

# **The Hills of Home**

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## Chapter 1: Butch

I was born on the second shortest day of the year wobbling over the cusp of the archer and the goat. Sherman acquired the city of Savannah as his early Christmas gift ninety years before my mother gritted her teeth for those last few pushes. Yet another general proclaimed "Nuts!" to a request for his surrendered during the Battle of the Bulge on the date of my birth some ten years before I entered this world all teeth and nails. And teeth and nails I was - entering this world with two genetic disorders - linked to some ancestors' escapades in South Africa before relocating to the place of my birth in rural Appalachia. Crying shot out in my parents' log cabin as the midwife removed the afterbirth and spanked my bottom. "A baby boy," she said.

Samuel Beckett died as I blew out the candles on my thirtieth birthday cake. The teeth had been paired down to the standard thirty-two by then, surplus appendages removed, nails trimmed. My mother's womb wasn't nearly so lucky - I was the last in the series of four children.

When I was a child, mother would sit at the kitchen table, mother would work her way down a carefully chosen list of celebrities and very important people who share my birthday - I suppose it was some form of intellectual consolation for the suffering I caused her or her way of trying to assimilate me into the world of men.

Later, on a day opposite my birthday in 1969 mother and father showed up at my special summer camp to shepherd me home for Susie's wake. Barreling down the road, dust rising and trailing behind us, I gradually lost sight of those most like me: bearing the burden of mangled bones, misplaced or missing facial features, webbed fingers and toes, confused genital as I gazed out the back window. "Insubstantial evidence" rang out

across a marbled-tiled courtroom on the date of birth that same year her killer was set free in our hometown.

I still don't know much about the day Susie was ripped from us. What I do know is that Rebecca, her cousin, didn't talk for two years after. I also know that Cheyenne, our token homosexual - made so by heredity, God's will, endocrine disrupters, Barbie dolls, over population - only Susie could say, left town after the funeral.

Defects: we're all born or afflicted with them somehow. Susie, Rebecca, Cheyenne, the killer, me; we were ostracized for our defects - whether tangible or subtle. Some would, and do call what Susie had a "gift." She never saw it that way. Could never do anything to stop the dreams or alter the premonitions. It was a pained existence that beautiful girl had.

I've celebrated fifty birthdays now. Yesterday, my fiftieth, I walked into our town's Irish pub with a swagger and came out blind-staggering drunk, a drunk that only time will cure. I've been smoking Pall Malls like they're going out of style - and being stylish have no desire to lose my investment in the hip and trendy. Last night, I walked out of the bar after many toasts were made to my longevity, which I accepted with the knowledge that they did no good - I know I only have three months left.

Only the truly famous receive a celebration, a governmental holiday, on the occasion of their death. The funny - perhaps just darkly comedic - thing is I've always known when I was going to die. Well, *always*, since Susie told me. I've foretold the date of my death in the course of my years and travels. Usually when my tongue is all slur, snagged on liquor and those phantom teeth.

I've traveled to a good number of places since Susie left us - alone - and I've seen a great many things. Confronted with the inevitability of one's demise, you try to make good use of the time you have. I've never seen: #1: a girl as pretty as Susie, #2: someone who knows things -just knows them, helplessly knows them, like she did. Granted, you have your shamans, seers, psychics; save those talented few... and they have their training. Susie's *gift* was natural.

Through my years, I've traced religions, places, and people across oceans and land masses. I'm pretty sure that in the three months I have left, I won't meet someone who parallels Susie. Then, again, I'd need her here to tell me that for certain. She met her maker - and she assured me that we all have one - long before I got a chance to ask her these questions. The important questions.

She knew that I'd eventually come back here. That I'd lose my wife early on. That my children would stop speaking to me.

Memories are memories - they grow hazy like old pictures, bent at the edges, yellowed and blurred by time. But, I lend some validity to mine - captured in my journal in *that* present.

I came back to look after dad, when mom died, I found my journals where I'd hidden them some thirty-odd years earlier; under the third floor board over from my bedroom window. And Susie was in those pages -just as alive as she'd been at seventeen. Tonight, when I came home, I opened the journal and poured over those pages. I found Susie in a rare moment we had alone.

A crisp fall day. The smell of tobacco curing hangs in the musty barn air -driving out all the other smells of autumn. Susie's legs dangle over the edge of the barn loft, long and thin - my own stubby legs droop, barely scaling the opening. Susie brought some sweet tea and we sit drinking it out of Ball jars. Occasionally, a truck or car passes by our perch and we wave to the drivers - an elementary school teacher, a neighbor, the town's veterinarian.

Susie talks to me like I'm an adult - which I'm not, she's two years older than me. She holds my hand, our fingers intertwined, something that seems inappropriate but which I desperately desire - something a step beyond something even my mother would do.

"The dreams are coming in the day now, too," Susie says. She's looking out at the mountains in the distance; I follow her gaze but can't pinpoint what she's seeing. "I can't stop them. And I can't stop what they tell me is going to happen."

I squeeze her hand. She pulls hers away as if to say: "I'm beyond even your comfort now."

The two of us have grown closer lately. We are feeling the pain of teen angst, feeling trapped in a small town, feeling cut off from everyone else. I've gone through four surgeries, and I look like a perfectly normal teenage boy, but still people remember the monster I was. Maybe they are afraid that if they touch me, my disease will spread to them; strange growths will immediately appear at the spot of contact and spread over their bodies.

It is late afternoon. The sun sets early in the mountains, hiding behind their bulk. Light from the sun illuminates the fall leaves and the hills catch fire.

We see the dust before the truck appears.

"It's him," Susie says definitively.

A red truck pulls around the bend - a glossy Ford pickup. No one waves. Then, taillights. The truck backs up into the dusty drive in front of the barn. I've seen the truck and its driver around town before, and I know what Susie said about him, but I don't know him.

"What are you doin' up there?" a teenage boy with clear skin and a bowl-cut asks as he steps from his truck.

"Hello, Ben," Susie says. "We're just sitting a spell, drinking some tea."

*She's awful polite to the boy who's gonna be her death.* Susie pushes her strawberry hair behind her shoulder, then tucks it behind her ear. She smiles. Ben looks at me but doesn't say anything.

"Can I take you for a ride?" Ben asks.

"Only if Butch can come," Susie says.

I don't want to go with him, but I don't want to leave Susie alone with him either. If she can't stop death in his tracks maybe I can. We leave the pitcher and the glasses in the barn loft and step into the truck. Susie sits in the middle. Ben tries to put his hand on her thigh but she brushes it away.

Ben lights a hand-rolled cigarette. Everyone around here smokes, but I still can't stand the smell in a closed car. Susie's legs are spread - one on each side of the gear shift. The stick thrusts further between her legs as Ben shifts from first to second.

*No reason to fight it,* Susie says silently. That's another thing that's happened since we got closer - sometimes we can transmit thoughts. Not always, but if we focus

really hard they come through. I can tell she's having one of her *dreams* now. When I look over at her, the color is gone from her face. It must be a bad one.

Ben is smiling, taking drag after drag from his cigarette with one arm hanging out the window. "Ever been to The Cabin?" he asks Susie.

"No, and this isn't the day to start," she says.

But, eventually he would get her out to that cabin. And tomorrow, once the requisite amount of coffee has been consumed, I will make the drive to ask some questions.

Up a road, if you can still call it that, tangled with weeds and rutted, there lives a man who knows the whole story. The man who still drives that red pickup truck with a dent in the front right fender.

They say Susie ended up at that Cabin quite a few more times. Whispered suggestions about what happened there are kept alive at the bottom of a pint glass. I'll take exit five off the highway; go under the overpass, past the graffiti that reads - in John Deere Green - "The Stabbin' Cabin - Gone But Not Forgotten" - three miles by car and then another which can only be navigated by foot. At the third stream crossing, I'll bear a strong right and I'll be there.

## Chapter 2: The Cabin Samantha

Honestly, I'm not the most unbiased observer. I've grown up in these mountains and readily defend these people's habits and customs. People take me for well-educated - lacking the accent they expect - the accent I've worked so hard to be rid of. I am not a tourist around here. I take relative pleasure in the ridicule of those that come to visit my beautiful hometown. Travelers crowd the streets, highways, restaurants and hotels for about five months of the year - and for those five months the quiet little mountain town people come to see isn't so quiet anymore. The influx of tourists starts as the Dogwood covering the mountainsides bloom white and continues until the last golden-red leaf drops from the trees. Of course, I've put myself through college on the tourist dollar.

I'm in my senior year at the local university. I study Anthropology with a concentration in Appalachian Culture. I wonder if my ancestors ever imagined they would be put to task in textbooks and lectures.

I've been compiling stories and interviews concerning my hometown and now I am completing the keystone interview: Ben White. Today, on my way out here - to Ben's cabin - I saw my favorite bumper sticker: "If it's tourist season, why can't we shoot 'em?" As I passed under the bridge, my heart leapt in my chest, a wave of nausea passed over me. There was the graffiti in the three foot high, *John Deere Green* spray-paint lettering, "The Stabbin' Cabin - Gone But Not Forgotten."



I first made my way out to Waterville, NC about a year ago we - Gary, my boyfriend, and I - were in search of a celebrated swimming hole. I'd never driven there myself, but I was certain we'd be able to find it. When I saw the paint on the bridge, I got chills - I'd been hearing about that cabin for as long as I could remember. Mostly in hushed tones, uttered in the shadows of bars, or in stories passed down around the campfire or slumber parties. No one seemed to know exactly what had happened there. Personally, I thought the graffiti reminiscent of the premise to a Stephen King novel.

No dust rose from the dirt road, soaked with heavy spring rain. Driving my Explorer - a retired fire truck, I dodged the pot holes pitting the road. We barreled down the road; a massive stone building with leaded glass windows came into view.

I pulled the steering wheel of the truck to the left and the vehicle swung into the parking lot of *Mountain Momma's*. On one side of the parking lot a jumbled pile of rusty pick-up trucks, sun-bleached buses, cars and their respective parts - laid out awaiting some car doc to fix 'em up again, sat neglected. Thick, weedy grass sprouted up all around and worked its way through the ribcages of the skeletal graveyard of cars. And there was this smell of wet: wet leaves, wet dirt, and wet cars mostly - upholstery saturated and mildewed which filled our nostrils.

On the steps of *Mountain Momma's* two trail-worn, *Bill Bryson-hungry* hikers sat, accompanied by their very hungry dog.

A cryptic sign stood to the right of *Momma's* door. "Look, we have ice and firewood." It transfixed me in all its garish-color glory. I could not look away. The *o*'s and */*'s were painted to resemble eyes. *And* was represented by a girl wearing a red dress

with an *a* on it: *Ann* or *An'* 'round here. Flames represented *y/re* and wood was spelled *wud*.

We walked up the stone steps, keeping our distance from the bone-thin dog, afraid it might take a nip at our heels. An elderly lady perched on a barstool behind the counter within. Tourist treasures covered the walls - "Hill-Billy toilet paper" - a corn cob on a roll, "Hill-Billy nite lite" - a candle set into a piece of wood accompanied by matches. The restaurant was "closed" - without any hesitation, however - perhaps motherly intuition, or pure mountain hospitality took over - and 'Momma' offered to cook for us.

Since we were so far unsuccessful in our attempt, I inquired as to how we might find this "Midnight Hole" - in my best Appalachian accent.

"Midnight Hole? Honey, I ain't never heard of no midnight hole," she replied as she walked toward the fryer - with a witch's cackle hanging on her tongue. She wouldn't have heard of it either...

I know the feeling she must have had. I often hesitate when people ask me directions to places in broken tones, attempting to pronounce Anglo-Cherokee mangled names. *More tourists who 7/ leave broken beer bottles and fishing bait lying around my favorite swimming hole or camp-site.*

We sat to eat our lunch. At a large table in the center of the room, a group of men had gathered - some wearing overalls, most baseball caps and all smoking cigarettes. The men complained, gossiped (the hallmark of retired farmers) and laughed, occasionally glanced our way non-committally and smiled. At our nineteen-fifties diner booth, we now had a clear view of the parking lot and the opposite side of the sign.

This side was, if possible, even more puzzling. "Us's ours isn't das aim." Loosely translated: "Our hours aren't the same [as Wal-Mart, for example]." Then, the even more confusing mountain-hieroglyphs: *a swirling line*, the *girl* again, this time "wearing" a blue dress and that *a*, a *sun setting behind mountains*, *we 'tins*, *an open door* and rendering of the *building*, *a chicken running*,  $7+7=?$ , another *chicken running* (in the opposite direction from the first). Well, we didn't really know what to make of all that, and spent most of our lunch trying to decipher the local language. We finally figured it liberally meant "Our hours aren't the same. We are open from when we get here to when we leave: Spring and Summer."

As we finished our lunch the rough looking men from outside entered the store. "Can we get a ride into town?" one asked.

"This is town," the woman behind the counter said with a smile.

*This is town to her*, I thought. And, then I got an idea. She'd been here her whole life...

I walked up to the counter; the hikers were perusing the shelves of the store proper. "Do you know where Ben White lives?" I asked.

The woman tilted her head. "Honey, no one's asked me about that man in ten years. I know where he lives. I sure do. You want to go up there?"

I nodded an emphatic 'yes.'

"You probably ought to take that boy with you when you go," she said nodding back at Gary.

She gave me the directions. As we left, she hollered out after us, "It's 'Knight Hole.'"

I should have known that already. It was named for a family rather than for a time of day. Should have asked around a bit more. Us transplants to the area - people who were born here, but whose parents are from somewhere else aren't truly locals in the minds of people with multiple generations' worth of mountain blood coursing through their veins.

"Gary, I think I just found my thesis," I said when we were back in the truck. He smiled at me and started rolling a joint.

Two months later I started my interviews with Ben. He was a transplant himself. He'd come to the county when he was fourteen, back in 1965. He was part of the start of the migration from Florida - it began with people buying summer homes in the mountains during the economic boom of the fifties and eventually making the decision to move here year-round. I am, myself, a later generation of this relocation. My mother was one of those children who spent the summers of her formative years in the mountains - at summer camp for part of the break and the last few weeks at her parents' home. She met my father - a native - in one of the last years she spent migrating.

Ben was withdrawn to start. I couldn't find a listing for his number, there was no physical address, no post box, on file. I had hoped to make a courtesy contact before going to his house - but with all other outlets exhausted, I loaded Gary and a tape recorder up in my truck and drove back to Waterville. I followed the directions the woman at *Mountain Momma's* had given me. We went under the over-pass, up the road a few miles, until even four-wheel drive was no help, parked the car next to an old red truck and hiked in.

The woods grew thick right from the start, ferns and trilliums filling in the spaces where sun broke through the canopy far overhead. Gary asked me if this was a virgin forest, I said I thought Joyce Kilmer was the only forest that hadn't been logged around here, but judging from the size the trees must be old. Mist clung about the ferns and may apples even though the sun shone bright outside of the forest.

Gary is always picking up things in the woods, a trait I used to find endearing - a trait I engendered in him. But then, as he handed me another rock for our fish tank, and I slipped it into my pocket, I thought how these things drag me down. Sometimes, I wonder if he really is seven years older than me.

Then, up ahead I saw our last stream crossing. A large tree-trunk, long ago sawed in half balanced itself against the two edges of the bank, a railing of locust wood zigzagged haphazardly across the bridge. I stepped up onto the slippery wood, slime coating it, never having the opportunity to dry out, the trees leaned sharply out over the water, blocking out the sun that shone so brightly above the canopy.

Gary was close at my heels, crowding me, pushing me across the bridge. I wanted to tell him to back off, to let me take my time. I don't have an athlete's dexterity - I'm more the draft-horse type of outdoorsman. When we got to the far side of the water, I hit him hard in the chest and didn't even try to explain what it was for.

He reached down, picked up a flat, smooth rock and chucked it at the creek. It skipped three times before hitting the opposite bank. He beamed at this - his skill. His other main talent is capturing cheap stuffed animals with those weak clawed-game machines found in the atrium of Wal-Mart or buffet-style diners. I checked my tape-recorder again, singing, in my best twang, "*On a hot summer night/* He wrote Billy Bob

loves Charlene/ In letters three-foot high/ And the whole town said the fool should have used red/ But it looked good to Charlene/ In John Deere Green:" lyrics that had been running through my head since we first saw the graffiti; lyrics that are a mark of my Western North Carolina childhood.

Gary was far out in front of me now. He sprinted from one side of the trail to the other, like a child or a puppy. I listened to the tape recorder, rewound it and erased my voice from it. That rock he handed me earlier kept bumping against the keys in my pocket. Our trail continued off to the right hand side of the main path. I called to Gary and we headed up the trail. Roots popped up here and there, erosion exposing them, and I took large steps to avoid them.

At the top of a small hill, the woods opened into a clearing. A burnt-out building stood in the middle of the field. The rock-work base and the chimney were blackened by vestiges of smoke and the chimney stood, crooked, as if it might topple over at any moment. To the left of the shell of a house another building sat, clinging to the hillside.

Gary ran out in front of me once more. I wanted to tell him to take it slow, but I wasn't sure if my voice would be more startling to Ben than Gary's presence. He was up to the chimney in no time, scouting out the rock work to take some pictures. I walked toward the second building, my target.

"What you doing out there, girl?" a voice called down to me. I looked up at the porch to see a shotgun leveled at my chest.

"Are you Ben White?" I asked. The shotgun moved up and down, pantomiming the motion of its owner's head still covered in shadow. "I'm Sam, up from town. I was told you might be willing to give me an interview."

"Been a long time since anyone was up this way. That your feller?" Ben's voice was calm, quiet, somewhat soothing. "What you want, anyway?" Ben asked.

"I wanted to hear your story, to give you a chance to tell your side," I said.

Ben consented to talk to me after I explained what I was doing: writing down the history of the county, focusing on the past fifty years. I proved to him that I had done my research, citing names, places and events which had taken me months to uncover.

I sit here, on Ben's porch at least once a week. Just now, after nearly a year he's starting to open up to me. I'm asking him about Butch.

"Yeah, you could say that I know him. He came up here, like you, a few years back. He wanted to know what happened. Just like everyone else. They all ask about that day. Truth is, story goes back further than that," Ben says.

"Well, let's hear it then, from the beginning," I say, glancing at the tape recorder's light to make sure I'm still recording.

"I met Susie when she was fourteen. Pretty girl, even then. I was fifteen, and we were at the swimming hole off Palmer's Creek. She was wearing a yellow bikini; it sagged a little in the drawers. She was always with that strange little girl, her cousin, and that Cheyenne boy. They were there, too. The swimming hole had a rope swing, I suppose you kids still go out there and jump off that rock."

I nod in response and Ben lights a cigarette, drags hard and sets it in the ashtray the side. He chain smokes, sometimes lighting two cigarettes at once. He'll smoke one as another burns its way to the filter in the tray. He also has the tendency to make stories

last twice as long as I think they need to, supplying me with details I'll never be able to use.

"It was about a year after we met that I got her to come up here the first time. I had been up here a few times with some of the boys from town. Girls were always already here, liquored up. It wasn't nothing wrong, just curiosity. I guess what the girls did, maybe they didn't like so much. But, it was good money back then and free booze.

"I bought some moonshine from Corn and we sat on the tailgate of my truck drinking it, just the two of us. My parents bought me that truck day I turned sixteen. None of the other guys back then had any transportation."

Ben pauses, I take a sip from my beer, the PBR I bring from town, along with the groceries Ben needs. He takes a sip from his own, sets it down and snubs out his cigarette. I look around, up at the mountains, over to the chimney, waiting for him to continue his story, waiting for him to fill me in on the details I've been lusting after for the past year.

"How you and that boy of yours doing?" he asks. Ben has a habit of doing that, when he starts to get uncomfortable. "Getting married? Or, do I still have a chance?"

"Honey, if you were a snowball..." I say.

"I know, and this were hell... He asked you?"

"Yes. And I said I needed some time to think about it," I say.

"Girl looks like you; ought to be a rich man's wife," Ben says. "Where was I?"

"You had been drinking moonshine."

"We're already to that part? I told you about her scar?"

I shake my head. *Where's this going?*



"Susie had a scar reached clear from one hip to the other," Ben says, motioning across his rather large stomach to point out where the scar had been. "Looked like one of them C-section scars. She never did tell me what it was from."

"Hmmm," I say.

"So, I got her to come up here with me, to the cabin," Ben says, his head motioning over to the burnt-out building.

"Chilly May night, back when we'd still get snow in late spring sometimes - they call it a *Dogwood Winter*. Susie finally said she'd come up here with me," Ben says.

I light a cigarette myself-I started smoking after I met Ben. I listen, translating spoken word into written in my head:

The Cabin was a two-story construction with oil lanterns out front. The road came all the way in back then. People from Tennessee and Virginia frequented the area on weekends. I can still see what Ben calls "the ring" out back. Some nights they brought roosters to fight; others boys and men lurched at each other and circled waiting to draw blood. Inside, by oil lamp, girls danced; men drank corn-liquor, smoked cigarettes, cigars or joints.

The first night Susie set foot in the place she must have been shocked. Only Ben knows her spoken reaction. Others have told me she had a gift, Ben says he doesn't know a thing about that, was more interested in her body than her mind. He says he's sorry that he never tried to get to know her other than in the Biblical sense.

I ask him if they had sex. Ben shakes his head and chuckles. "Never let me lay a hand on her," he says. He's got two cigarettes going again.

"We came up here that first night and when we walked in there were about three dancers in the main room. Most people were already drunk. Susie held tight to my arm. I remember how I cherished that little touch," Ben says. His eyes are on the burnt shell of The Cabin, he looks there much of the time he tells me his stories.

"Her eyes were big as saucers. I couldn't tell if she was afraid or just trying to take it all in. After a few minutes, she said she'd wait in the truck and left. I was about to go after her when a man came up to me and said, 'Who is that? I think I know her.' Well, I puffed up as proud as a rooster and said, 'That's Susie Woodey, she's here with me.' Whoever that person was said, 'I've seen her here before.' I told them there wasn't any way they had, 'cause that was her first time here," Ben says, snubbing one of his two cigarettes out and dragging from the other.

"Whoever it was shook their head, and said 'No, I know I seen her here. Been a while though.' He walked away and I went out to the truck. Susie was sitting there shivering in the nippy weather. I asked if she was OK and she nodded and said to take her home. On the drive I asked if she'd ever been there before. 'You know I haven't,' she said. I could tell by the way she said it she was telling the truth. But, the next time I went up there, without her, the same guy walked up to me and asked where 'Joanna' was," Ben says.

"Hold on, I have to change tapes," I say.

"Do you know any Joanna?" Ben asks.

I don't and I tell him so as I fumble for another tape. I don't have any more tapes in my bag. "I guess we're done for today, Ben."

### **Chapter 3: Hellbender Rebecca**

The day cousin Susie died was the day we saw the Hellbender. I was the first one to see it. I grabbed Susie's arm until she squealed and pointed out across the trickling water at the salamander. It moved through the little stream that fed into Winchester Creek, coming straight at us. Susie said it reminded her of a Kimono dragon she'd seen in a nature book.

She was teaching me to read. She hadn't showed me that book though.

Cheyenne, that's the queer boy, let out an ungodly scream, dropped the daisy chains he'd been making for Susie's hair into the water. He ran out from the creek and the flowers floated over a waterfall.

"What is it? What is it?" Cheyenne kept asking. I guess he was asking Susie, but she didn't say nothing.

The slimy thing looked real weird. He was brown and gold and moved from side to side like if a snake had legs. I read later on, in that *Foxfire* series, that fishermen blamed lost catches on Hellbenders - they'd dip and smear the lines with their slime, and the fish just wouldn't stick. When we read about the torments of Hell, the lake of fire, sharp things sticking into people, I knew where that thing got its name. It writhed and quivered as it came at us just like Satan was on its trail.

I wanted to catch it, but Susie held onto the back of my shirt and put her fingers to her lips. She pulled me down and we squatted in the stream.

"I never seen one before. I just want to hold it. Just for a minute," I said.

"Becca, soon you won't see things like this around here no more," Susie said.

"You best just sit here and watch it, remember it."

I knew when Susie talked I best listen. She was real smart. People said she could of made college if she lived. So I sat, still as a twelve year old girl could manage, until the salamander slithered over the waterfall, following the clover. I still wanted to touch it. If I could feel its slick skin, it might tell me something. I didn't know what. A thing like that must of lived a good long life, to be that big. It was bigger than my arm, I think.

"You done real good," Susie said and sat on a rock.

Cheyenne came back over to us and picked at the clovers still in her hair. The sun was streaking down through the trees, making Cheyenne and Susie glitter. I just loved looking at them like that. Cheyenne, he's queer, always looked real pretty like maybe he was Susie's guardian angel. He had white hair - not like an old person, like an angel, just like an angel. His eyes looked like the blue crystal necklace I wore for my pageant. He was always different I knew that. But, he was always around, too. Susie and him had an understanding.

Him sitting there with Susie I thought they looked real nice together.

"People like us," Susie said, "we ought to be able to enjoy these things. Our children ought to be able..."

Cheyenne reached out and held her hand. I didn't quite understand what she was saying. I thought I should go hold her hand too. So we sat there, three kids, holding hands and looking out across the water. Cheyenne was the first one to say anything.

"My momma said they named me for somewhere that people ought to always enjoy. She said it had a certain sound to it, too. I never heard of anyone naming their kid "Waynesville" or "Balsam" or "Winchester." They don't have that ring," Cheyenne said.

"People don't know what they got, until it ain't there no more," Susie said.

Years later I heard a woman by the name of Joni Mitchell say that same thing, only in a different way.

"I think you should have let me touch it," I said.

Susie smiled down at me and I saw her freckles speckling across her cheeks. "Some things you're not ready to know yet, Becca. Things are changing around here. Remember when they cut down the apple trees and dug everything up and then put new ones in their place? They wanted grocery-store apples, not Pink Ladies or Winesaps. Every city person moves in a dozen trees fall. That's what it would have told you."

I didn't really understand why a salamander would have told me that. I wrinkled my nose at her.

"The farmers that buy their feed and fertilizer from my folks' store ain't any better," Cheyenne said.

My paw was still out in the field when we got home. Susie poured us some lemonade - Cheyenne said his momma made lemonade from real lemons. I didn't believe him.

"Lemonade comes from Crystal Light or Minute Maid," I said. "You're silly." "Becca, you're the one who's being silly," Susie said. "He's right. Lemonade comes from lemons and orange juice comes from oranges. Think about it."

I looked at her and she seemed harsh. I shook my head like the time a spider fell on it and I couldn't get it out of my hair and didn't want to put my hand up there. *I was thinking.*

I pushed my chair to the kitchen table in real hard. It banged to the floor as I went out the door. The screen door slammed on its hinges behind me like a gun shot. Susie thought I was stupid or ignorant or something. She'd been talking down to me ever since we saw that stupid salamander. Out in the barn the animals weren't going to tell me I was dumb or silly or wasn't thinking. So I sat down in a bale of hay, set a straw in my mouth and hammered my thighs with balled-up fists. I came out here a lot when it was bound to be just me and paw or when I needed my space.

We never had no pigs after ma died. We got our ham down the road. Paw and me just did without bacon for the most. But we had chickens, sometimes ducks and other birds. I had a pet dove once, but it died. I found it the morning after, though I shouldn't call it *it*. Her name was Clara, like my maw's. Clara was stiff, her wings all splayed out in her cage. Moses from the Bible had a dove; too, it was real important. I don't know that it had a name though.

I felt a rough tongue on my hand. Jake, the barn cat, a Siamese, looked up at me expectantly and rammed his fluffy head into my leg. Below my jean shorts my legs were crimson from the pounding I had given them.

Petting Jake's head I felt the first words he'd given me in a long while. When an animal tells you something you hear it somewhere different than your ears. I think it mostly comes through my stomach. Sometimes I feel it in your fingers or toes, other times I get a tingle in my hair. What Jake told me, it made my stomach feel sick. I

picked him up just behind his front legs, his back legs dangling, just to make sure. It hit me like a shock then.

I ran over to Dallas - that was my horse - he was nickering softly in his stall. I touched him right under his forelock where the sounds and feelings always came out the best. Horses have a real sense for how you feel even when I didn't know Dallas could tell me. When I touched him, he threw his head up and I banged my hand on the stall door. He started breathing heavy. Horse snot - it's always real watery - shot on my face.

*Run.* Jake told me. *Run.* Dallas said. Soon, the animals were all chanting it. I could still hear them in my toes and lungs and fingers and on my tongue when I rounded Miller's Bend. My feet throbbed from pounding against the hard-packed red clay road. I saw what Jake said I would, laying over in the ditch.

As I crossed the road, I knew the animals must of smelled it: *death*, I'd seen my Momma dead, Clara, and lots of animals. It's funny, when the life goes out of something, that something loses its gloss. I guess the life must have been flowing from Susie, cause her hair got paler and paler closer I got. That's all I could see from the road - her hair. I knew it was her though, nobody else around had that red hair with blonde all mixed in. You could of blamed the dust settling down on her, we hadn't had much rain that year, but I know it was life going somewhere else.

It wouldn't of mattered, I never could of run fast enough to save her. I only made it quick enough to see the cloud of dust the Chevy and its driver left. I didn't know that then, though.

Squatting down, I moved the blood spattered hair from her face with stubby fingers. Susie's eyes were still open, stuck that way. I tilted my head to the side to get a real look at them before I moved her eyelids closed. Susie's eyes had been green only a while before now they were no real color that nature gives things. Death has its own color scale: browns and grays to our minds. I think animals have a different death color scale, that's why they know before people. I guess she looked surprised, her eyebrows lifted and all. But when life is gone, you never really know what something's last thought was.

Maybe Susie thought how much she hurt, laying in that ditch. Or, then again, she might have been thinking about the salamander or Cheyenne or dancing on Saturday night. She might have been wondering how many children she'd have, or what that noise behind her was. Sometimes, she talked about going to college, leaving the mountains behind. Susie might have been regretting all them things she'd never have a chance to do. But, I still think she was worried about me and what I'd do without her to take me with her when she went.



## Chapter 5: Cheyenne

I own an art gallery on the upper-east side. I was born the youngest son of Pamela (Pam-ay-la) and Frisbee in a sleepy town nestled in the mountains of North Carolina. They owned a store supplying the area farmers with grain and farm equipment. If anyone asks now, I tell them my parents are dead. And they are dead to me. Just as dead, maybe more so, as my only true friend in the world is, buried beneath six feet of red clay dirt, with moss covering her tombstone by now, although I can't say I've been back to that town since her funeral.

I've discovered many new up-and-coming artists. I live in a rent-secured apartment in The City. I have no pets. I hold parties routinely, with handsome, young, shirtless waiters passing crudites and champagne through a bustling crowd. They are usually aspiring actors, waiting to be discovered, waiting for a call back for that guest spot on *Friends*. So far, not a single one of these talented young men has gotten second audition from my "friend in the business" nor will they, but I like to keep up appearances.

A few years back I did see one of those ghosts from my past - another one of Susie's enamored. Butch was in the city on a whim - a birthday gift he had taken upon himself to give. He had some questions only I could answer. I was aloof to say the least. I remembered what he'd been as a child and shuddered whenever I looked at him. Susie saw through our disfigurements - my objectionable sexual orientation, his strange physical disfigurements. He thought we'd share some bond - as the outcasts of the

community. I was rejected because I was gay. He was shunned because of something much more tangible - an excess of incisors and a surplus of talons.

"Can I buy you a drink?" He offered.

I ordered a gin martini - up, slightly dirty - and the bartender set it in front of me with his number on the cocktail napkin. We sat at the bar and briefed one-another on the events of our past thirty-five years. He'd had his own search for Susie.

I had first gone to his namesake in Wyoming. Then, I'd wandered through the Midwest, thinking some semblance of Susie might be found in the corn-fed boys and girls of the plain states. Somehow, I'd managed to procure a spot in an Art History program and set myself up in business.

Butch had traveled all over the world - six of the seven continents. My travels were continental, but no less desperate; searching for the questions I would never get answered.

I returned the favor and ordered him a Manhattan. Over the course of several hours, I met a person I'd never really known before. He spoke with growing tenderness and adoration for a girl long since buried. Then, he inquired after the matter of her death. Rumor had it - for the past three and a half decades - that the boy had raped her and then sped over her with his new cherry-red Chevrolet pickup. I reddened, felt my face growing hot.

"I think that if we were to go to that cemetery on the hill and dig up her grave, we'd find her body just as young and fresh as it was that day she was plucked from us," I said. "A mark of sainthood, you know. Her hair would have grown long and spiral

around her body. Her clothes would have rotted away, but her hair would protect her modesty."

Butch shook his head at my speech. "You really think she was a saint?" he asked.

"Aren't they all tortured? Living with visions of the past or the future," I said.

"What happened that day?" he asked. "The day, you know..."

"I was on my way home," I said. "Something told me to turn back, begged me to retrace my tracks. I rounded Miller's Bend and I saw that funny little girl squatted down beside the red-clay road. She always made me a tad uncomfortable, what with her and the animals. Then, I saw Susie's body. I knew then that the truck that had past me was the one that ran her down. I knew she was never getting up again. A look on the funny girl's face... Rebecca, was it? That look on her face told me this was the closest I was ever getting to Susie again."

I stopped talking then. A young, golden boy sat down next to me and Butch wandered back out of the bar before I could ask him any questions.

The boy sat next to me and asked me my story. I almost laughed at his naivete. In this city, everyone has a story, but no one asks unless they haven't heard their fill yet. I told him I'm not a native to New York either. He's excited to tell me that he's from *Podunksville, Variablestate, USA* - one of those places I'd passed through looking for Susie.

"Can I buy you a fresh drink?" he asked.

"You must have waited tables before," I said. He cocked his head, wondering how I knew this information. "Fresh," I said. "Waiters offer a 'fresh' drink rather than 'another' drink, so as not to indicate that the recipient might have a drinking problem."

He said he was new in town and very lonely in a city with a population of approximately eight million people. *Lonelier than he's ever been.* And I don't intimidate him the way most people do. I have that *Je ne sais quoi*, that indefinable quality that marks the small-town transplants.

I tell him about the two days that changed my life. The first, the day I came out to my parents. "But you're married," my mother had said.

"It was only a blood-ceremony," I explain to my companion. "We, Susie and I, stood in the spring-fed creek, wearing flower crowns and cut our wrists with my Buck knife, but not too deep. The creek turned pink as the blood dripped into it."

"Why'd you do that?" the boy asked.

"Well, Susie knew - that I liked boys, I mean. She knew a lot of things. I guess she did it to help me. Maybe she wanted to have some bond with me before she died."

"She died?" he asked.

"I was getting to that. That'd be the second day that changed my life, that got me here today, I guess," I said.

"But, to continue my story, my father said 'You're going to Hell.' And then he read some passages from the *KJV*?" I said.

"What's that?" he asked.

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"The King James version of the Bible. It was published in the early seventeenth century. According to Protestants, the only true word of God. And, by Protestants, I mean Southern Baptists," I said.

"Then, my mother wept. She *balled*" I said, cringing as I hear myself use one of the words I've tried to lose, "for some grandbabies she would never have."

It's all very touching, my story so far. The boy seems to understand. I light a cigarette and then I offer one to him.

"Sorry, I didn't catch your name," he said.

"Cheyenne. You?" I asked, knowing that it's the question I'm required to ask now, even if I don't care.

"Jack," he said. "So, what happened with the girl."

"Susie," I said, correcting him.

I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but. We tipped our glasses and had a drink to my unwavering honesty. I ordered another martini and one for Jack, but he didn't want a martini. He wanted something less chic, more *at home* for this story. I want to say, "And something more stereotypically *Midwestern* for the handsome young naive blond (the same that I once was)." Jack ordered a beer - microbrew, the new black beer-wise.

I thought briefly of the history of the martini glass as I took a sip, gin sliding down my throat.

"Did you know that the martini glass was invented during prohibition?" I asked. Jack shook his head. "When people would be in a speak-easy, drinking bathtub gin, they'd often have to get out quickly - when the dicks showed up."

"Dicks?" he asked.

"The cops," I said. *This could take a while.* So, I go back to my story, inebriated - otherwise I wouldn't be telling it.

"Susie was beautiful. Strawberry blonde hair - a shade L'OREAL wishes they could bottle. She had green eyes; I still can't forget the little details, like the smattering

of freckles across the bridge of her nose," I said. "Come to think of it, I would highly recommend her to a friend of mine at Benetton. But, I digress."

I was hungry. I suggested we down our respective drinks and get something to eat. We wobbled down the sidewalk. Neither of us grew up in a town with real sidewalks. I didn't even grow up in town proper. Jack had a movie theater at least. It was thirty miles as the crow flies to the nearest movie house from where I grew up. I realized I must be drunk as I heard myself speak in cliches. Jack says he feels at home, hearing the trite aspects of my speech.

"I want to hear more about *her*" he said.

"Susie," I said.

"I had a friend who had a bird named Susie. It was a lovebird," he said.

I really wished to hear no more about this bird. Or his life. As comforting as it might be in this city of great divide to stroll with someone who at least feigns interest, I wondered why it had to be Jack. Then, he told me, in great detail, about losing his virginity, the first time he smoked dope, dropped acid, etc, etc. How he loves his mother. *Or hate her and love your father... wouldn't Freud be proud; typical Electra complex. Complete with the gay-role reversal* I listened, or pretended to - a skill you don't pick up south of the Mason Dixon - where we're all so *sincere*.

*Yes, Tom Cruise is sooooo hot.* I eased Jack back into reality. *He is a Scientologist after all. And, straight.* Then, he seemed to remember that I was the one who was supposed to be talking.

"Doesn't anyone talk anymore?" he asked.

He'd been talking the whole time... and I had been listening.

"I'll talk. So, listen. And carefully, because what Susie was, must have been too much for this world," I said. "Susannah means 'lily.' Lily can mean 'pale.' The word entered the English language from a corrupted word from somewhere else. English needed it for the 'Song of Solomon.'"

"You've thought a lot about this," Jack said.

"I've done my research," I replied.

## Chapter 5: The Inn Joanna

Joanna woke up at precisely 6:07 AM. The alarm wouldn't sound for another eight minutes - 6:15 AM gave her enough time to shower before work. So, Joanna laid in bed staring at the ceiling until the droning alarm sounded. Her husband, Johnny was still sleeping. She glanced back at him as she turned the alarm off and got out of bed. Waiting tables in the morning was such a bitch. It was even worse now that the hoard of Mary Kay women had descended on the inn for their annual sales conference. The convention for the Midwestern division - top sellers of the league - visited the mountains in February each year, bathing the inn in shades of pink and red. It would have been some welcome relief in the slow season had the overweight, clown-faced whores tipped - if they had even left a few coins on the tables when they left.

Work in the mountains was seasonal at best. The roads got chancy - the tourists didn't want to dent their expensive - a whole year's worth of Joanna's salary - foreign cars. Town was owned by ghosts in winter, shadows passing in and out of doorways where tourists wandered in summer. The wind rang the service bells but no human hand rested there between October - December if the town was lucky - and April of the next year.

The inn stands solitary on a hill overlooking the town. Down below, the general store and the post office sit across the rail line - which only carries the occasional freight train these days. The inn is a Victorian-style construction - built in the days when people still traveled to town from Atlanta or Athens by train for entire summers - in an effort to escape the Southern heat with the 'natural air-conditioning' of the mountain breezes.



Joanna's house sits in the shadow of the three-story inn. And she, Joanna, of all people was the one designated to look after the inn when it was vacant or when the owners left town. Part of the job description since she lived a stone's throw from the bed and breakfast in a glass house.

"It's funny, even the post office don't have much work when the skiers, them that are 'dreaming of a White Christmas' up from Florida leave," Martha said.

Joanna nodded. Martha was chain-smoking in the break room, colloquially referred to as 'Marlboro County.' Joanna smoked as well, but never understood how it was legal for them to puff away in a room just off the inn's kitchen. When Joanna had first started at the inn, Martha had referred to Joanna's diminutive breasts as 'mini-moos' - holding creamer up to her own chest - something Joanna had been sore about ever since. Then again, Martha's sense of humor gets Joanna on the floor, rolling with laughter at times. Once, Joanna found Martha in one of the rooms, pulling up the bed skirts. When she had asked Martha what she was doing, she replied, "Looking for my ass. I think I done worked it off." And Martha carries a voodoo doll - a custom she must have adopted from TV - on her maid cart. The doll fluctuates between symbolizing the inn's owner and particularly troublesome guests.

Snow melted slowly and refroze, forming dirty icicles on the fleet of pink Cadillacs in the parking lot. Through the break room window, warped by time - Joanna recently learned that glass is a liquid, so it 'flows,' eventually distorting window panes - she sees a stray dog sniff a hubcap, lick it and then lift its leg to construct a variety of rare yellow icicle.

Joanna brewed ten pots of coffee - eight regular, two decaf. Creamers, butters, jams and jellies sit in dishes on the tables. She's tried to think of everything. Spoons lay on coffee saucers, orange juice can be found at the end of the buffet, along with diner-style glasses. She will not have to serve mimosas today - Mary Kay is a teetotaling institution. And Mrs. Mary Kay would be rolling over in her grave if only Joanna could talk - or if Joanna did, she sold three bottles of wine the night before for the women to take up to their rooms. But - like Vegas - what happens at the inn stays at the inn.

The walls might be able to talk, Joanna thought. She's never been sure why the lights in room 205 come on certain nights, never known which story to believe. Plotting the nights out on her calendar, she could find no pattern. From her porch she could easily see the windows of room 205 and would watch the lights flicker on and blink out.

The break room clock ticked closer to 8:00 AM; Joanna stood up from her folding chair, tucked her serving book into her apron and walked through the swinging door into the dining room. She stood at the host stand, waiting. The floor began to pulse; a stampede of crimson headed her way. Swatches of pepto-magenta-violet-madder penetrated her peripheral vision.

The next three hours became a blur of biscuits and gravy, egg strata, bacon, sausage, coffee, and baked apple something-or-other - not to mention eyeliner, rouge lipstick cold cream and eyeshadow. The inn stopped serving breakfast at 10:00, but the ladies stayed well after hours. Joanna was left to clean up spilled coffee, orange juice, milk and sweep up discarded make-up sample packaging.

Smoke floated stagnantly in the break room where Joanna sat doing her checkout. She ran her fingers through her hair several times until they snagged in something

sticky. More than sticky, hard too. Her fingers wouldn't budge so she tugged harder, yanking at locks of tangled hair. Several strands eventually broke loose, leaving her scalp sore. Holding her head with one hand, she looked down at the other and saw it - a white glob.

*One of those concealer-spackled bitches put gum in my hair.* But, it wasn't gum - not at all - it resembled crusty pine sap. It was granulated, it didn't smell - not that she could tell - her nostrils still hostage to scented lip glosses and perfume samples. She rubbed the mass of hair and white between her fingers hoping it would change somehow. Her fingers searched her head again. This time she found the substance in a different spot. It was coming from her scalp. It was oozing from her head.

Joanna grasped at her head feeling around, discovering three sources of ooze in all. Using her fingernails, she tried to pry some more of the sticky stuff out without taking her hair with it. Wishing she had a magnifying glass, she analyzed the substance more closely. She dug the stuff out from under her nail. Squeezing, squishing and prodding it she resembled a child playing with a prize booger or torturing a bug.

When she got home, she washed her hair. Twice. Once with a popular herbal shampoo, and when that didn't work, she tried some of her grandmother's lye kept on hand for special occasions - especially bouts with poison ivy. The lye worked in part, but her scalp continued excreting the stuff. Joanna had never heard of anything like this before, and her mother had been well-versed in strange maladies and their cures - often relating her knowledge over the supper table.

Cleaning the house, cooking dinner, Joanna kept clutching at her head. The stuff - whatever it was - kept flowing, even more rapidly for her scalp. When her husband

came home - all "Hi, honey" - at 6:30 - she couldn't decide whether to tell him or not.

He'd always been the squeamish type. But, who else could she confide in.

"Johnny, there's something wrong," she said.

He looked up at her from his armchair, a Budweiser held firmly in his hand, the 'clicker' in his right. After five years of marriage, she had finally trained him to take off his work boots before sitting in the lazyboy.

"Honey, what is it? Your mother?"

"No, it's me. There's something wrong with my head. There's something in my hair," she said.

He tilted his head to the side, reminding Joanna of her childhood dog. He looked totally confused and helpless.

"Do you want me to look at it?"

She nodded and knelt down beside the armchair, parting her hair at one of the oozing sites. She'd looked in the mirror and couldn't really see a thing.

"What is it?" he asked. His voice contained a hint of panic now.

"I don't know. It feels like sap. From a tree."

"It's white," Johnny said, applying his index finger with a light pressure and then pulled it away quickly. "Nothing came off." Joanna pulled her head up to look at him. Johnny was pressing his fingers together. "It's sticky."

Inside, Joanna was shouting: *I know that, mother-fucker*. Outside, she tried to remain calm. After consistent prodding, she consented to go to the doctor the next day.

The pair ate in relative silence, each relating snippets of their respective days in turns. Johnny kept looking at his wife; she saw the fear in his eyes, although when she caught him off guard once, that fear was mingled with disgust.

Joanna was sitting on the porch gazing up at the inn when the light in 205 came on at 10:08 PM - she looked at her watch. She waited a few minutes to see if it would turn back off before gathering her snow boots and flashlight and started walking up the hill. Trudging uphill, her flashlight flickered out. She knocked it against her boots a few times, and it clicked back on, emitting a steady beam a good thirty feet out in front of her, illuminating the snowdrifts. The snow crunched, the ice-melt layer holding her slight weight a for a moment before collapsing. The three minute walk felt like a solid forty-five.

The wind knocked frozen branches together, creating a tinkling sound that Joanna found slightly eerie. She let herself into the inn through the service entrance. The hallways were difficult to navigate - dimly lit by the night-lights. The glow from the transom of 205 reached out for a few feet before being swallowed up by the darkness.

Joanna inserted the key into the lock and turned the knob. Entering the room, she took a quick breath through her nose. She had been in this room countless times. The room smelled of stream - clean, cold, pure, earthy. The radiator dinged and hissed from the corner - heating the room to a point beyond dampness.

The bed looked inviting. Joanna had never noticed how cozy the room was. She sat on the mattress, her hand and the flashlight resting in her lap. It was so warm. It felt

like a summer day. Joanna could almost feel the sun on her face, a cool breeze coming off a stream. She closed her eyes.

She reached up to her head again. Pulling her hand away she fondled the warm, sticky mess between her fingers. Then, she looked down and there was no pine sap substance it seemed to be congealed blood. Never one to panic, she held her clean hand to her mouth.

Joanna turned out the lights and walked back to her house, her flashlight hanging loosely at her side. Johnny was asleep when she got home. He groaned and mumbled "Su-" when she climbed in next to him. She wanted to shake him she was Joanna, his wife. *Something's wrong with me.* It didn't have to be another woman's name though, she comforted herself, it didn't have to be Susan or Susie or Sue.

The alarm sounded at 7:00 AM Wednesday, Joanna opened her eyes. When she rolled over, Johnny was gone. She smelled fresh brewed coffee - in her own home, a welcome relief from the day before - he had to be somewhere nearby. He never left for work before 8:00. Groggily throwing back the covers, she noticed the stale sheets, damp and dirty. Joanna had washed them only two days before, and she and Johnny always showered before bed. Touching something that seemed to be made of flesh and bile, coarse, sticky, but did not come off on her hand.

She pulled the sheets off the bed and threw them in the hamper. It was her day off she'd do laundry again. Plodding out to the kitchen, she found Johnny, his gaze fixed on the morning paper.

"Good morning," she said in a half-whisper. "Good morning" again, louder when there was no response.

Johnny turned a leaf of the paper without looking up. Joanna mimicked his dog-tilt from the previous evening and raised an eyebrow at him. "Good morning," she said once more, her husky morning voice straining.

He set down his paper, folded it and took a slug from the dark brew in his Gilmore Construction mug and finally looked at her. "Johnny," she said, her voice pleading, her face in front of his stare. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Those people called again last night - late ," he said. "They been looking for you. I left the number on the Chester drawers. You ought to call 'em today. They keep calling in the middle of the night - 'nough to make me crazy."

Joanna left the kitchen for the bedroom, glanced at the number scrawled in Johnny's peculiar hand, and retreated to the bathroom for her mirror routine.

The mirror showed a familiar reflection not uncommon for the morning. Her hair was slightly messed, her eyes watering and red. She was still there. Almost laughing at herself, she heard Johnny's chair squeaking across the linoleum. The front door knob turned -his truck engine started up. Johnny wasn't a morning person, Joanna knew, but this was ridiculous. Joanna wanted to race out to the driveway, flag him down. Gravel spewed out from the trucks' tires and pelleted the house.

She couldn't be sure how long she sat slumped against the tub. Ghosts don't get cold chills she thought to herself. Vampires don't have reflections. The dead can't dance or bleed. But she was cold she did have a reflection, she reassured herself with a jig, and

confirmed the crimson patch of scalp. Pushing herself up, she grabbed her robe and read the figures on the bedroom clock: 7:58 AM.

Performing her scheduled chores, she passed the time. She would do the dishes, dust, wax the kitchen floor, wash and dry the laundry. Johnny would be in a better mood when he got home, wouldn't care about the phone calls anymore.

At noon, Johnny's truck pulls into the drive. There is someone with him. Joanna removes her fingers from the blinds, closing her peephole. She goes to the front door. A heavysset woman - Joanna guesses she's about forty - steps out of the truck cab. She's winded from the exertion

She can hear them talking. "It started about four months ago," Johnny's voice says.

"I reckoned that," the woman says.

"It's not a problem that I'm not Catholic, right?"

"I ain't neither. This ain't what you've read about."

Joanna flees to the bedroom again.

"I've tried talking to her about... it." Johnny's voice wafts back to the bedroom.

"Some gifts some people has. Some gifts some people don't." The woman wheezes. "I remember you."

"You remember me?" Johnny asks.

"Yes, you were acquainted with her," the woman says. Joanna notices the shift in the woman's vocabulary.



"Who would that be?"

"Why, my Susie, of course. She's the problem more than likely."

"Susie? She died, what, twenty years ago?"

"Twenty six, but I ain't counting."

"Never you worry. That light's just got to be kept on. I'll talk to your wife for a spell, see where that gets us."

Joanna peeps her head around the corner. The woman sits at her kitchen table, stubby fingers clasped, her eyes closed. Joanna walks into the room.

"What's going on here?" Joanna asks.

"Joanna this is Rebecca Woodey" Johnny says.

"Shhh," Rebecca says. "This is between us." Her eyes pop open and her head rotates in Joanna's direction, the woman's eyes have no pupils . "Well, there you are. No, you ain't her. You're older. She been rotted a long time now. You sure look like her. I was never sure what they said about her having a double."

"Listen here, lady. I'm nobody's doppelganger," Joanna says, remembering college vocabulary.

"How's your head?" Rebecca says. "You tired ain't you sweetie?"

Joanna realizes she is feeling a bit tired. "Why the hell are you here?" she asks.

"I wanted to come by and see for myself. And, eventually, there's going to have to be some changes around here," Rebecca says. "Go back to sleep. You can have you a nice dream. Things will be the way you want, the way you remember them."

"What the hell is going on here?" Joanna asks, looking back and forth between Johnny and Rebecca.

The woman, raises her round rump from the kitchen chair and extends a hand to Joanna. For some reason, she takes it - it feels warm, almost burning hot. Rebecca ushers her out the door. "I forgot my coat," Joanna says before realizing how warm she was inside. Rebecca shakes her head.

On their way up the hill Rebecca tells Joanna stories. Stories about talking horses, pigs, fish. About the day her cousin, Susie, died. Joanna's head feels so heavy. "We're not quite there yet," Rebecca says. "It's funny, I never knew. And that you're manifesting the same... injury..."

Rebecca takes them through the front door past the bellhop's vacant station. They mount the stairs which protest Rebecca's weight. Standing outside room 205, Rebecca takes a key from her pocket, turns it in the lock and the door gives way. She pulls back the sheets with one hand, never having let go of Joanna's. Tucking Joanna in, Rebecca smiles and her pupils dilate. Joanna's eyes shut tight, just before she falls asleep she hears Rebecca say, "I finally made good. I finally made it right."

In her dreams, Joanna asks Rebecca questions and gets few answers.

