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The Healer

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THE HEALER

A NOVEL

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Master's in Fine Arts

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Dedication

To my parents, for buying and reading books to me

To Aaron, for tolerating my burgeoning library

THE HEALER

A NOVEL

by

CRYSTAL HURD, ED.D.

THESIS

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Preface

*“People are always complaining that the modern novelist has no hope
and that the picture he paints of the world is unbearable.
The only answer to this is that people without hope do not write novels”*

- Flannery O'Connor, *“The Nature and Aim of Fiction”*

Scope of the Project

Throughout history, women have surprisingly played significant roles in the Church. Even the Christ story features important women: Mary Magdalen, Ruth, Esther, among many others. Julia Kroeger writes, “Though they leave much unsaid, still...Christian and secular writers of the time attest many times to the significant involvement of women in the early growth of Christianity.” Kroeger writes that the most faithful parishioners in the early church were always women. Thus, women played vital roles in the church when Christianity was in its infancy. Kroeger continues,

Also, in the upper echelons of society, women often converted to Christianity while their male relatives remained pagans, lest they lose their senatorial status. This too contributed to the inordinate number of women in the church, particularly upper-class women. Callistus, bishop of Rome c. 220, attempted to resolve the marriage problem by giving women of the senatorial class an ecclesiastical sanction to marry slaves or freedmen—even though Roman law prohibited this.

During the stringent movements of the Great Reformation, Bible verses which outlined gender roles in society and in the church were interpreted with great severity. Thus, women were subordinated to submissive roles in the church and in their families. Since the discovery of the

Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, a more accurate translation of the original text confirms the context of many verses, including those outlining gender roles. However, before this point in history, most were still using the King James Version of the Bible and espoused particularly literal—and quite severe—interpretations. This includes verses such as I Corinthians and I Timothy. I Corinthians 14:33–35 states, “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (ESV).

However, in considering my thesis project, I wondered what contemporary male leaders would say about women who exhibited spiritual gifts. Is God democratic in His delegation of these gifts? The Bible mentions women were wise and revered in Biblical times, but what if spiritual male leaders were to meet such a woman in the flesh and blood in contemporary society? Would she be accepted or rejected purely based upon gender? Growing up in a conventional church, I had female Sunday School leaders, but the head of the church was always a male. I was told from a young age that I could achieve any goal I desired, but never as a head pastor. Those roles are only reserved for men. I Timothy 3:17 states,

This saying is trustworthy: “If someone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a good work.” The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher, not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not contentious, free from the love of money. He must manage his own household well and keep his children in control without losing his dignity. But if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for the church of God? (ESV)

It is evidenced by the pronouns employed in this verse that the potential leader must be male. Later in my life, I began researching what the Bible says about women in the church, and I was startled to find some very discouraging verses. I was particularly disturbed by the insistence of some male pastors that women were the exclusive authors of sin. According to some scholars, women are the lesser of two genders because Eve was deceived by Satan in the Garden of Eden. I Timothy 2:11-14 states,

A woman must learn quietly with all submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man. She must remain quiet. For Adam was formed first and then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, because she was fully deceived, fell into transgression. (ESV)

Yet, there are courageous women in the Bible who did great and mighty things: Mary Magdalen, Ruth, Esther, and Sarah. I couldn't fully understand why some men would be so discouraging of women's role in the church, especially given their early involvement in growing church of the first century. Why must all women pay for Eve's grave mistake? The punishment cannot extend for all eternity. Women have the same intellectual capacity as men, though they lack the physical strength. My own marriage is egalitarian, a union of equals which some preachers, particularly those in the south, insist is unbiblical. This project is a culmination of my imagination and personal experiences stemming from gender prejudice that I have experienced within the church.

The journey toward this novel was not an easy one. In May, I attended the reading of southern writer Wiley Cash. Cash was reading from his new book *The Last Ballad*. At this point, I had roughly 15,000 words of a novel set in Yorkshire about the Luddite rebellion. However, I had never been to Yorkshire. It was difficult to capture the climate, the personality, the accent

without stepping foot on the same ground which reverberated with the haunting of revolt. As Cash spoke with unbridled passion about being “from North Carolina, educated in North Carolina, and writing novels set in North Carolina,” I had a bit of a revelation. What about the soil beneath my own feet? Could I deny that there are aspects about my life which are irrevocably and unapologetically “southern”? Perhaps. I cannot deny that I am shaped by the mountains. O’Connor’s statement has much wisdom: I don’t want to blend with the masses which write quaint stories about coal mines and quilting and moonshine. Those are “a dime a dozen” in the south. I want to write a story which breathes with the heart of Appalachia, and at the same time, appeals to the wider audience by illustrating human struggle, suffering, and redemption.

In writing such a tale, I wish to capture what is admirable about “southern folks”: their charm, resilience, stubbornness, determination, and compassion, and yet acknowledge their fallacies and quirks. Their stories are filled with themes of struggle and survival, common stories that have colored the pages of novels by William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and John Steinbeck. In this way, the conflict is already established; poverty and disenfranchisement cast a long shadow in the south. The artistic responsibility of any “southern writer” is to portray the people of the south in an authentic light, one unblemished by cliché and stereotype. O’Connor puts it best:

It is not a matter of so-called local color, it is not a matter of losing our peculiar quaintness. Southern identity is not really connected with mocking-birds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads...an identity is not to be found on the surface; it is not accessible to the poll-taker; it is not something that can become a cliché. It is not

made from the mean average of the typical, but from the hidden and often the most extreme. It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. It lies very deep. In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist” (57-58).

The tone of authenticity and honest is crucial to my story. As a writer, I want to represent my culture realistically. Mario Vargas Llosa writes that authenticity is a paramount aspect of good literature (22). Although novels are technically “fabricated lies,” they hold a wellspring of truth: “the authentic novelist is the novelist who docilely obeys the rules life dictates, writing on those themes born out of experience and possessed of urgency and avoiding all others” (22). The balancing act occurs when I craft these figures as three-dimensional characters, not *caricatures*. I make this distinction because it is essential in good storytelling. These characters should remain true to the real people that I encounter every day, the real person that I encounter in the mirror. *This is Appalachia*. This is our story. Anything less feels like a betrayal.

My setting is a fabricated place in east Tennessee. Although I had some hesitancy about not naming a real location in Appalachia, I have seen successful authors create a town which bears a strong resemblance to a real one—William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, which is based upon Lafayette County, Mississippi or Thomas Wolfe’s Altamont, Catawba, a fictionalized version of his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina—which may prove that Gardner is presumptuous, if not incorrect. While such intimacy with the landscape can be helpful to a writer and is certainly achievable, can the writer capture the same authenticity that warrants a true southern voice? Storytelling is a vibrant part of the southern milieu. As a child, I sat across the dinner table from my grandfather and listened to his stories about World War II. The dinner

table represented much more than an area of simple sustenance; in the south, it is an epicenter of social gatherings. Home represents a vital and integral part of the family at large. This is why southerners tend to create a character of the home and landscape: their presence and influence reverberate throughout the story.

Poetics and Assessment

“In the South there are more amateur authors than there are rivers and streams. It’s not an activity that waits upon talent,” writes Flannery O’Connor in her essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country.” She continues, “The woods are full of regional writers, and it is the great horror of every serious Southern writer that he will become one of them” (29). What is it about the southern perspective that craves expression? O’Connor is right; the south is positively saturated with writers. How can one separate themselves from the throng? More importantly, how can one’s work avoid the obstacles of being an “amateur writer”? O’Connor suggests that some will say, “Don’t be a southern writer; be an American writer” (29). Gardner would concur with this; he states in *The Art of Fiction*, “Nothing can be more limiting to the imagination, nothing is quicker to turn on the psyche’s censoring devices and distortion systems, than trying to write truthfully and interestingly about one’s own home town” (18). Yet, we have seen successful authors create a town which bears a strong resemblance to a real one—William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, which is based upon Lafayette County, Mississippi or Thomas Wolfe’s Altamont, Catawba, a fictionalized version of his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina—which may prove that Gardner is presumptuous, if not incorrect. While such intimacy with the landscape can be helpful to a writer and is certainly achievable, can the writer capture the same authenticity that warrants a true southern voice? Storytelling is a vibrant part of the southern milieu. As a child, I sat across the dinner table from my grandfather and listened to his stories

about World War II. The dinner table represented much more than an area of simple sustenance; in the south, it is an epicenter of social gatherings. Home represents a vital and integral part of the family at large. This is why southerners tend to create a character of the home and landscape: their presence and influence reverberate throughout the story. Writer Eudora Welty writes in “Place in Fiction”:

Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress. Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place. Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else...It is only too easy to conceive that a bomb that could destroy all trace of places as we know them, in life and through books, could also destroy all feelings as we know them, so irretrievably and so happily are recognition, memory, history, valor, love, all the instincts of poetry and praise, worship and endeavor, bound up in place. From the dawn of man's imagination, place has enshrined the spirit; as soon as man stopped wandering and stood still and looked about him, he found a god in that place; and from then on, that was where the god abided and spoke from if ever he spoke.

Place has much to do with the story as other significant content. Setting establishes the world for the reader's mind.

Julia Kristeva, who uses the theories of Bakhtin, asks readers to approach texts as an axis which considers the reader, the writer, and the climate and context surrounding a text:

Confronted with this spatial conception of language's poetic operation, we must first define the three dimensions of textual space where various semic sets and poetic sequences function. These three dimensions or coordinates of dialogue are writing subject, addressee and exterior texts. The word's status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus (37).

When considered, regional writing goes beyond the mere story, but relies upon and provides geographical and cultural evidence of the society from which it begins. Bakhtin's idea of dialogism is "driven less by literary-critical concerns than by a philosophical agenda that draws on the work of a range of thinkers..." (Shepherd). Shepherd continues that dialogism asks that one "engage with the concept's place in intellectual history, with the philosophical and philological contexts in which dialogism denotes not an identifiable quality of a narrative text, but a set of problems in the study of human language, communication and cognition" (Linell as quoted in Shepherd).

Julia Kristeva writes in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" that intertextuality, according to Bakhtin, is "each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (37). In her article "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept," Maria Jesus Martinez Alfaro writes that, "we understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures" (268). P. Prayer Elmo Raj writes that intertextuality "existed as a universal phenomenon that elucidates the communicative interconnections between a text and the other and text and context" (77). Furthermore,

intertextuality posits that “a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system” (268). This is echoed from Plato’s notion that art is imitative, suggesting that art is merely a reflection of previous texts (as aspect argued by Harold Bloom in his work *The Anxiety of Influence*). Yet, John Gardner states in *The Art of Fiction* that, “All fiction is derivative, a fact that the good writer turns to his advantage, making the most of the reader’s expectations, twisting old conventions, satisfying expectations in unexpected ways” (174). In intertextuality, the authors “are not original and do not create anything from their texts from original minds but compile from the already existing texts” (Raj 78).

My work, although influenced by southern authors, is a new creation born of the impact of others. Other southern writers—such as Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, and Thomas Wolfe—have laid a precedence. Inspired from these texts and personal experience, *The Healer* is my contemplation and expression of my culture. Although I have studied great authors to refine my style and content, the desire to write about Appalachia.

As opposed to New Criticism, intertextuality fully endorses the blend of influences upon a text: culture, society, local and national events, the author’s own personal struggles. “The meaning that the text embodies is not constant and apparent because the text symbolizes the society’s conflict over the meaning of words. Intertextuality deals with the materialization of a text from the social text and its perpetual existence within society and history. The text, on its own, have no unity or unified meaning but part of the on-going socio-cultural processes” (41). This concept is similar to Bakhtin’s Dialogism. Dialogism considers the context of the literature and describes the influence that context has upon a work. The context, thus, is a substantial aspect of a work of literature. It frames the text, provides meaning for some of the linguistic characteristics, and provides a unique perspective from which readers view a text. “However

Bakhtin's notion of dialogism is based on how human beings exercise language in specific social situations but Kristeva thinks more in terms of text and textuality. Both arrive at a point that texts cannot be detached from the social or cultural textuality which is the back drop in which a text is created" (Alfaro 270).

Feminism is also imbued into this text. Joan is a female in a male-dominated culture, especially settled into the religious south which promotes patriarchy. Michael Ryan writes that, "Feminism asks why women have played a subordinate role to me in human societies. It is concerned with how women's lives have changed throughout history, and it asks what about women's experience is different from men's, either as a result of an essential ontological or psychological difference or as a result of historical imprinting and social construction (100). Why does Joan have to dress as a boy to gain legitimacy? What does this signify about culture? Ryan continues, "Gender, rather than be the sight line that allowed one to trace woman's banishment from an androcentric culture, might instead be a construct of culture, something written into the psyche of language" (529). When considering the language of the King James Version or English Standard Version coupled with iron-fisted insistence on legalism and literalism, it is no surprise that some leaders believe in the inferiority of women's role in church and the culture at large. This may develop out of a robust patriarchal belief, or for some, a misled yet earnest search for the righteous path. Despite a thorough review of the Greek roots of the words used in the actual scrolls, it is possible that the scrolls reflect more of a norm of Biblical culture than a divine decree. In this way, some gender roles may be a social and cultural construct. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan write,

Gender identity is no less a construction of patriarchal culture than the ideas that men are somehow superior to women; both are born at the same time and with the

same time with the same stroke of the pen. The psychology or identity that feminist essentialists think is different from men's is merely the product of conditioning under patriarchy, a conditioning to be caring, relational, and maternal that may make women seem more ethical than men, but a conditioning nonetheless" (530).

Literature is a reflection of its surrounding culture. Thus, the discouragement of women in the Victorian/modern church is as much about retaining power. It is the fear that women entering realms commonly reserved for men would upset the balance.

Power, specifically ecclesiastical power, is of paramount importance. Morals and ethics gained from religion impact a person's worldview, decision-making processes, and lifestyle. In literature, power in culture is continually examined and scrutinized:

Power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness –not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal, to be American—is to be not female (562).

Thus, part of the goal of writing *The Healer* is to make audiences comfortable with a feminine religious authority. Some religions pay reverence to women, but still deny that they can be used of God in unconventional ways. It is my treatise of firmly implanting women in the continual

conversation (or in some circles, establishing a conversation) about the importance of women to the larger outreach of the church. Rikin and Ryan write, “Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects” (566).

The protagonist and narrator Riley also suffers from deep burns to his face and hands that resulted from an accident after transporting moonshine for a prosperous farmer in the area. The (outer) scarring from this accident is so severe that Riley must withdraw from school due to the ruthless, incessant bullying. He loses his job at McCormack’s farm because his “disability.” He has been pushed to the margins because of his appearance. Michel Foucault writes in “Discipline and Punishment” that the “lepers” in history and literature were thrust to the margins as a means of power and control, creating a “ritual of exclusion”:

Generally speaking, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution...On the one hand, lepers are treated as plague victims; the tactics of individualizing disciplines are imposed on the excluded; and, on the other hand, the universality of disciplinary controls make it possible to brand the “leper” and to bring into play against him the dualistic mechanisms of inclusion (469).

Jacques Derrida also commented on the deconstruction of conventional modes of truth and reason. Historically, these ideas were established by religious or diplomatic means. The law, crafted by those of privilege and “reason,” created the edicts which are morally good. However,

when those individuals insert or appropriate their privilege as collective ethics, prejudice is ripe to develop. Michael Ryan writes, “The opposition of inside/outside must already be in place for philosophy to establish truth as what is identical with itself, living, and authentic and to establish repetition, substitution, and the rest as what is not truth) as the outside that defines the inside of truth’s identity” (72). Thus Joan, due to her position as a female healer in a patriarchal religion, and Riley, who is impoverished and is plagued with physical deformities, are not conventional characters to reveal truth and reason, as traditional protagonists often do. Instead, they cling to nature to provide religious experiences in the novel and eschew the man-made religions built from generations of privileged (and sometimes flawed) interpretations of Biblical text. Ryan continues, “Truth is always determined as the presence of ideas to the mind, an internal intelligibility uncontaminated by external signs, which pertains to the realm of the body and the physical” (73). Yet, our characters are outside conventional lines derived from social standards, standards established and obeyed by people who claim themselves as an authority. Joan and Riley are immersed in the realm of the body—of being rejected because the body is injured, or despised because it is the incorrect “gender,” traditionally speaking. Yet, both characters find hope in those systems which relegate them as “literary lepers,” and they learn to shatter expectations and thrive. This is the hope: that society can alter its view of privileging what is right over what is traditional.

The Healer chronicles the journey of a mysterious young girl who appears at a church. Brother Michael, a mainstream pastor, takes the girl under his wing. When he realizes that she can heal after healing the wing of an injured bird, Michael dresses her up as a boy and parades her as a miracle healer on the tent revival circuit. After it is discovered that Joan is a girl, there is an uproar in the church. There is no denying that she has gifts, but from where do these gifts

originate? Certainly not from the conventional scriptures, as some would suggest from Paul writing that women remain silent in the church. Still yet, there are people who believe Joan is a gift, and the two sides conflict. A dizzy chain of events will lead to the climax of the novel during which Joan will face Mike after he starts a fire. The narrator is Joan's friend, a twelve-year-old boy named Riley. Riley was burned in an accidental fire when he was younger, which scarred his neck, face, and hands. Their friendship is born out of similarities, of being unconventional in a society which insists upon conformity. Both come to understand that being marginal, or "the other," is a difficult road when juxtaposed with mainstream society. Culture expects Joan to conform to social stereotypes for women, while Riley is expected to remain concealed because of his distorted physical appearance. Both need one another to find some compassion and understanding in their world, and the only way for this character arcs to form is to create and then challenge the bond between them.

Both Joan and Riley are morally good characters. They are children struggling to understand the world around them, and the culture which can't accept them as they are. John Gardner argues that all good fiction is moral. Morality can preclude some idea of God, but Gardner states that most literature helplessly straddles the boundary between sacred and secular. Furthermore, great literature is founded on an expansive idea of love:

For great art, even concern is not enough. Great art celebrates life's potential, offering a vision unmistakably and unsentimentally rooted in love. "Love" is of course another of those embarrassing words, perhaps a word even more embarrassing than "morality," but it's a word no aesthetician ought carelessly to drop from his vocabulary. Misused as it may be by pornographers and the makers of greeting-cards, it has,

nonetheless, a firm, hand-headed sense that names the single quality without which true art cannot exist. (83)

Love is the theme. Joan believes in a good and all-persevering love. She might come off as naïve for some, but her love for God and humanity rules her emotions, her actions. It is what motivates Joan to persist in healing even when she knows that she is being used by Brother Michael to bring more people into the tent revivals and increase the offerings. However, Joan is important as a character because she is moral. Her personal and spiritual ethics drive every decision she makes. Thus, in a community where goodness persists, but corruption can thrive, there is a hope that there is a Good greater than all of us, a Good which rules with a justice and mercy and compassion unparalleled with human capacity. This is the trait that we desire in our protagonists. Gardner writes in *On Moral Fiction*:

But however it may be achieved, in all great fiction, primary emotion (our emotion as we read, or the characters' emotions, or some combination of both) must sooner or later lift off from the particular and be transformed to an expression of what is universally good in human life—what promotes happiness for the individual alone and in society; in other words, some statement of value" (62).

I have experienced such corruption in my own life. I have seen church officials motivated by money instead of compassion. I have witnessed men reprimanding women from the pulpit for tempting man. I have seen good people easily manipulated; I have seen high-ranking church officials wearing masks of kindness but hiding a deep deception or discontent for God's work. Yet, I have come to understand that people are fallible. Because of the Fall, they will disappoint and fall privy to their weaknesses. Some become intoxicated on a crude self-righteousness and

speak out against mixed-race marriage or homosexuality. But this judgement is born of arrogance and pride, not of love. Joan is intended as a symbol of hope, a hope that supersedes pride and arrogance and judgement. A character which Gardner would deem a truly *moral* character.

Framework

The basic framework of this thesis is to provide a contemporary retelling of Joan of Arc without the military experiences. My frame is a retelling of the myth of Joan, which has time-cherished themes, but also provides a structure to tell my contemporary story. In the same way, I am also borrowing themes from the Christ story—an orphan of sorts who has powers which the establishment doesn't approve of. The story is set in Appalachia in the 1950s, during the boom of evangelism through tent revivals. Joan becomes a symbol of hope, but her mysterious beginning leads to some speculation about her and her power. She is exploited by an enigmatic male evangelist and paraded as a boy. Later, when her true gender is revealed, the community is divided about her authenticity. Can a girl have such abilities or is she a heretic? The controversy sparks a search for her real family, which ultimately leads to her demise. Joan is good soul.

My narrative is told in linear fashion, however, one of my plot twists occurs as a flashback. This is what Llosa calls “the hidden fact.” Llosa writes that “the hidden fact” must be meaningful, not “gratuitous or arbitrary” (110). My aim is to place a “turn” in every act, creating a consistent tension and maintaining the audience's concern for Joan and the community. Joan is initially perceived as a boy, when he is dressed as a boy to satisfy the crowds in 1950s Tennessee. Things become complicated when it is revealed that Joan is a girl and has “mystical powers” to heal. This is different from Joan, who save visions, but the idea of the woman imbued with spiritual gifts is one that I wish to present.

Additionally, I employ a Chinese Box by working on levels of meaning which are fresh and relevant. One box is the use of Joan of Arc's story. Additionally, I pull elements from the Christ story, which ring familiar to more religious readers. The hope is to craft a story which illustrates the importance of women to the contemporary church through this tale, to show how God does not discriminate according to gender.

Although Joan is based upon a real person, the idea of a healer in the south is a new idea. I situate Joan later in history and in Appalachia. This novel relies upon a substantial amount of nonfiction to produce a fictional story. Paola Bozzi, in writing about the works of Herta Mueller, mentions the topic of "sur-fiction," a term created by Raymond Federman. Sur-fiction "thematizes the constructedness of reality...not because it imitates reality but because this kind of writing exposes the fictional nature of reality" (111). Perhaps this situation may be improbable, but it isn't *impossible* (scripture states that "Nothing is impossible with God"); thus this novel represents my own exploration of my culture in dealing spiritual, unconventional women. Bozzi writes, "To see imaginatively is to clothe something in a fiction that transforms its meaning and may take the simple form an image, a system of images, or a fiction properly evoked by the language" (112). I approach this novel as a scientist would approach an experiment: what would happen if Joan of Arc lived today? What if she lived in Appalachia as opposed to more progressive landscapes? How would the religious right respond to a woman who claims to have a Godly gift? All of these aspects I pondered when constructing this story.

In the end, even the scriptures write that man and woman are wonderful because they are born out of God's image. I Corinthians 11:7-12 states,

But the woman is the glory of the man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman

for man. For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. In any case, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman. But all things come from God.

Certainly genders exist, but most of our gender roles are often patterned from patriarchy or stereotypes. Perhaps it is a construct and, even though some may find it more convenient to depend upon these constructs, the truth is that every individual has a holy purpose. That purpose is not contingent upon reproductive organs. It is not dependent upon “brain size” or instinct. It is born of a desire to live in a world and satisfy, with deep longing, all that we have been created for.

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THE HEALER

A Novel

Introduction

A storm had swept through western Tennessee that summer. It uprooted the once-towering oak trees; limbs were torn from their lofty balconies. Debris filled the river beds, weeds and trash from upstream. It was as if Shakespeare had written the act for one of his great tragedies: the angry gods unsettling the land with their ire, wrecking the once-tranquil valley with the refuse tumbling down the mountain.

But we knew that there were no gods then. Only one. The one that the preacher hollered about every Sunday in a humid sanctuary when I was a boy. The one where he spoke with a swelling contradiction of emotion while women fanned themselves on the wooden pews. It was confusing; one minute, he seemed to puncture the roof with his staccato words, the next, he was weeping, the silence pervaded by heavy sobs. He would mop his angry brow with the same handkerchief that he had dried his tears with previously. Then he would work himself into a rage and pound the pulpit until we were certain that it would collapse. We didn't understand it all then. How could we? He had called it "holy rage." Everything an adult felt was holy, we had thought. But I had seen my Momma crying when my sister got sick, and I heard the long litanies of prayers escape her lips as she whispered to God. Then, the healer appeared and pressed warm hands to her chest. Her ragged lungs no longer struggled for breath but returned to a calm rhythm. The cough ceased. The pain drained from her face, and a placid peace, dare I say a smile, crossed her lips.

And yet, when the time came, they denied the healer. They denied the miracles. They turned their back *en masse* and refused the whole thing. The women began clucking about other business, absorbed in other controversies. They adopted their new saviors as they discarded their old ones. I was stunned at their change in perspective. This was the one who had laid hands on

their sons and daughters, on their friends and neighbors. They themselves had witnessed the grand miracles, spectacles which are now called illusions. Tricks. Deceptions. But the Healer is the real thing. I've seen many imposters in my day. The south is full of people claiming to have a spiritual gift. The Healer was confident, but not overly ambitious. The Healer was not drunk with arrogance like those who followed behind. There was a simplicity, an innocence. None of the others had that way with us. I cannot understand how they turned it all out. I'm not one to endorse all that voodoo, but I saw it with my own two eyes. When I'm on my deathbed one solemn day, I will still maintain that I saw a miracle.

Chapter 1

Beulah, Tennessee 1955

The old ragged bridge connected Sullivan County and spanned the wide frothing deep of the Holston River. I visited it often nights, darkness my deepest consolation. Many nights, I crept to the river and plunged my hands under the rush. I felt the current curl into my palm. I watched the slow wrinkle of my fingertips. I heard the ripples whisper to me about the secrets of the woods. Sometimes I cupped both hands and brought the puddle to my face. Momma used to call those moments my “baptisms.” Yet, I never felt transformed afterwards. The water dripped from my chin and jaw and evaporated in the crisp night air. Then there I was, unchanged. Momma always told me that such things were just a symbol. I wanted to believe it, but I could never bring myself to be a spiritual boy. I wished that the water would purge my past and I would emerge clean and new.

I preferred to go out at night. There were less people. No one to walk by and gawk at me. No children to point and stare. No women to shake their heads and mutter, “Bless his heart.” After sunset, I walked in the wildness of the woods, beholden to its wonder. I would sometimes pass a gathering of deer in the clearing behind our cabin. There was a small meadow there, furnished with all of the lavish weeds an animal could only desire. Moonlight flooded the field so if I focused, I would hope to see some visitors. Often my patience was rewarded when I noticed the silhouettes of brave creatures easing out of the thick branches. I laid oats on some burlap. Then I would wait for a deer or a fox to wander out. With delicate steps, they would creep toward the clearing, emerging out of the forest like an enchanted beast in a fairy tale. How majestic they were! How regal and respectful. I read an essay recently where Mark Twain stated that animals were the superior species. I agree. Humans can be the most deplorable of beasts.

A few years ago, Momma decided that it would be best if I studied at home. The kids were brutal, she said. She inquired at the library in Bristol for a donation of books. Every few weeks, a small package would arrive. Over time, I amassed an impressive library containing different versions of the Bible, old volumes of Shakespeare, Dickens, the Brontes (all of them fantastic), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Homer's epics. They were all classic literature books abandoned by someone in a previous age, but now my tiny bookshelf sagged and groaned beneath the weight. Soon after, Pop built me a nice bookshelf out of old kindling wood. It wasn't much but I adored it. By the time I was throwing off my adolescence like an old coat, I had not one, but three bookshelves. The running joke was that Pop was becoming quite the expert in such creations. I learned to appreciate my solitude, to find a peace in the quiet of lonely moments. I had my books to keep me company, and my family to love me—all else was vanity.

Summer was coming, and I decided to visit the meadow that evening. I had two bags of oats that I had traded for feeding Mr. McCormack's cattle. I sauntered up past the fencepost, climbed the small slope that led to the plateau. All I heard was the choir of cicadas. The meadow was lit with generous moonlight spilling from the skies, and the atmosphere was punctuated by the winking bottoms of lightning bugs. It was all so lovely. I became intoxicated by nature's pageant, it seemed as if they were all performing for my pleasure. Finally, in the distance, a young doe pushed her way past the brush and into the clearing. Majestic, she stirred slightly, then was compelled to travel toward the middle of the meadow, where the oats lay waiting. She was cautious, but her nose lifted, catching the scent of the treasure I had left. As she proceeded toward the middle, I saw her gain confidence, step surer, her pace quickening. Soon, she was

hovering above the oats. She nibbled a small bit, then finding them satisfactory, began to devour them. I was surprised, given how deer are often in packs, that others weren't with her. She was alone and hungry, of that I was certain.

Suddenly, I was compelled to step forward myself. I can't explain what drew me to do it. I rose to my feet and began a slow waltz toward the center. The doe was busy eating. My eyes were fixed on her. This sweet creature, this unassuming majesty. A small *crack* – a stick underfoot! Why hadn't I paid more attention? I shuddered. The doe paused, her ears turned. I slowed my breathing. I waited. Again, she proceeded to crunch the oats. When I felt that she was fully distracted, I exhaled and began my sojourn again. Step upon step upon step. Naked foot swallowed by the mossy grass. Now I was nearly eight or nine feet away. I was slowing my pace, a trembling hand outstretched. Then I summoned my courage.

“Hello there,” I whispered.

The doe stirred again. I noticed that she had feasted upon a considerable amount of oats. She was famished. She didn't seem startled, but she finally looked up at me. In the moonlight, I met the black pools of her eyes. It was unmistakable, the fear behind them. But something in me advanced upon the poor creature. I took another step, then another. She did not move. I expected that she didn't want to flee from her dinner, but can I not approach anticipating gratitude?

“Hello there. Don't be afraid.”

The animal began to shiver. My hand was nearing her head. There was a light patch of white which blended into a coat of caramel brown. Her eyes were alert.

“Did you like the treat I left you? Huh?”

She was frozen now, caught between the food she desired and the human she feared. Every deer that lingered in this meadow often ended up at the wrong end of a rifle. Food was scarce up the mountain, and most men took it upon themselves to live off of the land, some more out of pride than necessity. I'm sure this young doe doesn't know me from any gun-slinging man in the county. But I craved, in that moment, to find some form of companionship with the wild.

I dared to take one more step. My hand was nearly above the white patch, inches from her eyes. I locked my gaze with hers. Perhaps animals can understand kindness through nonverbal cues. I softly laid my hand down. I could feel her tension. She was ready to abandon her oats in order to survive. And who could blame her? These were not domesticated deer nor were they the magical creatures from Hans Christian Anderson tales. They were *wild*.

As soon as my fingers met the coarse hair on her head, her legs buckled. She hesitated for a brief moment and fled, her white tail rippling through the meadow and out to the forest. Her front hoof kicked the oats askew. Her graceful legs, graceful even in danger, led her back into the thick of the forest. I looked down upon my bare feet, my scarred hands. No creature finds me suitable.

That was the night that I stopped bringing oats to the meadow. Nature can be as suspicious as humans. I did venture out to watch it on warm evenings. I would go out there to think in the quiet, to mediate, to contemplate. It still was my sanctuary, but it would never be my salvation. Even nature has its limits.

Chapter 2

The town of Beulah squats firmly in the mountains of east Tennessee along the Appalachian Mountains. It was a small town then. Residents numbered in the hundreds. The “downtown” valley was smattering of stores (what used to be a company store) punctuated with a few municipal buildings. Back at the turn of the century, Beulah was a bustling coal town. Recent years had left it a ghost of its former glory. Signs hung sideways from vacant buildings. The cement sidewalks crumbled underfoot. About two miles out of town was our cabin. It was booming, there were cabins spread all over that mountainside. But the industry had started to wane, and people were migrating to better employment. When the coal left, so did the people.

The 1950s were a fairly calm time in Beulah. In other places, the Civil Rights Movement was causing good men and women to go to the back of buses, to drink from different water fountains. I never understood then why certain people would not walk on the same side of the street as my black friends, although they shared the same classroom as me. But this, I discovered later, was a recent event. When Momma and Pop went to school, they said that there was a different school for coloreds. When I asked why, they would just shake their heads and say, “Because some people are too ignorant for their own good. And those people are usually the ones who make the rules.” There was a total of four of us – Momma and Pop myself, and my infant sister Layla. We lived up on the ridge and out of people’s way. Momma was a woman of thirty-five, her auburn hair pulled back in a bun with a gingham violet dress and laughing eyes. My Pop was a thin, gaunt man who hardly ever removed his overalls. He swept his dark hair over his forehead when he wasn’t working and his boots were always muddy. That was how it was for my people. Generations of Suffolk, my kin, lived off the land. They had migrated from Ireland to North Carolina, and then stretched upward toward the Virginia border. My great-

grandfather Peter Suffolk was a farmer and a blacksmith. He had helped forge this area, carved that valley from the stone of the mountain, so we were well-respected in that manner. We didn't have much money, but we had a legacy of "integrity" that Pop said was worth more than all the money in the world.

Up until the accident, I lived an average life for a boy my age. I went to school, I played kick the can in the schoolyard until dusk. I went fishing with Pop and picked forget-me-nots for Momma's table. Momma always loved fresh flowers for her table. She longed to "bring a little of the beauty indoors." She was always wearing an apron and making her slow oscillation from one end of our kitchen to the other. The kitchen was one of the biggest rooms, located in the back of our cabin. The front had a small living room with two rocking chairs and a coal furnace. There were three small bedrooms off to the side (my bedroom and Layla's were on one side of the cabin and Mom and Pop's was on the other) and a small bathroom. But don't be fooled; what I considered a bedroom was more a hallway for most people nowadays. The room was tiny, but I was content to lay in bed at night and hear the rain sing on the roof shingles, to hear the crickets serenade me in the moonlight. Layla didn't hear this for some time because she slept in my parents' room for the first few years of her life. Thus, the western side of the house was my domain. I was young and proud and strong.

As a boy, I earned extra money by doing odd jobs for an affluent local farmer named Cedric McCormack. McCormack was a short, rotund man with a straw hat and spectacles. His beard was wintry white and trimmed to a couple of inches below his chin. His beard crawled along his cheekbones and framed his face with whiskers. He always wore a plaid vest with tight trousers and dirty boots. McCormack came from a long line of "gentleman farmers." He owned more land in the mountain and valley than any individual. In fact, they say he was directly

descended from the McCormick who made the cotton gin (although we all knew that wasn't true because the last names were spelled differently). The McCormacks owned most of the land, and they had many hands which helped with the prosperity of the farm. McCormack gave me odd jobs to do around the farm, and I would always bring my shiny nickels home to Momma and Pop. I was proud to hear the jingle of coins in my pocket after a hard day's labor.

After the accident, I stopped going to school. I retreated into my books more than ever. We never went to church now, although Momma and Pop believed in God. Layla had a nagging cough that spring that clung to her lungs. The doctor had visited our cabin multiple times, brought all kinds of salves and tinctures to soothe her, but none of them seemed to work permanently. Within a few days, she was back to the dry hack and the shortness of breath.

Not long after the summer arrived did the valley begin to talk about the revival coming to town. Supposedly, a pastor out of North Carolina had started doing them and thousands of people were coming each night. A tent was erected toward the northern edge of the valley, an ivory sheet which tightened to a several poles on a wide rectangle. A wooden stage was built to accommodate the local choir and a band that traveled with the evangelist. His name was Brother Mike, a burly, dark-headed bear of a man dressed in a crisp suit and tie. He never took off the tie, just loosened it when the humid weather got the better of him. That was the chatter of the town. He also had a healer boy who traveled with him in a separate vehicle. They said the boy was timid; he was kept in a special car on the revival trail so that he wouldn't be exposed to "sin and transgression" of the people he waited to heal each night. No one mentioned the boy, for he was solely the responsibility of Brother Mike. No one bothered to oppose Brother Mike's edicts, and the child was kept secluded from most of the revival folks. That was the way it was, they said.

A neighbor mentioned to Momma that she should take Layla out to that tent to let the healer touch her. Momma shot down the idea in a blink: there is too much noise and light, too much fanfare at such an event to bring poor Layla out into the night. Besides, Momma had argued, who believes in all that hocus pokus with them speakers and lights and singing and hollering? That religious carnival was just a smoke-and-mirrors show, and Momma prided herself upon being fiercely pragmatic, if not also stubborn.

Nonetheless, there was no revival for us. Momma believed in good ole' home remedies and medical intervention, if needed. She liked to live like her ancestors, canning food and hanging laundry out on the line to dry in the warm breeze. In truth, Momma had long been reluctant to accept help when she needed it. Like most mountain women, she was tough as a briar bush. That's what I loved about my Momma. She had been my saving grace after the accident. Don't get me wrong, Pop was encouraging too, but I always loved my Momma. She always had my best interest at heart.

That is why I felt so awful the first time I disobeyed her, but I don't regret it. Even to this day.

Chapter 3

It was a balmy June evening. I had been out looking for crawdads by the creek when I heard commotion out in the field by the post office. Commotion carried easily on the breeze. I heard that the revival moved in and was “sucking up all the electricity in the valley to run a damn light show” (this quote originated, I believe, from the local Methodist pastor). I had been instructed to stay away from that revival mess. Momma didn’t want to expose me to all of that, but something drew me towards it. I saw the crowd huddled under a white sheet supported by make-shift beams. A sweaty man in a loosening tie and khaki suit was yelling phrases into a corded microphone, to which the audience replied with thunderous cheering and applause. The man paced and paced the front of the stage. At first, I told myself to stay away, but my curiosity conquered better judgment.

As I closed in, I saw the man standing on a small wooden platform. Stage lights poured from beams mounted on both sides of the stage. Towering speakers also hugged the stage. Wires snaked through the grass to a generator in the back. Behind the man was a cluster of musicians, along with a small choir of women fanning themselves in the summer heat. They all wore the same deep purple robes with white collars. There was something quite magical about the whole scene, something ethereal.

“I’m here because I want to see the Lord work, amen?”

The crowd replied with fervor. A chorus of “amens” lifted above the crowd.

“I’m here to because I want to see God move in this land. I want to see people rise up and become righteous, to become holy, to become greater than our mortal selves.”

Again, the people cheered.

“Brethren, tonight. Tonight, we have a special guest. This here is Brother John. John is a young man that I met on the road a few weeks ago. He has the power, by the grace of God, to heal people. That’s right. Let’s hear it for little John.”

Out from the back of the stage came a tiny figure weaving through the choir ladies and musicians to the front of the stage. He was square and tiny, dwarfed by the pageant of music and enthusiasm that soaked the air. The boy appeared to crouch in fear as the suited man placed a hand on his shoulder. The little boy was wearing black slacks, with a white button-up cotton shirt. This was underneath a black suit jacket and a black tie. His hair was slicked back, a dark ebony color. He would have been an echo of his elder if it wasn’t for his complete look of fear which betrayed him on his sweaty brow and in his nervous hands. He seemed fragile, like a scared rabbit when he knows he has been spotted by a human. I admit I almost felt sorry for the poor boy. He looked about my age. Panic nearly seized me when I realized that I might be seen. Still, I found myself relaxing in the perimeter of the tent.

The man placed the microphone in front of the nervous boy. “How are you feeling tonight, little John?”

The boy stood stock-still. His eyes fixed on the far corner of the tent. “I am doing fine, Brother Mike.”

“Would you like the Lord to work through you tonight?”

“Yes.” There was an awkward silence, then applause lifted above the parishioners.

What I observed next was something I can never explain. First, an elderly lady from the valley named Beatrice waddled up to the preacher. She looked like a picture of the old days in a lavender polyester dress suit with a birdcage hat on top of her head like a cherry on a sundae.

With the help from her cane, she approached the stage from the left side, taking the wooden stairs with great care. She had a bad hip, she stated. John stood by his side, stiff and unaffected by the pageant around him. Then Beatrice stepped up to him, encouraged by the preacher.

“Can you help me, young man?”

He almost seemed hesitant. With the eyes of the audience on him, the boy seemed to transform. He blinked. He was so thin and frail, but he worked quickly and methodically to address the woman’s ailment. He moved his hands around the woman’s hip area. He didn’t touch her but focused his hands just a couple of inches from her waist. He closed his eyes and waved his hands wildly. He dipped like a weed dancing in a stiff breeze. Suddenly, his brow seemed to lift. The woman took in a deep breath, the angst left her cheeks and eyes. She turned to the preacher, “It don’t hurt. It don’t hurt anymore. Praise God!”

Suddenly, the woman leapt from the stage. Shock emanated from the crowd. Beatrice dropped her cane like a dirty stick and waltzed off the stage. People on the stage whooped while more “Hallelujahs” and “amens” came from the crowd. I rubbed my eyes. Was that a trick? He never even touched her. Beatrice was not one to indulge fancies. Stubborn and independent, Beatrice rarely asked for help with anything. However, she had a bad fall a few years ago after an ice storm and injured that hip. The cane had been her constant companion. Yet, I saw her now with hands raised, a smile spread across her face, dancing at the foot of the stage. I had convinced myself that I would never fall for the old pulpit trick, but this seemed like the real thing.

I should have stolen away after this, but I was riveted. I remained there for another hour in the far shadows, watching as the small boy went into his healing trance and lifted burdens

from a wide variety of people. Each one confounded me as the previous one did. The preacher finally dismissed the boy, who with loud applause, took a quick exit back behind the stage. I walked a few steps to get a good look at him from behind the fanfare. I saw him breathe a sigh and collapse into a lawn chair. He seemed to be praying, and thankful to be relieved of his duties. At this point, I went away in the darkness and thought all night about the things I saw. I laid in bed serenaded by cicadas and night owls and wondered about the world that I did not know, that I missed out on so often. Stars twinkled overhead, and I thought hard about the God beyond them. Could God really give children such a gift? If so, how is one chosen among the others to receive it?

The mystery followed me the next evening as I visited my meadow. The boy's wavering hands, his darting eyes, yet I also observed how his nervousness melted away when he began to heal. I told Momma about it, who reprimanded me for going over to the tent revival alone and without consulting her first. I dipped my head and apologized.

“And don't you go thinking that you're going back over there tonight.”

Dang.

That night, I formulated a fantastic excuse. I told Momma that I was going out to the meadow. Before hand, I had gathered some sticks around an old stump and placed my hat firmly upon it. At first glance, it looked like a small boy squatting in the shadows of the trees. Momma was convinced, although I felt bad for deceiving her. I walked the three miles off to the clearing near town where the tent was already alive with activity. It seemed that there were familiar faces among them, but also new ones. Word had spread about the healer boy, and people wanted to see the thing for themselves.

Buses and vans had been parked across the road. There were coming by the busloads to see the miracle worker. As before, the preacher man yelled into his microphone and gestured wildly in front of a timid choir. They nodded at his exultations. The crowd was even more vibrant than the previous night. There swelled a thick energy around the tent. The healer was summoned finally, tiptoeing from behind a makeshift platform and rich velvet curtains. Little John approached the preacher with trepidation, as before. His fingers were nervously tangled in one another as he stepped over wires and onto the stage. He kept his eyes fixed upon his shoes. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. Along came a young girl who was deaf. I didn't recognize her, assuming that she was a visitor from the Virginia border. She was carried by a young man in a neat suit and followed by a tidy woman in a khaki dress. The man wept into the microphone and then informed Brother Mike and the crowd that the girl, Samantha was her name, had been deaf from birth. She was nearly four now and her parents wanted to provide every opportunity for her to gain her hearing. The couple had travelled all the way from Roanoke to give their daughter a chance to meet the healer. They set the girl down in front of John. John stared at her. Samantha, who couldn't understand the gravity of her situation, began to cry, attempting to wrap her hands back around her father. No, no, the father insisted. He pushed the poor child forward toward the stranger. The child shook her head violently. After these dark exchanges, the healer finally reached out a hand. He cupped the girl's cheek in his palm. The small child, startled, stopped her tears. She was calm. The boy then reached out his hands and placed both ears in his palms. Again, I saw the boy go into a bit of a trance, his eyes shut in concentration, his lips mumbling prayers of intercession. The crowd grew still. I saw that other women in the audience were praying too, praying for God to use the healer. The scene continued for several long seconds. Just then, the healer let go. He sighed and caught his breath. He seemed

tired. Perhaps intercessing with a deity leaves a human exhausted. The girl, nearly now in tears from pain, raised her hands to her ears.

“Darling,” her father said. “Darling, can you hear me?”

The girl raised her eyes to the crowd, then shifted them toward her father. No one dared to breath until they knew that the healer had been successful.

“Can you hear us, sweetheart?” the mother interjected.

The girl nodded, gently then vigorously. Yes! She could hear. When the crowd burst in applause, the girl drew back. She was overstimulated. This new world was glorious yet frightening. But she didn’t have long to tarry; her parents scooped the child up and carried her off in joy. It was another miracle, indeed.

So continued the night all the same. The tired boy falling into his great fury and laying hands on the sick and the lame. The line grew longer and longer. Every night without fail. He would appear as timid as a lamb. Then he would stand, almost apathetically, and hear the story of this or that ailment. No tear ever escaped his eye, no look of sympathy or sorrow. He was there to do his job, in the name of the Lord. When the line evaporated, he would be dismissed to the back of the stage where he would collapse into the grass or into a chair.

I watched him exhale, observed as his body grew limp under the pressure. I never doubted that he was sincere. His chest rose and fell. I found myself feeling sorry for the poor boy. He was responsible for all of the fanfare, and yet here he was disposed after his duty. Alone and overwhelmed. I wanted to approach the boy, to strike up an acquaintance, even a friendship. But it was a mockery to think such things. No one would consider it.

Chapter 4

I returned to the meadow the next morning. I didn't bring the oats; I only sought some form of solitude. The sky was dotted with clouds, so that the meadow was only partially illuminated. There was little noise in the meadow that morning. It was the hush that I wanted. For the natural world to let me be.

I found my patch, with the sticks and hat, nestled next to the oak tree uninhabited. There was a bed of old leaves there, mingled in the carpet of emerald moss. The oak towered high about my head, and the canopy of branches boasted leaves that whispered when the wind moved through them. I watched them sway, swaying me into a lethargy. I hugged my knees and let the breeze wash over me, over my body. Despite the scars, I could still feel my skin prickle against a stiff wind. I could feel as a hair brushed my cheek. It was as if the whole world were nourishing me with a quiet peace.

Drowsy, I had nearly fallen asleep when I saw a form across the meadow. It was not a deer, a bear, or a fox. That I could tell from the silhouette. Like a creature, it stepped into the meadow with a cautious gait. Then a few steps out, with the sunlight on its face and confidence in its heart, the figure walked quicker, surer to the middle of the meadow. It sat down in a flood of light.

My first impulse was to leave the forest, to run back to my cabin and hide away there. Before my feet could obey, I felt a deep anger blooming in my chest. This was my meadow, my sanctuary. And this human wished to chase me away? I found a courage deep inside me that boiled against the trespass. Suddenly, my feet were moving, but not toward home. I had breached the circumference of the wide meadow and fumbled headlong toward the figure. I laid heavy feet

against the swaying weeds. The wildflowers bowed and bent as I trampled them. This was the one thing I would not forfeit. This was my Eden.

The figure, which I now realized was a small girl, did not sense a disturbance until I was three strides from her. Her hair was dark and tied back behind her head. Her cotton dress was lavender and trimmed in ragged lace. She was barefoot but encircled in flowers. I paused. To my surprise, my rage had begun to subside. She turned and looked full into my eyes. What I saw behind them, lit with the afternoon glow, was not malice but compassion.

“Ah, you scared me!”

My hands were trembling. “I’m—I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. You don’t need to apologize. Do you live here?”

“I live down the hill a bit.”

She cast her eyes over in the direction behind me. “Nice. This area is so beautiful. This meadow is something out of a picture frame.”

I stumbled. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Do you come here often?”

“Yes, pretty often. Usually at night.”

“I didn’t mean to intrude. I was out walking the forest and I decided to explore a bit.”

She was talking as if we had been long acquainted.

“Oh, you are not intruding. I mean, I don’t own this meadow. I just visit it.”

The girl smiled a genuine smile. The right side of her face was illuminated with sunlight.

“I’m sorry for my manners. My name is Joan. My...my brother and I are visiting the area.”

Joan stuck out a hand and I shook it vigorously. I hoped that she couldn’t feel it sweating with nervous energy.

“My name is Riley.”

As the morning wore on, Joan didn’t talk much about her brother. She simply stated that she was from Mississippi and that she had a big family here in the Tennessee. She didn’t come often, though. In fact, she had never been to this area before. She found the people very polite and cordial so far.

“How long will you be around?”

“Just a couple of weeks.”

Joan sensed my disappointment. I finally had a person with whom I could carry on a decent conversation, and she was leaving in a few short days. Why must one endure such cruelty?

“I’m glad to have met you, Riley. Maybe I can come over tomorrow and meet the rest of your kin.”

I brightened. “Sure, and you can bring your brother.”

Joan’s face darkened. “He is pretty busy right now. I don’t think he can make it.”

Joan and I talked and laughed for a good portion of the afternoon. She told me what her life was like back on the farm in Mississippi. I told her about the books I read, about my family. When we parted, I felt that I had found a treasured friend, even for a brief moment.

Chapter 5

The next morning arrived with a fresh sun, dew-kissed grasses, and a firm knock at the door. Momma was up making breakfast—grits, eggs, toast—and Layla was laying in Pop’s arms. She set the milk jug down and took three quick strides to the door. When she opened it, she faced a smiling little girl with dark braids resting on both shoulders. She wore nice overalls with a clean cotton shirt in pale pink.

“Hi ma’am. I’m looking for Riley. Is he here?”

You could have knocked my Momma over with a feather. Nobody hardly ever comes to the door asking for me anymore. She stumbled a bit, then recovered herself.

“Lord, yes child. Riley is right here. We are just eating breakfast. Would you like some?”

Joan smiled and stepped through the threshold. “Why sure, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

She stepped right into the kitchen. She had come to the back door, which is usually just reserved for family and close friends, and plopped down at the table. She eyed me across the table and nodded. “Hi there, Riley. Nice to see you again.”

I had nearly choked on my grits. She bounced right in like she was familiar to all of us. I wasn’t used to such intimacy outside of Momma and Pop, but I liked the change. Pop, meanwhile, was attempting to swallow his biscuits. He was taken aback, if only for a moment, at the fresh intimacy of my new friendship.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. My name is Joan. I’m visiting family up here. Did Riley tell you that we met yesterday in the meadow?”

Momma shook her head. “Naw, Riley didn’t mention it. I’m Nettie Suffolk, Riley’s mother. And this here is Ralph, his paw.” She gestured toward the baby in Pop’s arms. “And this one here is Layla.”

Joan didn’t need any introduction when it came to food. She shoveled a spoonful of grits onto her plate and dabbed it with butter. She got a heap of eggs with three thick slices of bacon, crinkled and steaming. Momma placed a cup of milk down by her plate. All of us were amazed at the degree of hunger. She slurped the milk and chomped the bacon like she hadn’t had a decent meal in ages.

“You not eating much at your family’s place?” Momma asked, not out of rudeness but pure curiosity.

Joan swallowed a mouthful of grits. “No ma’am. Not really. I’m only fed once a day.” Joan took another gulp and milk and then wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

Momma smiled, “Well, you must have a big family then.”

Joan raked the remaining grits into a small pile, then used a knife to push them onto her spoon. When she finally swallowed that last bit, she answered, “It’s not big, but there just ain’t a lot to go around.”

Joan’s visits became a daily occurrence. Sometimes she would wander out to the meadow and find me curled up at the bottom of my tree, cradling a book in my hands. Other times, she would look for me there and find my place empty. Soon after, there would be a brisk knock on the door and she would show herself on our doorstep, smiling bright and cheerful.

I began to look forward to her visits. Since the accident, I didn't tarry much outside unless it was to the forest. Being in a crowd of people made me wish to hide, to retreat into darkness, to conceal myself, to prevent the pity and judgment of others. I had turned into a shell of my former self, a husk in which the corn had been removed, robbed of its glory. All that was left was this scarred shadow of a boy.

I didn't realize until much later in my life how treasured that friendship was to me. I had watched and wept when my friends quit knocking on my door to play kickball or walking with them to school exchanging stories. All of these relationships had been a cornerstone of my development as a child. When they vanished like a morning fog in the afternoon sun, I was bereft. I had Momma and I had Pop. I had Layla, but she was an infant. There was so little of my life that I had retained before the accident. Now I was this small boy on the mountain that did chores for a few people, chores that didn't require social interaction, chores that would let me poke around in the wilderness like John the Baptist. Until Joan, there wasn't much in life to anticipate. Nothing except her sweet smile. Her arms swinging with a basket in the warm sun, humming a hymn and squinting into the distance. After a couple of days, Joan stopped knocking and began to let herself in. We took off to gather some firewood for Pop, or some berries for Momma. Joan enjoyed the conversation and so did I. I felt a renewed sense of purpose.

There was something unique about Joan that made me like her immediately. Our chatting was comfortable and natural. It was almost like Joan was a male companion, a friend who would talk about near anything. Our topics went beyond mere small talk. It astonished me, how quickly we grew as friends. I knew that it was only a matter of time before she would breach the topic—the topic of my scars. We had been out in the meadow that morning collecting flowers.

“Look at that,” she said, glimpsing a fox in the distance. “That fox has one white paw and the rest of them are scarlet red.”

“He looks a little off, I guess.”

Joan turned to look at me quizzically, “What do you mean? He doesn’t look off to me at all. He’s a fine specimen of the animal if I ever saw one.”

“Yeah, I like how he is different. That’s some Pied Beauty for you.”

“Pied Beauty. What’s that?”

I stopped. “It’s a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Pied means ‘speckled’ like. It’s a poem about how God’s glory is displayed in the variety of His creation.”

Joan paused. “I want to read it. Will you show it to me?”

I nodded. “Sure. I got a bunch of books at home. You’ve seen them.”

“Yes, but…” she trailed off.

“But what? Don’t you know how to read?”

Joan looked at her bare feet. I could see the shame spread across her face.

I started before she could answer, “You don’t know how to read? Didn’t you ever go to school?”

“Well, no,” Joan confessed. “My aunt pulled me out when she got custody of me. She told me that secular learning wasn’t for me. She made me stay home and read the Bible to me. She didn’t want me to have too much learnin’.”

“Where would she get a silly idea like that?”

“Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 18.” She said it matter-of-factly. For a girl who didn’t know how to read, she was still well-acquainted with her verses.

I scratched my head in total consternation. “I don’t understand why a book on God would tell you not to read. That doesn’t seem right.”

“That’s what it says.” She was resigned to this, but I could tell that she felt hopeful.

“Would you like me to teach you?”

Joan grinned. Before I realized it, she had wrapped her arms around me.

“Oh, Riley! That would be so wonderful. Thank you.”

I had never been in what my Momma would call a “compromising position” with a girl before, but I gave her a hug back and enjoyed the warmth of her embrace. I would teach her how to read. It was the least I could do for the jewel of her friendship.

Joan broke the hug. “Why you so stiff?”

I blushed. “It is just that, that I’ve never been hugged by a girl before.”

“Doesn’t your Momma hug you?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, but that is different.”

“You *act* like you never been hugged by a girl before.”

I let the matter go. A boy never confesses his inexperience with women, especially to a woman.

Joan laughed. I was lost in the warmth of her eyes. “I tell you what. You teach me to read and I’ll give you more hugs.”

I couldn't understand it then, the flutter in my belly. I was still so young, and I didn't know what was going on in my body. There was an energy vibrating through me. It didn't happen when Momma hugged me, or when my aunts squeezed the daylights out of me at family reunions. No, this was different.

Joan saw me swimming in an ocean of my thoughts, and she pulled me back to shore.

“So you going to read me that poem?”

“Sure. I'll show you as soon as we get back.”

She looked full into my face. “Is that poem your favorite?”

“It is one of my favorites. It holds a special place in my heart, I guess.”

“Why?”

“Because...” I gestured to my face and hands. I may not have believed much in God at that point, but I would take comfort and assurance from wherever I could.

“I guess you want to know what happened.” I knew that this was a great mystery to her. She had never mentioned it out of kindness, but it was probably time that she understood.

“I was burned,” I continued. “Burned bad.”

“Riley, I'm so sorry. Will you tell me the story?”

She saw me recoil a bit. It was a natural reaction when people want you to talk about it, the pain you endured, the people who turned away from you.

Joan sensed my deep hesitation, “You don't have to if you don't want to.”

“Do you *really* want to hear it?”

“Of course. I want to know lots about you. You are my friend.”

I began to unspin the tale that led to my exile.

Chapter 6

I had worked all weekend at McCormack's farm, around the holler. McCormack had recently begun making moonshine to expand his business opportunities. I wasn't told what was in the jugs. They were tan-colored, smooth, and quite heavy in my young palms. Pop had always told me to be grateful for any money, no matter how I earned it. I didn't object when I heard whispers that it was illegal moonshine. Momma and Pop didn't know since I wasn't allowed to admit it. I only saw his stills once, behind a tall fence in the south end of his property. The still cowered in the shadow of tall oak trees. A delicate tangle of glass met my eyes. The odor was unmistakable. It slept quiet in the shade most of the time; McCormack only mixed his liquor in the evening hours right before sundown and delivering the load by cart and horse on side roads instead of his dusty old pickup truck.

That day, McCormack was delivering a large load down the road a stretch. I was paid to load and not to ask questions. For hours, I lifted bottle after bottle onto the horse-led cart. All went well until a bird spooked McCormack's old mare. The mare bucked and rolled backwards. Instinctually, I spread my arms out and pressed against the stacks of jugs to keep them from tumbling down. This was nearly successful. I panicked as dozens of bottles were tempted by gravity to come crashing down on my tiny frame. Only one came from above. It splattered all over my shirt. The stench and tang of alcohol were unmistakable.

"Eh, good job, boy. Saved me a lot of product just now with your quick thinking. It could have been much worse. Bert never usually gets startled like that," McCormack choked. Bert was his old horse.

I continued another half an hour to load jugs. Finally, I was awarded with two quarters placed squarely in my fingers. I had only been promised a quarter, but McCormack pushed an extra quarter into my palm and told me to “keep it a secret.” At the time, I was just excited to have the extra pay. After my job, I realized that I had to go home and wash. I was saturated by the jug’s contents.

McCormack warned me that I need to take a different path home, “so the po-lice won’t think you’ve been draining a cup at your age.”

I agreed and waded through the dark brush to the cabin. When I arrived home, Momma was tending to Layla as she was crying. The baby had been squalling since I left that morning, and according to everyone else in the house, she hadn’t stopped all day.

I heard the baby wailing as I stepped on the porch. She barely stopped to fill her lungs. Momma was exasperated. I put my hand down into my pants pocket and fingered the two quarters. I wanted to buy some new editions of Mark Twain volumes, but as I heard the crescendo of Layla’s screams, I was determined to provide some relief. I appeared at the door of their bedroom.

“Riley, there you are. Did you finish with McCormack?”

There was a small pause, and then the smell of liquor knocked her over.

“My Lord, Riley. You need a bath. What were you doing at the farm?”

Hearing McCormack’s words echo in my head, I swatted away the question, “Aw, nothing. Just a nasty patch of land we had to expose to the air.”

Layla was squirming in her arms. I stepped forward and offered her the two quarters.

“Here. You can use these to call the doctor.”

Momma was already shaking her head. “Oh Riley. I don’t want to take your wages.”

I took another step forward and offered it to her again. I watched as the quarters glinted in the lamplight. There was a pang in my heart, but I knew it was the right thing to do. I could hear Layla struggling for breath, the mucus thick in her windpipe, and it broke my heart.

Just then, Pop stepped through the door. It appeared that he had been a step ahead of me. Behind him was the county doctor. He cast a strong glance at me, obviously unhappy with so young a boy smelling like a liquor cabinet. He laid Layla down and did some inspection. After several minutes of poking and prodding amid the high-pitched complaints of my sister, he determined that she had the coup. The doctor produced a small vial and announced its price.

“This is one of my last ones. Coup’s has been bad out in these parts.” Pop was short about 45 cents. I rushed up to him and placed the quarters in his hand. Pop glanced at his hands and then into my eyes. I knew then that he was hesitant to take my money, but he had no choice.

He sighed and scooped the money from my hand. The doctor nodded and placed the vial in Momma’s hand. After instructing Momma how to give the medicine, the doctor left in a flush. Momma put one hand on the top of my head and tussled my hair.

“Bless you, son. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I want Layla to feel better. I hope the medicine helps.” I could see the desperation in their eyes as Layla took up again with growling and seething against the pain in her chest.

Momma hadn’t eaten all day. I offered to make her some beans while Pop finished up cutting timber for the stove. I waltzed into the kitchen, thinking about those Mark Twain

volumes as an afterthought. Perhaps I could catch them on sale. Then it would have been a good thing that I waited. All of these thoughts circled in my mind as I placed the old pot on top of the stove. The embers in its belly were barely lit. I opened the grate to peer inside, nothing but ash and a soft glow of defeated wood. I retrieved two stout pieces of kindling wood from the back of the cabin and headed back to the stove. There I opened the door and shoved the first piece inside. It slid in with little obstruction. The second one had been a bit long, but I found myself shoving and shoving. I had forgotten the accident with the jugs earlier, now that my pockets were aching empty. As I pushed the second log inside the stove's torso, surprising sparks jumped out and clung to my shirt. I didn't know then that alcohol was flammable, and I was shocked when a small flame blossomed on my chest. There were remnants on my hands and face, where the jug had fallen from above. The hungry flames licked at my cotton shirt, then climbed toward my neck and face. A scream rose in my throat, suppressed by shock. Finally, when my voice broke free, I was aflame in the small kitchen, a good fire roaring in the stove and stretching across to my chest.

My memories of that afternoon are vague at best. I recall being on the floor and Pop rolling a rug on me. Someone had hollered, "Somebody go and fetch the doctor back." Then there was blackness. My next recollection was being in bed, bandaged so tightly around my chest, neck, and mouth that I could barely breathe. Momma whispered prayers of thanks over me. Pop shook his head that I was given the grim news that my face and hands were scarred. There were covered in layers of blonde bandages. The doctor hovered above me, walking back and forth. Someone had applied salve to my wounds as I lay unconscious. When I awoke, I felt utterly changed.

I didn't know right away that I had been transformed. A week later, I was pulled to my feet to try and walk again. When I looked in the mirror and saw this hideously deformed creature staring back at me, I shivered. He had my eyes, but the face was undistinguishable. I would live the rest of my life in a mask of charred flesh, a mask which frightened many townspeople. McCormack gave Pop some money for my care, but it was never revealed that his moonshine and a freak accident at a cast-iron stove had caused the injury. McCormack shook his head. At one point, he apologized to me, but never hired me back to work on his farm, claiming that my appearance was a distraction to the others.

Later, when I went back to school, I could no longer bear it. Other students pointed and stared. Others laughed. One child said that I was not Riley, but the beast who ate him; now I was doomed to carry on in the shadow of my former life. I only lasted for a few weeks at the schoolhouse and then I was exiled, if voluntarily, by my mother. The last straw was when a new girl began to cry, claiming that I was going to devour her. She was oblivious to the fact that such a claim was disrespectful. Her words cut straight to my heart. The scarred flesh around my eyes prevented my tears from falling in straight lines like a hard rain. Instead the tears fell in slants, tracing the puckered tissue around my nose. Even in my sorrow, I could not shake off the horror of the accident.

Now, I am Iago. I am Frankenstein's monster. I am exiled from all that was familiar to me. I felt as Beelzebub in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: twice punished. Once I am punished when I peer at myself in the river's reflection or when I pass a mirror that commands my gaze. Then I am punished afresh by the loss of companionship with society, with the world that cannot accept me because I cannot conform to its rigid standards of perfection. My imagination compensated

for such a defeat. I live within the pages of books, within the folds of my dream world. This is where I live unfettered by circumstance. A world not only unforgiving, but flagrantly apathetic.

When I finished the story, I witnessed Joan wiping a tear away from her eye. She put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“Riley, I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

I shrugged it off. “It is the life I live now. It’s fine. I surround myself with the people who love me.”

Joan took my hand. “And I’m honored to be one of those people,” she said with a smile.

Again, the flutter in my stomach, the heartsickness, the fear. Through it all, I returned her smile as best I could.

Chapter 7

The next morning brought the same familiar knock on my door. Joan had decided to use the door today, not wishing to barge in when Layla was crying. Layla had grown sick again and Momma was doing her best to stay optimistic. When a neighbor suggested that she start making arrangements if Layla didn't improve, Momma told her to go to hell and walked off.

Joan had found a pencil somewhere and she was ready to learn. I pulled out an old grammar book that my grandmother had gifted our family when I was born. The letters were laid out, each one paired with a word. I flipped to the first page. We sat in the living room facing one another and Momma grabbed Joan a piece of paper to could practice her letters.

I opened to the first page and showed her all the letters. My pointer finger scanned the list of symbols on the page. It was strange that they were foreign to her.

“This here is the full alphabet. There are twenty-six letters total. Basically, you put all of them in different orders and you get language.”

Joan sat up, surprised. “There are only twenty-six letters? That's it? I thought that there'd be a lot more.”

I smiled and pushed the book toward her so she could observe the full page. “Nope, there are just a few of them. Some of them are barely used, like X and Z. Then there are some of them, they are called the vowels, and they are used a lot. Vowels are A, E, I, O and U. Sometimes they have long and short sounds. Like, see here.”

I pointed at the picture of the apple on the page. “This is an apple. Now you have known how to pronounce it, but you've hardly seen it printed.”

“Yeah, I’ve only seen it printed in the Bible, but I didn’t know how to spell it.”

“This here is an A, and it makes the sound Ahhhh, like in apple. That’s a short A.”

Joan glanced at the page and waited for a moment. Then, staring at the capital A, she responded, “It looks kinda tall to me.”

“No, no. The sound is short, not the letter itself.”

Joan grinned. “I see.”

“You’ll get there,” and with a confident stroke, I took her right hand and modeled how to make a capital and lowercase A. Over time, she began to learn it and speak it with a deep satisfaction.

We worked for over three hours that day. And the next day. We worked hard during those morning sessions, but Joan was a natural. By the end of the week, she had all of the vowels down, and was working on the popular consonants, like S and M and N. Once she began to master the sounds, I would pull out a children’s book and began to rehearse one page at a time. When we hit a snag, I would slow down and create a lesson around the sounds that she struggled with.

I pulled out a small book called “The Good Little Dog” and went through each page. The book was an old one, one that had been donated to the Bristol Library at some point. It has veins of creases on its cover and dog-eared pages. It had been well-loved by the library patrons. On the cover was a droopy-eyed hound dog standing outside of a red dog house. He was tethered to it by a thin metal chain. Back behind him was an empty blue feeding bowl and then layers upon layers of hills. The protagonist Spot was abandoned by bad owners and was sent to the pound. Spot

earned affection from a family's little boy and is adopted by them. He now lives in the house with no chain.

“Now just take all of the letters and blend them really fast. Like here. It says that the boy received a what?”

Joan squinted at the symbols on the page. I saw her eyes scan the book looking for clues in the pictures.

I took a stern tone, “Now, don't cheat. Look at the word. Study it.”

“L—L—e---t...”

“Good. Keep going. Let...”

“Lett---are. Lettare. Letter. Letter! It says letter!”

I nodded. She was coming along just fine. I even allowed her to borrow “The Good Little Dog.” She came back a couple of days later and had read the whole thing three times in her tent the night before.

“Your tent? I thought you were staying at your family's house.”

Joan stumbled. “Um, yeah. We camped out yesterday. We set up a tent and toasted food over a fire.”

“That sound like fun.” I was genuinely jealous of her then. To be able to enjoy the night air with other people and not wonder what they are thinking when they look at you. A pang of pity, regret, and anger rushed through me.

“Nah. Not really.” With this, she returned to the page with a swift motion, eager to devour the next sentence.

By the weekend, she was reading sentences with a fluent tongue. She still tripped over difficult words, but I had started her on the Psalms to read. I thought they would be fine, considering the fact that David likes to repeat words over and over again, like “Selah.”

But she had asked for literature too. She loved when I discussed the great poets. She wanted to experience the same rush, the same ecstasy that I felt when I read.

I brought her the Gerard Manley Hopkins volume. I flipped to “Kingfisher’s Catch Fire.”

*As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

*I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.*

I read the lines slow and steady, letting the syllables sizzle on my tongue. I took deep breaths at each semicolon and colon. There was a pause after I finished the last line. I glanced at Joan and noticed an abiding joy in her eyes.

“That is so beautiful. Read it again.”

I read it again with more vigor, more intensity. She breathed with me when I paused, soaking up each word like it was a morsel and she was ravenous. I tasted the vowels as if they were luscious fruit.

“The sounds of the words. They are so lovely. The way he uses the same sounds for different words and emotions. The effect it has on my ear. My heart.”

I read it again and again. I think we read that poem seven times that morning. I vowed to get her a copy of the poem, then I had another idea.

“Why don’t you copy this poem down? Then you can memorize it. Then you wouldn’t need the sheet at all!”

Joan lit up at the idea. To have that kind of beauty inside her, words tucked away in her head like a delicious secret. This was her dream. She wanted to carry those words around like fruit in her basket, to summon them on a whim and rejoice in the beauty of the language.

I pulled out a sheet of paper from a notebook and began to coach her on writing each letter and sound.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

Again, she said the words as she wrote them.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

The pencil was steady in her hand. Her eyes were squinted and focused. Her letters disobeyed the lines which commanded their lift and length. Joan was lost in the words.

She continued, “*As tumbled over rim in roundy wells,*”

Again, “*As tumbled over rim in roundy wells*”

She wrestled with the letters on the page but practiced saying them over and over until they rolled off her tongue with ease.

She wrote and spoke for several minutes until she reached the end of the first stanza. Then she wrote the words and stopped. Her hands ceased to carve the letters. As her head remained down, I heard her gasp and then a tear fell onto the page.

“Whát I dó is me: for that I came.”

“What is it?” I interrupted her thoughts. She was quiet for a long moment, then I heard her inhale quickly. She was weeping over the line in the poem.

She wrote it again: *“Whát I dó is me: for that I came”*

Then she skipped down through the poem. She began looking for a fragment that she had heard me speak moments earlier. Then her pencil took to the page again.

*“Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,”*

She wrote it again and again and again. I didn't know if she was enjoying the exercise or the sentiment of the passage. She delighted in the taste of each sound like it was a ripe berry.

By the time she finished copying the whole poem, an hour had passed. I suggested that we move on, but Joan insisted that she continue. She wrote the lines again and again, until she achieved a smooth elegance in shaping the words. She asked for another sheet of paper and then repeated the whole poem again to have a “nice copy.”

During this time, we were also reading small slivers of the Bible. Joan wanted to read things for herself. She wanted the privilege of reading the words, instead of simply having them read to her. We jumped around—the gospels, Psalms, Proverbs. I didn't want to go too deep into the Old Testament just yet. Names like Beth-diblathaim are tough for a new reader.

And so it went. Morning after morning, we met for nearly two weeks. Sometimes we met in the cabin with our books and leaves all over the floor spelling out sounds and expanding our book inventory to include such children's classics as "Jane Makes a Cake."

But that was not enough for her. After much pleading, I opened my Hopkins volume. She wanted more poems. She was now entranced in the language, mumbling "*Whát I dó is me: for that I came*" while we walked through the forest. It wasn't enough for her.

I scanned the volume and located "Carrion's Comfort:

*As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells —
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age.
Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage
Both sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells,
Yet both droop deadly sometimes in their cells
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.*

*Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest —
Why, hear him, hear him babble & drop down to his nest,
But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.*

*Man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best,
But uncumberèd: meadow-down is not distressed
For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen.*

I read the poem slowly as before, pausing and giving the vowels their room. Again, she took to the task with a fierce enthusiasm, grabbing paper and carefully placing words on the page. She didn't ask me to reread it this time: she asked to read it back to me. Satisfied, I told her to read it when she felt ready. For a few moments, I only heard the whisper of lead on paper and the gentle yet swift scratch of her eraser. She was working hard at it, at placing the words on the page and tucking them into her mind and heart. I watched in rapture. She was learning to read and I was teaching her. It was a glorious thing.

Chapter 8

Word had gotten around that the local revival had been extended another two weeks. The healer boy was so popular that people were coming as far as two hours away to receive a healing. Momma and Pop discussed it during breakfast that morning, for Layla's cough had not improved.

"Momma, why don't you take her to the tent?"

"Because Riley, I don't trust those people."

"But don't you want Layla healed?"

Momma looked at me with an earnest look, "Of course, I want her healed, but by God, not by a bunch of liars. I don't trust that whole affair. God don't work like that."

"How do you know?" I swallowed at my stupidity in questioning Momma.

Momma's eyebrow lifted, confirming my stupidity in questioning her, "Because the preachers around here are just fine. We don't need some stranger coming in and stealing all of the thunder from the pastors here. Who's to say that high-dollar preacher is working for God, anyway?"

I thought about that intriguing boy with his coma and his magic hands. It played on my deep curiosity like fingers on a mandolin. I wanted to sneak into the revival again that night. I would come in a long jacket with a hood and watch from the safety of the back row as before. As more people streamed into the revival, I could blend in more and more. No one would worry about me.

That night, I told Momma I was going to the meadow to collect sticks. She didn't ask, but I'm still certain that she gave me the "stink eye," questioning my motive. Why stay my whole

life inside when I could at least witness this boy do his miracles? I may even muster up a belief in God. That wouldn't be a bad consequence of my curiosity. People need something to believe.

I stood at my comfortable distance and watched as a line of hopeful people approached the little healer boy. I stood near the back, my face cloaked in darkness and covered by a dark hood. I didn't want anyone to see me or to recognize me, but I was enthralled with how this healer worked. I wanted to see the boy work his magic on these tired and wounded people.

So I stood in the back this time, silent as a lamb, and watched as the boy was brought out. One by one, the people lined up. Their babies had the coup, men had a leg or arm injury, women had weak lungs. Person after person after person came and went, leaving relieved, rejoicing. I noticed that the healer weaved his fingers through a certain way. It was then that I realized something strangely familiar about the way he worked his hands, about the interlocking fingers with pointer fingers which formed a small pyramid.

Surprised, I stepped back, trying not to arouse suspicion, but nonetheless, astonished at my discovery. I noticed the gentle curve of his swanlike neck, the rotund face, the delicate ears. These were details that I had noticed before, but not from a stage. I had seen the sunglow on that face, the way those fingers picked wildflowers or how they formed a smooth sound on the page, the slope of the jaw when forming a laugh.

It was her. It was Joan

I considered it a privilege to be her friend, to protect the secret of her identity among so many in my community. I knew her personally, intimately. Despite the fierce realization that few bothered to know or understand me, this came as a great comfort. She had taken me into her confidence, she blossomed in our presence like a sunflower. It took all my willpower not to call

out to her in this crowd, to reveal her real name and tell them all how wonderful she was. I watched her as one observes a rare creature in the wild, in awe and wonder. And in truth, in envy. I wanted to have her gift. I wanted her fame.

She was dismissed from the stage just a few minutes later. Exhausted, “the healer boy” trudged off behind the band, and the stage lit up again with music and lights and sound. I fought every desire to go back and comfort her. I knew I would see her as I did before, on her knees in silence, collapsed under the carnival of noise and heat. How I yearned to reach out to her now, to give her encouragement and a smile, as she had given me. But the risk was too large. Brother Mike and his cronies would see me lurking out past the shadows. If there was one thing I knew for sure, it was that the healer boy was insulated from the rest of the world. The gift was a blessing and a curse. It brought her in front of thousands of people, yet it isolated her from everyone else. She was strictly watched and fussed over. At least, to the degree that Brother Mike allowed. It seemed that he didn’t want her getting too confident and robbing the whole revival of the experience. It was said that she rarely ate and wasn’t allowed to speak to people. On the road, she was forced to listen and pray, not to socialize. Brother Mike was concerned that she would lose her motivation if she were to fall to the “common vices” of teenage girls. He said he didn’t want her becoming a nag or a gossip.

The next morning, we met in the meadow. All the gleam of the previous evening had been washed away. Joan stood before me with her fist around some wildflower stems, trudging through the meadow’s untamed flora. As I sat in my usual spot with a story book on my lap, I noticed a baby bird. Grey and fragile, it had attempted to fly out of its nest too early and had landed at the bottom of the oak tree. I watched as its little chest struggled for air. Its feathers were askew. I scooped it up in my hands, observing as it winced and tried to escape my grasp. I

held it in my palm, the little bird grey with the slighted wing scrambling against my fingers. I thought of Thomas Hardy's darkling thrush, of the beauty of the bird, even in its injured state. Its delicate feathers massaged my skin, scarred as it was, but I watched as the bird refused to relax. He was frightened of me. I set him down in a gathering of overgrown grass and twigs nearby. The bird struggled for a moment, and then settled.

Just as the bird slipped from my grip, Joan appeared from the underbrush. She was wearing the same thing as she did yesterday: a brightening smile, purple corduroy overalls, a yellow t-shirt, and sandals. She raised a hand in greeting as she saw me perched against my old oak tree.

"Howdy, Riley!"

She came near enough to be in earshot. I noticed how tall she was, yet with each step she had an air of grace about her. I hadn't noticed this in the past evenings as she tiptoed across the stage. It was as if the whole affair gave her a completely different gait. Even her steps this morning were surer, her posture straighter and more confident.

"Hello there. You have some flowers already?"

She was panting as she arrived at my oak. Her cheeks burning with exhaustion. I knew she was probably hungry, yet she smiled through it all.

"Well, they were so pretty that I couldn't help myself. Maybe your Momma can put them on the kitchen table. I bet they would look right nice in there."

I nodded. "They would. Thank you for thinking of it."

She attempted to hand me the flowers, but I gestured that she could hang on to them a little longer. I knew that she didn't want to surrender them to someone else's table, but she didn't have a place to put them. She didn't have much of anything. I had a little book of verses in my hand, but I was not ready to dive into my lesson just yet.

“We might go looking for crawdads tonight. Do you want to come?”

I saw her hesitate right then. I had never invited her to do anything with me during the evening before. We had both assumed that it was her brother's edict that she be home before nightfall. Although I watched her eyes flicker with delight at the thought of wading through the river like the child she was, the light was quickly extinguished. She knew that she was occupied.

“I wish I could, but my brother has me doing some work for him.”

I cocked my head in confusion, “At night? That is an odd time to be doing outside work.”

“Well, he has a job. You know, barn lights and all that for the animals.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “But I thought you were here to visit family anyway. He's making you work? That sounds awful hard of him.”

Joan took a deep breath. “Yeah, well the family is in a hard way. They need me to do some work while I'm here.”

“They make you wear a suit too?”

Joan stifled a laugh. “Wear a suit? What are you talking about? I don't wear suits. I'm a girl.”

There was a minute or two of silence between us.

“I know, Joan. I know.”

She wrinkled her brow. “What? What do you know? Riley, you are talking crazy. Do you know what you are saying?”

“I saw you. I saw you healing those people. You were dressed up as a boy. But I know and it’s okay. I won’t say anything to anyone. I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

Joan lifted her head back and chuckled, a full-throated laugh which seemed to accuse me of insanity, but also to camouflage a deep discomfort which occurs when one is brought face-to-face with a stark truth.

“You are silly, Riley. Are you saying I dress up like a boy and go to those tent meetings? My brother won’t even let me out that late. He doesn’t want me in an unfamiliar place by myself. You must have lost your mind.”

She looked at me earnestly in the face. In that moment, I questioned myself. Perhaps I had only seen what I wanted to see. Maybe I transposed my thoughts and wishes onto that other little boy. Joan was my friend, and I really thought that I recognized her among the throng of people under a hot, crowded tent. Maybe my eyes deceived me. But somehow I was emboldened to continue my interrogation of her. I was gaining a bit of confidence in myself.

“But I saw you. It was you. You were wearing a wig and a suit. I saw your hands moving in the air, and I saw you go into that trance. I watched you over and over again as you healed all of those people.”

Joan looked down at the ground. She was quiet now, tangled in her own emotions, searching for words.

“What I’m saying is that it is okay. I won’t get you in trouble.”

“But Riley I’m not the healer. The healer is a boy, isn’t he?”

I was resolved now. I reached behind me and pulled the bird from its settling place. It scratched and protested against my fingers, but I pulled it back into my palm.

“Do you see this bird? I found him this morning right by here. He must have fallen off the branch up there.” I pointed to a tangle of twigs and dead grass that was suspended about 30 feet about our heads on a lofty branch. “I know that it pains you to see something suffer. If you are a healer, you will help this bird fly again.”

Joan glanced at me, then at the bird, then back at me. “I can’t do that, Riley. I’m not a healer.”

“Yes, you are. I think I know you pretty well. And I know that you will heal this bird because you can.”

The bird trembled in my hand. It began to shiver, frightened at the humans lingering over it. It was young and afraid. I felt a deep sympathy for this poor creature. I extended my cupped hands toward Joan. The bird flitted against my palms.

“Don’t you see how scared it is? It needs to fly again. It made a mistake of leaving the nest, but now it will never learn to fly with a bent wing. You need to heal it, Joan. It needs you.”

Joan raised her hands in protest, but her eyes kept darting back to my hands and the flurry of feathers as the bird tried helplessly to escape my grasp.

“I can’t—I can’t do it.”

I urged her, my hands outstretched. “Yes, you can.”

In one smooth motion, Joan stole the bird from my hands. She let it rest as her fingers curved around its tiny body. I saw the tension vanish as it transitioned to Joan's palm. Her other hand was hovering slightly above the bird. She began to stare intensely at it, to focus her healing energy on its small frame. Her eyes watched as the bird blinked and shook its wings. Slowly, the wing began to right itself. The crooked angle, its jagged interruption to the symmetry, began to creep back into obedience with the rest of its gentle curve.

Joan was taking deep breaths. She was willing the wing back into place, hands hypnotically swaying above the bird's head. The bird's eyes raised upward, watching the fingers hover. Certainly, it was concerned about its life, but Joan meant it no harm. Soon, it was fluttering, testing the wing, moving it up and down in rapid motion. It was as if the bird could hardly believe that the pain had disappeared.

"Now to return her to the nest." I took the bird and placed it in my shirt pocket. I began a quick descent up the tree, first feeling the texture of bark on my arms and legs and reaching the limbs with a bit of strain. After a few moments, I reached the height of the nest.

I dared myself not to look down. Joan peered up with an anxious look on her face.

"Please be careful," she yelled.

I used my arm to pull myself along the length of the branch. I felt as the limb groaned under my weight, but it was a swift trip to the middle of the long limb, where the nest sat snugly at the crossroads of three different limbs darting out in different directions. The mother bird was not in the nest, but two other small birds peeped out, squawking at the stranger approaching. As I neared the nest, the creature in my pocket squeaked a greeting. It recognized its siblings. I wondered if they were expressing some kind of relief, or maybe they were admonishing it for

leaping out of the nest too quickly. Sliding on my side, I got about an arm's length from the collection of twigs and feathers and old grass. I reached into my pocket and lifted the bird out. My shaky hand made a methodical journey from my shirt to the nest, laying the tiny bird back into the fold.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I backed off the limb and back onto the tree. I brought my right leg around to meet another high branch, while my left followed obediently. Within a few minutes, I was feet away from the ground. Joan was silently cheering me on to safety.

“So you are the healer after all.”

She looked down at her shoes. “I’m sorry that I lied to you. I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“I said that I understand. It’s fine. I won’t tell anyone.” I made the motion of zipping my lips shut to reassure her.

“Brother Mike said that he will kill me if I tell anyone that the whole act is a fraud.”

“It is not a fraud. You really are healing people.”

Joan sighed. “I know, but the whole costume and all. It’s all a ruse. He wants me to be a boy.”

“Why won’t he let you heal as yourself?”

“Because he said that women weren’t supposed to be like that. He said that I will heal more people if I don’t start a controversy.” She peered down at her hands. I saw her and wondered how anyone could suppress her or her gift.

“Are you being paid?”

“No. He is giving me room and board. He said that I didn’t pay for the gift, so why should he pay to use it?”

I placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “But you barely get fed. And he keeps you away from others. What kind of life is that?”

“It is the sanctified life, according to Mike.”

Chapter 9

We sat in the meadow surrounded by the generous glow of shrouded sunlight. Joan looked at her hands. Her hands were nothing special. They appeared ordinary. I cradled her right hand in my palm. I squinted to see if there were any special marks, any boundary crossed between the human and divine. My eyes traced the three gentle creases at the center of her hand, watched as they angled toward her pointer finger. Her hand was a network of lines, criss-crossing in a chaos of perpendicular scratches. The bend of her fingers curled up, with small pillows of flesh around the creases of her knuckles. I flipped her hand over. Five slender fingers were illuminated in the light overhead, but I couldn't find anything suspicious there.

“Your hands. They are so plain.”

Joan blushed. “Thanks, Riley. You're a pal.” She said it flatly.

“No, I mean. I've seen you heal people. I expected there to be more to your hands. You basically place them over the injuries and illnesses of people and they get better.”

Joan was getting uncomfortable. She pulled her hand away, out of my grasp and massaged her palm with her left hand. Joan didn't like to talk about the healing when she was simply “Joan.” It was as if she were wearing a mask. She didn't want to discuss the mask when she was in her raw form.

“I've never told anyone this story. You are the first person I've uttered it to. When I was a kid, I was left in the care of my aunt. I never knew my father. To this day, I've never had a firm story on what happened to my mother. I was told that she walked out on me. Later, I was told that she died in a plane crash. Others told me that she had a bad illness and went away to a hospital in Mobile that specializes in her kind of illness.”

“Did they tell you what she had?”

“No, but people said it is a psychiatric ward. Do you want to know what I think? I think my mother had visions, Riley. I think her visions were mistaken for insanity. She left when I was two and I never saw her again. Sally is a very religious woman. She didn’t want me to end up a “witch” like her sister, so she took me to church every time the doors were open. I was raised on the second pew of Covenant Baptist Church. People prayed over me. They would hoot and holler and I was there in the midst of all of it, confused. I felt God, but I felt Him when I was alone out in the woods watching birds swoop overhead and ants form straight lines to their hills. There was a ritual to it all, and I felt that God was controlling it. I never felt it at church, where men blinded the stage with lights and filled the air with noise. I didn’t like all of that, Riley. It all felt man-made to me, untrue, as if someone had decided how God should be presented and everyone else just agreed. Only this one way to God was acceptable; all else was rejected as unnatural. I tried to explain that my God, the one I found in the forest, was the same God that all of the preachers were speaking of. It was just that I viewed him through a different lens, like looking at a landscape through a pair of glasses instead of with the naked eye. I think my aunt was about to put me out, place me in some kind of orphanage when a neighbor’s son became ill. I came to the house to deliver some food my aunt had made for the family, and I saw him sitting there in a crib. His face was red and his limbs were swollen. He wailed and wailed and the mother was so tired. So I asked her, ‘Can I hold your baby?’ She looked at me with complete surprise. I had only seen the baby a few times, but I had this desire to pick him up and hold him. At first, she shook her head. She didn’t want some wild neighborhood kid handling her baby. But he kept crying and crying. I had to do something. I asked again, “Ma’am, can I please hold your baby? I

don't mean it no harm. I just want to comfort it.' By this time the baby was barely breathing for her screams, and I think she was so frustrated that she finally agreed.

“So I lifted him from the cradle. I felt this pull in me. *Pick him up. Pick him up.* Like I said, I wasn't one to be handling babies, but I scooped him up and pulled him close to my chest. There wasn't any magic in it. My hands didn't tingle. I didn't feel any different, just this desire to help the baby. I pulled him up and he stopped crying. The mother was shocked. I could see it in her face. No one had been able to calm that baby. The parents, the doctors, the nurses. I placed one of my hands behind his neck. I wanted to just pull the sickness out of him. I wanted it so bad. I held him for close to an hour. Other neighbors came by to see it. They were amazed. I put him back down into the crib and he fell asleep. By that evening, his fever broke. The mother called my aunt thanking me for doing a 'miracle.'

“Then my aunt proclaimed that I was touched by God. I shook it off, but when one of my classmates got sick at school, I was called to her house. I placed both my hands on her forehead. It was damp with a fever. I was overcome again with this desire to pull the sickness out. I had to go to a place where I wanted the sickness to leave. Again, I didn't feel anything in my hands. I didn't say any chants. I just imagined her better, in a field running and playing and swinging on the swing set at school. I pushed that image through my mind and out of my hands. The next morning, she was feeling better. By the next week, she was back at school and running around the playground, just as I had seen her when I wished her to get well.

“Over time, I was called for different ailments. I didn't always heal them. Sometimes I guess it was just their time to go, but when I felt that I *could* heal them, I usually did. A couple of months later, this bigshot pastor showed up in town. He had heard about me down the line somewhere and asked my aunt if he could 'take me on the road.' I told her I didn't want to go

with him. He was a stranger to me. I didn't trust him, but my aunt insisted. She told me that this is what God had created me to do. This was my calling in life. So I went with Brother Michael on his tent revival tour. We've been on the road since April. He rarely feeds me and then at night he parades me around like some kind of spectacle. I had a few good friends my age, but now they are all back home and I'm here, alone."

She turned to me. Her eyes were watery but her voice was strong. "I don't know what is in store for me, but I want to thank you for being my friend. I don't have many friends, just a lot of adults."

There was a stirring in the brush, heavy footsteps and loud cursing. Both our bodies went brittle. Other than animals, nothing ever visited the meadow, being that it is so far off the beaten path.

Suddenly, a figure carrying a rifle appeared through the overgrowth.

"Joan? Joan, is that you?"

Joan froze. Under her breath, I heard her whisper, "Brother Mike."

Chapter 10

The man who emerged from the shrubbery was very different from the figure on the stage each evening. This one had a five o'clock shadow. He was slightly inebriated, from my best guess. He wore dark green overalls and a red plaid shirt underneath. He wore a wool hat, which certainly made no sense in the hot southern afternoon. I realized later that he was trying to conceal his identity. He looked like an old rugged arborist, not a slick pastor with his hair coiffed and his white cotton sleeves rolled up. He barreled through the undergrowth and made quick steps toward the center of the meadow.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Joan was stiff. She seemed to lose all her confidence around Brother Mike. "I told you that I was going out into the forest."

"And who is this?" Brother Mike averted his eyes to me, "Who are you?"

"I'm Riley," I stammered.

"Well, Riley. I hate to break up your little meeting, but Joan can't keep running away like some scared animal. I need her back home."

He grasped his gun with fierce confidence. All I could see was the glint on the rifle and the scorn etched all over his face. I was genuinely scared of him. He was a predator, a bully. He reached down and yanked Joan up by the elbow. She nearly fell, struggling to regain balance at the man's insistence.

Joan turned as she was escorted out of the meadow. "Bye Riley." Her eyes were full of fear. She was like a cornered animal. I wished that I could heal her in the same way that she

healed other people. I wish I could envision her running through the meadow, unencumbered by the role as the healer. Just allowed to be young. To have a life not in service to adult whims. Then again, to ask her to return to her role as a young girl would deny others the healings that they needed. Is that selfishness?

The whole ordeal left me uneasy for hours. Part of me mourned the loss of my friend. Brother Mike would never let her out on her own now, especially since I knew who she really was. He had outright threatened me, the man who proclaimed Jesus every night in front of a large crowd. "Suffer the children to come to me," the Good Book says. They come obedient and leave shackled to ideals and uniformity. Where is the freedom in that? How is faith so uplifting if it is, at its core, a flawed man's concept? I pondered what awaited me, given my ignorance of the Good Book and my vast knowledge (and, I admit, pure enjoyment) of secular texts.

The next morning, she did not appear. I waited for a long while in the meadow, but she never came brambling through the woods. I wondered where she was. After two hours, I gave up and went back to the cabin. How long had it been since I preferred my solitude in this very field, just a few days? Now the space seemed barren without her. I went the next morning too, and the next. Days became a week. I began to get worried about Joan. Townsfolk said that the tent revival was a huge success and that people were pouring in every night to see the healer do his work. I knew she was still around. Why wouldn't she come to greet me? Had I scared her away? That moment, I inventoried all of our conversations looking for something offensive or discouraging. I couldn't remember anything of recent that would cause Joan to turn away.

So that night I snuck off once again to the revival. I placed an old red windbreaker over my shirt and pulled the hood up, tightening the string around the hood so my face was properly concealed. That day, the rain had come hard and fast. People were struggling to get through the

mud surrounding the opening where the tent was placed. I stood, as before, near the back blending into the crowd without much notice.

It was the same song and dance. The choir sang, and the band played. Brother Mike came out with his microphone too close to his mouth and proclaimed he knew who had the answers. He railed against sin. He railed against the Enemy. He railed against drink and drugs and sex. Then he summoned his healer boy out to the crowd.

She looked ridiculous. It was the first time that I realized how mortified she must feel being traipsed around stage and hiding her glorious hair under a cheap wig. How her slender body was covered by an oversized boy's suit, ill-fitting at the ankles and sleeves. She walked out on that stage like an individual destined to her will. No trace of enthusiasm shone on her face. Her hands were mingled in their usual way, hanging in a clumsy, uncomfortable fashion in front of her.

“Tonight, we have a special guest. Now, Brother John is a young man that I met on the road a few weeks ago. He has the power, by the grace of God, to heal people.”

It was the same script, the same words. The people in the crowd rather didn't notice it or didn't care.

Even knowing her, I watched with renewed amazement at her gift. Some twenty individuals were healed that night from various ailments. The posture and experience were nearly the same for every person. Finally, she was dismissed to head back to her settlement behind the tent.

I should have left that night. I should have left her alone. It was one of the mistakes that I regret most in my life. I shouldn't have interfered, but the thought of my friend paraded around

like cattle in front of those people—the thought enraged me. She was such a good person and the people she worked for were horrid. Wasn't there something in the Bible about the first being last and the last being first? Yet, here was a girl who was plainly a believer surrounded by a camp of apostates. Or showmen. I wasn't sure which.

My feet went obediently back to the rear of the tent. I found her sitting in the ragged lawn chair with her head hung low. Exhaustion spread across her face. I didn't know what to say, but I knew I had to speak.

“Joan,” I whispered as I approached her. “Joan, it's me.”

Joan raised her head. “Wh—who are you?”

I had forgotten that my hood was still firmly on my head, disguising my identity.

“It's me. Riley. I haven't seen you lately. I was wondering where you have been.”

Joan's face was contorted with fear. “Oh Riley, you shouldn't have come.”

My lips were trembling, ready to confess any apologies for my wrongdoing.

“I just, I just, I missed you and I wondered why you weren't coming to the meadow.”

Tears were slipping from her eyes now. She brushed them away with the long sleeves of her jacket.

“I miss you too, but now is not the time.”

“But I don't understand. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry if I said anything to make you angry.”

Despite the carnival that was happening a few feet away, there was a long pause full of misunderstanding, but never of the right words.

“You shouldn’t have come, Riley. Why did you come?”

From the far corner, a man had emerged instantly. He was dressed like the other men of Brother Mike’s camp: rolled up sleeves on a button-up shirt, black slacks, hair full of pomade, and cat-eye glasses.

My first instinct was to run. He was coming at me. Without thinking, I turned and ran as fast as my legs could carry me. I ran off into the night with the man yelling over the music.

“YOU COME BACK HERE, YOU. I SAID COME BACK HERE.”

I didn’t stop running until I was nearly at our cabin.

Chapter 11

It would be nearly three days until Joan emerged again. Again, I felt her absence in our meadow. I tried to push it from my mind and focus on a new volume of Charles Lamb essays fresh from the library, but she haunted me night and day. Finally, I was out getting some firewood at the edge of the forest when I caught a vision of Joan gathering sticks. I rubbed my eyes to make sure that what I saw was correct. Right as rain, it was Joan. I waved my hands like a madman and screamed her name.

Joan saw me, and immediately looked around to see if anyone else was paying attention. She crossed the wide path, keeping her eyes swinging left and right. I noticed a slight limp in her step and the tightness in her face as she attempted to scale the forested pathway.

Joan wouldn't look me in the eye and that's when I knew that something was wrong. I began to apologize. I felt that any punishment meant for me would probably have been given to her in my absence by the revival folks.

"Look, I'm really sorry. I hadn't seen you in days and I was worried about you."

"You really shouldn't have come, Riley. Now he knows."

"Knows what?"

"Brother Mike. He knows everything now. I had to confess that I had told you the secret."

"But you didn't tell me. I figured it out myself."

"That kind of answer isn't satisfying to a man like him. He thinks I spilled all of the details. He said women love talking, especially to a man about all her doings. He didn't believe

me when I told him that you figured it out. Anyway, I ain't allowed to be out here anymore. I can't go to the meadow. I have to do my chores and then go about the revival business."

"It's my fault. I'm so sorry, Joan. I'm sorry. I can tell him myself."

Joan eyes grew at the suggestion. "No, don't do that! Don't step foot near him. If we let it die, he might forget about it. We have to be moving on to the next city anyway. I think we only have until the end of this week and then we are moving up towards Roanoke."

My heart sank. I had forgotten that her stay would be temporary. She was destined to travel the road, to heal as many people as possible in as many places as possible.

"I must be going, Riley. His men are everywhere. They will see us talking..."

Just then, I saw Joan wince as she turned to go. She placed a hand on her back and began to massage it.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just—hurt my back a little."

One of the logs dropped to the ground, rolling off the small stack collected in her arms. I bent over to fetch it and bring it back up.

Joan stopped me, "I can do it. Please."

We both reached for the log at her feet. When she attempted to stop me, I noticed the blue blossoming on her arm. It seemed to grow upwards, weaving around her forearm and elbow.

I gasped. "Joan, where did that come from?"

Joan pushed her sleeve back down in great hurry. "I appreciate it, but I can do it on my own. Please."

Balancing the pile on her right arm and knee, she bent over and picked the log up with a left hand. She groaned in response.

“What is wrong with you? Are you hurt?”

“No, I—”

“Did he hit you? Why do you have all of these bruises?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

I was angry now. Not at Joan but at the man leading this whole masquerade. Of the man who said he was filled with God but was instead filled to the brim with greed and malice. What God would allow this to continue? She was an innocent girl at the hands of liars and deceivers. She was the reason that so many piled under the tent—to get a healing.

I caught her arms in my hands. “Look at me, Joan. Look at me. Is he beating you?”

“No, he isn’t. But--”

“If he is hitting you, we can get you out of there. You don’t deserve this.”

Joan motioned toward a group of voices that were now reaching a crescendo around the bend. The desperation in her eyes was undeniable. I understood now how she could be torn between two worlds. I also understood that her duty could not be overshadowed by hopelessness and fear.

Joan scooped up her kindling and turned to go. She had a job to do. She was a young girl in a hard situation. But I couldn’t shake the anger from my body.

I called back from behind her, “You know where to find me if you need me. Okay?”

The figure scurried back toward the camp. Her unsteady steps across the terrain betrayed the extent of pain in her body. It would be days before I saw her again. Some nights I was tempted to disguise myself and attend the revival meeting. The two of us employing a different face to be in front of a crowd. I missed her, and I wanted any opportunity I could to see her. But every time, some stubborn hesitation pulled me back. I didn't know then how to express my anger, my fear. As a child, you don't know how to navigate the adult's world. They have the upper hand. It gets tiring and frustrating when you don't know how to retaliate against those feelings. It was unfair, all of this. She didn't deserve to be whipped like a disobedient animal.

I went home and ate supper. When I closed my eyes, I still saw her with her arms full of kindling, her hair jostling against the her back as she took long strides away from me. The secret had hidden long enough. When I wouldn't touch my dumplings, Momma finally asked me what was wrong.

And I told them. I told them everything.

I told them that Joan was really the healer boy from the revival. I told them that she had healed a bird before my very eyes. That she had been dressed as a boy to please local parishioners. I confessed (to Momma's chagrin) that I confronted her at the revival and now Brother Mike and his men were punishing Joan for not keeping silent. I recounted, with great anguish, the bruises on her arms and legs. How she walked stiffly to accommodate her injuries.

Momma was nearly in tears when I finished. Pop didn't say anything but got up from the table. A minute later, he returned to the kitchen with a rifle in his hands.

Momma raised her hand. "Now Ralph, don't go doing something you might regret."

“If a man lifts his hand to hurt a child, it is my business. I will have to straighten him out.” He cocked the gun and reached into his overall pocket for shells.

Momma changed roles from priest to peacemaker, “There is a way of going about this. Blunt force won’t do nothing but raise a fuss among the people. How do you think people will react if you threaten a preacher?”

“That man ain’t no preacher. He’s a fraud. He’s a liar. He needs to know we don’t deal well with people who take their ire out on children.”

It took a few minutes for Momma to convince Pop to put the gun down. He finally put the gun away when I promised that I would somehow reach out to help Joan if I could get to her. There was nothing that I could do at the moment; I could only sit and wait to see what would happen.

That’s why, when Joan showed up on our doorstep a couple of days later, I was filled with a strange blend of elation and fear.

Chapter 12

Little did I know then, but Joan was enduring a special kind of hell at the hands of Brother Mike and his disciples. When his men saw me cavorting with the healer, he was told later that someone recognized me as “wrinkled boy,” a terrible moniker given to me after the accident by unscrupulous people of the valley.

They had chased me into the shadows that night. I panted and panted until I was far up into the woods. With the darkness surrounding me, they wouldn't find me. I assured myself of this. Part of me was tempted to go to the meadow, to return to that sacred place where it all began, the backdrop of our first encounter and the subsequent friendship which bloomed after. Yet, I discovered that my feet were leading me, unconsciously, toward home.

After the night that we spoke at the revival, Joan did her best to hide from Mike's anger. But not long after the tent emptied, she heard her name echoed throughout the camp. Mike was looking for her, and he was on the warpath. For a split second, Joan thought about running. Like a little doe, she wanted to gallop toward the underbrush and conceal herself behind a canopy of leaves and branches. But what good would this do? She would be found and she would be punished.

Joan crawled back to her little tent and pretended to be asleep. That was the only way, she thought, that he would provide some mercy.

After the story of our discussion reached Brother Mike, he immediately stood to his feet. He and his men had been hunched around the fire, swapping stories and reviewing the night's high moments. Yet his ecstasy was short lived. He got to his feet and trampled off to her tent. Inside, Joan was praying, praying to God that Mike would forget. But he hadn't forgotten.

Supposedly he had had a bit to drink that night. The tonic invigorated him. He knocked over some plates as he swayed through the men up to Joan's tent. She was nearly asleep when she heard him approach.

“Joan? You get up here Joan. I heard you were atalkin’ to that boy. Now what did I tell you about getting to know people? I told you not to make friends. Now you might spoil our whole operation. Get out here now, or I will drag you outta there myself!”

Joan was stiff and trembling. She was cornered like a small animal. She had no choice but to face him. She heard his breath heavy over the tent opening, his polished shoes crunching on the twigs at the entrance. She made a brief noise to make him think that she was asleep.

“Did I speak French?? I said get out here now! I will drag you out of there myself if I have to.”

Joan's tiny hands, the ones that had healed so many, appeared at the bottom of the tent. She slowly pulled the zipper up. In the darkness, she can't remember much about how he looked or what he was wearing. He recalled his breath, ragged, as he took his fist and pulled her out of the tent. Her back scrapped against the zipper as she was pulled upward and outward by her collar. He yanked her up and drew her to his face. His brow was sweaty, his fists hard like nails.

She realized now that he hadn't even changed out of his button-up shirt. The fire had warmed his torso, but the real heat came from the man beneath. His brow was creased, and his eyes were like daggers. His nose sucked in the air like a bull in a ring.

“I asked you a question.” Every word crashed upon her ears. Spittle exploded from his mouth and dripped down his chin. “What were you doing tonight with that boy? I told you not to

tell anyone. It will jeopardize everything, just so you can have your little friend. Well, I tell you what. You won't ruin this for me. Do you hear me?"

He was yelling hard into her face and Joan was wincing in pain. She was hanging by a few threads of her nightgown, dangling a foot or two above ground in Mike's grasp.

"Did you tell that boy about your powers? Well, did you?"

Mike shook her. Although moments of that night have tucked themselves comfortably in her unconscious mind, she remembered how the whole world seemed to jumble into a blend of images, like someone shaking a snow globe. There was the summer heat against her skin, the smell of honeysuckle nearby, and then there was the jumble of trees and the darting of the fire. It danced in her vision as Mike jostled her in his hands.

Then he threw her down. Her body landed hard on the pinnacle of the tent, the props collapsing under her body weight. There she laid in silence, tangled in the remains. She could feel her pillow bulging under her. Just by her knee was her Bible. The world was swirling by her. She was dizzy and gasping for air.

"I'm going to ask one more time. Did you tell that boy about your gift?"

Joan could taste metal in her mouth. She had bit her cheek when she landed. She wiped her mouth and saw the crimson stain across her fingertips. She could barely respond. When she did, Joan did something that I've only heard her do once to me.

She lied.

"No," she coughed, trying to get her air back. "He don't know nothing. He's just my friend."

“You sure about that? You sure he don’t recognize you? Why was he back there trying to talk to you?”

“Because he is lonely and he wants a friend,” Joan choked.

Brother Mike continued his rant like a rehearsed sermon, “This is the thanks I get for letting you roam around the forest during the day like some damn wild animal. I should have just kept you here instead of you fornicating with some local boy.”

Joan stared up with contempt. She spit into the mud. “We ain’t fornicating.”

“And how would I know that? You and him laying in the meadow. He fancies you, I know it. So don’t give me some rigmarole about how he is your friend. He’s a teenage boy, and that means he gives in to the flesh. If you actually think he just wants you for a friend, you’re a damn fool. We can’t have nobody knowing about our operation. You hear?”

At this point, Brother Mike had reached his limit. His rheum had conquered him. He began attacking her like a wild animal. He kicked for a good twenty seconds, hard and swift. He swung his left foot into her hip until she screamed out in pain. Some of the men at the fire turned their heads to see what was amiss. The taste of blood was heavy in her mouth. Her body was numb.

“Now you do me a favor and you never mention that boy ever again. And you don’t go see him anywhere. It’s over.” Brother Mike staggered back to the fire and returned to regular conversation with a startling apathy.

Joan laid there for nary an hour swollen with pain. Although Brother Mike had stumbled back to his fire pit and his associates, not one of them came to check on Joan. Everything sounded muffled to her ears like she was swimming underwater. Her arms and hands were

aching with a deep pain. Her head was bleeding from the thrust of the tent poles. Joan looked down at her hands, the ones that had brought healing to so many, which now only reflected her own pain in them.

She slept all night on that tent. In the morning, she walked down to a nearby stream and washed the blood off of her. None of the men whispered a word to her, but she swears that they shook their heads and clicked their tongues. She washed in the river and headed back to camp, where one of the men had given her leftovers of hard biscuits and gravy. She was thankful for that, at least.

That night, she performed as she always did. Joan felt that she had no choice; she must perform as expected or more blows would come. One of Mike's men approached her with a blue container. He barked at her, "Stand still," and began to cover her bruises with powder. The powder smelt like fresh flowers. For a moment, Joan inhaled the fragrance with pleasure and was transported. She had seen this same cylinder in her aunt's bathroom—a small, plastic box with a delicate rose engraved on it. Her aunt hadn't touched it in years, though. She said it was a sin to "put on airs." She left the container out as a decoration in the bathroom, but Joan had lifted the lid a few times in deep curiosity and removed the soft brush inside. She pulled it out to examine it, the long fur on the applicator, the faint pink tint, the small puff of powder that awakened and resettled when she set the applicator back into the cosmetic box. She felt that all of this is what it took to be a woman.

That memory lingered in her mind as the man finished powdering her hands and face.

"Now get in that suit and we don't want no trouble out of you tonight. You hear?"

Joan nodded. She kept quiet as she walked up the hill to the trailer bearing her suit coat. The wig covered the sore spot that was blooming on the back of her head. The suit jacket and

pants concealed nearly every bruise. Only a few inches of skin were exposed, just enough to do her healing. She did her healing that night, as she had done every night before, but this time she decided to look up. Joan looked out among the blur of faces, at men and women and children with smiles and pleading looks. At the sweaty brows and the upturned hands. She saw their desperation, their pain, their suffering. And she understood that she held the answer. Brother Mike couldn't heal, all of these henchmen couldn't heal, the musicians and choir couldn't heal. But Joan could. She summoned God to help heal these people. That was an epiphany for my friend that night. Only she could do the Lord's work. And that was exactly what she planned to do, but on her own terms.

Chapter 13

She had heard me say it, even among the crescendos of nature: “If you need me, you know where to find me.” The next morning, there was a hurried knock on our cabin door. Momma had come to answer it and found Joan breathless on the doorstep.

“Come on in, child. You all right?”

Joan leapt in the back door with urgency. “Yes ma’am.” She peered across the room and saw me putting a book down. She brightened a bit.

“Riley, can I talk to you outside?”

I nodded and placed the book down on the desk. I followed her out the back door and into the bright July day. It had been two days since I had seen her, had seen the marks on her body. I shivered to think of it now, but in front of me she seemed quite recovered.

“I figured it out, Riley.” A smile was tugging at her lips.

“Figured what out?”

“I’m going to tell the audience that I’m a girl. I’m going to make Brother Mike out as the fraud he is.”

My eyes were the size of silver dollars, “How will you do that?”

“I’m going to pull off that suit and old wig and I’m going to tell them I’m a girl.”

“That doesn’t change anything. They still know you are a healer.”

“Maybe, but I need to get out. I will heal someone in the crowd after I reveal myself. They will know it’s me then. Maybe I can heal other places, I don’t know. But I can’t stand it anymore. I have to break free from this revival circuit. I can run away, but that won’t let people

know the kind of person that Brother Mike is. They need to know that he is a liar, that he takes advantage of people. The only way to do it, and not get the pulp beat out of me, is to do it in front of a crowd. That way he will be exposed to everybody.”

“Then what? You run away?”

“Yeah, I run away, but here’s the thing. I need to hide in your house for a couple of days. I would stay in the forest but I’m not safe there. I know I will be safe here.”

“What if they come for you? What if they show up with torches and guns and demand to see you? I mean, I don’t mind to hide you. I’m just worried about my family being in danger.”

Joan seemed to consider this for a moment. She put her hands on her hips and averted her eyes.

“It would just be until I can get a hold of my aunt Sally and she will come get me. She might be upset that I left the revival, but she will understand once I tell her how he treated me.”

My mind was already racing with possibilities, “We have an old cellar. We usually store canned food and such down there, but we could probably move some things around and make a space for you. It’s dark and damp, but we keep a rug and a table over it, so no one may think to look down there.”

Joan hugged me tightly. “I knew you could help me, Riley. Thank you.”

When I returned into the house, Momma and Pop were at the table. Layla was laying in Momma’s arms still choking and coughing from the pneumonia.

“Is everything all right, son?” Momma raised her head.

I sat down at the table like a man about to conduct a business deal. I seated myself with a straight back with my hands folded neatly in front of me.

“I have a proposition for you.” I said it with the confidence of any banker or stock broker.

Pop chuckled and Momma lifted her head back and cackled. “Is that right, Mr. man? What is this great proposition of yours?”

“Joan needs a place to stay and I offered her our cellar.”

Pop’s face fell. We barely had enough for the four of us, and now another one would be added to our home? He genuinely loved Joan, but it would be a bit of a strain on us to provide nourishment for another person.

Pop cleared his throat, “Now Riley, I’m not one to grudge hospitality, but you should have talked to us about this before we opened our home to her. You think she will just sit like a knot on a log in that cellar all day? And what will she eat? Heaven knows that she has quite an appetite.”

“I will go get her extra food. I can catch a few extra fish up the river. And we will both pick extra berries. She is another set of hands to feed the chickens. I promise that she won’t be a bother.”

Momma stopped before Pop could speak again. “We will welcome that girl into our home no matter what. She has been through God knows what. Even if we have to begrudge ourselves a little bit of extra food, we will welcome her here.”

Pop redirected, “I ain’t got a problem with her escaping all that abuse. I welcome her here any day. I just don’t want people talking because we got a girl under our roof the same age as Riley.”

“Oh Lord,” Momma cackled, “Nobody will say anything about it. It ain’t inappropriate to take in a young girl who has been abused and neglected by a devil of a man. She can stay here as long as she pleases.

With a solemn nod, Pop agreed. He couldn’t prevent this young girl from a safe place to land. Pop was worried about her being with us, about the risk it would be for her and our family, but Momma was adamant that we had to do what was best for her. She couldn’t be left to the wiles of the wilderness. She needed a place to go, a place to feel comfortable and safe, a place to heal and grow.

That evening, Momma and I went into Layla’s room. There wasn’t much in there, but we moved the scant furniture around to make a humble little cot for Joan to sleep on. Momma made a nightstand out of a wooden Pepsi-Cola carton and placed a few candles on top.

“Here,” she said with a grin, “in case she wants to read before she goes to bed at night.”

I was ecstatic to have her under my roof, knowing that she would be away from Brother Mike and his gang of idiots. We finished the cot and a placement of a few pieces of furniture.

And we waited until nightfall.

Chapter 14

There was the fanfare of noise and pageantry. There was choir music and drums echoing against the mountains. There were blinding lights structured around the large, ivory tent, propped up by four-inch round beams. Folding chairs squatted in long and tight rows, filled with people from all walks of life. The music was blaring, the lights hot and bright. I wondered what was going through Joan's mind in the moments before she arrived among the throng of followers in the front of such a riotous crowd.

As he did every evening, Brother Mike introduced his "boy healer" to the audience. As before, Joan walked out in a dark suit, but without the tie. Joan weaved between the band members and the yawning choir ladies. Brother Mike lifted his head out to the crowd, milking "amens" with his usual platitudes. He then turned expecting his faithful wonder boy only to find an unkempt and disgruntled misanthrope. Brother Mike did his best to hide his displeasure, stifling a frown. He doubled up his grip on the microphone, squeezing the life out of the cord.

"Do you feel like letting the Lord work through you tonight, John?"

"My name isn't John."

The crowd was ready to cheer, but instead murmured at the change in mood. Brother Mike checked up and coughed. He was struggling to maintain his composure.

"Now, John. Let's not play games. Are you ready to heal people tonight?"

"I'm ready to heal people, but I'm also ready to be honest with these folks."

Brother Mike pulled the microphone away from his mouth, bending down to whisper in Joan's ear. "Don't you ruin this, little shrew. I will take you back to the run-down shack of a house with your crazy aunt and leave you there to rot."

Joan didn't miss a beat. "Rotting in a shack is far better than this."

Then she walked ahead. Before Brother Mike could respond or stop her, Joan stripped the dark wig from her head and unloosed her auburn hair from a hairband. It cascaded down her shoulders while the audience gasped in disbelief. Brother Mike ran and grabbed her from behind, dragging her back up toward the front. He was accustomed to direct deception.

"Who is this stranger? What have you done with John?"

Joan struggled in his grasp. He held her firmly in his left hand, his strong fingers intertwined into the collar of her shirt. His right hand held the microphone. The crowd was loud and restless now.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you would just calm down. This here child is an imposter. You all know the Lord wouldn't use a female to do His bidding. We all know what Paul said. This child is a liar, possessed of the devil to deceive you fine people this evening. Your healer is not here."

"The Lord is here," one woman yelled from the front.

Brother Mike stammered to maintain control. "Yes, that's what I meant. The Lord can still work this evening, just not through a confused brat."

Joan found her voice now. "I AM THE HEALER. I am John. I swear."

I watched her lips as they whispered, "What I do is me: for that I came."

Brother Mike kept his strong grip on the back of her neck. "Is that right? If you are the healer as you say, then I want you to prove it."

Brother Mike swung around and began to search the crowd. "I'm looking for Riley Suffolk. He is the boy with the burns on his face. I know you are here, Riley. Come forward."

Suddenly, there were a hundred heads turning to find my face in the crowd. There was no hiding in darkness, no veil too thick to cover my face. A woman in the back pointed toward the rear of the tent where I was standing behind a crowd clustered near the entrance. My first impulse was to run, to leave the whole scene behind and hide in the cabin with my Momma and Pop and Layla. It was a bad idea, all this exposure. I remembered how hurtful other people can be, and how solitude can heal like a balm. The wound was fresh and open.

There will a multitude of eyes on me when I stepped out from the crowd. I pulled the hood back slowly and listened as newcomers gasped at the crooked lines on my face. I barely knew this man in front of me, but I could feel the anger seething in me. I'm not sure what brazen sense of confidence was leading me toward the stage, but my feet walked firmly on. I locked eyes with Brother Mike and didn't release them. He tried hard to avert his gaze.

Joan escaped his clutches now and was standing with her shirt askew, her auburn hair unfurling from her head. There was something poignant and beautiful about that moment. The moment when all the fetters of make believe are loosed, when the costume fell away and landed at your feet. There was a mix of fear and freedom in that hour. It was cathartic, really. I had dreaded this moment for a long time, had stayed guarded in the confines of my cabin or hidden by the cover of night in distant meadows. I had made myself scarce because I didn't want them to see me. Now I was open to all, open to all the criticism and mockery, but equipped with a new sense of boldness that filled my lungs with air. I rode a sensation that was part courage, but also pure bravado.

Brother Mike interrupted my revelry. "Now boy, if your friend really is a healer, she should be able to remove the scars of your accident. Right?" A smirk crossed his face and he brought the microphone to my mouth. At first, I wanted to push it away from my face. Wasn't it

enough to be seen? The weight of eyes and opinions is a heavy burden. Then I spoke with a steady conviction: “The only fraud here is you, Brother Mike.”

Again, the crowd erupted in hysterics. Some women were fanning themselves from pure emotional exhaustion. Others were up from their seat running to and fro. Some assumed that this whole act was satan coming against Brother Mike and the revival. A small group of men near the front were praying loudly for the demons that had inhabited the tent to leave. I finally fixed my eyes on Joan. She was weeping. She knew that she couldn't mend the lines on my face.

“Go ahead, healer woman.” Brother Mike was milking the whole fiasco.

Joan cupped my face into her hands. I could tell that she was envisioning me with a perfect face, the winding lines vanished. I watched as tears chased other tears down her cheeks. She massaged both sides of my face with her hands, then she whispered, “I'm so sorry.”

“You can do it, Joan. Just imagine it.” I encouraged, her palms warm on my cheeks.

“I can't see you without them. The scars. You are perfectly fine how you are, Riley.”

Brother Mike had recovered from the damage of Joan's exclamation. He was fully in control of the surroundings now, the crowd at his command once again. “Well, kids. Get on with it. Heal him or leave.”

Joan hands trembled on my skin. Her fingers began to trace the deep runnels on my cheeks. I didn't feel them change or alter. I knew then that I was as I always had been. There was no healing here. Not on this bright evening.

Brother Mike guffawed into his microphone. He had won, and he knew it.

“That's enough of these imposters. Take them away.”

Quickly, two men came out of the back to escort us out of the tent.

Chapter 15

We both sprinted away from that horrid tent and the fated evening. Joan was still wiping away the tears as we took off against the evening breeze. I was filled with a wild and curious freedom. It became clear to me as I was running down the dirt road and jogging up through the forested pathway that I had neglected the true ones, the ones who loved me and cared for me beyond comprehension. That was what buoyed my spirits that night. She has whispered that she cared for me as I was, the scarred, the warped flesh on my cheekbones, the disturbed skin knit around my knuckles and crawling up my arm. She saw these things, saw them clearly and soberly and still chose to love me. So did Pop and Momma. I strove so hard to gain the approving looks of the world, when the world would toss me out like a discarded cloth. Joan loved me for who I was. She admitted it, in front of Brother Mike and the gawking crowd at the revival, a love that surpassed my hopes and my understanding.

We arrived at my door. Joan was still wiping tears away. Now with the revival at our backs, I grew worried. I would never admit it to Pop, but I was scared about all he had warned about. I was concerned that Brother Mike would appear at the door brandishing his rifle and harm my Momma or Layla, or lay hands on Pop. I was scared that he and his henchmen would storm the cabin at night to break and destroy us. Joan mirrored those same fears.

“You okay?” I turned to grab her by the shoulders.

Her hair was tangled, and a small knot was forming on the back of her neck from Brother Mike’s hard grasp. She was struggling to breathe, and her eyes were fixed on some distant spot in the sky.

“I don’t know. I’m still a little confused by all of it. I mean, I’m sure my aunt will be mad when she hears about it. I thought so hard about actually breaking free that now I don’t know what to do with my freedom.”

I smiled, “You don’t have to worry this minute. You just did a brave thing. You stood up to your bully and I’m really proud of you for doing that, Joan. Why don’t you eat some and get a good night’s rest? We can talk with Momma and Pop about the long term. I know they wanted to return you back to Alabama to be with your family.”

Joan sighed. “My aunt will never take me back, Riley. She will have me sent off to the hospital just like she did my Ma. No, I can’t go back now. I have burned that bridge. I have to go it alone now.”

I was shocked. I had told Pop that we would reunite her with her aunt soon after she left the revival circuit. This is why we had agreed to let her stay. Now things were being changed.

“You aren’t alone. You have me. You have my family. We are here to help you.”

Joan straightened her back. Her eyes were dried now. She seemed to have matured in a single instant, “Oh Riley. That is sweet of you, but I can’t ask you to do that. I can’t live in a cellar forever like some wild animal. I want to reach out and help as many as I can.”

“You ain’t in the cellar. We gave you Layla’s room.”

By this time, we had walked in the door. Momma greeted us both with a large grin.

“Welcome home, Joan. I’m so glad that you are here, sweetie.”

Joan returned her expression with an honest smile. She appreciated the gesture of courtesy, but something in her had shifted that night as she left Brother Mike’s hands. She had no need to feel alone, but she did. And who could blame her? She had just met me a few short weeks ago, and now she was trusting me with her life.

That night, I slept in my bed and listened intently as Joan slept in Layla's bedroom. It felt nice having an ally under my roof, but we were still cautious. We had a plan: when a knock came at the door, we swiftly lifted the cellar door and Joan disappeared beneath the floorboard. Within a few moments, a rug and table were moved to camouflage the spot. No one was the wiser. As of yet, we had no need to employ it.

The next morning, we arose early. Joan appeared in the kitchen wearing a thin smile. I knew then that she was still unsure if she had done the right thing. At twelve, she had never needed to depend upon herself; her aunt or the revival folks had always kept her fed and clothed, but not in a satisfactory way. I tried my best that morning to lift her spirits. I gave her an extra helping of grits and eggs. She came in, sat at the table, and greeted us flatly. She took her fork and pushed the eggs around, occasionally carrying a small bit to her mouth. Momma poured her some orange juice. She felt the heaviness in the room.

“Joan, did you sleep well?”

“I didn't sleep much, but it wasn't because I had bad hospitality. I'm just wondering if I did the right thing.”

Pop, who had been quiet throughout most of the business concerning Joan, finally spoke up, “I think I speak for all of us when I say that we are glad that you are here. I know this isn't what you had planned, but sometimes God puts you in different situations. He makes you uncomfortable so you can allow Him to use you, to grow. Maybe this was God's way of nudging you toward your true path. I ain't one to speak for God, He knows I'm not perfect, but I have read and observed things in my years on this earth. I know that comfort is equal to complacency. This will pass. And you are welcome here as long as you need shelter.”

Joan looked earnestly at my Pop. She knew that he wasn't one to mince words, or to speak for the sake of filling the air with noise. What he said, he had meant deep down in his heart and Joan's expression showed that she appreciated it.

Chapter 16

God's mercies are new every morning, the Good Book says. So were our hearts buoyed by this new freedom.

In the next days, we settled into a comfortable routine. Joan would help around the cabin. Now I had four hands instead of two to help with my chores, along with good conversation. That next morning, we went out to get some berries for Momma's cobbler. We grabbed wicker baskets from the corner and began heading up the mountain in the cool summer morning. Dew was still fresh on the grass, the honeysuckle bloomed thick off the bushes. The trees stood firm on the sloping hillsides. We galloped around the forest that morning gathering blackberries and raspberries from the bushes. I'd never known such joy as we had weaved a path through the underbrush and tree copse made of lofty oaks. It felt like we were king and queen of our tiny universe.

We pressed forward and into an area where apple trees were planted behind a long wooden fence. It wound around the property and cut at a sharp angle not far from where we stood. It was McCormack's orchard. I noticed that we were not on his property, but the limbs of certain apple trees stretched tall and far over the property line.

"Want an apple?"

Joan scanned the countryside. "This is someone else's property, isn't it? I don't want to steal?"

"Oh, it ain't stealing. It's McCormack's land anyway. He won't mind. Besides he kinda owes me anyway."

I stepped toward the orchard and stretched on my toes to grab a few apples. Besides, Momma could make apple pie with some of these. McCormack won't miss them. He had an

orchard full of trees with limbs dripping with crimson apples. To remove the burden was to do a bit of a favor for these trees. Joan continued to peer left and right, uncomfortable with the theft. But I felt deep down that McCormack had yet to reconcile his debt to me. Every molecule of my skin railed against the great injustice that had occurred. I was tossed aside, spent and spit out, pushed to the margins by my visage. How could a few apples tucked into my basket draw an interruption from his workers?

Joan coughed, then her voice dropped to a whisper. "Riley. Riley, here comes one of his hands. We gotta get out of here."

At that point, I was intoxicated by the insouciance of my crime, my hands pulling and pulling apples from the trees to place in our basket. I watched as the limb bowed toward me, plucking the apples, coaxing until they gave way and the branch snapped back into place. The leaves shook and the other apples buoyed like floats on a river during a storm, the rhythm soft and lulling. There was a deep satisfaction in wrapping my fingers around a bright fruit and yanking it from its bow. It was mine anyway, was it not? I knew the apples would be a heavy load to carry home, but the old resentment raged in my heart. I ignored Joan's insistent warnings, and I continued to take my bounty. I stepped across my basket to place a few in her basket, but she refused, gasping.

"Why you putting them in my basket? I won't be an accessory to this!"

"Oh hush," I snickered. "I can't carry them all. Besides, you won't complain when you get a fork full of Momma's apple pie."

She picked up the basket and attempted to walk away. Although her hands were clean, she was still agonized by the whole affair. I sensed her aggravation and grabbed one more before I climbed down. I smiled placing the final red apple in her basket.

It was then that the hand, a thin and gaunt man, turned around. He noticed the shiver of a tree by the end of the property. He placed his ladder promptly against a tree and strolled across the property to investigate.

“Hey! Is anyone over there? You ain’t supposed to be taking these apples.”

I hopped the fence and we began our escape. In the process, I knocked over my straw basket, spilling its contents all over the grass. It was too late now to pick them up. Plus, the weight would slow down our getaway. Thus, I surrendered my berries and apples and ran as hard as I could away from McCormack’s property.

Joan was in front of me, the basket swinging from her right arm as she tore through the forest. Behind us we could hear the man calling us, “Hey, hey! Come back here!” He only chased us to the fence and the line of trees. Perhaps he saw my basket sitting there with the apples strewn all over the place. Or he didn’t feel like running after two wild children.

When we were comfortable with the distance between us and the orchard, I stopped to catch my breath. The brambles grew around us, creating a shelter. I put my hands on my knees and breathed the damp earth into my lungs. It was a good long moment before one of spoke.

“What will you tell your Momma about the berries? And the missing basket?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll go back in a couple of hours and fetch in. If I go back now, I’ll be discovered.”

“What will McCormack do to you?”

“Nothing. He won’t do a damn thing.”

Joan placed her hand on her hip. She wasn’t satisfied with that answer. Everyone in the valley knew that McCormack held sway in this region—politics, church, townspeople. It didn’t matter. He secretly ran this valley according to his whim, thanks to his money.

“Really, he won’t. He owes me more than what a few apples cost. If he raises a fuss, I’ll tell the truth about the shine I moved.”

“I thought everybody knew about that?”

“Not really. Not the law. Everybody else knows I was burned by the oven. They don’t know that I was covered in shine.”

“But he trusts you not to say anything, Riley. What will happen if you tell? McCormack holds a lot of sway around here, based on what I’ve heard. He was over with Brother Mike a bit. He knows how to throw his weight around.”

“He owes me. He won’t raise a fuss over a few apples.”

We continued to walk for a few minutes, chatting about the accident, about how careless some adults can become. We came upon our meadow. Without saying a word, we both migrated to the middle of the meadow and took our usual spot. The sun was high and hot now in the July afternoon, and we both fanned ourselves as we talked. Eventually, we laid down in the meadow, crowned by lavender and wildflowers, and lingered talking about our dreams.

We laid side by side, our arms intertwined at the elbow, our eyes closed.

“Do you ever miss Alabama?” I spoke into the sun.

“Yeah, I miss my mother. I miss my old life. But I’m glad to help people.”

“I think you are helping people, but do you always feel that healing is the only way you can do it? I mean, you can be a decent person. You can feed some hungry folks or bring clothes to some of the kids up on the mountain. You don’t have to go around on that circus and place your hands on people.”

Joan sighed. “I know, but it gives me a platform to do my work. Before I was just an orphaned kid who chased away a fever or got rid of a limp. Here I can do so much more, for so

much more. It's just that I didn't know it would be that way. I didn't know that Brother Mike would treat me so harshly, or that some people would be so ungrateful if it didn't work. I just wanted to bring hope to others. Now I see how indifferent and fickle people are, how they are one way and then another. I don't understand it."

Yet, I understood her. I had winced as boys my age played kickball with me by the schoolyard, and now they couldn't look me in the face unless they felt pity. They said that my injury didn't matter, that it didn't penetrate the deepest part of me, but my confidence, my self-worth had eroded like river rocks in a stream. The boys stopped visiting the cabin, they stopped asking me to play ball or walk to the dime store. I was invisible, erased from the community. Naïve, I thought that my friends would learn to look past it, that they would understand that through this swollen skin was the same friend they had always known beneath it. But everything changed that day.

"I think that is why we cling to God and not people. People ain't perfect. I wish they could all be like you. You really believe in what you say, in the power God gave you."

Joan turned to look at me, smiling, "Look at you, talking about God like that!"

I shrugged. I met her gaze. Maybe she was right. Perhaps Brother Mike was a bad example of something that, in its very essence, was very good. Maybe God is the only real goodness and his people, his "vessels" that are too flawed. They keep giving in to temptations like pride until they don't resemble what they claim to represent. Then that wasn't God's fault; that was ours. If God did exist, then all of this would make some sense. There was a God who fashioned this meadow, these tangled flowers. He made the eyes that I stared back at me. It was then, with the sun on my face and Joan's body in a near embrace that I felt a goodness that couldn't be articulated. There was a divinity that pulsed beneath the moment. A deep

contentment washed over me. I searched for the words in every corner of my mind, but every utterance seemed to be inadequate. I reached over and plucked a singular daisy from the patch behind my back. Sheepish, I rolled the stem in my hands, watching the bloom spin between my fingers. I held it to the breeze and watched as the wind rippled through the petals. Then handed it to Joan. Grinning, she sat up and fingered the petals, brushing her palm with them, delighting in the sensation.

“So why do you love God?” It was a question in the back of my mind, a seed of thought growing and growing. So much mystery. I wanted Joan to unravel all of the great mysteries of the world in that moment, to guide me into a deeper understanding of these pious tendencies. I had barely paid attention in church my whole life. I was a foreigner to these patterns of thought. She could initiate me, could take me by those blessed hands and lead me to some greater knowledge. Some greater truth.

Joan settled back into her bed of flowers and closed her eyes. She was bathing in sunlight. I heard her snicker.

“What kind of question is that? I love because He made all of this, because He is Good and kind and just. I love him because He isn’t human, and humans are experts at making of mess of things.”

“So does that mean that you can’t love humans?”

Joan rolled over onto her elbow. The rope of her braids fell across her shoulders and swept the carpet of grass. She looked so lovely with her eyes shining, her body outlined with jumbled wildflowers. There was a quality heavenly about her, certainly. I had never experienced anyone like her before, even before my supposed exile.

She laughed off my question. “Of course, I can love humans. I just can’t love them to the same degree that I love God. He gave me this great gift. He plucked me out of the whole of humanity and blessed me with this. Just like when you picked this flower for me. All of the other flowers are still there, warming in the sun, but waiting to become something more. This daisy has waited its whole life in this field for you to pull it from the earth and give it to me as a gift. What a lovely duty to spread joy around. That’s what I want, Riley. More than anything in the universe.”

“You are being used by God, I was just saying that you don’t have to do it on a revival circuit. There are tons of stages and platforms all over the place. Maybe there is another one waiting for you, waiting like that daisy. This one, if it had been planted on a hillside, would have never been available to be a gift. It was here in this moment for me to place in your hands. Maybe you need to move to another venue, another opportunity.”

She turned her head around and peered at me in the eye. Her silhouette was drenched in sunlight. I had to stop myself from gasping. I wanted to reach over and draw her to me, to kiss her passionately, but the fear of rejection swelled up in my chest. Also, I was inexperienced. I had never befriended a girl, much less wooed her into romance.

“You really are a good friend, Riley. Thank you for everything.”

“You know, Jane Austen once wrote that she would do anything for her friends because she had no notion of loving people by halves.”

Joan giggled. She caught herself in a fit of laughter. I was riding the moment like an intense wave. I spoke quickly and acted quickly. If I was going to dive in, there was no use testing the waters first.

I remember reading about the poet Robert Browning, how he wooed his poet wife Elizabeth in a sweeping confession. He stated that he loved her poetry, and he loved her too. That was it. A poet who helped define the generation of Victorian literature and all he could say was, “And I love you too.” I’ve thought, in the years that have lapsed since I read this, how ridiculous it was for a poet to express his love with such inelegance. But at that moment, in the meadow with my emotions swarming around in a complex dance and a special girl beside me, I understood the struggle of expressing one’s emotions.

“And I love you wholly,” I said. It came out with no premeditation, no afterthought. Then I did the unthinkable. With this statement, I placed my hands upon her face and drew her to me. I didn’t know how to do it, but I pulled our mouths together in a swift second. Her lips were soft and supple, her cheeks were warm in the sunlight. The whole scene was framed by the presence of buzzing bees pollinating local blooms, of birds calling their mates from faraway limbs, of deer in the distance gathering together in herds. There was a single snatch of seconds in which our eyes were closed and our lips were searching for the meaning behind all that we were exploring.

I was lost in all of the ecstasy around us, distracted by all that was good and fair. I didn’t expect to feel her hands pushing at my chest, her lips pulling away with violence. I opened my eyes to see Joan, with anger knit on her brow, her face glowing red.

“Riley, how could you! I thought we were friends. I, I don’t see you as any more than that.”

I was fully panicking when I realized my error. It had been easy to recognize: I was far too confident. My chest had swelled with pride, my head with visions of romance. My body was a slow motor turning off after a crescendo of idling. I was stumbling for words as Joan stood up, dusted off the flower petals and threw the daisy back at me.

“I’m sorry. It was just that I thought...I thought...”

“Huh, maybe Brother Mike was right about men. He said ungodly men only want one thing from a woman. How could I have been so blind?”

She rushed out of the meadow. I stumbled around but finally caught my feet and began to follow her.

“Joan, Joan please! I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again. I know better now.”

Once again, I found words inadequate. She had said it just before: *you are a great friend, Riley*. How could I have interpreted that expression to be anything more than mere friendship? I only read of love in novels; I didn’t understand that flesh-and-blood relationships were often divorced from the fantasy? A fantasy created to sell books, to stir the hearts and wallets of men, but not their conscience.

I followed her for a few yards, but I finally let her go. I had spoiled the moment, this much I understood. I walked the forest for a couple of hours in a lost daze, stumbling over tree branches and getting tangled in thorn bushes. When I returned home later that night, Momma rushed to the back door, marinating in worry.

“What happened between you and Joan? She came in here and gathered her things in a bag. She was ready to leave the house, but I tried to talk to her about how things are during this time of your life. It is hard with the hormones and all. She went to her room and shut the door. She’s been in there for an hour or so. She said she didn’t feel comfortable being here anymore. What happened between you two?”

“We were out in the meadow and I kissed her.”

Momma’s eyes grew as big as silver dollars. “You what?”

“I just grabbed her face in my hands and I kissed her. I thought she had the same feelings then, but she doesn’t. She saw me as a friend and nothing more.”

“Oh baby,” Momma said in a conciliatory manner, “you’re just growing up. Boys have a hard time letting their hormones control their brains. It’s just part of it. Don’t feel bad.”

My brain was in a dizzy fog. I oscillated between panic and anger. I felt bad for reaching out to show her my feelings, but the old agony of rejection was rising in my chest. All of the laughter and bullying, the numbness of being alone, of the turning away of my friends, of the gossip and chatter when I went into public, the pain in my chest of watching McCormack’s farm prosper while I withered away in darkness: all of this seemed to accumulate inside my mind. It wasn’t just about her pushing away my affection, it was about the long and terrible consistency of dismissal, of neglect. I had one true gift and I drove it away. I couldn’t blame Joan for all the rejection I had experienced before her; in fact, she had been one of the only people to accept me on my own terms. Yet, that wasn’t enough. I had hungered for more, expected too much. Now I was alone again.

Momma knocked softly on Joan’s bedroom door. Joan squeaked a greeting behind it, and Momma asked nicely to come in. After some gentle nudging, Momma entered the bedroom. The door was closed for nearly half an hour. I heard a muffle of conversation. Momma’s conciliatory tone gave me some reassurance. I could hardly make out any of the words, but Momma dominated the exchange. Joan seemed to be asking questions, and Momma, in her infinite patience, answered with kindness.

After thirty long and agonizing minutes, Momma opened the door and Joan walked out ahead of her. Joan strolled into the kitchen where I sat in a nervous heap at the table folding and

refolding an old napkin. Joan gave Momma a final look, and then she stepped around the table to face me.

“Riley, I’m really sorry for the things I said. I didn’t mean them. I just want us to be friends.” She turned to face Momma. “Ma’am, I’m so sorry for trying to storm out of here in a fuss. I was really upset, but now I’ve had time to think about those things. Please accept my apologies.”

Joan walked out to the front room, and Momma set a hand on my shoulder.

“Maturity is a funny thing. It does funny things to you. I know it is so hard for you, Riley. But there are a lot of things going on inside you that you don’t understand. Neither does Joan. She doesn’t know much about it. She doesn’t know much about her body’s changes either. Those tent men didn’t explain anything, and her aunt didn’t say much. Poor thing. She understands now but try to be patient with her. Okay?”

I nodded. Momma tussled my hair. “I love you, Riles.”

I smiled back.

Chapter 17

I'd always envisioned that I would know how to live with a woman when I became a man. Besides, my Momma was a woman. She was sweet and kind, she was smart and agile. What great mystery is there for a woman anyway? Cooking and cleaning and tending to kids, I suppose. But a girl my age was something altogether different.

Those first few days were heavenly. I had my best friend with me. We would go out and pick berries and gather firewood. But something deep inside me was growing. I started to see my perspective changing. Sure, she was a good friend. But I found myself drawn to her. Momma had told me that I was becoming a man and that she had instructed Joan on what it was to become a woman. One morning, not long after our excursion in the meadow, Joan had run in asking to speak to Momma. She was panicking, and she wouldn't tell me what was the matter. Finally, Momma took her into the bathroom for a while and explained how it was "to become a woman." At least, that is all Momma would tell me when I asked later what they were discussing. I was told not to bring it up, and like a gentleman, I kept my mouth shut.

But that afternoon, there was more trouble. McCormack heard that there was a thief in his orchard and, although the man was prosperous in his fields, he was bound and determined to capture the person purloining his fruit.

Pop had heard out in valley that McCormack was offering a reward for information leading to the identity of his thieves. All of a sudden, every kid with a basket and a penchant for wandering was a suspect. My name rarely surfaced; gossip stated that Riley Suffolk barely comes out during the day after his accident. I was ruled out early on.

However, the farm hand had retrieved the basket and began to study it for signs of the owner. The basket was woven by my great-grandmother many years ago. She made a trio of

them; Joan had carried the other one home and the third one had been misplaced after a neighbor borrowed it years ago. The basket was collected for evidence, and soon McCormack had his men gathered all around searching for the owner of the basket to locate his thief.

One apple. One red apple. And yet he was interrogating the valley over that single incident.

McCormack supposedly told his crew that “he wants to send a message that no one messes with his crops.” It was overkill, Momma said. The truth was that McCormack was a big bully who liked to throw his weight around. He certainly enjoyed his privilege and he threatened anyone who took what he thought was rightfully his.

His men took the rest of the day off at the fields and began to canvas the valley looking for the basket’s owner. Men combed the countryside that day, strolling in the hot sun. The hand believed that he saw two children that morning. He only saw two small silhouettes vanishing into the forest. When the knock came at the door, it was unexpected.

Momma pulled the door open, “Yes?”

The boy was only a few years older than I was. Tall, gaunt, tanned. He took his straw hat off to address Momma.

“Ma’am, I’m looking for the owner of this here basket. It was found on McCormack’s property this morning.”

“Why are you asking me?” Momma sniffed.

“Because you have a young boy living here and they found some young people a stealin’ his apples.”

“So you think that Riley did it?”

“Not necessarily ma’am. Mrs. McCormack asked us to question folks in the neighborhood about the basket and apples.”

Momma was unmoved. “Mr. McCormack has plenty and he don’t need to be fussing over a few apples.”

From the back of the house, we heard a voice. Another boy went around to the back where we had come in earlier that day. I gulped because I knew that Joan had laid that basket...

“Here it is, Jesse. I found a basket just like the one left on the property. And it still has an apple in it. These people here are the culprits.”

The boys had surprised the family by pulling a ruse. One had went to the back and looked for clues while the other had distracted us at the front. While we had been questioned by a boy named Jesse, the other boy named Hank had went around back and found Joan’s basket with her one red apple.

Hank came up behind Jesse gripping the basket in his hand. He was similar in stature to his comrade. He held the basket out and noticed that the weaving patterns were the same. He pointed down into the basket at the one shiny apple shimmering in the afternoon sun. We were caught.

Momma was surprised, “I don’t know nothing about this. Riley, did you go to the McCormack farm today?”

I should have just told the truth, but I didn’t want to disappoint Momma even more.

“I don’t go nowhere near that farm. Especially now.”

The boys looked on me with great pity. But there was still the business of the basket to be dealt with.

The other boy, the one who discovered our apple, spoke up. “Ma’am, we ain’t trying to cause no trouble. We are just doing our job. McCormack sent us out here to figure out who was stealing apples from his orchard. That’s it. We ain’t here to start nothing.”

Jesse handed the other basket back to Momma. It was the one that I had abandoned in the meadow so quickly.

“We will have to take this as evidence to Mr. McCormack,” the boy said, gesturing to the basket. “I’m sorry to cause you so much trouble ma’am. I’m under strict order to bring back this basket and tell him where we got it. I’m sorry.”

Momma nodded. I had to come clean. When I opened my mouth to confess, Joan’s voice came from our backs.

“It was me. I did it. I stole the apple.”

My face went white as a sheet. Joan had come out of the shadows and revealed herself. Not only was she coming out of hiding, she was taking credit for the theft that was my fault. I was the one who insisted that we take the apples in the first place. Now she was exposing herself and taking the blame for my terrible idea.

From behind the two boys came a familiar baritone. “Did you boys find my thief?”

It was McCormack himself. He had condescended to come to the side of the mountain to aid in the search. In reality, he had come to make sure his young hands weren’t smoking cigarettes and flirting with mountain girls.

He glanced at the basket in the boy’s hands. “I see you’ve found a match there. Is some of my bounty in it?”

The boy never spoke but held the basket forward for McCormack to inspect it. He picked up his apple and eyed it suspiciously. “Yeah, this is one of mine. Where did you get it?”

I swallowed. “It was me, Mr. McCormack. I was hungry, and I took a few apples.”

McCormack looked at Momma then me and then Joan. He was struggling to figure out which topic to address first: the theft or the discovery of the healer girl.

“Riley, nice to see you again. But I can’t say it is on the best of terms. I’m a little disappointed in you. I figured you would have at least asked. I would have given you a whole bushel of apples if you needed it. There ain’t no need to steal.”

I cleared my throat. “I ain’t trying to disappoint anyone.”

McCormack redirected, “I understand it. You are a boy. You don’t know any better. I expected better from you.” He sighed. “I’ll have to send you a small bill for the apples that you spoiled in my orchard. I’ll send the boys with it later.”

A small bill? In total, we had only carried off *one* apple. It was ludicrous that he insisted upon charging my family for my mistake.

I started, “Mr. McCormack, my family doesn’t have much money. How about I work off the cost? I will come and help roll your hay or pull some corn. Anything, please. Don’t punish my family over this. This was my doing.”

McCormack thought it over. “Well, I really can’t have you on my property right now. We are in the middle of harvest and all. How do I know you won’t steal from me again? I can’t supervise you all the time. I have a lot of land to look after.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. McCormack had hired me for several years and knew that I was as good as my word. Why, now, was he punishing my family for the one crime I committed against his property? He owed me; it was his shine that caused the accident. My heart was beating wildly.

Before good sense could intervene, I started to pour all of my blame and ire into McCormack's ear. "But this isn't fair, Mr. McCormack. You know me. You know I ain't capable of being no criminal..."

Joan spoke up, "That was my basket. I took the apple. I'm sorry, Mr. McCormack. I thought you would be okay with it. Please forgive me." Joan's apology was sincere, and she looked at her shoes after she spoke her peace. There was a beat of silence as McCormack processed the new indictment.

McCormack took two steps toward Joan. "You that healer girl that was with the revival? I watched it several times. I was there the night you tried to turn Brother Mike out. I figured you were hiding out around here somewhere." He began to chuckle.

"I am the healer girl. I was told to wear a disguise, but I am the one who healed those people."

"Wrong," McCormack interrupted. "God healed those people. You, little minx, are an imposter. You ain't no healer. I don't know what you did with the real boy healer, but we are all pretty concerned about him. Mike filed a police report on his disappearance yesterday. I'm sure they will be up to question you all later."

Joan was about to erupt, "I *am* the healer. Brother Mike made me wear all that mess."

McCormack turned to go, "Mrs. Suffolk, I'm no lawyer, but I wouldn't be housing this fugitive in my house. I would turn her over to the authorities where she can be properly handled."

Momma had watched the whole turbulent scene, but she finally had a chance to speak, "I appreciate your concern, Mr. McCormack, but Joan isn't a fugitive. She is a sweet little girl that a bunch of religious men want to demonize. She is always welcome in my home."

With this, McCormack turned to go. “Well, I have other business to attend to. Boys, bring along that basket for evidence and I will send a bill shortly. Unless you want to talk to the sheriff about it...”

Momma shook her head, “We will send you the money. No need is raising a fuss over a couple of apples and young kids acting like kids.”

“Kids acting like thieves, you mean? Perhaps that is problem. I don’t excuse it as childish when a young person steals from me. It is a crime, and it will be punished as such. At least until you can learn to keep that child inside where it can’t stir up trouble.”

My fists were balling in fury. I had never been so close to assaulting a grown man before. Momma was preparing to say something else when McCormack took his leave. He stepped off the porch and into the afternoon heat. The boys, like two lost puppies, followed him without response.

We waited for the police to come and question us, but they never did. We settled into a routine in the cabin and a relative peace prevailed for the present. The bill from McCormack came the next day. He had charged Momma and Pop a whopping 27 cents for one apple.

Just one apple.

Chapter 18

A few nights later, a knock came late at the door. Momma carried a candle to the front door, her housecoat sweeping the boards. She was so lethargic that she didn't even stop to ask who it was. She opened the door and found a young woman of about 25 with a toddler in her arms. She was tall and thin, with blonde hair. The toddler was a boy with curly dark hair and a sparkle in his eye. As my eyes scanned down, I noticed that he had leg braces on both of his legs. The woman spoke with an urgency.

“Is this where the healer lives? I'm looking for that healer.”

Like a sentinel guard, Momma remained unmoved.

“Who's asking?”

“I'm sorry to barge in like this. My name is Priscilla. I'm from Blount County. This here is Jack. He's two.”

Momma loved little babies, but for the sake of our safety, she still didn't move from the threshold.

“Look, I know this is very forward. I heard the other day that there was a healer kid who traveled with the revival. I saved up some money to travel over this way, and they told me the revival just left town. I was heartbroken. Then a kind woman told me that the healer was still in town, that he lived in the woods in a cabin. I had to pay a couple of people off to tell me where the cabin was, that's why I'm here so late. But I just want to have my boy healed.”

“You ain't got no weapons, do you?” Momma was still in a defensive gesture.

“No ma'am. I promise. It's just me and Jack looking for a miracle.”

Momma sighed heavily and finally moved from doorway. The woman strolled into the living room and headed toward the patchwork couch. She plopped the boy down next to her. He

sat upright with his corduroy overalls and plumb sweater underneath. His mother seemed to be on high alert, but Jack was as calm as a thistle with no breeze.

“Hello,” the boy said, raising his hand in greeting.

I stepped forward and tried to shake hands with the boy. At first, he seemed to cower when he saw my face in the candlelight, but his mother gently nudged him.

“Go on, shake the boy’s hand, Jack. Don’t be discourteous.”

Jack grabbed my hand. I felt his tiny fingers relax in mine. He was genuinely scared at first, but he seemed to find me fascinating. I smiled at him to let him know that I was not a threat.

Priscilla spoke up, interrupting the awkward first moments. “I hate to be like this, but I gotta catch a train soon. I have some relatives on the other side of the mountain, but I can’t abuse their charity for too long. I have to get back. I don’t want to be gone on my own for too long. My husband works at night, but...look, if we could just go ahead and start the healing.”

She looked deeply into my eyes. She grasped my hands and placed them on her son’s knees. “He’s got club feet. I don’t know what happened during childbirth or what, but now he has to wear them braces. I know they pinch and he don’t like them. Plus he can’t go play with his friends. Kids say really mean things to him. He’s bullied all of the time. I just want him to walk around like a regular kid.”

I finally got an opportunity to interrupt her. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not the healer.”

Her brow furrowed and her hands formed fists. “Then why are you putting me along for? I came all the way out here to get a healing for my son, and then you people bring me in and tote

me along like some fool? I spent near ten dollars getting over here. My husband has to work hard for that money. I should have known that you couldn't do it."

Momma shushed her. "Now you listen here. The healer lives here but this is my son Riley. We have a sleeping baby in the back of this cabin and I ain't going to allow you to stay here if you are going to start kicking up a fuss. We will bring the healer in here but keep your voice down. Do you hear me?"

Momma's face was red. She had fumbled with her overcoat belt, the curler wagging on her head as she spoke with conviction. Priscilla was relieved to hear that she was in the right place. She wilted on the couch next to her boy. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry ma'am."

Momma sent me to go fetch Joan from her bed. She awoke quickly and I explained to her that we had a visitor needing a healing. Joan cracked a smile. Her reputation was finally spreading through the valley. Now she could help others without the noose of Brother Mike.

Joan walked into the living room and found Jack engaged in saying his ABCs. When he finished saying, "WXYZ," Momma softly applauded him. "That is really nice, Jack. You are a smart boy."

Joan knelt down next to the boy. She stuck her hand out, "I'm Joan."

Jack retreated a bit, but reluctantly stuck out his hand. He was meeting a whole new cast of characters this evening, in a strange place. He was a bit overwhelmed.

"Are you the healer, then? I was told it was a boy."

"I was dressed as a boy," Joan explained. "But you are looking for me. I'm the healer."

"All right. What do you need me to do? You want me to sit him somewhere. You need to pray over him?"

Joan elected to have the boy lay in the floor while Joan hovered her hands over his tiny body, mainly his legs and trunk. She fell into her trance. The mother looked from Jack to Joan and back again. She didn't understand the simplicity of the whole act.

“You chant something? I mean, what do you want me to do?”

“Just let her work, and don't interrupt her,” I said.

The mother then moved to the floor, pushing Joan over to the side. She grabbed Jack's hand in hers. She continued to mumble encouragement. Then when the silence permeated the scene, she couldn't stand it anymore. “How about we all say the Lord's Prayer together, huh? We pray together so God can do His work.”

Without gaining consent from any of us for the idea, she raised her voice again while dropping her head, “Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name.” She paused and looked up, hearing her singular voice echoing through the living room.

“What, y'all ain't going to pray with me? He needs prayers right now. Please.”

“Thy kingdom come...” she stopped, waiting for the rest of us to repeat after her. When we did, she pulled us tooth and nail through the rest of the model prayer, insisting that we repeat after her since “maybe y'all can't remember all of the words.”

Throughout the whole ordeal, Joan sat perfectly still, her hands raised slightly above the boy's knees. She finally broke her gaze. Her face was tempted to form a frown.

“That's all.” Joan looked up at Priscilla, then to me and Momma.

Priscilla's face brightened. “All right, Jack. Will you get up and walk for mommy?”

Jack was pulled to his feet, where he was set unsteadily on the floor. Priscilla walked several strides across the living room, then turned and kneeled with her hands out. “Come to me. Come to mommy.”

Jack took one step, then two, then just as the mother began to rejoice, Jack fell. He fell hard on the wood floor. Jack began to sniffle. His knees were red and sore. His arms were swollen from the impact.

Priscilla was insistent. "Here maybe it takes a few minutes for it to work. Try it again. Here, boy. Lift him off of the ground."

I reached for Jack, who already had tears forming in his eyes. "I think he might be hurt."

"Nonsense. It was just a little fall. Pull him and let him try again."

It was no use arguing, so I pulled him back up. He took a step or two and fell once again. Priscilla was now inconsolable. She scooped up her crying son and began looking for her purse on the couch. Momma was checking over her shoulder to see if Layla had been disturbed.

"I should have known. I should have known. They said these braces would help him grow out of it, but even some healer can't help him. He's hopeless." Priscilla turned while Jack began to wail in her ear. Momma heard Layla stirring in the bedroom and ran to get her before he woke up Pop.

Joan sat on the floor, dumbfounded. "I'm sorry ma'am. I tried. It isn't a guarantee."

Priscilla spit out her words, "I can't believe I wasted all of this time and effort, only to be let down again. I knew deep down that this revival stuff was hogwash. I don't know how to fix all of this, no thanks to you."

Joan's face bore a genuine expression of sorrow, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Priscilla didn't hear the weak apology, "The doctors said just to wait and the braces will fix it. But I don't want him going through childhood being a laughingstock. Kids are downright cruel."

"I know," I whispered.

“Well, I don’t want him to deal with that. I’m his momma. I’m supposed to shield him from all of that. I thought we could just heal him and skip all that. But here we are still in the same place, and I’m out ten bucks.”

With that, Priscilla took Jack, who was crying from the falls, to the door and walked out, slamming it behind her. The quiet swallowed up the last few minutes of our time.

I took a deep breath and looked over at Joan. Her face was solemn in the candlelight, “You couldn’t heal him.”

“I told you that I don’t have control over it really. God heals whom He chooses to heal.”

“But you healed so many under that tent. How is this different?”

Joan raised herself up from the floor and trudged into the bedroom. “I don’t know if this is any different, Riley. I think I just need to get some rest.”

Joan retreated to her cot and remained there. Later, when I went by her bedroom, the door was cracked and her back was to the open door. She was peering longingly out the window into the warm night. There was a sorrow so deep that penetrated me. Momma finally got Layla to sleep and the house stilled.

Chapter 19

My mind drifted back to that night under the tent with the full gaze of the community on us. On her cold hands grasping my face and the hard truth that she could not heal my scars. I wasn't sure then why I couldn't be healed as others could. I wasn't sure at the age of twelve what the blueprint of my life would be now. I just knew that I cared about my friend, but my friend could not help me.

I remembered the other night when Jack came with his crooked smile and his club foot. How he tried to walk and tumbled down and Joan sat there startled that her healing powers didn't work. The child cried and the mother had been so stern: *why did you not heal my boy? You were supposed to heal my boy.* It was as if Joan or God Himself owed her a great debt. I couldn't understand her stubbornness, her anger. It was frustrating that Joan could not heal him as she had healed the others, but there was no explanation for it. Joan certainly could not explain it.

The next morning, we were all sitting in the living room. Pop was off to work, Momma was feeding Layla a bottle that she seemed to refuse, and we were sorting berries from our excursion from the previous day.

I looked across at her and noticed the focus in her eyes, how her hands went so swiftly through the basket to sort the different berries into cannisters. The question was gnawing at me, squatting in the back of my mind and not budging. I couldn't understand it. How could she heal others, but not Jack? She had done it dozens of times during the revival. How many nights had I watched her with that absurd costume, waving her hands around in the evening air, swaying, surrendering to that power that had made so many crooked things straight in this community? Beatrice still walked with a spring in her step; others had tossed their medicines, their canes. Over and over, the image haunted my mind: the little boy, the wig, the night-black suit, the

illuminating lights and the billowing tent stretched firm against stakes as round and stout as telephone poles. Yet, here she was, the girl. The healer. She was under my roof, a safe and secure structure of a roof and walls without the blur of choir robes or staccato of snare drums. She did all of that in the front of these clouds of witnesses. Why couldn't she do the same for Jack?

Or for me?

At times, I couldn't push away the old memory in the meadow. The blush of her cheeks against the grass, the elegant curve of her hips as the sunlight sketched out her body, the smells of honeysuckle and hum of ladybugs. All of it was a symphony that clutched me at the very heart. And then the moment after, the push aside, the pulling apart of our lips, the flagrant tossing of my flower—all of these were a painful reminder that I couldn't have what others had. It was a mirage, a dream. I was left with this contorted face, this life that is more scarred than my skin. Although I had acted rashly that morning, something in me still swelled with enmity. I had simply imagined all of the intimacy beforehand, the closeness I developed with Joan that I hadn't stirred with any other being in this world. My body ached with desires that I couldn't fully explain, and as the hormones surged toward a crescendo, they were only tempered by the deep regret that I would never find that love. Never. This is as close as I would come.

That morning, the questions burrowed deep inside me. I finally worked up the courage to broach the topic while Momma went to change Layla's clothes.

In the quiet, I whispered, "Why couldn't you heal that boy?"

"I don't know. I did everything I could. I imagined him in our meadow, running and playing and smiling. I saw him beneath a bright sun and running a path along the river. I saw it as clear as I see you now. But it didn't work and I'm not sure why. I'm not sure why God chose not to heal him." She busied her hands separating the berries. She wouldn't look me in the eyes.

“Or to heal me,” I blurted out. I ran a quick hand over my face.

“I don’t know why, Riley. We have been over this before. I am just…”

“…the vessel. Yes, I know. Did you know the mother would react like that?”

“Of course not. I can’t really control it or how others respond to me.”

“To you or your gift?”

“Both.”

I let the silence grow between us. She appeared to me to be indifferent. She couldn’t heal me; she couldn’t heal the boy. Who was this person that I thought I knew, that I thought had been my friend?

There was a darkness behind her eyes now. She could feel the distance and she was frightened.

“Hey,” she brightened, “why don’t we do another poetry lesson? I’d like to do more Hopkins. Or maybe some Browning like you were talking about.”

I shrugged. “I don’t feel like it today.”

Now, as the years collapse in my memory, I wish I had been more kind to her. I should have just dropped the subject all together and let it die, this desire for healing. I shouldn’t have indulged my inadequacies, the deficiencies that all teenagers seem to feel at the cusp of maturity.

“I’m so sorry you feel this way, Riley. Please don’t take it personally. I don’t have anything against you. I don’t.”

“Why can’t you do it? You can heal so many other people.”

“I… I don’t know, Riley. I don’t have any control over it.”

“But I think you do. You knew I would still accept you with my scarred face and hands. You knew the mother would be ungrateful. So you withheld it. You withheld the blessing.”

Her face was stark, “Why would I do that? That would be cruel. Why would I withhold a healing from people just because I had some kind of prejudice against them?”

I was steadfast in my flagrant stubbornness, “I don’t know why. That is why I’m asking you. You don’t have anybody now, right? You can keep me around as your friend, someone you can depend on. Yet you can’t do one thing for me. You can’t heal me like I’ve asked you to.”

“It’s not me that heals.”

“Blame it on God then. Blame a power that isn’t here to fend for Himself. That’s mighty convenient isn’t it? You can work all of this magic and be paraded around on a stage, then when we sit here in the quiet of a cabin without all of the lights and the fanfare, you can’t do it.”

“I tried to heal you in the tent, Riley. I tried.” Her face was pale, colorless.

“No, you really didn’t try. You cried and held my face and said you couldn’t do it. You didn’t visualize it like you do the others.”

“I healed the bird right in front of your eyes.”

“That is an animal. It doesn’t count.”

Joan looked at me, her face hard, her eyes peering through to me. “Riley, what has come over you? I thought you were my friend.”

“And I thought that you loved me.”

“I do love you, as a friend.” She was getting nervous, like a cornered animal.

“As a friend, but that isn’t what I want. I think I love you more than a friend and you don’t love me like that. That is why you can’t heal me.”

Joan was starting to cry now, tears sweeping her pale cheeks. “That isn’t why I can’t heal you. And I do love with a deep love, but it isn’t like that. I don’t know...I am so confused. I thought we had this figured out.”

I didn’t respond then. I looked down at the ovals in front of me, heartbroken.

The next morning, there was a note on Joan’s bed. A small satchel of clothing was missing. In scrawled letters, Joan had written, “I’m sorry to be a burden. They all know where I’m at. I have to go. Thank you for everything. Joan.”

My stomach dropped. I had chased her away with my words, my actions. I still didn’t understand what was going on inside of me, the blend of feelings I had about Joan as a friend, as something more than a friend. It had cost me, though.

Chapter 20

The days stretched on without Joan. I went to our usual spots to find her, but she had hidden well. I went back to my books, back to the routines I had carved out before Joan's appearance. It was a solitary life, but I had called it mine once again. The rains came so constant that it began to flood the valley. Tree limbs were washing downhill and the rivers were full of debris. It was one of the worst summers on record, according to the WCYB weather folks.

Layla's cough seemed to lag on. Momma held Layla gently across her bed. The baby's throat rattled, her lungs swimming in fluid. Momma was trying her best to stay positive, but the baby had been sick for nearly a week now. At times, Layla would alternate between crying until her cheeks were red and swollen or laying so silent and still that Momma would check to see if she was breathing.

Momma stayed up most nights, but over time she began to wear down. I began giving her breaks, rocking Layla in the giant old chair that had been passed down from Pop's grandfather. He had taken a nice slab of wood from the forest and carved it out himself, the spindles rounded and elegant, the high back sweeping across the curtains in the front room of the cabin. There, in the evening glow, Layla struggled to catch her breath. I warmed a bottle by the fireplace, but the milk only provided temporary relief. Layla needed a doctor.

There had been a bad bout of pneumonia going around the valley. Some say the well water was tainted. The previous week, two small children had died of strange symptoms and several were suffocating with pneumonia. The doctor had made several visits to our cabin and diagnosed Layla with "weak lungs." Momma assumed that the doctor was just trying to prevent another steep walk up to our cabin, to which Pop replied, "He will make as many trips as he wants as long as he is getting paid." The sickness continued to worsen until Momma and Pop and

I were all taking around-the-clock shifts caring for Layla. Momma's eyes were red and swollen with fatigue and worry. Pop took a couple of his sick days to sit in and watch Layla. Word had gotten out that no child on the mountain was safe. The constant rains had made the air so damp, and the run-off from the mountain's defunct coal mines so intense, that it choked us all. Now Layla was once again in danger and the family was concerned about her.

The doctor continued to warn us to keep a fire going near the child to dry out her lungs. By the third time to our property, the doctor joked that he was getting quite a workout, although his old Buick usually got him down the county road just fine. The hike wasn't that bad. Still, the tinctures and salves and medicines wouldn't work. With the other deaths due to the damp, Momma was on high alert for promising signs. Yet, Layla would not provide them.

After Momma heard Layla stop breathing, we called and got an ambulance up in the holler. Unfortunately, the ground was too muddy for the ambulance to make it to our home, and they had to turn around. "If you bring her to the bottom of the hill, we can try to reach you."

Momma didn't want to carry her down a steep hill in a torrential downpour. "Can't you do anything to get her to the hospital?" she pleaded.

The paramedic was sympathetic, "Sorry ma'am. If we get stuck, then we can't take her nowhere. We will come back in the morning. Maybe the rain will clear up a bit and we can make it through without sliding down in the holler."

Fair enough, Momma thought. Her only obstacle was to make it until morning. We began our rounds with Layla. Her gentle coughing, the dripping saliva, the desperate whining. We all wanted to give her some relief.

"We can wait it out until morning," Momma had assured us.

It was deep into the night when a knock rang out at the front door. I placed Layla to rest over my shoulder, picked up the baby blanket and stepped close to the door.

“Who it is?” I called. By my estimation, it was at least after midnight and not a keen time for casual visitors.

“It’s me; it’s Joan,” the voice trembled. I recognized it at once.

For a moment, I fought the urge to keep the door shut tight. I could hear her now, pleading with me.

“What do you want?”

“I heard Layla was sick. I overheard some workers talking about your family out in the woods the other day. They said she is bad off.”

“Yes, she is sick. So we can’t have visitors right now.”

“Please Riley. Just trust me. I think I can help her.”

A long pause stretched out between us. I thought then about slamming the door in her face. Then I looked down at Layla. I watched her squirm and struggle in my arms. I knew then that I had to put my pettiness aside. If Joan *could* heal her, I had to give her an opportunity to do it.

I stepped aside and opened the door wide with my free arm. Joan stepped past the threshold and into the quiet house. She looked at me earnestly in the face.

“Can I hold her?”

I hesitated a brief moment, and then placed the baby into her hands. Joan took her and laid her across the shoulder. She patted her on the back. Slowly, Layla began to soothe. Joan rubbed her hand up and down the baby’s back, swaying from one leg to the other as she focused.

Just as she had done under the tent, she took a deep breath and began to move her energy through Layla. Her eyes glazed over, her breathing slowed. The baby took one clear breath, then two.

Layla then cried out, as if her lungs were relieved to finally have a gulp of air. Joan began to pace around the room softly shushing her.

“There you go,” she encouraged. “There you go. Good baby.”

Joan wrapped the baby in her arms and hugged her. Then, determined, she looked at me. She handed Layla back to me. For the first time in several days, the baby was cooing. She was *resting*. I had so much confidence that I laid her down into the tiny crib. There, she went right to sleep without a moment’s hesitation. No doctor, no medicine—but Layla was healed.

Perhaps due to the cry, Momma came out of the bedroom in a ragged housecoat.

“Is everything okay?” she started.

When she turned the corner, she saw me standing with Joan by the front door. Layla was not in my arms.

“Where is Layla?” she began, a flash of panic in her eyes.

“She’s here,” and I gestured toward the crib. Layla was on her back, her arms above her head in full surrender, her legs relaxed. She was perfectly at peace.

“Goodness, Riley. What did you do?”

I glanced toward Joan, whose eyes were shimmering in the candlelight, “I didn’t do anything. The healer did it.”

Momma had crossed the room by then and picked Layla up. She was calm and peaceful and serene. Her chest rose and fell with a tranquility never given by any previous medication. She was finally resting, after a long struggle with unending suffocation and illness.

Joan looked at me and at Momma. She was wearing a long jacket and her hair was disheveled. Her braids were loosening and her hands were scraped from thornbushes.

“Would you like to stay here?” I asked. I wanted to extend the olive branch to her. I had been less than a friend. I had been reckless, angry, petulant.

Joan smiled back, “I appreciate it, but I have a little place up in the forest. It is quiet, and no one will find me out there. If I stay here, they will find me. I know they will. There’s no use in getting you all in trouble on my account. I’ll go.”

Before we could protest, she vanished out the door and into the night. There was a vacancy in the house now. I grimaced at the fact that she would not stay. But the night wasn’t over yet. Less than an hour later, we had another visitor and one that was not so hospitable. The next knock was loud. It rattled the house on its very foundation.

“Joan. Joan, you in there?”

Pop stepped across the living room and came to the door. When he opened it, he found himself looking straight into the face of Brother Mike.

Chapter 21

Brother Mike stood stern as a tree on the porch. “Where is Joan? Give her to me now.”

Pop was taken aback, “I don’t know who you are, mister. But you threaten me one more time and you will meet the end of my rifle.”

Brother Mike pushed past my father, nearly knocking him down. “Where’s the girl at? McCormack told me that she was here. My men said she was spotted on this porch nary an hour ago.” Brother Mike was pointing a shaky finger at Pop’s face, “Now, don’t you lie to me.”

Angered, I spoke up. “Well, she ain’t here anymore. So leave.”

Brother Mike sauntered up to me, smiling, “Hello Riley. I see she hasn’t taken care to heal you yet.”

By then, Momma had noticed commotion at the front door and winded her way through the house, Layla asleep in her arms.

“What’s going on here?”

“I don’t have to answer to nobody, especially you,” Brother Mike spit out.

Pop had about enough. He threaded back through the cabin to retrieve his rifle. Momma spoke up once again, “I don’t know who you are stranger, but no one will talk to me like this in my own house. Get out!”

Brother Mike swirled around. He looked from me to Momma then to Layla. “What are you protecting her for anyway? She’s no good to you. Hell, she can’t even do anything about this boy’s face. The truth is, I need her. I went on down to Morristown to do a revival there and people were lined up all down the street looking to be healed. I told them that the healer was no longer with me. They nearly rioted.”

“So you are just using her to get your crowds?” I asked.

“And your money too,” Momma added with a tone of resentment.

“What does it matter to you what I do with her? I fed her, I clothed her. She shouldn’t be so ungrateful. I gave her a name and a stage to do her healings.”

“Yeah,” I interrupted, “but it isn’t her name or her clothes. It is an act. You’d think a man of the Book would know the difference between a lie and a truth.”

“Who cares if she is wearing different clothes? These people came seeking a healing and they got it. They ain’t comfortable getting it from a girl, so I dressed her up as a boy. It’s the same medicine, just a different flavor. Ain’t nothing wrong with that, in my opinion.”

I was working myself into a rage, “Sure, it don’t mean nothing to you because you ain’t the one being paraded around a bunch of people on stage. You act like you did her a favor.”

Brother Mike shifted his weight back to his heels and laughed. “I did do her a favor. I pulled her up from obscurity, from being poor and hopeless and gave her a purpose. She was just laying hands on kids and chasing away the coup when I found her. Now people are throwing away their crutches and running home. People are going off medications and getting their lives back. I have her a big canvas to do her best work, and what does she do? She tries to out me as a liar and a devil to these kind people who were needing some hope.”

Momma cleared her throat. “Sounds to me like you confused about the difference between you and God. What’s all this talk about you giving her purpose? You’re a flawed man. Don’t you think you are capable of sin like everybody else?”

“Sure, I’m capable. I just don’t do it that often.” Brother Mike had relaxed his grip on the door. He realized then that Joan was not in the house. He had craned his neck this way and that. He saw how small and humble the cabin was, and he knew she wasn’t here.

Just then, Pop was coming back through the house carrying his rifle. Brother Mike grabbed the door and leapt past the threshold onto the slippery grass. He didn't even say bye. He just took off running like the scoundrel he was.

Momma shut the door and exhaled. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that, Riley. He ain't like most good people who are church-going. He's a rat."

Pop came through the living room. "Where's that bastard at? I was coming to set him straight."

But just like that, he vanished from our doorstep. I saw the silhouette of a man tilted toward the wind, running in his fancy clothes. He took off toward the north, toward the forest. Someone had told him that she might be in the forest, squatting in her hut. I wondered if I should warn her, send some kind of letter or find her myself. But something kept me here, at home, helping Pop to protect my family. I knew that it was selfish of me. If I was a true friend, I would have waited until later in the evening and took off to find her.

Hindsight is painful like that.

Chapter 22

The next morning, Momma sent the ambulance away. Then word of a Brother Mike's "manhunt" spread like a brisk wind. He had canvased the countryside looking for Joan. I headed out to the meadow with a breeze at my back. When I reached my tree, I found a tiny figure leaned against it dozing in the shadow.

I tried to approach softly, but she stirred when I was near her shoulder. Maybe she sensed my presence. Without turning around, with her eyes fixed on the middle of the meadow, she spoke.

"I thought you might show up here."

"I was worried about you."

"I'm fine, Riley. I can take care of myself."

I walked around to her side, but she refused to meet my eyes. This hurt me worse than anything did at that point in my life. It hurt more that my expulsion from school, from all those evening kickball games, from all of the revelry of my former life. I stood still for a moment, waiting for her to speak. When she continued to stare out ahead, I became resolute. I plopped down in front of her, forcing her to look at me and listen to me. Yet, she looked over my shoulder into some distant vista, some point across the meadow that I could not see or comprehend.

I finally broke the silence, "Did you know Brother Mike is looking for you? He came to the cabin last night in a fury. Said the next town was demanding the healer boy. I was worried that he would find you and hurt you. You need shelter. Anyone can disturb you out here. Why don't you come and live with us for a few weeks? Momma and Pop miss you, and I think Layla does too."

“That’s awful nice of you,” she replied, still looking beyond me, “but I know about Brother Mike already. He came through here calling my name. He basically woke up all creation, stalked through here with a torch and a couple of his henchmen. I was hidden so he never spotted me. Rest easy. He doesn’t know this area very well.”

She was looking down now, mingling her fingers together into fists, clamping her hands gently and watching as the blood ran out of them and turned pale.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry, Joan. I’m sorry that I made you feel uncomfortable. I’m sorry for blaming you the way I am. It wasn’t your fault; it was mine. I chose to react that way because I’m frustrated at how things are. No matter how hard I try, I cannot change my destiny. That is why I was upset. I transferred some of that anger and hatred that I had about myself onto you, and that’s not right. Please say you forgive me. Please. I was a fool.”

Bees buzzed at a nearby bush and birds called overhead. Nature seemed to interrupt the moment, for the best of reasons. She sighed deeply and brought her hands to her face. She rubbed them hard upon her eyes and cheeks and placed her hands firmly back in her lap.

Finally, she whispered, “Of course, I forgive you.”

I wanted my friend back. I wanted the former glory back. Had it only been a few weeks when we first met in this very meadow?

“Where are you staying now?” I struggled to capture her gaze. “I worry about you, especially at night.”

“I built a little fort out of sticks and mud. And I eat berries. Occasionally, I eat an apple or too.”

With this, she shifted her eyes to meet mine, then she giggled. That shattered the tension like glass. I smiled at her and a warmth began to spread between us.

I invited her back to the cabin, but she declined. She was fine in her small hug, a makeshift cabin that would hide her for the time being.

“That way, I don’t put your family in harm’s way. I want you all to be safe too. It’s better that Brother Mike and others assume that I’ve returned to Alabama or that I’ve wandered off into another county. He will leave me alone eventually when he can’t find me. He can’t invest the time to look anyway. He has a busy schedule, healer or no healer. He can’t afford to spend time looking for me.”

This was the truth. To Brother Mike, time was money. He wouldn’t waste too much of either on Joan. Not at this point.

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, just meet me here in the morning.”

I turned to go with a renewed excitement in my lungs, a vibrancy in my limbs. Joan was back.

The rain had ceased for a couple of days, but more rain was in the forecast for the next five days. The rivers were still wild and restless, the mud still gave way under our feet. I walked up to the meadow and saw her, straight and proud, standing by my oak. I greeted her, and she greeted me. There was still a bit of strangeness there, but I made it a point to erode the resentment that I had fostered for her.

From the meadow, Joan took me to see her hut. We wove through the deep brush and came upon a little tent with a small stack of sticks for a fire. A circle of stones revealed a fire pit where Joan cooked little meals for herself. She admitted that the solitude gave her time to think

about her next move. She wanted to heal on a wider scale, but how to do so, especially with Brother Mike interfering, was a mystery.

I noticed too the sounds of a threshing machine off in the distance. And voices. We were precariously close to a farm, to someone else's land.

“Wait, are we close to McCormack's farm?”

Joan shrugged. “Yeah, I just set up in the best place I could. I didn't want to be seen exploring or I would have to move again. Besides, there is a creek that runs by his property where I get my water.”

I began to wonder toward the noise, leaving Joan to stay back. Several paces and several paces more, and I was at the far end of McCormack's farm. There were tall stalks of corn scratching the sky. As I walked the length of the field, I saw McCormack's old pickup, a white truck he had designated for “Farm Use.” By my estimation, it was only about 1000 yards to Joan's hut.

I walked back to see Joan's face washed in concern. She hadn't realized that we were on the west end of McCormack's lot. Technically she was on McCormack's land, which didn't sit well with my conscience. I told her she wasn't too far from the orchard, from where we had stolen the apple earlier. All of these facts left me feeling uneasy. I offered again and again to allow her to stay in our cabin, just temporarily, until the heat and rain died down, but Joan refused each time. She was ready to be out on her own, to face Brother Mike with all of the bravado she could muster. Her gift made her a necessity, but her liberation had made her a fugitive.

“Do you like it here?”

Joan grinned. “Yeah, I like it. I hear the birds sing to me, I hear the patter of animal feet. The only thing missing is some good books.”

I pointed at her, “I can probably remedy that.”

When I left that evening, I did so with much dis-ease. I felt like she was vulnerable in that copse of trees, land abutting McCormack’s farm with all of his nose, sycophant farmhands. But she had made her choice.

I went to sleep that night with a heavy burden. I pulled the sheets over my body, but I couldn’t shake the desire to shiver in my skin. Joan had once been under my roof, she had slept in her bed, she had been safe within these four walls. But I had pushed her away. I had projected all of my hopes and dreams, all of my inexperience, all of my vulnerabilities, and thrust them all upon her. Joan, by opening up to accept me in a moment when I was utterly disgusted in myself, had taken the burden of loving me when all others my age had thrust me aside, had dismissed me as the kid who was different.

Now as the crickets sang outside my window, I worried about her. I was tempted to crawl out of bed, put on my galoshes, and traverse out into the wet forest. By then, the rain had sprinkled the mountainside with a thin veil of dampness. This rain, mixed with the dew, made the ground difficult to manage. It was the rain that stopped me from rising from my bed.

Yet I thought I had loved her, I had told myself. What was love anyway? Something articulated in novels, something I saw that was subtle and ordinary, like the love between Momma and Pop. But I had disappointed her. Again and again, I had disappointed her. I rose from my bed. It was time to make right what I had sullied, to heal the wounds of our old harms.

Chapter 23

Night fell on hill and the valley. Word spread that Brother Mike was on the hunt for his healer, and the men of the valley had coordinated a search party for nearly three days. His story was simple: his healer had been kidnapped. “The girl,” he had told police, was a poor substitute who was working for the kidnapper. Thus, to find the girl was to locate the kidnapper.

All over the county, the search began. There were multiple knocks on the door, asking if I knew where Joan was. The interrogations began and wouldn’t stop. Some gossip included me as a part of the crime. I was, all over again, pushed to the margins.

For a time, Brother Mike was still convinced that I was lying. He told his men to watch after me, to keep an eye on the “cripple boy.” Unbelievable. Anyone in our house could barely take a step out of the perimeter without hearing a rustling in the trees. The Revival men were stationed outside of my cabin expecting me to lead them straight to Joan. When I could steal an unsupervised moment, I ran to her hut, I told her to make for safer territory. Take a bus and head to Bristol or Roanoke, or even further to a big place such as Knoxville. No one would know her there and she could blend in while establishing a new identity for herself. I suggested that she visit a hospital or a monastery. Someone would open their hearts and doors; someone would take her in. I begged her to please, please leave McCormack’s property and find higher ground. She said she wanted to make like the kingfishers. When I asked her to explain, she merely replied with a simple request: “I need you to get me some Borax.”

Chapter 24

Deep in the night, there was a group of men cursing and sliding in the mud. Their flashlights scanned the hillside, caught reflection in the eyes of skunks and squirrels, and yet never found the young orphan. McCormack had offered a couple of his farmhands to assist in the search. He regretted that he didn't take the "little girl" right then and there from the Suffolk house. McCormack was situated in the group climbing the hillside near McCormack's farm.

"Now, somebody said that they saw a fire here the other night. I'm pretty sure it was her," McCormack told Brother Mike.

"It ain't fire now. I feel it," Brother Mike blurted. "The Spirit is guiding me."

No sooner were those words out of his mouth that his flashlight caught the shadow of a humble collection of sticks in a tent shape.

There it was. Her refuge.

Brother Mike was yelling against the strengthening wind and soft rains. "Joan! Come out. Come out now. If you do, no harm will come to you."

The tent remained dark and echoed Mike's enmity. Only the staccato of rain on the tent tarp responded. In the distance, an owl attempted to call back, but the whole of nature seemed distrustful of Brother Mike and his men. They were strangers, but they were tyrants.

Brother Mike changed his approach, "Joan, you have a gift. And with that gift you have a responsibility to God to use it to the best of your ability. Can you deny others of your gift? Will you choose to be selfish?"

Again, only the wind seemed to whistle in reply. Mike and his men were reaching an impetus. At Mike's request, a man behind him lit a torch.

"I'm asking you one more time, Joan. If you are here, come out and reveal yourself."

With a snap of his head, Brother Mike summoned his men to gather branches and old leaves around the hut. They created a large circle around the tent, the soft *swish* of leaves sweeping the ground. The rain only protruded through a small vent in the limbs, the canopy of branches above absorbed most of the rainwater.

And with that, the men set fire to her tent.

The fire choked and crackled a bit at first, until the slick leaves caught. After a few minutes, despite the timbered roof which shielded most of the rain, the fire chewed and chewed at the ground, then it caught the tent and gnawed at the material. Ravenous, it licked the sides of the tent until it consumed it, until the simple sticks propping it could no longer bear the burden.

Then the fire lit a billowy figure inside what remained of the tent. A gasp went out above the men. Finally, one to Mike's left exclaimed, "I thought you said she wouldn't be in there!"

Another burst out in anger, "I don't want to be no murderer."

Brother Mike raised his hands to calm his crew: "I told you that she wouldn't be in here. Just wait. I don't smell flesh burning, do you? Use your head. She wouldn't have surrendered so easy."

The billowy figure began to rise. It was covered in dark soot and wet leaves, and it began to release curdling screams at the men. One by one, they began to abandon Brother Mike's side until only he was left. The figure had on a long coat on which the flames were slowly crawling up.

"So it is just you and me now," the figure said.

Brother Mike laughed. "Ah, now. I see that you have committed to be a martyr. Good for you. Somebody has to buy those old tales."

Joan's eyes were raging. The fire was slowly, slowly making its way up her legs, but it didn't seem to weary the cloth. "You are not a man of God. You are a liar. You are a thief. You steal from those who have a gift and you exploit them."

While Joan and Brother Mike stood opposite of one another, the infant fire leapt to a few branches outside of the tent's perimeter. It began to slowly grow, insulated by water from the tall oaks. One branch lit up, then another. Soon the area was beginning to grow hot under the heat, the flames climbing the tree bark's vertical rungs. The fragrance of burning oak was unmistakable.

"What do you know, kid? You are just some hillbilly that I found in the backwoods. You don't know anything about God. You don't know anything about *anything*. You find one crippled friend and then you think you have the confidence to overthrow a whole operation. Maybe God should heal your head."

Joan then leapt toward Brother Mike. He darted sideways and she missed and stumbled forward, but his feet were slipping in the mud. Joan's clothing, which had been soaked in Borax all day, was resisting the flames, but it was slowly giving way. Joan's skin began to burn, she was sweating. She was grunting and wheezing, fueled by all the frustration and anger that she had endured over the last few months. Joan noticed that the flames were heavy on her limbs and she was moving slower. Brother Mike was weaving right and left. He now noticed that the fire behind them had been feeding on a diet of branches and leaves in the area. His only reason to stay and not flee was the impending rain that reached him here and there. The moonlight was shrouded in clouds, but a bit of light peeked through. The night sky was like ink dipped in water.

The two struggled in the mud and heat for a few seconds. The flames had crawled up Joan's body and were tickling her sleeves. She was like a savage beast.

But Brother Mike had turned to run. His confidence in the rain had expired, and he was sliding through the mud away from the flaming tent and its fiery climate. Joan gathered the last of her strength and, finding purchase with her boots, attempted to pull Mike back into the area. His clothing was beginning to catch fire, and he was too surprised to put up a fight when he felt a tug behind him. His legs were free from her grasp, but the mud was simply too soft. He was swept into the flames with a scream and the two continued to wrestle on the ashes of the tent. Mike's men were long gone, retreating through the forest.

I only know all of this because I watched it all, at Joan's request.

However, as the flames stretched around them, I called out to Joan. I hoped that her clothes would sustain her, prevent her skin from burning. At one point, both figures disappeared into the smoke, and I called her name again. The fire was now coming through the protected pathways of the woods, making progress toward me and toward McCormack's cornfield. Finally, I turned to go. I had to leave before I was eaten by the flames. I backed away, Joan's name on my lips. When my lungs ran out of oxygen, I left. Tears were streaming down my wrinkled face.

In my peripheral vision, I thought I saw one lone figure standing in the chaos, looking for me, but I ran home to tell Momma and Pop what happened. Pop left to gather men to address the fire, but there was no need. Just a few minutes after I arrived, the tin roof of the cabin was singing with hard rain. *Ping. Ping. Ping.* I hoped that Joan was okay. I hoped that she had survived.

That night was the first time I prayed. I prayed that Joan would be safe and unharmed.

Chapter 25

The next morning, the hillside was covered with police and first responders. The fire had torn through about two acres of land, tearing a distinct path from the remnants of the tent toward McCormack's farm. Only a few plants burned that night, and a few trees were wounded by the flames.

Most importantly, there was a body among the ruins.

Mike's men admitted that Brother Mike had started the fire to avoid prosecution. They were allowed to leave and return home to their families. The tent revival could not survive without its patriarch, so the operation was disbanded, and the money earned split between the men.

Some bones remained, a small patch of them, but the intensity of the fire had made it nearly indistinguishable. Rumors began that maybe it was an old drifter, squatting in the forest for protection from the rain. One vibrant lie claimed that it was the "healer boy" who had been captured and burned by his captors. Surprisingly, this was the tale which had the most gusto among the local women's circles, so the stories of the healer proliferated until he was transformed into a local myth. One man even accused Pop of "harboring a fugitive," and accused Joan of killing the boy herself. Pop dismissed it with a wave of his hand and a chuckle.

"That's ridiculous," he said, "Ain't no girl capable of that."

Epilogue

I still heard talk about that healer boy for years later. Meanwhile, I fell in love with the literature that had nourished me so much in my exile. Eventually, I achieved a high school diploma and was accepted into the University of Tennessee to study literature. Despite my lack of formal schooling, I received high marks in college, and stayed in Knoxville until I earned a Ph.D. in literature. I minored in Religious Studies as an undergraduate, and later that interest, planted by a young girl so many years ago, blossomed into my dissertation topic: Religious themes of disfigurement in Victorian Literature. Layla went on to become a nurse at a hospital in Bristol. After she was touched by the healer, she never suffered from anything other than a bad cold the rest of her young life.

I was a long-tenured professor at the university when I saw a news article about the “healer lady.” She was tucked away at a retreat center in the hills of Kentucky. The center assisted rural, impoverished community members who couldn’t afford medical treatment otherwise. When asked for an interview, the “healer,” who was described only as wearing a long, dark robe with a hood, refused a photographer. “No photos,” she told the reporter, “but you can talk up the hospital all you want. God is doing good things here.” When I began to read the article, the mysterious healer talked of her early life in Alabama, of how she traveled up the east coast with the kindness of strangers and used her gift to heal many, many people. No coarse words about Brother Mike or the revival circuit which tried to rob her of her blessings. To date, the healer believes that she had helped nearly 1,000 people in her long life.

The reporter, who stated that the healer had “no name but sister,” lived in a small room in among the hospital’s residents. She wore her hood around patients and guests, a dark, lush cotton cover in an ebony color. The other sisters admitted that she was gregarious and funny and

unwaveringly kind in a casual setting. "You just have to get to know her," one sister exclaimed in the article, "And you will love her instantly." The reporter was fortunate enough to witness one of the healings on an old man with pneumonia:

She laced her fingers together in contemplation. From here, it was easy to see the seam of old scars running along her fingers. She told the man to relax and think of better days ahead. Then she began to work. She placed her hands above his chest and waved them vigorously, as one who plays a violin. The hood concealed her eyes, but the others said that she often closes them in concentration. Then she began to sway and breathe deeply. The old man grunted and wheezed on the table. The healer wove her hands over the body like she was pulling an invisible thread. This continued for a minute or more, until the man coughed. Then he coughed again. "Set him up," one of the nurses said. When the man sat up, he leaned to hack up phlegm. An unpleasant sight, but when he recovered himself, he smiled. "My, do I feel better." He stated. The healer excused herself to the kitchen.

And that was that.

In the blink of an eye, the mysterious healer had moved the obstruction from the man's chest and allowed

him to breathe again. It was a miracle straight out of the Old Testament.

The whole thing made me smile. When I searched for the name of the hospital, I found that there was an address but no phone number. I reached into my desk and grabbed a pen. I pulled out my personal correspondence which bore the title "Dr. Riley Suffolk." I spend a few good moments pondering how I would respond to the article. Then I began my letter.

"Dear Joan..."

Appendix

To all of those with faith, no matter the gender, thank you for your inspiration. A special thank you to writers and poets who nourished me, like C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, Saint Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Joy Davidman, Marilynne Robinson, Wendell Berry, Christian Wiman, Madeline L'Engle, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, John Steinbeck, Elizabeth Goudge, Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Herbert, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, The Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, William Faulker, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Crystal Wilkinson, Silas House, James Baldwin, Esi Edugyan, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Annie Dillard, Winston Graham, Colum McCann, Colm Tóibín, Hilary Mantel, Andrew Miller, John Gardner, Cormac McCarthy, Gabriel Marcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorges Luis Borges, Luis Alberto Urrea, Brandon Sanderson, Patrick Rothfuss, Scott Lynch, Sarah Perry, Sarah Moss, Madeline Miller, Shobha Rao, Hannah Arendt, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath, Natalie Tretheway, Ocean Vuong, Haruki Murikami, Sebastian Berry, Adriana Trigiani, Barbara Kingsolver, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Paul Johnson, Tsugumi Ohba, Yoshitoki Oima, Ichigo Takano, MUTEMATH, London Grammar, Snow Patrol, Mewithoutyou, Khalid, Disclosure, Calvin Harris, Brooke Fraser, Drake, Cardi B., and last but definitely not least, Stan Lee (Excelsior!).

Vita

Crystal Hurd is a poet, researcher, and educator. Her nonfiction has been featured in several academic conferences, as well as appearing in a variety of publications, including *Inklings Forever*, *Mythlore*, and *Englewood Review of Books*. She has a devotional titled *Thirty Days with C.S. Lewis: A Women's Devotional*. She also wrote a chapter on Flora Lewis (the mother of C.S. Lewis) for the publication, *Women and C.S. Lewis: What his life and literature reveal for today's culture*. She currently serves as the Reviews Editor for *Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal*. Her poetry has appeared in *Neon Ink*, *All Nine Muses*, *Wings*, *The Origin Project*, and *The Purpled Nail*. Both her poetry and prose have won awards in the John Fox, Jr. Literary Festival. She works as a high school literature instructor and a mentor teacher for the National Writing Project in southwest Virginia.

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