble. I’ve thought about what would happen if they come here.”

The ocean slammed into the shoreline a few feet from Tabitha’s door, crashed beyond Simon D’s door.

“High tide,” Simon D said, opening his door. “It’ll not come any higher. I’m on your time but I got to be out in this.”

He was gone into the swarm. He left the keys in the ignition; he just walked out onto the end of land and held out his arms, twirling in the tumult of sea and sky and swarm. He stopped and flapped his arms in delight. Locusts landed on him and grabbed tenuous holds. Some stuck and others cartwheeled into the salt spray raised by the clashing waves. His hearty chuckles boomed across the sand.

“What the hell,” Tabitha said. She joined him in a wild dance on the sand at the end of the world. She heard within the roaring winds a women’s work chant from Ma’s people sung around a hearth fire.

Way way ah-way, way way ah-way, ah-way way ah-way, Ah-hone-ay.

The chant was a whisper from a gale's whirlwinds. Drums beat like strong, slow hearts accompanied the repeating chant. She knew the words praised great spirit Ahone's maize blessings while women pounded harvest moon corn.

Simon D sprinted down the eastern shore chasing locusts.

Black and yellow locust cadavers lined the high water mark. She kneeled at the joining place of land and waves crossing from both sides of the sand spit. Removing the medicine bag from around her neck, she spread its contents on the damp sand. Taking up the ash baggy in her left hand, she stuck the quartz arrowhead between her knees, the claystone arrowhead a few inches beyond it. She wrapped the chain of the turquoise and silver feather charm around one wrist.

Oh yes, she thought, sacred tobacco and fire to complete the rite. She lit a cigarette inside her windbreaker and stuck it into the sand between the two arrowheads. Tobacco embers blew into the leeward surf. She pressed a pinch of Ma's ashes into a balled handful of wet sand and chucked it into the windward ocean. "May your spirit rise with father sun," she said, waving the feather charm above the arrowheads.

Sweeping locusts out of her hair, she dropped another pinch of cigarette ashes behind her back. Careful not to see the ashes blown away—"Do not look to the north," Ma had said, "that's Ukeus, great trickster spirit of the dead, her home—Tabitha said, "May your spirit rise with north wind Mother." She released another pinch of ashes above the burning cigarette, watching the wind carry them into the leeward surf. "May your spirit peacefully rest in the place of the dead underneath the earth," she said. She stood and stepped over the arrowheads and cigarette. She poured the remaining ashes into the water at the end of the sand spit. "And may your trials

through Hell be long.”

She felt a moment of guilt for wishing Hell on Ma, guilt for selfish thoughts she got from Ma’s misbehaving teaching little pictures with big ears. Ma probably didn’t go to Hell anyway. She believed great spirit Okeus would keep her comfortable in a blissful meadow until her time came to be reborn as a white buffalo bull.

The line of meeting waves tossed on the shoals out to the horizon. Spray leapt above into the sky, freed from the ocean’s bounds. Such violence made delicate laces of the sea. “God or Ahone or Okeus, can you send me a sign?” she screamed into the wind. Maybe her dreams that night sleeping in the fishermen’s motel would give her an answer.

Her skin crawled, escaping from her flesh and bones, yet with nowhere to retreat from the musty bedding of the fishermen’s motel. In dawn’s light intruding through threadbare curtains, the bedding was as worn out and stained by neglect and decay as the framed fish identifier and fisheries regulations posters. The framed posters hung above a chipped Formica and pressboard dresser chest of drawers. Yellow and olive print wallpaper peeled from the walls. Hauling her bags out to the car, cracked and buckled parking lot asphalt and unwashed grit grated under her soles.

She put her overnight bag into the car trunk before she’d rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Though she’d slept a dead sleep, her shoulder muscles were tight and achy the way they were mornings when she’d slept fitfully.

Gripping the steering wheel in the motel parking lot—the edges of a dream flickered in her

memory. She held only a glimpse that she'd decided to go to Dad's bedside. The remnant thought was confused with the decision she'd tough out the night at the fishermen's motel. No question in her mind, she'd travel by highways following old Indian trails across the state and across Tennessee into Arkansas. The longer route felt right. She knew the interstate route as well but . . .

She stopped at the motel office and called home to see if Ronnie had called about Dad.

"Hi, Tabby," husband Morris said. "No news from Arkansas."

"I'm going out now from here," she said. "Tell the kids I'll see them soon as I can."

"Should I fly out tomorrow?"

"No. Stay put and I'll call when the funeral's set."

"Dr. Costulow's office called," Morris said. "The biopsy results are back."

"They wouldn't tell you anything over the phone, right?"

"Yeah. I made you an appointment in two weeks."

"They never give out bad news over the phone," Tabitha said. "Not good."

"They don't give out good news no more neither," Morris said.

"We'll wait and see about things when I get back."

"Providence's blessings be praised," Morris said. "This too shall pass."

Silently echoing Morris's prayer, her dry lips stuck together, Tabitha clutched the silver feather hanging from her neck and wrestled the cancer worry into the back of her mind. "Miss you. Love you," she said. "Gotta get going."

"Love you also," Morris said. "See you in Arkansas. Drive safe."

Interstate driving jangled her nerves. The back roads were soothing. Trees blazed reds and yellows and oranges between evergreen forests and picked cotton and corn field and mown soybean fields. She fell into the rhythm of fields, forests and open road, small town outskirts, downtown strip malls, McDonald's and Bo Jangles and Best Westerns, edge of town outskirts, open roads and fields. She could see the mown fields as harvested Indian meadows in her mind's eye.

She made it to Raleigh before she quit the back roads for Interstate 40. The interstate barged through the landscape like it ruled the earth. She couldn't feel connected to her people from broad concrete road beds lined by thin forest screens, bypasses skirting choked cities, road repair crews as regular as speed traps, motorists racing to the grave honking and flashing high beams at her steady-paced sixty miles an hour. Any faster and the anxiety rush she didn't want rattled her nerves.

She showered and slept overnight at a Nashville Days Inn and woke refreshed. She bought a fifth of Jack Daniels. Dry counties ahead, she knew.

Halfway to home. She rejoined Interstate 40 until the highway going west into the setting sun left her off northbound at Lake Dardenelle, made by a dam that flooded the valley of her ancestors' territory. She slept another regenerating night at a Traveler's Lodge an hour outside of the tiny Hasty hamlet tucked into a valley of the Ozarks.

Ronnie had Dad home from the hospital at her home in Jasper, the Newton County seat where Dad had built his second home with the home-wrecker Bessie and homes for brother Garland and sister Ronnie, who stayed in Arkansas. Dad had gotten ahead buying and selling

homes to family. He got further ahead building homes for strangers. But Tabitha wanted to ask Dad before he died why he'd broken up his family, why he divorced Ma, why he sent her away.

She passed through Jasper's downtown, past the hardware and feed and seed store on the outskirts, the bowling alley that hadn't changed into something else like in so many small towns, the theater likewise, The Ozark Café mom and pop diner, the Front Porch gift shop catering to Route 7 scenic drive tourists, the court house and county jail across the town commons with a bronze statue of John McCoy, Union army captain, towering over the parkland lawn. The old town had seen some prosperity from tourists dollars, but it was still a lazy, no horse town.

She passed the turnoff to Ronnie's neighborhood, reluctant to rush into the crowd she knew had gathered for Dad's wake, and on into the rolling countryside, gawking at the fall foliage and granite mountainside views like any other New York tourist. She was home, she felt, but home was a towering stranger.

The one-room house she was born in still stood in Hasty's ten-house center, home for a mom and dad, infants riding side saddle hips on older sisters, and a lanky teenage boy who came out when she pulled onto the house's yard. A blue Ford pickup rested up on cement blocks, its hood open and the engine missing. Plastic toys and rusted tools were scattered like fallen leaves, dropped where they fell on earth kept bare by tethered goats.

"I was born here," Tabitha said to the approaching man and wife, scowls of distrust and anger on their faces.

"Go back inside," the missus told the kids. "You one of them Jasper Johnstons?" she said, her limp brown hair heavy and flat in the stale air.

"I'm a Johnston all right," Tabitha said. "But I never lived in Jasper. Moved away to

Carolina from this house here.”

The mister stood behind his wife, his hands in the pockets of a pair of grease-stained work pants. “We hear old man Johnston’s final reward is upon him,” he said.

“You come to see him into the hereafter,” the missus said, “did you?”

“I came for the wake and all that, yes,” Tabitha said.

“What do you want here?” the mister said.

“Mind if I have a look-see around?” She fell into the old mountain speaking patterns she’d shed when she was a little girl learning the coastal banter of her second home.

“You want to look inside, it’ll cost you,” the mister said.

The missus punched his arm. “You shush up now. She’s looking for some, you know, mourning peace, and you want to treat her like a gaping tourist.”

“She wants to see inside here, she gots to pay,” he said. “We got a right.”

“I don’t mind paying,” Tabitha said. She thought they could use a lot more than she felt like paying, the mister not too proud to take as much as he could get. She put her wallet in the pocket of her windbreaker.

The missus pulled him aside, wheedling, and heedless of Tabitha’s overhearing. Tabitha heard most of it. “She could of offered on her own anyway,” the missus said. “More if you hadn’t of spoken up,”

“She’s got it to spare,” he said. “Look at the car.” He pointed his chin at the car. “Brand new Japanese four-door last year.”

“Let her in and see if she’s fair about it,” she said.

“All right,” he said. “What about if she’s not? She’s a miser Johnston after all.”

“Might be she’s outgrown the old penny pincher’s hard dealing and she be thinking on her own self.”

“Might be,” he said.

“Be nice.” The missus nudged him toward Tabitha.

“I’m Joseph Kettledeer from the Choctaw Kettledeer,” he said. “This here is Petal. She’s from Russellville, the Walken folks.”

“Pleased to meet you-all. I’m Tabitha.”

“Anything special you come to see?” Petal said.

Tabitha followed Joseph up to the porch. Petal looped her arm in Tabitha’s.

Tabitha said, “I hadn’t thought . . .”

“Come inside and it’ll come to you,” Petal said.

The porch boards had been replaced with plywood that was now in need of replacement again. The house layout was as Tabitha remembered. The porch stairs felt the same heights and the roof posts were in the same places. The doorway felt narrower and lower now she was a grown up. The ground floor was still open, a kitchen sink and counters, cupboards, but running water at the sink taps. A plank table and benches set beyond the kitchen windows that overlooked the side yard.

The children watched a small TV from a duct-taped leather couch. A big-eyed little girl holding a grimy plush penguin and a thumb stuck in her mouth watched Tabitha.

The back wall had been partitioned for a bathroom. She could see a claw foot tub and shower curtains inside the open door. Indoor plumbing she didn’t know was possible until after the war rationing had ended and she was allowed a chocolate bar on her birthdays and her stepdad

had installed pipes and plumbing in her third home. A queen-sized master bedstead nestled privately behind the bathroom partition and a tall and wide chest of drawers.

A box wood-stove the same model as the one that heated the house when she lived there gave off a cozy fall heat. The stairs to the attic loft were as crude as she remembered, though the railing looked to be metal rather than the wooden one she'd rode down a time or two.

"Can I go up?" Tabitha said.

"Children," Petal said, "can Miss Tabitha look upstairs?"

"I don't mind," the teenage boy said. "Uh-huh," the smaller children absentmindedly said, their attention rapt on an episode of American Bandstand from after Dick Clark quit. The big-eyed little girl said, "Tabitha's a witch name. You one of them?"

"Now, Daisy, no," Petal said. "That's not polite."

"I apologize," Daisy said.

"You're precious," Tabitha said. "If I was a witch—well, I'm not, but I'd eat you up."

Daisy giggled. "Like candy and spice? Or like snakes and puppy dog tails?"

"Like spice," Tabitha said. "Just a little bit."

Daisy giggled again. She came off the sofa and took Tabitha's hand, leading her to the stairs. She climbed up a couple steps and cupped her hand around her mouth. She pulled Tabitha close and whispered, "Do you want to see my secret hiding place?"

"It's not a secret," the teenage boy yelled.

"Meany," Daisy said. "Is too."

"Everybody knows about the loose stair board and what's under it," the boy said. "Babies' stuff."

“Mommy,” Daisy said, “tell Joe-Joe to stay out of my stuff.”

“Not worth anything in there to count anyway,” Joe-Joe said.

“Children,” Petal said, “not in front of our guest, please.”

Tabitha spoke softly to Daisy. “Is a little metal cannon in there? The stair tread near the top?”

“You know it too?” Daisy’s eyes couldn’t possibly have grown any bigger. She stopped at the top of the stairs and sat Tabitha down beside her.

Tabitha nodded. “This was my secret hiding place when I was a little girl like you. I forgot my keepsakes when I moved away.”

Daisy swung the stair board aside. “There’s a dice and a little metal box for candy and a needle and yarn in it,” Daisy said, handing Tabitha the candy tin. “I play with them but always put them back. They were there and—you know, like, taking them away was wrong. They’re yours?”

Tabitha had missed the keepsakes. That they were still there seemed impossible after all these years. A breath caught in her chest like a fishbone had choked her. Tears threatened a flood. The enameled Parminter Tart Lemon Drop cover was undamaged. She rattled the box to check the contents as she had when she was a girl. The back had a word crudely scratched into it. “Fig,” Tabitha said.

“Fig,” Daisy said “You’re Fig?”

“My daddy’s name for me,” Tabitha said. She popped the top off, turned the die and cannon, needle and yarn out into her hand. A smell of rusted metal came out but she smelled and tasted sour lemons. Rust traces in the box now marked where her tiny tongue had licked the candy dust that was all she’d tasted from the box.

“Can I have some candy?” she’d said then, asking Dad on the porch coming home from looking for work in Jasper, when he met his second wife Bessie. And Ma knew about it, adult Tabitha on the stairs now realized.

“Here,” Dad had said, giving her the box, “take this.”

She’d shook the box, disappointed by its silence. “This is empty.”

“Use your make believe it’s full,” he said. “You can’t have candy.”

“Why not?” she said.

“Because I said no.”

“Because why?” Tabitha said.

“Because you didn’t earn any,” he said. “You don’t make your daddy happy.”

“I’m just a little girl.”

“You don’t do your chores like I tell you.”

“I do. I do,” Tabitha said.

“Fig,” he said, “Daddy’s tired.”

She’d gone through his sock drawer looking for candy. She found the silver and turquoise feather charm and chain and took it. Dad looked for the charm until he suspected someone stole it. He lined the children up at the dinner table and asked them who.

Ronnie, Garland, and Laurel said not me. Tabitha said not me.

“Tell me who’s responsible or you’ll all be whipped,” Dad said. Tabitha kept silent. Her siblings pleaded for the guilty person to own up. Dad bent each in turn over his knees and whipped them with his belt until he raised welts on their bare butts. She’d kept quiet and felt she won the battle of wills.

Supper that night was Ma's punishment dinner for when the family disappointed her, Ma's silent suffering expression of disapproval: fried calf liver and onions—scorched—dry and bitter mashed turnips, and boiled, wilted cabbage and collard greens. Usually another test of wills, Tabitha savored the cruel meal like she never had before. She served the same meal to her own family when they disappointed her.

Daisy picked the candy tin out of her hand. She held it to her cheek. "It's yours," Daisy said. "You keep it."

"I can't," Tabitha said. "This belongs here." She took the medicine bag from around her neck. She showed the arrowheads and feather charm to Daisy. "These are my keepsakes now. Let's add one to yours."

Daisy took the brown and cream stone shaped like an arrowhead. "Pretty."

"You keep it," Tabitha said.

"Mommy," Daisy said, "can I keep this?"

Petal and Joseph hadn't taken their eyes off Daisy and Tabitha. "You may," Petal said.

Tabitha came down the stairs. "I've seen what I come to see," she said.

"You left behind things you should have taken with you," Petal said. "Did you take away what you should have left behind?"

Mountain women's sense—Petal knew Tabitha's mind. Petal walked outside with Tabitha. They embraced in the yard, Tabitha slipping cash into Petal's apron pocket. Petal's eyes brightened when she felt Tabitha's hand in the pocket.

Tabitha said thank you from the car.

"She didn't pay," Joseph yelled from the porch.

“She gave as good as she got,” Petal yelled back, waving good bye to Tabitha.

Tabitha felt she’d left behind the worries she’d carried from home; the drive into Jasper was carefree. Ready now to meet her kin, she drove up to the house she’d visited once or so a blue moon. The driveway was empty, the house dark, no one outside. For a moment, retracing the route in her mind, she doubted she’d come to the right house. The golden house number on the entry was the right one. Brick one-story rancher, light blue trim boards, the entryway door sidelights and scalloped transom windows were the ones she recognized from scarce visits after she was old enough to. She’d just never seen the place as still. She worried Dad had died and the family had gone to arrange the services.

Ronnie would have met her before she knocked. A strange young man answered the door.

“Do I know you?” Tabitha said.

“Are you Tabitha?” he said.

“Yes. Who are you?”

He waved her inside. “I’m Mr. Johnson’s nursing aide Joshua.”

“I’ll see him now,” Tabitha said, brushing past the aide, walking down the hallway to the bedrooms. She glanced into the living room when she passed. Still cluttered with junk nick-knacks Ronnie hoarded, hoping they’d be valuable some day. The cramped living room was empty.

“They went into Dardenelle this morning,” Joshua said. “They needed to get away for a rest.”

Dad was lying in Ronnie’s bed, face up, eyes closed, his hands by his side over the neatly

arranged bed covers.

“He’s been out of it for a week,” Joshua said.

“Leave me alone with him, please,” Tabitha said.

“Door closed?” Joshua said.

“Please.” She turned the end table lamp on. Placing the feather charm and chain on Dad’s chest, she whispered, “I stole this.”

He grabbed her hand with the strength of a steel clamp.

“You been fooling them?” Tabitha said.

“I dreamt you were coming.” His voice croaked. His eyelids fluttered opened. “About time you got here.”

“I didn’t think I wanted to come see you die.”

“You were the willful one,” he said. “I knew you stole my feather. Your siblings couldn’t have held out against a whipping.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Tabitha said.

“Why did you steal it?” Dad said, tugging her hand.

She halfheartedly pulled back. “Why did you send me away?”

“You were mad at me about the candy?” he said. “You still mad at me?”

“You remember that?”

He released his grip on her hand. “That was the time you turned against me.”

She massaged her hand. “You hurt me.”

“You were always about you,” he said, “like me. When you went against me I didn’t have a soul who could understand me no more.”

“Is that why you left us?” Tabitha said. “It’s my fault?”

“Your ma and I had our differences.”

Tabitha gently took his hand. “Was it because she was an Indian?”

He pulled her hand onto his chest, closing their hands around the feather charm. “You’re asking me if I’m an Indian again? You asked twice before. No. Once and for all, I’m not an Indian.”

“You know better,” Tabitha said. “I know better. Government records don’t lie.”

“No,” he roared. “I am not a damn dirty Indian.” He choked on the last word.

“That’s my dad,” Tabitha said. “True to himself to the end.”

“That’s your problem,” he said, “still blaming me for your troubles. You’re a grown woman, for God’s sake. You have had the choice to decide your life since you became an adult. Get over yourself.”

They quietly gripped and clamped hands and exchanged portent shrugs and smiles. Dad faded in and out like his grip did on Tabitha’s hand.

Holding onto grudges and blaming others, Tabitha thought, that’s what Pearl meant about taking away what you should leave behind. Dad’s coughing fit grew worse, gasping to catch a breath when he could.

Around fits, he said, “I waited on you.”

Joshua rushed in. He turned Dad on his side and pounded on his back. “He chokes on spit when he doesn’t swallow right,” Joshua said. “He’ll be fine in a minute.”

Tabitha sat on the bed opposite Joshua while Joshua listened with a stethoscope to Dad's breathing sounds. "He's fine now."

She laid down beside Dad and measured how tall he was and how short even when grown up she was. Her arm across Dad's chest she nestled her nose against his neck.

He woke chuckling. Tabitha wasn't sure. He said, "I'm in good company." He gulped a few coughing breaths and stopped coughing. A breath rattled from his chest and he lay still.

Joshua felt Dad's wrist for a pulse. He felt his neck. He stepped back. "I have a do not resuscitate order," he said. "Do you want me to try?"

Yes, he should try, Tabitha thought. She couldn't live with herself if she was to blame for killing Dad. No, it was his time. Not hers to say when. She thought about what Dad said. She had the decision to make about her life. Had he made his own? "Is the order his or—"

"He gave the order, yes," Joshua said, "in his living will."

"Let him be then," Tabitha said. "He decided."

Joshua stepped out. "Going to call the coroner," he said.

She felt warmth drain from Dad's hand, watched his skin lighten, his eyes dim and darken like the light of the world had set. She sat on the bed facing away from him, her head bowed down, she cared not how long.

Ronnie rushed in followed by a crowd of gawking and babbling kin. "Is he gone?" Ronnie said.

"Just this minute," Tabitha said.

Ronnie hugged Tabitha. “Hi, Sis,” she said. “Was he awake when he went?”

“No,” Tabitha said. “He didn’t wake up while I was here.” There you go, making your own story. She thought, true to yourself, like Dad. She’d think about letting blame and anger go. Maybe now she could. Now that he was gone she had to reconcile with herself. She leaned over the bed and kissed her daddy good bye.

