

RURALITY

by

Laura Pittman

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Director of Thesis: Dr. Liza Wieland

Major Department: English

Rurality is a collection of short fiction that seeks to explore the unique lives of characters in rural areas. The stories display the ways in which characters engage moral codes and challenges, while remaining in pursuit of a different life.

RURALITY

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by

Laura Pittman

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Laura Pittman

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: _____

Liza Wieland, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____

Donna Kain, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: _____

Reginald Watson, PhD

DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON: _____

Marianne Montgomery, PhD

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL: _____

Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

I dedicate this work to my forever love, Keith Pittman.

- Your little writer

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Ain't We Havin' Fun

The sky poured upon the earth and the mud squelched between the paws of each competitor as their claws begged for footing. A farmer, a painter, and an electrician trailed behind their respective dogs, walking lightly as to try and keep themselves from surrendering to the soft earth underneath their rubber soles.

The farmer's dog turned left, weaving between the rows of corn as though his coat were a shield of armor against their razor blade arms. As the dog pounded the path, so did the rain, and the farmer trailed further and further behind, until his dog was merely a white blur in the distance.

The painter was west bound, his pointer loping and leaping like a gazelle caught in a wildfire. As he reached the edge of the pines, he spun sideways, his tail quivering, straight as a twelve o'clock hour. The dog's head slowly rolled back towards the heavens as he inhaled the scent he had been searching for. As the painter approached to flush the quail, shotgun at the ready, he paused to admire the rain streaming down the side of the dogs' face, as though they were teardrops at his great pleasure. He couldn't help but smile as he kicked up a gentleman bob and fired the shot that brought it back down to earth. An effortless retrieve, with one slight chomp; tasting his spoils before turning them over to his dismayed master. The pointer shook his coat, licked his lips, and plowed onward to the next hopeful find.

The electrician's dog had headed North, running alongside the creek, despite the constant hollering intended to reign her back into the promising looking thicket. As she rounded the bend, he heard a splash, and then the frantic quacking. She generally preferred chickens and ducks, and despite his best efforts at redirection, she had found her favorite prize. He put on a stern voice,

grabbed her by the collar, and lead her back in the opposite direction. When they reached a safe enough distance, he turned her loose, and off they went again.

As the sun steadily rose in the sky and the rain ceased, the stomachs of the men reminded them that it was time to return to their friends and the truck where the cooler awaited. With the sun hanging slightly below its peak, the tradesmen charted their course, at first hunting along the way, and then with growing pangs of hunger simply stepping back into the same tracks they had created only hours earlier.

The throngs of hunter orange, wood stock guns, and panting dogs collided. The men placed their guns over the rail of the truck bed while the pointers roamed, too tired to go far. One climbed into the dog box, while another preferred the shade beneath the rear tire. The men turned facing each other and the farmer spoke first.

“Ya’ll find many coveys?”

“One covey and a few singles,” the painter replied.

“Mine was too busy hunting ducks and butterflies to be bothered with the good birds,” the electrician lamented.

The painter turned to the farmer, “How about you?”

The farmer grinned and looked towards the heavens. “I found my sanity.”

The electrician grunted. “Just from sloshing in the mud behind a pointer?”

The farmer shook his head. “No, from walking the land in pursuit of a dream.”

To this they toasted, with a ham sandwich apiece. They tossed the dogs the crust, pulled cold drinks out of the cooler to wash it down, and then entered the wooded realm again.

From Milk and Honey

Ada rolled over in bed, falling into the emptiness beside her. The sun was not yet pressing its warmth against the curtains on the front window, but her shift at work cared not for sun or sleep. The pine table beside her bed held a bottle of Tums, a worn out Bible, and a framed photo of her late father. Her morning thoughts consisted of what she first laid eyes on, the acid taste that never left her stomach, the ponderance of a promised land, and the memory of her father. She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair as her eyes followed her hands to pull a colored tablet out of the plastic bottle. She chewed it and continued her morning ritual of flipping through the Bible until she found a few amicable sentences. She'd read them and toss it back on the table, a duty to the Divine seemingly fulfilled. The verses were just enough motivation to help her throw her legs over the side of the bed and onto the gray grass of the carpet beneath her. She ran her fingers over the top of the metal picture frame, wishing her father good morning with the same absent-minded sweep she would use to greet the family pet.

Another piece of pine furniture encroached on her path to the bathroom door. An entertainment center, with a square hole cut out for a television. A square hole filled with two stacks of denim, his on the left and hers on the right. She grabbed a pair and opened a connected drawer to pull out a t-shirt with the Red Cross logo from the blood drive the high school held last summer. She knew her boots were by the door. A swig of milk and she was starting the engine of her truck, headed for another day of bedpans, dementia, and haunting smiles.

Ada knew death. The death that comes in brutal form and the death that comes gentle as cotton, when sleep crosses the other side. She hid her emotions better than most, but whenever she lost a patient at the nursing home, she'd mourn them for months. She didn't have to know their stories or even their names, but losing them always sent her running to her refuge; the rough rope that laid in

the corner of her closet, waiting for its handler to give it form. The rope was coarse between Ada's fingers as she pulled it out of the canvas satchel. It needed the satchel to keep its form during the cold winter months and she needed its form to perfect her own form. The roughness of the rope came from too many days practicing on the pavement rather than in the pasture. The coarse ground had broken the wax seal along the edges until the stiffness of the rope had begun to mellow. It was coarse in her palm and on her memory, this rope of hers. She roped every day that she was able; of course, much preferring cattle to concrete, but taking what she could get while the Corriente steers enjoyed their new home in Conway and she suffered through slow days with her rope and rough husband. The burning in her forearm seemed to take away some of her remorse that she was wasting her days by living a mediocre life.

She hated the suburbs and they hated her too. There had been three complaints in the past three weeks from neighbors who wanted to have her seen and not heard; neighbors who made themselves heard in hopes she would eventually no longer be seen. Most of them simply found her offensive because she was different. She would swing her rope in the front driveway to stay in form for the competitions she dreamed of riding in. She would stop to watch a rabbit if it scampered by and she would swing her rope no matter who was watching. Round and round her head, swinging her rope behind a sawhorse, trying to knock off a perfectly lined row of pebbles on the top wood panel with just the tip of the rope. One swing, one stone. Two swings, two stones. She had the control and was ready to swing her rope at a rodeo. Any competition far away from this God forsaken place.

The first complaint came from the homeowner's association and was taped to her front door. It informed her (and all the nosy neighbors who stopped to read it to ensure it outlined their true feelings) that the hay bale she had in the middle of the yard with the plastic steer head stuck in it was unsightly and led to a disreputable image of the area. She pulled the note down with stifled frustration and crumpled it in her fingers before adding to those same fingers the coarseness of the rope. She marched over to the hay bale and began swinging her rope. She tossed the notification up

in the air and swung the rope around it. Round and round as the note fell with the weight of dislike down to the ground.

She wished no one could see her. That she could swing her rope in the privacy of her own bedroom where no judgemental eyes could wander. Judge her marriage, sure. Her house, sure. They had to judge something. But the hobby that kept her sane? She so desperately needed it to be her secret. There just wasn't room in the suburbs for swinging a rope. Her backyard patio effectively prevented her from swinging her rope as the tip would always collide with the roof and come crashing down. A constant disconnect. She tried swinging her rope inside the house, but broke a lamp on the first swing by knocking it off the shelf. Her second attempt in the less fragile kitchen resulted in the rope tangled in the ceiling fan. So she had been destined to move to the front yard. At least nothing there loomed in the sky above her to stop the motion of the rope, and trap it, like this neighborhood had already done. Her swinging time was methodical, as many rituals are at first. She always wore a long sleeve shirt, thick jeans, sturdy boots, and a wide brim cowgirl hat to hide as much of her vulnerability as clothes are able.

She swung the rope for practice, and she swung it for peace. When the whirl of air trapped between the tight fibers ignited above her, she could block out the dizzying expectations that came with being a young married couple freshly moved into a suburban home. With every swing of the rope, she created the desired distance between the world she lived in and the world she called home.

When the weather warmed up Ada drove to work with her windows down and her arm resting on the side of the truck, feeling the burn of the sun on her winter-worn skin. Summer was her favorite time of year, and yet it had been a summer that brought Jett to her life. That summer four years ago when the big league rodeo was passing through. The fairgrounds filled up with the smell of horse sweat and funnel cakes. The children's laughter followed the clowns, and the horses followed the steers. The men followed the women and the flies followed everything. She settled into the

bleachers with a lemonade at her feet and nachos in hand, listening to the announcer croon the opening military tribute. One more dip of cheese and they would be coming round to the prayer. She knew rodeo inside and out. She'd watched and read and practiced and done everything but ride in it. It had swallowed up more of her friends than snakes did field mice. They had taken to a life traveling from dirt arena to dirt arena, Waffle House to Waffle House. She had vowed to her daddy as he laid on his deathbed she would never lead a life on the road like her friends and her mama did, feeding that restlessness within her. Her sawdust as he called the restlessness. With the cotton sheets pulled up over his head came the beginning of that covenant. Instead, she rode in her dreams and in her heart, and in real life she watched the free few ride. A promise was binding in good times and bad, and she had made one to her daddy and one to Jett. But lately when the rope fell back down from the sky, she'd noticed even tight ties like the tautness of a rope come loose when the slack is let out.

It was the third run of the roping that night, and she had moved on to eating a pack of Skittles. The man in the chute was thick and muscled, with a tan Cattleman hat pulled down low in the front. The couple sitting next to her were talking about him. "I can't believe his brother is letting him ride his horse." Ada looked up, curious about what gossip this couple might yet share. The husband of the pair caught her eyes, and said somewhat sheepishly "Local boy. Lives a county over." She nodded, and looked back at the arena, just as he burst out of the chute, his horse taking strides like a rake. His first loop caught the horns and he dallied hard, turning the horse to the right when--he doubled over, the rope still taut. His partner stopped his horse and the announcer stopped talking. She had seen the thing that everyone else only heard in the hush of the crowd. His rope made a clean cut and his fingers disappeared in the dirt of the arena that horses and bulls would trample on all night long, until the tractor dragged it at the end of the night and shredded them into dirt permanently. He turned his horse back to the gate and staggered off with his hand bleeding. His buddy had left the chute where he was about to climb on the back of the infamous bull Bodacious and ran towards his pal, stopping briefly to grab something out of his bag.

This was about the time that Ada ran up. As a Certified Nursing Assistant by day she was used to dealing with bodily fluids. The injured man was encircled by the men who worked the chutes and neither the EMT's nor Ada could reach him. When Ada finally fought her way forward and got a glimpse, she saw the stubs on his hand being doused with kerosene. Had she known at the time about his tobacco habits she would have been amazed he did not ignite. He looked up at her and flashed a slight grin mixed with a grimace of pain on his pale face. He said "hi" and she smiled, drawn to him as a doctor is a patient. Drawn by duty and a compassionate heart.

She sat on the fence at the back of the crowd and waited. She finally saw the men disperse and realized he was now sitting alone, leaning up against the empty stock chute. Walking over to him, she offered up her concern.

"Doing okay?"

He glanced at her, not looking particularly interested..

"I'd be better with a drink."

Ada nodded and stared at the square toe of her leather boots as they dug a into the sand underfoot. Jett's gaze shifted back to her, and she could feel his eyes roving her body.

"Well, take care." Ada said with a half wave as she started back to her truck, having lost interest in the nights competition. She was two steps into the darkness away from the circle of floodlights when his voice surrounded her.

"Hey, have a drink with me."

She was surprised, but regrouped quickly enough to decline, telling him he really should go home and sleep rather than go out after losing that much blood. He ignored her.

"See the third truck parked down from the hot dog cart? Red Dually? There is a six pack under the back seat. Grab it and come on here and sit."

“Damn it,” she muttered under her breath. She hadn’t had a drink since high school but didn’t want him to know that. She couldn’t leave him. He was hurt. And a little woozy acting from the kerosene and no doubt adrenaline rush. And the blood loss.

She better stay.

She sat next to him. “Name’s Jett.” He said. “Ada.” She offered back. They sat in silence. He drank and she pretended to. “You been roping long?” Ada asked him. He grinned, and looked at her with an eagerness she never could have imagined on his face. “Let me tell you,” He said. The stories began.

She didn’t think much about her daddy unless she saw a store or a donkey or a stick. All the meager pieces that he built a life on. He was always telling her that if she married a boy she met hanging around town she’d never be able to taste anything but the bile of sawdust rising from the depths of her being. She’d asked him what sawdust had to do with it and he’d told her it was what her mama was made of. The dusty haze of an imagined future and the hard chips that stuck in her side like Peter’s thorn for every day she failed to act on them. She knew her daddy was a good man, but he was a poor one, and she couldn’t listen to him unless she wanted to be him. She ignored him and married a boy from town whose daddy owned the local stock company.

When Jett asked her to marry, she thought of her daddy first, and knew Jett would keep her from living fast and free. She liked his stories, and she liked his presence as a warm body in bed. He was someone to care for, and he lived the life she had always wanted. She said yes and figured they’d be okay.

In their early years together, Jett helped his dad take care of the livestock during the week and on the weekends rode in the county rodeos to try and pick up some extra cash. His dad was a stock contractor and kept all the rodeos in the state supplied with the rankest bulls and the freshest

steers. Jett had used his family connections to his advantage as a boy and was now making a meager living as a steer wrestler. He explained his profession to all willing to listen with the finesse of a boy who drank more tobacco than he did water. He'd been ripened by living his life without escape from the sun. His skin had soaked up heat until the tobacco that coated his belly practically reformed into its original leaf and cured in his stomach, having to rearrange itself to find a space amid the acid seeping between wads of wet nicotine.

The ladies at the rodeo would play dumb and ask him to tell them about his sport, leaning against the chute he sat on until the rails pressed indentions into their bellies that made their breasts appear to be crawling towards him with every word. He would spit, always needing to rid himself of a bit of tobacco before putting more in, and then flex his navel in the way cowboys do, pressing his crotch and his belt buckle together into a noticeable bulge, and then say the same words Ada could recite by memory from ten miles down the road at their house. "Ladies, if you can just imagine. After I lost my fingers' I had to find a more refined profession. I moved to steer wrestling like a fly moves to a hog house. Just picture this: you're standing in the back of a pickup truck as it flies down a gravel road. A mailbox is coming up in the distance and you get the nerve to jump off the truck onto the mailbox and wrestle it to the ground." They would say how dangerous it sounded and he would puff up with pride.

Ada never bothered to stick around and listen to his testimony. They were rarely together and liked it that way. His lack of steady employment and her over employment in the city was what stuck them in the suburbs anyways. She did not mind Jett's flirtatious ways as she didn't want him to herself for love. Most nights he ate his supper in front of the television, and she ate hers at the kitchen bar, flipping through one of his *Western Horseman* or *Spin to Win Magazines*.

When they lay down in bed for the night they'd talk for a few minutes. Those were the moments she liked him best. She would whisper, "Jett, tell me about the barn today." He loved to talk and would always indulge her. "I've been working this gelding, Ada, and he's turning out to be

real nice. Not so spooky anymore. He turns like he is a part of your line of vision. I think I'll haul him down to Chester and try him out at the next rodeo." She would fall asleep listening to his stories ramble on and find herself filled with dreams of the world she loved and longed to be a part of rather than spending her days emptying bedpans for a \$7.25 return. She needed Jett's presence, as it was her staying power. His demeanor was the one thing that kept her own internal sawdust from spilling over. He quenched her restlessness through his participation in the world she always longed for more of. His injury reminded her that her imaginary world would always have a hint of darkness if she pursued it as her miracle. Easier then, to simply dream of it, to twirl her rope in the yard and do her job in the suburbs and live with the frustration that he embodied.

She found her roping more and more frequently interrupted by the women dog walkers strutting down the sidewalk. The women were a lot like their dogs, Jett liked to say. Just glad to have a new set of tires on the street to piss on. Crass, but ever more true.

Just last Tuesday, she had seen two women coming, in yoga pants and high ponytails, neon sneakers walking in step as their teacup dogs pranced along. A little girl trailed a few steps behind them, jumping over cracks in the sidewalk making her embroidered dress sway from side to side. Ada had put down her rope and waved to the group, as she had many times before. The response was generally the same, the women kept their eyes down and ignored her, talking more loudly to ensure she would notice they were not free for conversation. On that day though, the little girl waved back, and started running towards Ada. The blonde woman with the dog jerked her head up and yelled "Charlotte!" with such a harsh screech that the girl stopped dead, and turned back to her mother. As she arrived at her mother's side the woman began reprimanding her, with words that rang in Ada's mind. "What have I told you about visiting with people like her, Charlotte? They are not our friends. I don't want you around them ever."

Jett and Ada had rarely been in bed together in the past few weeks, spending most of their time instead arguing in the kitchen and then both exiting out of opposite doors. He had been spending long days at the arena, not returning home until his favorite three am hour. She thought he was probably seeing some woman, but she preferred not to know. Their nightly conversations had ended as Ada was asleep when he returned home. Her dreams were different without these talks. They were now a mix of nightmares of a neighborhood mob and flash images of the backside of her mama's jeans, the imagined pockets and scuffed heels of her boots as she walked the other direction. Always away from Ada until she was completely out of sight.

She arrived at the nursing home early for her shift on Saturday morning, and walked down to the room Mrs. Jane occupied. Mrs. Jane had always been one of her favorites. A tender woman who sat in her chair and watched the birds out the window all day long. Her health had been declining, and Ada always checked on her first. As she saw the wooden door, she saw a man standing in the doorway. Her supervisor. Behind him, an empty bed. An empty chair. No birds out the window. She knew right away, and her supervisors nod only confirmed it. She would have a new patient by morning. She felt numb the rest of the day, eating lunch from the vending machine and never talking about more than the weather with her coworkers. She needed to get home. Home to her rope and the momentum of it swirling above her head that carried her cares to the heavens.

Rush hour, four stoplights, and she was in the front door. Jett had beat her home for a change. They exchanged "heys" as she walked down the hall to change and he went back to yelling at the referee on the television. Her attire on, she reached for the rope satchel, and was met with nothing more to grasp then the empty air. She knelt, feeling the comfort of the closet carpet, flipping on the light and feeling the empty space where the satchel had sat between her boots and old boxes of winter clothes. It was gone. Where could it...? *Jett.*

“Jett! She turned the corner into the living room and stood in front of the television. “What!” he replied, irritable she was in front of him. “Where’s my rope?”

“I don’t know, can’t we talk about this later?”

“No. Not later. Now.” She stepped closer to him.

“Hell Ada, they were close to making a first down.”

“Where is it, Jett?”

“There’s a lady I met a while ago, she wanted to learn how to rope. Wants me to teach her” he said with a grin before continuing, “ she didn’t have a rope. You know the shipping takes a few days from the ropers supply and yours was just sitting there.” He turned back to the television, looking around her body trying to see his boys on the screen. “You gave some woman my rope?” Ada felt a warm anger rising in her. It brought a strange rush of fear and excitement to her taut stomach. “Yup. Not like you were working any steers with it. Hell, it will get those women you’re always complaining about out of your hair anyways. You can watch tv or something like other women.” He took a swig of his beer, considering the conflict resolved and the conversation over. She agreed with him. It was over. Her one connection to peace and passion, her sanctuary. Her rope. Gone.

Leaving had never been an abstract concept to Ada. She knew it as well as the tear on the far corner of her mother’s suitcase, and the way the brass buckles glistened in the sunlight that day. It was a part of the past for her mama and daddy and she figured a part of her future. Jett was like a door stopper. Sooner or later the dam would break, the door would swing, and freedom would rush through. She did wonder though. Wondered what it would be like to walk out on a life. On a man. On a mortgage and an address and a last name. She had known from the time they signed the papers in the courthouse that she did not care if they were ever undone. She’d never been tied to him in her

heart and didn't put much stock in the legality of a union. She felt her feet stiffly moving beneath her as though her brain had given them a secret purpose she had been scared to admit on her own. She went to the bedroom and grabbed her phone and her purse. The background noise of the tv blended out the click of her boots on the hardwood in the hallway. She walked around the couch, seeing the ruffled top of Jett's hair, as brown as the bottle wrapped between his remaining fingers. As she opened the back door, she heard Jett holler, "Pick up some milk while you're out."

She shut the door; on him and grocery lists and time gone by.

As she eased the truck down the driveway, she thought about the days to come. She imagined him stumbling into the kitchen in the morning with his hair ruffled in the back like it so often was, wearing nothing but boxers and the perpetual smell of nicotine. He would likely swing open the fridge and look for the milk, pushing aside a bowl of baked beans on the edge of turning sour with a tupperware container stacked on top of it. He'd curse and mutter, whining about how he could not use sweet tea or water on his cereal. Perhaps add in how it was the only thing he had asked of her, if he was feeling particularly like himself. He would walk to the bathroom that was intended for guests but used by Ada. She envisioned him shocked by its cleanliness and emptiness. He likely assumed she would be there. But she was not. Not simply working a night shift he had forgotten about or hiding from his reprimand about the milk. She was gone.

As she watched this episode play out in her mind, she found herself leaning on the accelerator as though the distance speed provided was the only friend she could count on. Each green sign coming and going, on a highway that would take her from ocean to ocean. She dreamed more of somewhere in the middle. And yet had to dream no longer. She had wanted to have a child, but not his. Wanted to ride in the county rodeos, but not with him. Wanted to join a church, but not as a couple. Wanted to own land, but have it as her private property.

She wanted a life.

A life without him.

She finally had to stop for gas; practicality never failed to interrupt passion and pain. She pulled into Brad's Gas and Grill, her shiny boots drawing the attention of the men leaning against the outside of the gas station. She glanced up at them, then went inside to pay. As she walked back towards her truck, one of the men hollered out at her, "Lady, you look like you could rope the moon."

Ada didn't turn around, but as she lifted the gas pump she said to herself, "I'm sure going to try."

Silent Stacks

Guilty. The twelve said. One weak man in the outfit and Dan found himself in the courtroom with the prosecutor asking questions. It was better when it was just him. The rules were supposed to be that the people couldn't have any living relatives. Damn if his data man hadn't screwed that one up. Letting them layer people who had grandkids coming to put silk flowers on their grave. Knowing Johnny, he was probably playing solitaire and watching porn on the hours he billed for research.

The brown headed guard came to unlock his cell. New guy, young kid, but seemed nice enough. Wouldn't last long in this place. Dan tried to banter with him as he headed down the hall past the cat calls and obscenities the boys considered a proper send-off. As he collected his personal effects from the clerk at the front window, and looked at the door before him, he saw the guard staring at him with a half smile. "You waiting to do an exit survey?" The guard asked. "Yeah. Tell the warden he needs to improve the way this joint handles thunderstorms and birthdays." The guard laughed. "Twenty-years in, and you think about thunderstorms and birthdays?" The corner of Dan's eyes narrowed and he took a step closer to the guard. "Look, kid, you better learn quick--you sit around and 'think' and you'll be carried out on a stretcher. Around here, you do or you get did."

His wife Elaine picked him up as though she was waiting outside a bar to drive her fun-loving husband home from a weekly night with his boys. He felt nothing, neither excitement or

hope, but he slid into the seat beside her and looked into her face. A few more lines than he remembered. Her skin had a sallow tint to it.

“Dan,” she half whispered.

“Been some time,” hoping to get a response as to why she had stopped coming to visit and had resorted to calling once a month instead during the last year of his twenty in.

This rolled off her shoulders in the same way the other problems must have. They looked worn and rounded. He had heard women weren’t wearing shoulder pads anymore. Maybe that was it.

Women.

His wife.

Words that had little bearing the past two decades.

“Supper’s ready.”

He nodded. They rode a little way in silence.

“Cigarette?” She asked him as she rummaged around in her purse.

“You smoke now?” She never used to.

“Found your stash in the workshop not long after you left,” she said. “Figured what the hell. You were right. Calms me down. You?”

“Quit. About the same time you stopped sending them.”

“Ain’t going to send you something I got a use for. Aren’t you the pride of society, all reformed?”

He snorted. “Stuff still there?”

“Yep. And three orders for headstones waiting for you.”

“That’s my girl.” He said with a grin as she turned and blew smoke on his face.

The shop was packed with his stuff. Just like she said. Classic motorcycles, yellowing paintings, ornate dusty saddles, and worn vats that once held fine wine. It had all endured a century during the time he had been away. He had half expected the goods to have been searched and plundered by the sheriff's department but they had spent all their time at the cemetery and never ventured down Laken Road. They no longer cared. He had served his time and the community had forgotten. He was nearing seventy-three, and his parole officer was overworked. He had told them during his parole hearing that he just wanted to explore his hobbies and spend time with his wife. Half true. Hobbies he intended to explore. He would have to spend time with his wife by nature of their living arrangements. But the time between 5 am and 5 pm when he was awake; he had a plan for that.

This man and woman were the first visitors in a long time. They needed a place to live. He wanted to sell them the bedroom that existed on stilts behind his shop. A boxy elevated cabin with a long ladder to reach it. He knew they wouldn't buy it as soon as he saw the face the woman made looking at the ladder and looking up at the sky it climbed towards. Part of the reason he had gotten the stilts and ladder— his wife had given him the same look. But these were the first visitors since he had been separated by a glass pane and held the phone to talk, so he might as well keep showing them around.

“Wow, that’s a beautiful saddle!” she said. Nice enough lady. He hadn’t seen any women in so long. Until his wife. But he was not sure she counted. Elaine looked more like a wax figure than she did a human being. Would’ve thought she was the one who was freshly paroled out of a cement box.

“Want to see the horse?” he asked.

She looked at the man she was with and broke into a smile. “Yes. We’d like that.”

He led her into the yard, chain link and a random chihuahua on the horizon. “What’s the horse’s name?” She asked.

Hell if I know. He thought. But he lied and said “His name is Sam.” She walked over and stroked his neck and whispered hello to him. Maybe he could sell her the horse too.

“Well, we’ve got to be going,” The man said.

“Hey, come here for a minute, I got something I want to show you.” Dan said.

“We really have to be going,” The man seemed bored.

“Nah, won’t take but a second.”

“Well...”

They crossed the road as a diesel truck roared west and they headed north, straight into a dimly lit house. Crumbled cement littered the yard and an old sign for an old business peaked through the wildflowers.

They looked like the type that drank wine. The woman had a monogram on the pocket of her shirt and the man a Polo button up and snakeskin loafers. Dan had every intention of pawning a few bottles of his homemade concoction off on them and charging double. Hell, it had aged twenty years.

His wife sat at the desk by the front door, waiting, staring at the phone as though it might ring. He didn’t want her to leave it. He liked her working even if the phone never rang. It gave her a sense of duty.

“Hi,” she said. The woman introduced herself with a bubbliness that seemed to sap all the energy out of his wife who met this woman with a continued silent stare. The man had wandered

into the next room and the woman quickly followed when she saw Elaine was not up for making friends.

“Hey Dan, I like this drawing,” the man said, his voice ringing out.

“Oh that.” Dan walked up to the sketch of a man and a young boy walking through the woods together in late fall, the foliage as detailed as the faces on the man and boy and the deer in the background. “Good huh?”

“Real good,” he responded with a look of admiration.

“My buddy did it while he was on death row.”

The woman’s eyes got wide.

The man nodded. A nod of appreciation or empathy for talent confined. Who knew.

“He’s probably dead now.” Dan mused. “Wonder what he went with for his final meal. I would have chosen the meatloaf. About the only thing that McNamarath Correctional could cook right.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said.

Like it bothered him. He couldn’t even remember the guy’s face. All the guys had started to look the same. They all had reputations. The guy who could smuggle you cigarettes. The guy who could fix a broken tv. The guy who always had a shiv on him. But the last guy was Common. A nickname for a no one that most everyone held.

His buddies were in and out so much he never bothered to keep up with phone numbers. If it rang, he answered. If it didn’t, he didn’t wonder where they were. If the government didn’t know then he probably shouldn’t either. Condition of his parole. Like no damn guns. Who the hell said he was violent? You spend a little time in joint and then people think you’re going to

start strangling them or something. Wasn't like he was in Rikers. McNamarath Correctional Facility was his temporary home.

'Nam as the boys called it, like they had been through a real war with actual agent orange. A mirage. The biggest threat in there was the idleness of your own mind..

The man spoke up, bringing him back to the present. "So you back to carving headstones?"

Dan nodded. "Til I don't wake up and need one."

The woman touched the man's arm. "I think it's time for us to be going. Thank you for showing us around. Good luck with your, ah, carving." He could tell she was nervous. He liked that.

"Yep." He nodded as the man waved and they walked out the door.

He looked at his wife. "Johnny send over the new names?"

She smiled and tapped a folded sheet of paper.

He picked it up and walked to the shop, uncovering his tools, the chisel and the sketchbook.

Unfolding the sheet, he started running through them.

"Pilzer, Kay Elise." Born 1860- Died 1900.

"Pfetner, Roger Lawrence." Born 1910-Died 1918.

The names of the latest two needing a change of scenery.

Dan had done his first etching at seven years old. Penny, a nine year old girl who lived next door had desperately wanted her name carved into a tree. He was the only one around with a

pocket knife, or so she thought, because he was the only one who rode around on his bike with the switchblade flipped upon, erect and ready to leave its mark.

So they carved a willow tree. He did and she watched and promised she would bring him a cup of lemonade when he finished. He got to the last “n” in her name and she ran to get lemonade, knowing he was almost done. When she returned, she saw the “e” he had added, instead of the “y” needed to complete the proper spelling and howled with disappointment. Her howling bewildered him and he was so distracted that he had little recollection of how the lemonade wound up coating his front. Whether she poured, dropped, or pelted it on him would always be a mystery. But he never saw his “Penne” again.

He carved a lot in the years to come. He accepted a variety of payment from a variety of folks for whom he did a variety of jobs. The most rewarding proved to be the headstone he made, and yet he engraved the occasional plaque for retirements, graduations, buildings, and bench dedications. His wife described him as a monumental mason, and his late mother as an incorrigible outlaw.

The majority of his mistakes and successes were linked to bodies 36 feet underground. That's how they operated, in layers. It had really been quite brilliant, or so he had always thought. He'd be asked to carve a headstone for the dearly departed. He was a reputable man around town with an array of finely etched tombstones lining his front yard. He consulted with them about the wording and during the consultation mentioned that for a small additional fee he and his men could handle the burial and sell them a discounted plot. *Been in the family for years* he would say. Perhaps it was true. Perhaps for someone's family. To the initial customers he told they would still need embalming done, but not to worry about the rest. *Let us take care of it while you grieve.* Time passed and his reputation spread amongst those who had neither the time

nor the money to worry about the details. Many were not concerned about credentials or behind the scenes knowledge. Provide them with a lovely head stone for a cheap price and they would sign on the dotted line. The word spread.

Dan and his crew dug up confederate soldiers and sons, wives and daughters, babies, dogs, and horses. You tell them the size of the most recently departed, and they would go find the plot. They'd then dig some more and lay the initial resident back to rest, deeper this time, all in the dark of night, making the first hole 48 feet down. This way there were enough increments that the bodies could be moved each time a new one came in.

Layering, 'til everyone was stacked.

The nights he leaned back in his chair and smiled. It was simply brilliant.

The headstones he could chisel down and often reuse. Those he couldn't; well, he had plenty of shop space.

Cemetery caretakers cared surprisingly more than they anticipated and were far nosier than necessary but he quickly discovered that they had a price and it was not too high.

The payroll expanded.

He met a retired mortician through a poker game in the back room of an old motel that rented by the hour and seldom had overnight customers.

He considered him, but finally decided against it. Let someone else do the mess. Let us do the etching.

He knew better than to keep money under his mattress with young people like his neighbor around who needed drugs the way a hound needs to howl. He didn't like banks, didn't trust his wife, and didn't consider his buddies. That left investments and random spending. He did the books and often found that $2+2$ could be made to equal 7.

He began to spend. Although his wife did more of that than he ever could. She soothed her soul through shopping and saying the layering was like an involuntary request by a hotel occupant to move to a lower floor.

Unbeknownst to her, the two of them were the patron saints of the annual professional pool tournament that took place in Jim and Tammy Faye Baker's old Heritage U.S.A. building. He took delight in this sponsorship and didn't care whether it was the smartest investment. He knew it was the cleanest. Nobody looked there. Nobody wanted to look there. A Mormon businessman delivered the tables and the crowd that came to observe had enough of their own secrets. He labeled it as charity and took it off on his taxes. He considered himself a philanthropist.

Dan had been out three weeks when he began to be concerned about the wheezing coughing Elaine was doing. He knew it was from the smoking and had wheezed himself for years before quitting. But this was different. It changed from an annoying sound to an alarming bloody sleeve when she raised her arm to cover the dispersal of mucus.

Dan had seen blood in a lot of ways after his years at McNamarath and he knew when it came to the surface in this manner often one's fate was already sealed.

When his wife's coughing drowned out the voice of Alex Trebek during Jeopardy, he growled at her to go to the doctor already.

She didn't say anything for a minute, and then replied, "I have."

"Well," he turned away from the tv for this one.

"Couple months maybe."

"Sorry," They'd been strangers so long now even this seemed forced.

In his typical twisted humor, he tried to lighten the mood. "Still got life insurance?" He waited for her tirade on what a heartless bastard he was but he was instead met with a slight smile.

"Still got it."

Silence.

"Sports for 100 Alex!"

"I'm going to bed, Dan."

"Night," he whispered, eyes never leaving the screen.

He'd called in hospice six hours ago and they said it wouldn't be much longer. Seeing her lying there unconscious brought back memories of the few good times, years ago. They had a good time when they were young.

He had been confronted with so much death, by his own choosing, and considered it as daily a ritual as pouring milk on cereal and taking out the trash. They'd never talked about their own death wishes, being far too busy making that decision for everyone else.

But for the first time, he felt as though he owed her something.

So what do you give a woman who has already left the consciousness of earth?

He kissed her forehead and walked into the hallway, pulling out his phone and flipping it open against his ear. Jack answered on the second ring.

"Yep?"

"Jack."

"Dan--hey man I heard you were out."

"Yeah."

“My wife’s dying.”

“That sucks.”

“I can’t have her buried. Ya know, I can’t take the risk of her being layered when I’m dead and gone.”

“Oh yeah. I hear ya brother. Send her over to me when she kicks it.

“Still running the crematory huh?”

“It stays hot and ready.”

“I’ll bring her to you when it happens. What do you get now?”

“Eleven hundred, cash”

“Damn.”

“She’s your wife, man.”

“Yeah. Okay, well, we’ll be there, Jack.

“Ok.”

The first months after she was gone were strange. He was having to run her side of the business, eat out or eat frozen meals, drink all the wine himself, and answer the phone. He even missed her warm body in bed but kept the vase of her ashes on the front desk by the telephone. They were normally surrounded by a stack of bills addressed to her.

He had waited four days before digging through the house for the life insurance policy. Before he went to prison she kept it in the desk drawer. Now, he searched and searched to no avail. Under the mattress, in the safe, in the cabinet, in the bottom of the sock drawer.

Nothing.

He ate every morning at the Fastbreak Country Store. He was a man of routine, an old prison habit, and always went over to speak to the local boys sitting at the back booth. Out of the four booths in the store it was always left open for them and always filled by them.

It was the last day of the eighth month when his routine was broken. The boys waved as he walked in and he walked over to say hello and get the local news .

“Dan,” one said with a nod.

Dan slapped Todd, sitting on the outside edge, on the shoulder and asked, “What’s good this morning?”

Todd responded, “ Whatever you’re buying is good to me.”

Dan stuck his hands in his pockets and replied “You boys have me so deep in these pockets that there ain’t nothing left but lint.”

They all laughed. Joe piped up when silence fell. “Hey Dan, you hear that guy Jack that runs the crematorium got locked up?”

“No...locked up?”

“Yeah he was taking the bodies and selling them to science. Using ashes out of his fireplace to give to families. He always was up for a hustle.”

Dan froze. Bodies, and fireplace ashes, sold- the words rang in his head. *Elaine.*

“When was he selling them?”

Todd replied “He’s been doing it a while. Couple months at least. I don’t know all the details. Been on the news every night though. You still got rabbit ears on that tv in your shop? Turn it on tonight.”

Dan nodded and walked out in a daze, forgetting breakfast.

By the time he got home, his hunger and his irritation had grown. He walked into the pantry and dug around, looking for something that sounded as awful as he felt. He came across a round Quaker Oats canister pushed deep in the back and pulled it out.

Back in the kitchen, he sat out a bowl, opened a jug of milk, and popped the lid off the oats, titling them towards the bowl. He could feel the weight but saw nothing falling into the bowl.

Turning it towards him, he discovered an envelope, yellowing and torn, but packed full. A few oats stuck to it but otherwise the canister was empty.

He and Elaine didn't believe in wills, preferring common law to dictate the division of possession, and so he knew before opening it that it had to be the life insurance policy.

Dan felt a slight bit of excitement as he began to peel it open, trying to remember just how much he was set to gain by her loss.

He saw the logo, and was proud she had chosen a reputable company. More security for his money.

He did not care to read the pages of information, and flipped through the pages hastily, looking for a dollar sign listed under beneficiary.

Finally, the second to last page: \$250,000. He could stop doing headstones for the next year with dough like that.

He couldn't help but smile.

Good things come to those who wait, just like his mama said.

As he stuffed it back in the envelope, he saw the beneficiary line glaring back at him:

Beneficiary: the McNamarath Correctional Facility

P.S. Thanks for keeping my husband occupied all those years. - Elaine

Shock coursed through his veins, like the time his late uncle had lit him up with the cattle prod for drinking his secret stash of liquor. Death had always made him money. Now his partner in the scheme had died, without leaving him money to carry on, and had instead cost him \$1,100 and a few years of dreamed soft retirement.

The papers had made alarmingly little sound as they crashed to the kitchen floor. Perhaps that was the worst of it. That haunting silence.

The clock struck a quarter to six and he settled into the recliner that he kept in the shop. He'd adjusted the rabbit ears perfectly and the news anchor was staring back at him with a somber face as he spoke of power lines down, a tsunami overseas, and a local man selling bodies to science.

Jack's face flashed up on the screen. The details poured out, the date of his arrest, the number of bodies, the discovery. He kept no records with most of his clients being ex-cons like Dan, and the police gathered up this information solely through his own confession.

Started five months ago, or so he said.

Six women and seven men.

A neighbors dog but that one he actually cremated.

The camera turned and zoomed in on the second news anchor, a blonde female, as the final details were released.

The TV had become a blaring echo in Dan's mind.

She had not been layered.

She had not been burned.

She had not been donated.

She had been sold and studied.

They always said that the worst part of prison was the silent moments. That thinking of the days, hours, and minutes would drive you crazy. The repetition. The rules. The monotony of the lack of change. The fact that you couldn't even hear a thunderstorm in the innermost parts of McNamarath. His victims were silent, and he had liked that about them. Now the silence haunted him. He walked twice a day the path to the country store and would stop and rattle the chain link on the perimeter of the prison property. He would rattle, and the wind would still the noise. Stifling. He hollered out one day, her name, his buddy's name, the name of every person he had layered. Still, nothing replied.

Mi Mujer

Petra had to wake up to see the day, but never to smell it. The aroma of the camp seeped into her dreams, mingling the two realms of desired and lived until a buzzing alarm and outside chatter determined her final destination. The ladies that manned the kitchen kept beans simmering at all hours of the day and night, and the pile of clothes on the floor from her brother gave off sweat like a fire gives off smoke. The distant fragrance of tobacco leaves lingered, too far to touch but easy to taste after long hours and long days walking the rows. Her father had told stories about the labor camps in Georgia when she turned sixteen. Fifteen had made her a woman and sixteen meant she was mature enough to know what poverty and politics could do to a life. He had passed, but his memory was all the fresher now that she and her brother Ciano were spending the summer in the camps.

She reached down and felt the top of the steel knife nestled between her breasts, tied to her bra and secured with a leather sheath. There were only a few other women in the camp, and she was one of only three women who did not have their husbands with them. She hadn't been too worried at first, although Ciano had been. Then the new patrón, Javier, started at the camp and she saw the look in his eyes and the thirst below his belly. She could tell from the start he was the type that would lurk in the shadows. After a day in the fields, the camp was nothing but shadows. The little bit of light that was left on the outside of the barracks often illuminated the paint-saturated faces of women who wandered door to door, knocking and offering "tamales" to any men with money and loneliness. There was a lot of loneliness to go around, which was easily

measured in the amount of beer the men consumed each night to drown away the memories of their children, girlfriends, wives, and parents, a continent away.

When their mother decided to come to the states and take a job working cleaning houses in New York, Petra and Ciano could think of no reason not to follow. There was nothing left for them in Guadalajara. One of Ciano's friends had told them about the farms and connected them with the name of a man who knew a man who knew a man in North Carolina. They arrived, and it didn't appear would soon be departing.

"Ciano!" Petra called, shaking him awake. He stretched and groaned, his Guadalupe pendant sliding down his chest. Their father had always slept with a machete under his bed and his daughter took after him now. But his son, Ciano, was sure no one could touch him. Ciano crawled up off the cot and stepped into his boots with the perfect symmetry of someone whose muscles are trained to move even in their dreams. His hair flopped down, shielding his eyes, and he shook it to the side as he reached for his shirt. Petra tossed him his hat as he pulled on his shirt. Long sleeve beneath and t-shirt on top. He cringed as he felt the leftover sticky residue from the leaves.

"Let's go. I want to get a good seat on the bus. Cesca and Maria always save you a seat and leave me stuck in the back with Miguel."

"Ay, hermana, you don't like Miguel?"

"The only person who likes Miguel is Miguel."

Ciano cracked a smile as they walked outside into the darkness, low voices trailing off as they stepped onto the yellow faded school bus. The other men were whispering and erupting in occasional loud laughter. She knew why and wondered if Ciano too would have succumbed to

the women in the short skirts offering “tamales” to the men late last night if he hadn’t been sharing a room with his big sister.

Ciano didn’t deserve to be in a place like this, didn’t deserve to have his imagination contained within the hours within the crop rows. He had been good in school and always fixing bikes for the other kids in the neighborhood. He could fix anything, except losing his friends to the guaranteed brotherhood of the gangs. Nobody was strong enough when the streets ran the town.

The bus ride was short and the fields were still standing. She had often dreamed that a giant deer would come consume all the tobacco during the night. The animals never seemed to touch it though, and even the snapping turtles that crawled through the sand between the rows never took time to stop and mess with the leaves. She liked watching the animals. The coyote that stood near the edge of the woods, the fox whose beady eyes often watched them at dusk as they loaded onto the bus.

Most days she dreamed of home as she trudged through the furrows of sandy soil, and started the plants on their trip to ashes, but today her thoughts could not leave Javier. Everything had changed with Javier’s arrival.

Javier always smiled. He smiled when he yelled, he smiled when he laughed, he smiled while he stared at her, and he smiled while he smoked. When other men teased him about it, he said it was part of his “friendly persona.”

The past few months had been calm with only a few families sharing the divided barracks, but when July came around, the introduction of the new patron was necessary. A flood of men came with him to handle the rush in the tobacco fields.

Javier personally delivered the news. He had been wandering through the far side of the barracks, the divided side where Petra and Ciano were staying, and did not bother to knock on the door. The room was small enough that simply by Petra's not sitting on the bed, he collided with her when he let himself in, and by stepping forward, forced her body back onto the bed to allow him to pass. Ciano jumped up off the cot in the corner and stepped towards him, muscles tensing.

“What do you want, Javier?”

“Ciano, Ciano...I thought we were becoming amigos, ? You can call me Jave you know.”

“Leave. We are not working now. You should not be here.”

“You will be working soon though, a ways down the road.”

“What?”

“Dalle Farms. Your new home. Go ahead and say adios to your hermana.”

“Leave.”

Boots digging into the cracked concrete floor, Javier slowly turned, and opened the door, letting it press into his stomach as slid around it. Facing the two left in the room, he looked from Ciano and rested his gaze on Petra, winking, and adding, “ I like playtime too..Mi Mujer.” Petra felt her stomach drop and slid down the bed towards the far wall, away from him. She expected Ciano to start his normal cursing and threatening to fight him, but this time he was silent.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Ciano ran his fingers through his hair and packed his cigarettes, pulling one out and offering the truth between his first drag and her final realization.

“His eyes, mi hermana, don’t you see what is in his eyes?”

She had seen. Seen what was in his mind and heart. Seen the way he pulled other women behind buildings and took them to the back of the field to work on a special section of tobacco. She knew he was watching her.

The next few days dragged on and she stayed by Ciano's side. There was often a smiling figure leaning against the wall in the shadows, to whom people murmured and nodded "el jefe" in passing. Javier cared about titles. Everything had it's place. He had his and everything else belonged to him.

Three more days and Ciano was leaving. Sunday morning at breakfast, to be fresh for the week at Dalle. He was to report to the bus lot. She spent the early morning with a different horse each day, talking to them about her concerns. People had joked the horses were bilingual because they had been purchased from el gringo. She knew they understood her even when she spoke silence.

Sunday morning she rose to Ciano's snoring and stepped out into the darkness, closing the door gently behind her. As she rounded the corner and headed into the rising light a voice awakened her to reality.

"Hola, mi mujer..."

A chill went through her body. Javier. How did he...?

As her eyes focused on the shadows she was met with the image of Javier standing, holding a half a bale of hay, with one of the other men from the camp at his side.

"You looking for me, no?"

"No."

"That is good. We will be sure you are not lonely when your brother leaves." Javier's grin got even wider as he continued. "It is today, yes?"

She had already begun backing up, watching the Haitian man by Javier's side, and taking in his confused look at Javier's statements. She ran back to the barracks and found Ciano still sleeping, looking at peace with all that was to come.

She shook him awake again, and he groggily murmured, "es Sabado..." to which she reminded him, "Ciano--Dalle Farms!"

"Shit!" He scrambled up, and she saw the white residue littering his right arm like a fungus.

Pesticides.

"You were there when they sprayed?"

"Yeah, Javier had me and Miguel walk behind the sprayer to be sure the nozzles were working evenly."

Tears streamed down Petra's face, softly at first, and then progressing to full on sobs.

"Don't cry. Lo siento." He put his arm around her.

"You did nothing wrong. It is him."

Ciano sighed. "I know. I wish I could..."

"I know you can't stay. Dalle is waiting. Bueno Suerte Ciano."

They embraced and the tears subsided. Petra wiped her face and used her wet hand to wipe his irritated arm. Ciano grinned and touched her on the arm, squeezing it reassuringly. As he stood up to walk to the door, he promised he will be back to visit on the weekend.

She sat for a few moments, looking at the closed door and feeling the weight of the silence. The room still smelled of sweat and nicotine. She saw he left his notebook sitting on the corner of the cot, and picked it up, rushing out the door with it in hand. As she rounded the

corner of the barracks, she saw Ciano disappear onto the bus. She froze, watching the doors close.

She heard footsteps behind her, and turned, walking into the sickening words.

“Hola, mi mujer.”

She slipped her hand down her shirt and wrapped her fingers around the knife. She had often wondered about this moment. Would there be deliberation? Thoughts of right and wrong? But when she felt the callouses of his sticky hands slide across the small of her back, twisting her body towards his groin, she found herself leaning into the momentum and letting gravity give her the needed strength to sink her knife into him. He gasped but without the pleasure she had feared this moment would bring him, and instead seemed to crumple. As he hit the ground, a cigarette fell from between his fingers and she ground the ash with the heel of her boot. He watched with a grimace, color draining from his face. There was blood, but not yet death, and she looked upon him with the power that comes from standing over a wounded animal.

The Shedding of the Velvet

Wyoa went off to college, and came home one day on the arm of a young man with a buzz cut and bulging muscles who was introduced as Sam. The muscles bulged in his left arm, and his right arm was nonexistent. An army injury, they were quick to explain. He seemed friendly, and Wyoa seemed happy, and yet there were subtle flashes of anger in the boy's eyes that only her father noticed. Anger not towards his daughter, but towards his missing limb.

When they announced their engagement, her father was not surprised. Wyoa was always drawn to the wild, strong, unpredictable ones. The day before the wedding, he pulled her aside and told her to help him gain his arm again. Wyoa was puzzled but knew that it was better to sit with her father's words than try and decipher them. The first few months of marriage brought to the surface small moments of frustration from Sam about daily tasks that he struggled to perform. The VA was no help, and Wyoa didn't know what to do. She tried prayer, and she tried passion, administered through new recipes and her own affection, but neither seemed to bring Sam back to the vibrant person she knew he had once been.

For Valentine's day, he gave her a necklace. It was beautiful and she was thrilled. He went to fasten it around her neck and found himself unable to figure out the right combination of using the fingers on his remaining hand to do so. He reacted first with rage, and then with tears, finally collapsing against the refrigerator, apologizing for not being stronger. She tried to comfort him, and he acted appreciative, but his eyes remained the same. He went up to bed, and

left her on the sofa downstairs, lost in thought about how to help her husband. She stared at the ceiling for a while, then called her father.

“Wyoa?”

“Hey dad.”

“Are you okay? It’s late...and Valentine’s day...”

“I’m okay, but--Sam--well, he’s not okay.”

Sigh. “His arm?”

“Yes. What should I do?”

“Try to prevent further war.”

“Dad, I don’t want to talk politics right now.”

“Wyoa, this is not a discussion about politics, it’s a discussion about humanity.”

“What about Sam, that human, my human-- what can I do for him?”

“Well ...why don’t you teach him about the animals? That always brought you peace. I bet we still have your old journal with the notes you made about the different animals and your observations.”

“I guess I could try that.”

“Your vows are to try something.”

“Can you look and see if the journal is in the attic at your house?”

“I know right where it is. I’ll drop it off at your house tomorrow on my way to work.”

“Thanks Dad.”

“Goodnight Wyoa.”

“Night.”

When Wyoa was a child her dad liked to call where they lived the “sub-country,” which he was always eager to explain was the result of the subdivision they lived in being in a very remote area. It had started out as the premier place to be, and his wife was enthralled by the promises of stores to come. They bought the second house when Wyoa was nine . Things were great for the next few months, and then the crash hit and the building stopped. The contractors fled, and the neighbors decided to move in with their successful son and daughter-in-law. The planned playground of the Harborwood Hills subdivision became a square of mulch that soon faded into the topsoil.

Wyoa heard her mom and dad discussing this desertion. She knew something was wrong when the noise stopped. She could no longer wake up to Saturday mornings and see men with hard hats parading the streets. She had loved those days. Her dad would walk her down to pay tribute to the working man. To see the development in action. Her dad always wanted her to know the land, and this was the way he knew how in what he called “the white man’s world” that his wife had been born into. He would kiss Wyoa on the head and tell her when she said her prayers, to “remember our people on the reservation.” Often, she would see him stop and stare out the window after he uttered those words.

As the neighborhood vanished, so did the neighboring children, and it wasn’t long before Wyoa’s mom suggested she join the local soccer team. Her dad had protested, a game for “foot fairies” he said, but had consented when his wife reminded him that their daughter needed friends besides her parents.

So she tried soccer. It went fine in practice. The first game, she was put on defense and after standing guard for two minutes and forty-five seconds (her best internal count), she settled

down into the grass, feeling at home as the sun blared down, and began daydreaming. Between the coaches yelling, and her mother's disapproval of the bruise the ball left on her head, when it bounced off and brought her back to reality, Wyoa was soon back spending all her free time at their own sub-country estate.

The fall that she turned eleven, she heard her parents arguing again one morning. She peered around the corner, watching the way her father's crow black hair swung freely when he was angry, and the way his hands tamed it when he was paused to think. Her mother was the one fussing. "You don't want her to do ballet and we can't afford to drive the two hours over to the reservation every day for the events there. What *do you want* her to do?"

Her father began turning around, and Wyoa ducked into the shadows. "Right now, I'd like her to stop listening to us at the door."

Wyoa cringed.

"She is listening? How do you always know when she is sneaking around?"

Her mother was wrong, Wyoa thought. He did not *always* know. Last week she had stolen a cookie off the tray her mother had made for the bake sale and he had never said anything about it. As she sat frozen in place, her father turned back to her mother and put his arms around her.

"I have an idea. Can you pack us some supper? We won't be back in time for a hot meal."

"Should I even ask or just wait and see?"

"How about wait and see?"

He leaned in for a kiss and then started for the door, pulling his boots on and buttoning the cowhide vest he liked to wear over his button-down shirts. "Wyoa!" She came running, as

curious as her mother about this outing, her eagerness cancelling out any fear for the repercussions of eavesdropping. Her father stroked her head.

Come on my little moth.”

“Moth! I am not one of those ugly things.”

“You could never be ugly, but you are a moth.”

“Then how? I don’t fly or circle lamps.”

“No, but like a moth, you have the best hearing in all of the animal and human kingdom.”

He grinned and waved her along. They walked behind the house, towards the edge of the pines. The ground grew slick with the pine straw damp under the melted frost. The ground was quickly refreezing as the temperature dropped and the sky slowly grew darker. Dusk was coming upon them.

“Wyoa, do you remember your grandfather?”

“On the reservation or the one in New York?”

He laughed. “My father. On the reservation. You were seven when we saw him before he passed.”

“He was lying on the bed and the man in the corner chair was saying strange things.

There was smoke too.”

“You do remember then. Do you remember what he said to you?

“He said I should see some animals. Mom told him I’d been to the zoo before. He said that wasn’t what he meant.”

“Yes, and then he said something else. He said learn from the animals.”

“I didn’t think that really meant much.”

He put his arm around her shoulders. “Well, Wyoa, you are going to find out.”

The next morning, Sam was off to work by the time Wyoa had opened up her laptop. Medical transcription paid the bills, and sometimes it was nice to work from home. She listened to the continuous “ding” of her email as it loaded while she stirred milk and eggs and sprinkled salt and pepper onto the scrambled concoction. The last ding was notably louder, and proved to be her father at the doorbell. She saw the worn green notebook in his hands and felt a warmth rise inside her as she remembered her days in the woods. They exchanged greetings and he wished her peace before climbing back into his sedan to head to his job, which was only a slighter shorter commute than Sam’s.

She spent her lunch break pouring over the old entries. She had forgotten the time she saw a raccoon eat a squirrel and the time she learned that coyotes mate for life. She had a note scribbled at the bottom of the page that read “I will marry a coyote.” She laughed at the memory and felt more confident sharing all of these stories with Sam. It might at least make him smile. He was a city boy through and through, but a smart and kind one, and she wanted him to be happy.

When he got home that evening, she had lemon chicken sizzling in a cast iron skillet and asparagus with parmesan roasting in the oven. A nice meal and maybe some wine. A chocolate cake in the oven. Hopefully it would put him in a better mood to read the journal. He gave her a hug and kiss and handed her some flowers. “Sorry about last night.” he said sheepishly. She told

him he didn't have to apologize and asked how his day had been. He said it was okay and asked about hers. She pulled out the green journal and began regaling him with the stories, re-telling them more rapidly than he could read them on the page. He laughed about the coyotes, was amused by the raccoon and squirrel story, and was turning the page when the oven timer went off and Wyoa got up to check the chocolate cake. He hollered from the living room as she stuck a knife in the cake, "hey babe who was Scout?"

Scout had been the turning point in her childhood. She still remembered when he first came into her life. It had been a Wednesday afternoon, and a fairly ordinary day at school, until she returned home. Wyoa walked in the house after school and went straight to the kitchen counter, grabbing an apple and a bottle of water. Her mother came in.

"Hi Honey, how was school?"

"It was fine. But I've got to get out to the woods. I promised dad I'd be there by dusk to wait."

Her mother sighed. "Yes, I heard about the deal you made with your father. Be safe out there." Mid-bite of apple, she hollered back as the door closed, "I will, mo-.

The first few nights her dad sat with her. They sat in silence mainly, and looked at the birds and squirrels. He told her how to watch them. "Don't look among the trees for an animal. Look for movement, and then you will see the animal."

When she put his advice into action, the world came alive. The turkeys would come barrelling through the underbrush before trying to roost in the trees, and the occasional fox or

coyote would slink by. Rabbits and squirrels were abundant, and her father said he could make a good stew of them. She didn't like that idea. Too much fur to possibly imagine eating the meat underneath. She imagined they tasted like acorns, and if this was true, perhaps she tasted like string cheese, her favorite snack.

It was the deer that she fell in love with. The dark brown of the swamp deer, the light brown of the field deer, and the speckled white innocence of the fawns. The soulful eyes. She would take notes in her green journal of what she saw every day. The deal with her father had been that if she watched the woods every day for a month, then he would get her tickets to see her favorite singer coming to town. The month ended, and no crowd of crazed fans could longer attract her. She turned down the tickets and returned to the woods.

One deer in particular became her favorite visitor. She named him Scout, as he seemed eager to be on the lookout, eager to protect the others, and always the one who tilted his eye so he could watch her, with curiosity rather than fear. Her teacher had recently introduced their class to Wikipedia, and every night she sought to learn more about Scout and his kind. White-tailed deer were the classification and yet something about Scout was magnificent to her.

He had horns that her father said were really "antlers" and yet he zipped through the woods with the ease of a squirrel. The wide antlers, at least a ruler's length, never seemed to get in his way. She had read that he grew them by eating protein, and wondered what such forest food kept him so strong.

As the aromas of the meal brought her back to the present moment she felt guilty she had forgotten about her childhood friend. Scout! She set the timer for five more minutes and went back to sit with him on the sofa. They started with the way he had appeared and gotten his name and then moved on to the way he acted through the seasons. When she told him about the velvet shed and the way the antlers disappeared and then regrew he went pale.

“You okay Sam?”

“How does that work? The antlers?

“I don’t know exactly, it’s like blood vessels and stuff.”

“I need to know.”

“Sam?”

“Wyoa, don’t you see? This is me. I lost a part of me, just like him. His body instinctively knows he needs it. Helps him regrow it. Why can’t mine?”

“You’re not a deer, for one thing. And you didn’t exactly ‘shed’ yours.”

“Yeah, but still, why aren’t people studying that? I’m not the only guy coming back from war hurt.”

“Who knows, Sam, maybe they are.”

“I’m going to find out.”

Sam took off work the next morning and sat with his laptop balanced on his knee and the phone between his chin and shoulder. He made call after call, trying to get meetings with research centers in the area. Most people wouldn’t talk to him. The VA wouldn’t even take him off hold. She could tell he was getting frustrated when he hung up from one call and let the phone fall to the floor, staring at it and not bothering to pick it up again. She called out and told him to come sit and eat lunch with her.

He had eaten some leftover chocolate cake for breakfast and said he wanted breakfast food now, and let her eat the leftover chicken while he scrambled some eggs and cooked bacon. She asked him how it was when he took the first bite off the steaming hot plate and he replied, "better than anything I ate in Iraq." Wyoa paused, "We haven't ever talked about the war."

Sam grunted. "We aren't going to any time soon."

"I want to be there for you Sam." He softened and sighed. "I know. Thanks. Tell you what--- how about I tell you about life on base and in return you tell me about the reservation you lived on before you moved into Scout's backyard."

They both smiled and she handed him the bottle of hot sauce. A truce enacted.

She had spent more time since they talked about Scout reflecting on her childhood, and discovered that most of her memories were marked by the stage of her interactions with Scout. A few months into their time together, winter began to set in. December came, and her mother put up a tree. They asked what she wanted for Christmas, and she asked for a book about woodland animals. Her father smiled and her mother sighed. Wyoa wondered what Scout was doing. The internet suggested he should have a girlfriend about now, or several, but she preferred to think of him in terms of a prince with one woman.

She went back to the woods and looked for Scout that evening, munching on a cookie she had saved in her pocket, intending to share it with the squirrels but first growing hungry herself.

A deer appeared, but he didn't have any antlers. When he gave her the same alert look, she knew it was Scout.

She knocked on the door of her father's study and walked in without waiting for a reply. He turned around and waited, knowing she would speak first.

"Scout's antlers are gone!"

"Ah. Yes, Wyoa, I should have warned you, but he lets them go like the trees do their leaves and the snakes their skin when the time is right."

"How does he know when?"

"When he has had his time with all the women and feels his job is done."

"They were so beautiful."

"The does likely thought so too. It is how nature intended it. They will grow back."

"Really?"

"Yes. It is a magical process."

Christmas Eve approached, and Wyoa's mother stayed up late wrapping gifts. Her mother knew the girl was becoming too old for the Santa story, and her father had never liked telling it to their daughter, but she wanted it to all last as long as possible. She made a batch of oats and barley and placed them in a plastic bag, as she had done for years, prepared to present them to Wyoa as reindeer food.

Wyoa opened presents and got her book, along with a new soccer ball (surprisingly from her mother) and a camera from her father. "So you can remember them when they depart." He had said, with the mystery that always hung in his words. She remembered when she was seven and their dog died, and she remembered when her classmate said her dog ran away. She did not know yet what action held true for the departure he meant. She hoped neither.

She continued this routine of daily visits to Scout, and her father prayed nightly for the hunters to have mercy on Scout so that his daughter would not lose her friend. She watched his antlers begin to come back, and became a scientist of sorts, learning all about the velvet coating and blood vessels that regrew his magnificent head dressing. When the next Christmas rolled around, her fascination had begun to fade slightly. School was becoming increasingly appealing simply because of her ever expanding friend group and an array of clubs to be a part of. She felt she knew Scout as well as herself, and so she became the first to depart. Gradually, choosing afternoons of watching television and drawing pictures of animals to watching in the woods. A picture of Scout remained by her bed, and their interactions continued only in her dreams. Her father was slightly dismayed, but pleased in knowing she would not forget the deer, and that knowing nature the way she know did would help make her a woman.

Over the next few weeks, when Sam wasn't working, he was making phone calls and doing research online. He couldn't find much about the shedding of the velvet from a medical perspective and was starting to research out to wildlife specialists. Their relationship was improving as they both shared more of their past.

Wyoa's father called one evening and asked how Sam had liked the journal. When she told him about Sam's new quest and her own doubts, her father reminded her of his words years ago, "you can learn from the animals." Before hanging up, he suggested that Sam go talk to people on the reserve through the Indian Health Service. Wyoa wasn't sure this was a good idea,

knowing how against Sam's military service most of her family had been. Her dad knew this, and hung up after stating that while the family "may not believe in war, they believe in healing."

Sam jumped on the idea of the Indian Health Service. He was determined to visit all the reservations within a two hundred mile radius and talk to every doctor, researcher, and secretary that would listen. The first few people he got on the phone assured him that they could refer him to the VA and that each of their locations had military culture training. But nobody wanted to make time to see him. He vented to Wyoa, telling her how impossible it seemed to get someone to listen, when she had an idea.

"Doesn't your knee hurt? Or your stomach?"

"No...what made you think that?"

"Oh, I think they are. And that choosing a good Native American Doctor to help you recover from your sickness is important."

"Wyoa, I'm not sick."

"Sam, being sick would mean you'd have uninterrupted time with a doctor of your choice to talk to about your dream."

He finally understood and his face lit up.

"I think I am feeling a little puny, now that you mention it."

"I thought so."

He chose a doctor that was serving the reserve next to the one that Wyoa had been born on. A little bit of internet sleuthing had uncovered that the man was an avid outdoorsman in addition to being a top notch medical practitioner.

The appointment was a few months out, and he began to come alive with the possibilities such a day could hold. Wyoa feared the downfall, but tried to live in the hopeful present. When

the day came, she sat in the chair across from him, joking with him about his weight and blood pressure. The doctor finally came in, a middle-aged man with a kind smile and hiking boots on.

He shook their hands and asked Sam where it hurt. When Sam pointed to his missing limb, the doctor's face flashed with confusion, and he looked from Sam's stomach to his eyes. Sam laughed and launched into the story about Scout and the shedding of the velvet. The doctor took a few steps back and sat down himself.

“Let me get this straight. You want someone to do research about the shedding of the velvet that whitetail deer undergo and see if the same process can be simulated in humans who have lost limbs?”

“Yes sir.”

“Damn.”

“What?”

“It’s brilliant. And jarringly strange.”

“You think it would work, doc?”

“I think it’s worth trying.”

“And if it does work?”

“Then you will have to start wearing a wedding band on the appropriate finger rather than on the opposite hand,” the doctor teased.

“Thank you, doctor.”

“You know, I have a lot of folks come in that talk about nature and how they feel better when they get outdoors. But you’re the first one that has actually learned from the animals.”

“I have to thank my wife for that one.”

“It was all my dad. And Scout.”

Sam went out to pay and turn in the paperwork for the visit. Wyoa trailed behind him and the doctor flagged her down and pulled her aside.

The doctor started, “You know there are no guarantees with this. It is incredibly experimental.”

Wyoa smiled. “I know. But there is hope. And that is all he ever needed.”

