The Coyote Fields

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The Coyote Fields

A Novel

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For Mary Ann, who played a piano over my head

and *For Blake, for keeping the faith*

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Chapter One

How quickly emotions melt together into an empty bottle. That first rush of bravery, convinced that your hair looks a little better than when you left the house. Second is the anger at someone who left you because why the fuck would *they* leave *you}* Thirdly comes a sadness so manic that you wave away the bar tab and there are only three words you want to say. Sometimes it's "I love you," and sometimes it's "Keep 'em coming," but no matter what three words you use they are always a mistake.

Still drunk from the night before, I laid in bed with my head propped up, watching hot summer rain blow in through the open window. It was early morning, the sky the color of dead air on a television. Through the rain I heard a train barreling through the north side of town, and I wished I was still asleep, hopping boxcars in my dreams. I pictured bread and coffee downstairs, needing to be made, wondering if I could make anything at all. After looking over at the empty bottle of wine next to the bed, my head began to feel heavier, and that lucidity which comes with drunkenness, that crossroads of possibilities which grows larger with each sip, all fell back into the pillow when I knew that the biggest task of the day would be to sit up and get a glass of water.

The wind rushed the thunderstorm through our mountain town. Branches broke. I wondered if the world would end, and if so, would I leave it with a hangover? I would be alone. On the other side of the bed was nothing but a pillow smelling of hair and skin, teetering on the edge as if I'd been married to that punched piece of down for years. George must have left sometime after midnight, after I had passed out. Like a good ex-

boyfriend, he knew to leave after we fucked. There would be no cuddling. George knew from the moment he sat down by me at the bar last night that I needed to fit into the contours of someone else's bones. On summer nights in the mountains, there's not much else to do.

George preferred traditional pubs; he was an Irish boy. It was only natural that he came to the Eighteen Whiskeys last night. It was a bar with heavy wood and high-backed booths, a place where you could hide if you wanted to. The crowd was predictable by the hour. First came the locals after work for pints of bitter and fried fish plates, then they were weeded out by bands of artists—sculptors, musicians, writers—sometimes starving, sometimes not. Finally the younger college kids, boys who never bothered to cut their hair and who made vague literary toasts with a commanding voice, their scotch glasses clanking in unison. I came here a few nights a week, to help bartend and make some extra dough on the side. Late at night, once the younger crowd came in from the college, I put on records in the corner and deejayed a bit until closing time. No one really cared what I put on the turntables, so I amused myself, putting on songs with memories anchoring down each word. Faces and hands hovered over me like wings, song after song, until I was roused out of my past by the barkeep's voice booming off the walls: "Last call!"

I am convinced that the city of Asheville is a small world with only one-way streets leading inward. My friends were made up of travelers who always knew someone that hitched a ride to this town and liked the vibe. Mouths spread word, and strangers creeped in like kudzu. My circles expanded and touched one another, overlapping like stones dropped in water. More people arrived, but no one seemed to leave. The few that managed an exit strategy went across the world for a bit—surfing, teaching, hiking until

their shoes were nothing but thin pieces of rubber—and then they came back. Sometimes in the mornings, when the fog smeared the mountain horizon, I felt tired and lost, wondering if I'd ever crawl out of this strange Southern fairy ring, or we would all stay here, asleep forever.

My artist friends Gary and Mike step into the bar, and I noticed that they had George in tow. All three wore paint-splattered pants. I guess George had joined their Thursday night life-painting class next door. He was finally moving on from painting houses. I had to hand it to the guy for living out a dream, since all of mine were still indistinguishable lumps of Play-Doh. And then there was the fact that George now had some sort of weekly routine, a routine that did not involve fucking me. You always wonder what moment of courage inspired them, but you never ask, for you're afraid the answer will be another woman.

George walked past, not noticing me, but looked up in the air as I mixed in a Daft Punk track that we used to play in the apartment we shared together. His eyes traced the bar until he turned around.

I smiled and slipped my headphones off.

"Any requests, sir?" I asked.

He walked up and reached over the sound system to hug me. I hate it when people do that, trying to hug over tables or friends. It makes me anxious to have a real connection. My headphones squished his face. He smelled of Old Spice and I caught him sniffing at my hair as he pulled away. George smiled. "Hi Eledy," he said.

My beer was only half-empty but George ordered another for me, and left to sit down with our friends. I put on a couple more songs, ambient stuff to set the mood and

make people introduce themselves to one another. It was a kind of mix that made you anxious to know who you would leave with at the end of the night.

Two hours later, our friends gone, George pulled his stool up next to my table.

He took a swig of beer before speaking. "So how you been?"

"I've been good." I smiled and stared him down.

George once said that my eyes could change anyone's mind. I asked Cliff to hand me a bottle of wine from behind the bar. The night was late and hazy. I could feel sweat beading between my shoulder blades. George wiped his neck and tipped the Cabernet for me.

By the time I licked the last drop of red wine from the glass I couldn't decide if I wanted George to leave the bar with me or just with the thought of me. There was a nagging anxiety in the air, like a bill I had forgotten to pay. Underneath my laughter at his stupid stories I wondered what the hell I was doing there at that stool with him. Why was I irritated all of a sudden? I asked Cliff to pour me one more glass, and while George went to the bathroom, I emptied it and felt my cheeks burning.

After closing time George walked me to the car, and tailed behind in his Buick. As we slowly drove away from the Eighteen Whiskeys, its bright lights blinked out with a left turn. I popped a piece of gum and hoped for an orgasm. Between the fumbling of keys in the door and the last "Oh, fuck" from George's mouth, the only moments I remembered were of wine spilling across the kitchen floor and a mid-coitus feeling that again, I was forgetting something important. A birthday? Did I feed the cat? I let George's heavy breathing take it away until the morning, when the space between us returned.

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My house was a stone cottage that I loved and hardly left. There was a flagged floor in the kitchen and flowers carved into the banister. My bed was in the attic and even on rainy days like this, when the walls felt damp and I placed buckets under the roof leaks—there were three—I hated to go any farther than my couch.

With the clock urging me to go to work, I sat up, pouty-lipped, and pulled myself out from under the sheets. Honeysuckle drifted in on the wind and rain through the open window, and followed me down the stairs. My hands shook on the descent, my thighs felt sore. There was still a stickiness between my legs that would be there until later tonight, perhaps, when I had the energy to shower.

The couch pillows were tossed on the floor. I picked up my shirt and bra and threw them at the foot of the stairs before trudging into the kitchen. I stepped over the puddles of wine and reached for the bread. While breakfast toasted itself I sat on the counter and stared at the coffee-maker. With all its gurgling and steam that fucking kitchen appliance was more alive than me.

Ruby padded in and leapt to the counter to join me in my wait. Although she didn't eat toast, Ruby was nice to see in the morning. She didn't talk too much and her hairs always got in my mouth, but she was just enough company to make me not fuck ex-boyfriends night after night. Ruby had been my father's cat.

Today was the two-year anniversary of my father's death.

Throwing up in a kitchen sink is so icky that it makes you want to replace the entire sink area, but it happened nevertheless and I sank down off the counter and ran my feet into the puddles of spilled wine and started to cry. Mostly because I felt guilty for

forgetting to "honor thy father," as Christians say, and a little because I was so greasy and gray and unprepared for what I knew would now be an exhausting day ahead.

The phone rang.

I gripped the countertop and pulled myself up, crossed the kitchen back into the living room, leaving sugary red footprints behind me. It was my mother, calling from the other side of town, I was sure of it. Only a mother calls at a depressing hour. You think it's because they somehow know something is wrong with you, but usually it's only that they need to remind you about your niece's birthday which is coming up in three weeks, and oh God, you didn't get the same gift as her, did you? And you reassure her that no, you didn't get the same gift because you haven't given it a fucking thought since the last time she called.

"What's wrong sweetie? You sound hoarse," Mom asked. "Are you sick?" Without giving me a chance to answer she went on, "How can you be sick in the summer? It's that house, I swear. You've got mold in there, I've been trying to tell you ever since you moved in—"

"No Mom. That's not it. I just went out last night and stayed up late, that's all," I said.

Then added: "And I'm sad about Father."

There was silence.

"Hello? Mom?"

"I'm here. I thought you could pick up James later today and come over for dinner. Just the three of us. But of course, if you already have plans..." She trailed off, giving me my cue.

"No, Mom," I sighed. "I don't have any plans."

"Ok, well maybe you can help me cook if you're going to be here—"

"Yes, Mom I'll be there-"

"—so I"ll call James and let him know that you'll pick him up after work and I'll see you for dinner. Lasagna okay?"

"Sure."

"Great. Love you. Bye."

Sitting back in the couch, I dropped the phone into my lap and stared at the ceiling. Ruby followed my footprints and curled up next to my legs. In the last few days before Father died, when his face had puffed out a lot and his skin had that certain smell of something wrong just under the pores, it occurred to him that nobody knew what would happen to Ruby after he passed on. When he appointed me her guardian, my first thought was that her fur would match my white stone cottage exactly, which pleased me to the point that I told myself I'd get over the tiny fact that I wasn't really a cat person. But I had to ask: Why was her name Ruby?

"Oh, because that is what we were originally going to name you," my father had answered, coughing in between words. His lungs had been shot to shit as well as his stomach; cancer doesn't take lunch breaks, it works overtime.

"You were going to name me Ruby?" I asked, smiling and faking a groan. "I'm glad Mom had a say in this."

"It's the name of a waterfall in Tennessee. So quiet and beautiful. My first thought of you, Cornflower." It was the last time he called me Cornflower.

Mom named me Eledy after a French grandmother I never met. Father gave me that other name for the color of my eyes, even though I never saw a cornflower in my entire life. Anything's better than Ruby. It suits a cat.

Now it occurred to me, sitting on the couch this morning, that nobody called me Cornflower anymore. Mom never used my Indian name after she left Father and took me and my little brother James to a house with an unlisted phone number on the Carolina coast. That happened when I was five years old. Only when I saw Father during the summers growing up did I hear my real name whispered in my ear during our conversations.

My fingers curled around the phone cord and I stared out the window at the rain. The clouds were just dark enough to see lightning flashes over the street. Most of the houses seemed unstirred behind wind-blown shutters. In my hangover I was half-tempted to open all of the windows to get the rest of the house washed clean and smelling of honeysuckle and ferns. After all of his relocations around the States, Father had always loved the summers he had spent in North Carolina, living with my mother. On days like this, she once told me, they would stay in and try to make babies.

The way women looked at her, and in the way men talked to her so frankly about things, I knew that even after they divorced Mom still carried a lot of weight in this town. After we moved to the coast and came back, Mom was given her old position as manager of the Wealth of Health, a food store downtown. Many people came to see her everyday, usually to pass the time, trying to talk with her about Doug. She had been in my father's presence, had touched him and been loved by him and shown secrets of healing in the old ways.

After his death, my mother was swarmed by Father's friends, who made her swear to keep in touch. They were afraid of forgetting traditions, as if they were unable to keep fires themselves.

And Madeleine, who had loved Doug to the point of leaving him to preserve what respect they had left for each other, kept the fire going in his memory. She passed on his stories to James and me. She hosted sweat lodge ceremonies on full moon nights. She wrote letters and health articles about good medicine. Many women loved my father. He had occasionally loved them back. I didn't know this until I was much older, at an age when I knew that my father was going to die from cancer and that love and making love were two very different things.

There was work to be done. My job first, then to pick up James on the west side of town, because the kid worked at a restaurant around the block and only owned a bike. Then dinner with my mother and my father's empty place setting.

I threw coffee and cream into a travel mug, waved to Ruby on my way out the door, without an umbrella. On days like this, when I needed shelter, I had none.

Chapter Two

My work took place behind the desk of astrology bookstore downtown, which means I didn't do too much work at all. Most of my store hours were spent answering questions about the natal charts and books on transits, both of which I knew enough. My mother had raised James and I on daily horoscopes and cream-of-wheat; five years later after landing this job and she's still beaming with fucking pride.

The bookstore also sold other stuff to supplement the wise movements of the stars, but I didn't really give a shit about any of it, especially crystals. I always screwed up gems and their appointed properties, and had to pass on whichever customer had made the mistake of talking to me to my coworker Jake, a retired taxi driver whose eyes never failed to focus on my tits whenever we greeted each other in the morning. I never knew why he did that, there wasn't much to look at. But he was an alright guy; with the exception of the examination, he had good taste in music and more importantly, he actually cared about the uses of garnet, onyx and pearl.

This morning I looked up from the desk and saw Jake standing over a box against the wall, making hand movements to explain something to a middle-aged woman who kept nodding and smiling. Whenever he made hand movements like that, I knew he was excited that someone was actually taking him seriously. Every now and then he smoothed his gray ponytail and looked over at me to make sure I was watching the rest of the store.

I reached into my purse to grab my bottle of aspirin and my Henry James novel. Besides Jake and his new "client," as he would later refer to the smiling woman after forcing one of our business cards with his cell phone scribbled on the back into her

hands, the only other person in the store was a middle-aged woman who squatted in the narrow space between bookshelves directly in front of me. She was quiet. As I tipped up my bottle of water I watched her, noting which books she fingered and browsed. It was the Sexual Astrology section. People kill me sometimes, the way that they'll make certain every star and planet and piece of dust are in place before giving any weight to the electricity of one kiss.

Jake eventually escorted his client up to the desk, where I totaled her pile of rocks and threw them in a paper bag. The other woman made her way out the door, and as soon as it closed I picked up my book and pretended to read while my coworker shuffled the CD player to Nick Drake and left to sort and shelve the new stock. The rain had not stopped, and I was thankful for the low lighting and even lower number of people. Even the smell of books, a smell which I wished could be captured in one of those car air fresheners you hang from the rearview mirror, suffocated me to the point of tears. I wanted to go back to sleep, even here behind the desk. Everything felt heavy, a little because of the wine, but mostly because of the obligations I had to my dead father.

Two years. That was it?

My father's death had been memorialized in a couple of small newspapers, mostly local stuff, and some one-lined tributes at the beginning of magazine articles. A few months after his cremation ceremony, some friends called my mother and suggested a biography be written about Doug's life as a healer among his people. The medicine he had done, the political activity at Wounded Knee and around the country, the huge following that had been built up over the years: it was all there, waiting to be written and published. Mom would not do it. She had been divorced from the man and the image for

years, and just wanted to keep what was left stashed away in boxes, to be passed on to James and I when we were older.

Barbara and Will, two of my father's closest friends and followers, decided to come to me instead.

"You should write his story, so that will be available to inspire everyone who knew him and those who didn't," Barb had said to me over coffee one day.

I had looked at her with uncertainty. Father had hardly been around when I was growing up, and I didn't think I was emotionally prepared to go through box after box in my mother's attic to make up for time lost with him.

"But that's why you would be so good at writing it," Barb had said. "You loved your father very much, and would care about this project more than any of us. You've always been talented at writing, we all know that—"

"I wrote poetry when I was younger, Barb. And it sucked. You know, teenage angsty stuff."

"Oh, come on. Your mother would show us your work and we all loved it. Besides, this is very different and would mostly be documenting what you found and putting it in order. Just a chronology of his life."

I told her I would think about it. Six months, off and on, whenever they came to Asheville to visit my mother, Barbara would call me up to casually ask me if I had taken a look at Doug's old stuff yet, pushing the idea. Although I hated her phone calls, I was curious to put things in order. I had only summers with my father and a cigar box full of memories: some pictures, a tattered letter, a golf ball we once found together while hiking in the mountains. Childhood: we all have it in a box or jar somewhere.

In the winter of 2003, bored out of my mind with the bookstore and having nothing else but Ruby's bird-watching to entertain me, I went to my mother's house and asked her for all of Father's stuff in the attic.

"You're really going to do this, Eledy?" she had asked, concerned.

"I just want to go through all of it, Mom," I said. "It will do us some good to organize it and figure out what should go to James and what I can keep."

Knowing my mom's cleanliness issues, I added, "And we should put all of it in plastic containers. You know, to make sure the stuff doesn't get water damage. Plus I'll keep it all at my house."

That sealed the deal. There were six boxes in all, and it only took one car trip to the other side of town.

The breakfast nook was never used for breakfast, so I sat all the boxes there and left them alone for a few days. My father's life had been an extraordinary one, but I wasn't ready to cry and grieve again over it. When it came to losing a daddy, the little things hurt the most, like knowing he would never walk me down the aisle on my wedding day, if I ever had a wedding day. Stupid shit like that hurt a lot, to the point where it was hard to breathe.

But at night, while in bed, I pictured the boxes downstairs, wondering what was contained inside, never seeing any of it since my mother had packed it up so quickly James and I never got a chance. What parts of Father's life had I missed out on? Were there missing parts that I was unknowingly part of? Were there pictures of me and him that I had never seen?

On the fourth day, at three o'clock in the morning I took the scissors from the kitchen and opened the first box. Half-naked in an open bathrobe, I sat on the tiles in the breakfast nook and began to dig through my father's life. By dawn all six boxes were open, their contents fanned out around me and grouped in piles, and when the sun rose I decided that maybe a biography about Douglas Littlehawk was a good idea. I never knew until that time just how smart he had been, what horrifying things he had seen in his travels. All I had before then was this feeling that whenever I looked up at him, I felt like I was looking at a rollercoaster.

That was a year and a half ago. This morning, as I sat behind the desk, pretending to read my novel, I thought about the work on the biography I had done. It was almost finished, and nobody knew. Later tonight, at dinner, I would have to tell Mom and James.

My little brother lived on the west side of town, in a shabby house that hardly had any paint left on it. The yard always looked sad and wet and was full of dog shit. James was twenty years old and one would, at first meeting him, write him off as a lazy hippie kid who couldn't even clean up after his animals. James had fine black hair as long as mine, and kept it tied up under a hat most of the time. Looking at both of us from the back, it was difficult to figure out who was male and female. We both had our mother's skinny-ass build and sallow skin that tanned in the summer, but James had Father's nose and jaw and deep brown eyes. And I had crooked teeth. Mother never afforded braces, and James was genetically lucky.

I was really the lazy one in the family, but since I had gone to college to make something of myself and worked behind a desk, so to speak, James got the shaft. He didn't talk much, and when he looked at you it was always with a glazed expression, like he wasn't even there at all. He was just preoccupied most of the time, looking up in the sky, constantly painting and drawing clouds. I was surrounded by artists in this town, but nobody painted clouds. What was the point when there were so many portraits in front of one to be made? That's where James succeeded. His brush strokes could make you blush or even feel guilty for something you didn't do, whatever he wanted to capture in his pictures of the sky. There were pink sunsets and blue hazy mornings caught up in paint, stuff we saw every day in North Carolina, but he had a way of saying something about it that was silent but right on point. He was the kind of kid who would stand out in an oncoming storm until drops splattered across the canvas, and turn around and put it in a gallery for two hundred bucks. I appreciated James' art, even if he couldn't clean up after his damn dog.

Clouds are not in as high demand as Monet's water lilies, so James worked down the street at Clancy's Cantina, an Irish-themed Mexican restaurant, slinging salsa into burritos and serving green Coronas on St. Patrick's Day. Aside from the Eighteen Whiskeys, my friends and I went to the Cantina a lot to get hooked up with free beer. My little brother was the best damn server there. Even with his blank expression he could memorize drinks and food for a table of ten and deliver it right down to the sour cream substitutions and no-jalepenos requests.

My little brother and I didn't really have anything in common except our ways to get by, and James fascinated me because he actually had passion for something. I was

still waiting for it to call out to me, from behind some door while I was walking down the street. Maybe my passion for now was recovering my father's past and putting it down on paper. That was a heavy task, let alone putting his life in order around the desk and on the computer, and felt more tiresome than anything. It was almost done. That passion would dissipate with the last typed word so I guess I had to be on the look-out for something else, if you can look for passion at all. Maybe it does just hit you in the face, like the opening flap of a cardboard box at three o'clock in the morning.

I walked down the sidewalk to James' house and knocked on the door.

Nothing. I knocked again.

Seelu's barking broke the silence in the yard as she came rushing around the house. While Ruby was my inheritance, Seelu was Father's newborn puppy that was passed onto James when he moved out of Mom's house a year ago. James needed a companion who wouldn't mind his quirky lack of communication. Her paws scrambled their way up my legs and over my shirt.

"Seelu! Fuck, get down!"

The door unlocked and opened.

A girl's voice rang out: "Seelu, inside!"

Seelu backed up and ran inside the house. I was bent over, trying to clean myself of her fur and dirt. Letting out another "Fuck!" I flipped my hair back over and straightened up to see who was standing there.

Her shape in the doorway was such like an hourglass that you could have flipped her over and happily watched time slip like sand through her waist. Wow, *wait to go James*, I thought. Maybe he had picked her up at the restaurant.

The girl pulled her strawberry-blonde curls from her face and tucked them behind her ears. "Are you Elle?"

I brushed myself off some more, then went to shake her hand. "Yeah. That's me. Eledy. But James calls me Elle for short, so I guess that uh, you can, too." I laughed like an idiot.

"He's inside," she said, moving back inside the door. "Upstairs, in the studio."

"Thanks," I said and stepped in next to her. She glowed next to me. Her whole shape smelled like apple shampoo. I looked down at the ground until I found the stairs and made my way to find James.

Despite the open windows the air was hot and heavy, making me dizzy with the fumes of linseed oil and paint thinner. The radio was on, loudly announcing the rush hour traffic delays. "Hey!" I yelled over the speakers.

James looked up from the cumulus-covered field he was working on. He looked sad as hell. Father's death had shaken him up in such a way that he didn't talk to anyone for a month afterward; I couldn't recall a single time he spoke in that period. The first anniversary we saw another silent spell from James for a few weeks, and he lost about ten pounds when he couldn't afford to in the first place. I guess this year it would be the same. I wouldn't stop him. I would just hold on for the both of us and make sure his bills got paid on time.

I made my way to the radio and turned it down. "Did Mom call you about dinner?"

"Yeah," he replied, not putting down his brush from the canvas.

"So you wanna go in a few minutes?"

"Sure."

"Okay, I'll be downstairs when you're ready." I started to turn away and then remembered the girl. "Oh, by the way, who's that girl? Did you meet her at Clancy's?"

James looked at me and smiled. It meant to be a laugh, I knew, but today was not a day for laughing, not for James.

"No," he said. "That's Gillian. Dave moved out. She moved in."

"Oh," I fished for more information. "When did she move in? Did you put an ad out or something?"

"No. She was a friend of Dave's and was looking for a place. He was going back to Portland anyway, and just decided to leave a little earlier than usual."

He went back to painting, end of conversation. That would probably be the longest sentence I'd hear from him for a while, so I left him alone and went back downstairs.

Gillian was in the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee. "Would you like some?"

"You read my mind," I said. I wondered if my waning hangover was that obvious.

We walked with our mugs into the living room and sat across from each other. I tried not to sip too loudly. She flipped through the paper on the table between us.

You can usually feel it when someone is staring at you so I tried my best to study her without freaking her out. I looked at James' art on the walls and back at her, art on walls and then back to her. Gillian was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in this city. Her skin was smooth and fresh-looking, and even her lips had a flush to them that made me think she had just been swimming. Her curls fell below her chin and made you want to reach out and pull one just to see it spring back up. In the darkness of the

living room it was hard to see the blonde hairs on her arms, but I knew they were there, like shiny down, just barely visible like her eyebrows, which she furrowed while reading. They didn't make her look angry, but concerned in a such a sincere way that you wouldn't be surprised if she made it into sainthood at the end of her days.

"I'm not fucking him," she said, still looking down at the newspaper.

"What?" I was startled.

Gillian looked up at me with light eyes. "You were looking at me," she said. "I'm not dating your little brother. You don't hook up with roommates, that's a rule."

"Oh," I fumbled for words. "Well, that's none of my business. He's twenty. He can take care of himself."

"I'm not so sure of that," she said.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

"Look, you just moved in," I said. "James is having a hard time right now. Our father died a couple years ago, and today's the anniversary, so.. .he just works it out in his own way, that's all."

Gillian held her coffee mug with both hands, looking at me over the rim. Her eyes made me forget what I was going to say. They were small and serene, and even though this girl looked like she would have trouble getting into an R-rated movie, I knew from that look that Gillian had seen more in her years than I would ever know, even if I asked. I finally had to blink and look away. *Lost that staring contest, I guess.*

James was moving around upstairs, above our heads. I heard the jingling of keys and feet that grew louder. He appeared in the room, standing next to Gillian's couch.

Without a word I stood up and carried my mug into the kitchen, placed it in the sink and walked to the door. Gillian and Seelu followed us out. I still couldn't look at her.

"Bye guys," she said, looking at me. "It was nice to meet you." That smell of apples again.

James waved without looking back and wrestled with Seelu to keep her from jumping into the passenger seat. He pushed the retriever away and quickly shut the door. I started the car and pulled away into the street, looking into the rearview mirror at the dog and the girl who disappeared into the crumbling house.

The summer shadows were long and stretched over our drive across Asheville. James sat and looked out the window, up at the sky, like a child. I just drove, thinking about that exchange of words, how jolting they were, like a missed heartbeat.

One of the many things wrong with my mother was the fashion in which she wore her sweaters. It was a peculiar way with the sleeves, something which I believe was an actual trend around the 1980's, but like so many other clothing statements it quickly lost its point. My mother pushed the sleeves up to her elbows, like any other person who was dumb enough to wear sweaters in the summer, but then she took the bunched-up fabric and pulled it over the sleeve end, so it ballooned back down to her forearms. She played with the sleeves constantly, pulling at the ballooned ends so that they were perfectly soft and round, just floating above her skin.

The style reminded me of an uncircumcised penis. And it wasn't even useful. Even now when she reached over the table to grab the parmesan, the billowing cotton dipped into my pile of half-eaten lasagna. It left a red trail back to her plate.

"Mom," I said, nodding toward her fashion faux pas. She smiled and grabbed a napkin. While dabbing at her sleeves she still smiled, stoned out of her mind. I wonder where she went in her head while all of this was happening. Most likely she was thinking about the curtains in the dining room.

"Could you please pass the garlic bread?" I asked.

James started crying and left the room.

Well, this is fun, I thought. Maybe now wasn't the time to talk about the finished biography, since James was emotionally unavailable and Mom was under the influence. I excused myself and walked down the hallway to check on my little brother in the bathroom. As I reached the door and hesitated, and kept on walking. He'd work it out on

his own time, no point in doing the whole *Are you okay* bullshit when I knew there was nothing I could do. I grabbed a cigarette from my purse and went out to the front porch.

The rain had stopped and frogs were trilling in the grass. It was almost dark, but I could still trace the outline of Beaver Mountain with the tip of my smoke. My mother's front eaves were covered in hyacinth. To my surprise they were still blooming in purple bunches, heavily drooping just above my head. For a minute I felt like that fox who tried to get the grapes. What was the end of that story? Didn't he fall into a well or something? Probably; nothing else about this day held the promise of a happy ending. I sat on the edge of the steps, smoking, and tried to pinpoint the location of frogs in the dying light.

The history of the world is not nearly as terrifying as the history of our own families. A photo album, with its salvaged faces pushed into paper corners: this is how the universe is set into motion. I open one book and then another, looking at dates written in cursive by my grandmother. Here are the children on the New England coast; here is the wedding of a cousin, her dress made of lace creeping up her throat; here is my great uncle who, frozen in his white Navy suit, smiles before sailing off to one of many wars. Did he come back? The milestones are here, untouchable, like all the things that happened in between. I feel like Alice, staring at the looking-glass, knowing that everything inside of her, what she's made of, waits on the other side of her reflection. I can't step through that glass; that magic shit only happens in stories. So I look through photo albums, at memories that aren't really mine and at the same time hint at everything I will become.

Because there is so much weight in the actions of your own family, you can only fill in the gaps before you were born and hope that what you believe really did happen. You set the universe in motion with those closest around you, and move outward through consummations of genes.

The story of my mother and father shall always begin with a bed mattress.

My mother was married once before moving to North Carolina. She was eighteen, with tangled hair, just out of high school in Fort Lauderdale. She spent her days helping my grandmother hang laundry on a line in the backyard between the orange trees, and surfing in the long afternoons. Then she got married to a guy twenty years older than her.

In the photo albums there is a six-year period where my mother's face is missing. There are rare moments—when I'm sitting in the laundromat, when I'm driving down Highway 64 to the Tennessee line, when I hike through the Lake Eden valley bed—when I will try to build those years of Madeleine's first marriage in my head, like the missing years of Christ. I like to picture this older man, a gentle fool, made of wrinkles and moles, a worthy villain of my father's handsome features. Perhaps this guy loved my mother, but there are different kinds of love, and this one did not fit. When I found out that the older man managed a grocery store chain, it only made those imagined six years of Maddy's life even more depressing. I thought of her visiting him in a back office under twitching flourescence, bringing him a bagged lunched while he figured net incomes on endless rolls of calculator paper, returning home to her at night smelling like a dairy case.

Madeleine and her paper-or-plastic husband continued to live out their marriage in that same Florida town, so that she could still surf in the mornings and study business during the day, and he could manage the store, and my grandmother could keep an eye on

both of them. In summer the couple took vacations, driving his yellow Volvo around the country. They spent the last three summers in the mountains of North Carolina. It was cooler, the air fresh, full of wildflowers. They laughed at how there was only one movie theatre in town, a drive-in with a broken marquee, advertising old films for a dollar. When they passed cars on the road, drivers waves as if to old friends. Trucks parked on corners spilled open with vegetables, and old men smoked cigarettes in silence to pass the time between customers. It was a different world from the tanned flesh and neon lights of Florida. Maddy and her husband decided that it would be a perfect retreat for them when they decided to have a family, so they purchased a piece of land near the town of Franklin, where they would one day build a cabin in the hollow of Rainbow Mountain and hang daisy-printed curtains in the windows.

But it ended. In the divorce, Madeleine ended up with half the woods and stream they purchased, along with his yellow Volvo. And suffocating under the heat and my grandmother's variations of "I told you so," my mother decided to leave everything like broken shells on a beach. She moved her savings and a clothes trunk up north to Franklin and rented a house from a couple named Barbara and Will Allen.

How strange to think that my mother's life began again at twenty-four. It happens all the time: people are born again. But not your own mother. She tells her story and you sit back and think, *This woman wiped my chin until I was three. And at one point she just said "Screw it, " and packed out into unknown territory?*

There were more cows than people living in Franklin, but I think my mother was grateful for the lack of neighbors at the time, especially when young men eyed her at the drive-in, a girl with skinny feet up on the dashboard, watching movies alone, trying to

recollect herself. People live two ways: they live simply, or less so. She liked lying in the tall grass of the yard, raking her fingers through clover while bees overhead eclipsed the tiny shapes of airplanes miles away. She even liked the revolting smell of galax and rotting leaves when she walked along Fish Hawk Mountain.

A beaten path ran in the grass between her house and the home of Barbara and Will. They were easy people, always smiling, and within a week and a half of her move my mother began crossing the field to take her meals with them every night. They kept the windows open to the chilly fall air, and wrapped blankets around their shoulders while the three of them drank wine and got stoned. Records played late into the night. There was no one around to complain. They traded stories: my mother's bicycle accident in her youth that left a scythe-shaped scar on her stomach, Barb's wanderings through the heady streets of San Francisco. My mother noticed the stars were brighter here than on the coast, and this gave her hope.

From the first day in the rental house Madeleine noticed with disappointment that the built-in bed frame was missing something. It truly was built into the wall, the same colored wood, and sat before her like an empty garden box. Now that my mother knew the Aliens a little better, she asked them about the missing mattress.

"Oh," Barb apologized this way, stoned. She thought for a minute. "One of our other friends is using it right now, while he's building his house. You can ask for it, if you want to."

Madeleine certainly did not want to disturb someone who was in the middle of something so important as constructing his own home, but the weather was turning colder and there were mice trying to nest in her sleeping bag on the floor. After a week of

consideration, my mother took the directions to this man offered by Barb, and went to recover the bed mattress.

She followed the road for a few miles and turned into a dirt drive called West Haven. The drive disappeared into blackberry brambles, and not far from it was a makeshift shelter—boards and tin quickly hammered into shape—leaning a little against an oak tree, protected from the wind. Here my mother found Douglas Littlehawk standing among the tall weeds, chopping wood for a fire pit. Here, in the valley among briars and weeds and all things thrown together, my parents met. A few yards away, beyond the shelter, stood the skeleton of the house where they would soon live together. In the meantime, Madeleine brought Doug some water in a jug because he looked thirsty, and asked for the mattress.

Six months after she came upon my father chopping wood in that field, the house was finished and they were married. I think of them sharing that mattress, newly-ringed fingers intertwined, their mouths falling open with sleep. Douglas was four years older than Maddy, but I swear if you cut him open he'd have a hundred rings just like the trees in Joyce Kilmer.

He was like the hyacinth on Madeleine's porch. My father could take roots and bloom anywhere he wanted to, any season of the year. He had been born into a Cherokee family of medicine out in Oklahoma, who then decided to split from the reservation and move north to Washington. Just outside of Seattle, Doug grew up continually injected with the history of his fathers before him, taught how to heal the sick with only one or

two things at hand. He had to honor the dark and light in everything. He chicken-scratched what he could into leather journals, but what I found wasn't much as far as secret spells go. He kept most of it in his head, I suppose, for the words of a father to his only son are sacred. Doug also studied biology as much as he could, so that later he could deliver babies in the privacy of bedrooms and listen to the wizened hearts of retired cattlemen. Even though I knew my mother was wise, as a young child I felt as if my father's veins ran with the sap of the world. He had an answer for everything, if you waited long enough. All his life my father was very careful with his words, as if he knew they would bounce off the sky vault and come back to haunt him. I have never known another to speak so slowly.

When he was nineteen years old, my father jumped boxcars across the States to find a home. It took him another decade or so to get across the way to North Carolina, he said, because he made many "people stops." Only when I uncovered the boxes from his life did I start piecing together all of these stops, putting them in order as best I could, and concluded that my father had been destined to become a figurehead, a leader of sorts.

Doug never intended to set up a medical practice, but it happened that way. While living outside of Franklin, in that shack, my father soon made many friends with the families in the valley. Most of them were of his generation, looking to "be here now" in the middle of nowhere and get back to the simple gatherings of everyday life. They had children and warts and colds in the winter. He helped them brew teas and gave advice.

Farmers would come around to see what he was up to, most of them not saying much, and the few that did just looked up at the clouds the whole time, predicting frosty mornings and deer hunts. They understood that Doug was different from them in a way

they couldn't describe even if they wanted to, but his ancient brown hands seemed to match up with theirs pretty well One of these farmers, a McDowell, took him to Deep Gap and showed him where to dig up ramps on the mountainside, enough to feed you all summer long. My father never had a knack for fishing, and I think the most excitement he ever displayed was over a string of trout. A couple of men brought him fish while he was building his house. He would smile and laugh, make them stay for dinner in his shack. And when he spoke to them, he slipped into their southern accents along with them, in a gentle voice. When they walked up the dirt drive he was always sanding wood or nailing a wall or digging into the ground around the foundation. They brought him seeds for a garden: corn, beans, tomatoes, cabbages, strawberries. My father knew it would be okay if he stuck around for a while.

In the town square of businesses, a medical practice rooted in family generations thrived. Doug kept to the outskirts, with his "animal magic," as they whispered behind his back, but my father could hear them even while consulting someone else and with nine crows screaming in the trees overhead. When the house was finished, and the flowers and grass began to grow again against the porch, my parents opened the Mountain People's Clinic above the garage. Since Doug didn't have a medical license it was unofficial, but the faith of those around him drove it into business. They brought him bushels of corn and knitted scarves in exchange for medicine. My mother passed out maple candy to the children who waited for their parents talking to Doug. She made sure they kept themselves busy lying on their stomachs in the grass, playing with her checker

set. In the winter the two-story house was full of friends and patients, sitting on pillows in front of the stone fire pit in the living room and talking.

The first five years of my life were very busy. I sat in the laps of strangers, and delighted when they called my name, with a piece of homemade bread in their hands. I paraded back and forth in front of waiting patients, toting behind me a red wagon, pandering like a gypsy child for a piece of honey comb or fingers to untangle my hair. And I preferred to wear only my underwear. Some of the wives thought it shameful for a naked child to run around like that, a sure indication of future promiscuity. Madeleine tried to explain that it was the only time when God's beauty wouldn't be covered up, so should we not rejoice in it? She gave me her floppy hat to help cover me up, but for those five years I ran around like a spotted Apaloosa, sunburned and wild.

Barbara and Will came by the house every day, usually staying for a couple nights in a row. Since Barbara had a nursing degree she assisted my father as a midwife. For eight years the Clinic ran off and on, my parents trying to keep it small and simple. He may not have acknowledged it, but the fact was clear: my father had a building number of admirers. I believe a few even wanted to be disciples of Doug. He had been followed for most of his life, like a white heron tailed by fishermen down the bends of a river.

My mother didn't support my smoking, so she didn't have an ashtray on the porch. I rubbed the tobacco between my fingers until the cinders fell into the wet grass, and turned to go inside. *Fuck it,* I thought, shoving the filter into my pocket. It seemed fitting to tell Mom and James on the anniversary about my biography on Father. I didn't want this stuff exiled from memory. And I was done. I wanted it to be out of my hands,

into theirs and others, as if to scream, *Look! Look at what my father did and what he witnessed! Do you see? Do you see how much we are worth?*

I wanted my mother to read it and remember why she loved him before the divorce. I wanted James to snap out of it. And maybe they would be proud.