ABSTRACT

MORGAN, LISA PAIGE. Death by Clogging and Other Stories. (Under the direction of Jill McCorkle.)

This is a collection of Southern alcoholic first ladies, criminal mothers, self-destructive cloggers, disgruntled nuns, self-absorbed businessmen, cross-dressing Vietnam veterans, militant breast feeders, jealous husbands, insomniacs….basically the people we meet in our everyday lives just with a bit of exaggeration Southern-style. The protagonists of this collection of stories are – an alcoholic mayor’s wife exhausted from the phoniness of living in the public eye in small-town America; a mother who makes a difficult and criminal decision to keep her son out of foster care; a young boy sent to live with relatives—one of them a cross-dressing war hero; a blind girl with her eyes set on a dream wedding fit for a princess; a man with an extreme case of insomnia and jealousy; a nun and a business man who makes the mistake of “going Dutch treat”; a self-destructive clogger who learns the dangers of living out the dreams of others; and a soldier burdened by his cowardice.
Death by Clogging and Other Stories

by
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DEDICATION

To my beautiful and wonderful mother Kathryn Morgan

Love, Lisa
BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Morgan was born in 1972 in Raleigh, N.C. to parents James and Kathryn Morgan. She graduated from Sanderson High School in 1990 and in 1996 graduated from N.C. State University with a bachelor of arts in English. She works as a speechwriter for the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Lisa’s articles have appeared in the *N.C. Literary Review*, the *Agricultural Review* and *Great American Agriculture*. Four of Lisa’s short stories have been published in the Raleigh News and Observer.
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OF THE PEOPLE

After the Little Sweethearts Tap Dance Studio trotted by, coiled Shirley Temple curls and all, their dance instructor followed closely with a few steps of his own. “Shuffle off to Buffalo!” the pudgy little man with fey mannerisms cried in a high pitched voice. The grand marshal’s car, an old, candy apple red Plymouth convertible, rolled slowly along Mountcastle Avenue past the tall Confederate Soldier monument on the Capitol grounds. From the corner of the monument to a nearby light pole hung a large banner reading “Pink Hill Veteran’s Day Parade.” Mayor Everett Spencer, his wife Charlotte, and three children rode past the cheering crowd in the convertible.

“Yeah, keep on shufflin’ fairy man,” Reggie, the mayor’s teenage son, said with a wide gray mouth of metal braces, and sucked in the remaining drops of his pink slurpy through a straw. The tap dancer’s clacking heels faded as the car rolled on.

“That’s you in twenty years,” his sister Paine said with a snicker. She languidly twirled her blond hair with her glittery fingernails and worked over a wad of chewing gum in her toothy mouth.

Two baby motorcycles buzzed alongside the mayor’s convertible bearing elderly Shriners lodge members donning wool Moroccan fezes with swinging gold tassels. “No, wait, that’s you in twenty years,” his sister Paine said.

“Well, that’s you in twenty,” Reggie said and pointed to a rotund lady holding a blue ribbon pound cake on the Ladies Auxiliary float. They continued the game pointing out disfigured people and those in various degrees of ugliness.

Mrs. Charlotte Spencer thumbed the flint of a Bic lighter, but it only sparked. A long brown Virginia Slim protruded from an ivory cigarette holder between her scarlet lips.
“Damnit,” she said around the holder. She tapped the black chauffeur on the shoulder and said, “Jackson! Have you a light, dear?”

“Charlotte, please,” Mayor Everett Spencer said and winced. Large placards with the red lettered words “Re-elect Mayor Everett Spencer” hung from both sides of the convertible. Small letters below that read “Veteran’s Day Parade Grand Marshall.”

“Yes, ma’am.” the elderly black driver said and fumbled through his jacket producing a Zippo lighter. He flicked it open as Mrs. Spencer leaned over the front seat to catch the flame on the tip of her Virginia Slim.

“Ah, thank you Jackson,” she said and blew a column of smoke above their heads. She looked at Everett’s weak chin and silvery hair, trying to find the younger man beneath the sagging skin. As Everett waved and smiled to the crowd, he thought about how she had changed from a dashing auburn haired trophy wife to a slightly disheveled and worn trophy wife. The unusually large Jackie O style sunglasses concealed the dark circles and bags beneath her eyes and the growing contempt for Everett and what she referred to as his worthless endeavor—re-election as Mayor of Pink Hill, North Carolina.

“Charlotte, must you be so---?” Mayor Spencer said with an exhausted sigh.

“What’s eating you?” Charlotte snapped and blew smoke through her nostrils.

“You’re such a racist, Mom,” Paine said between bubble gum smacks.

“What’s racist about that?” Charlotte asked.

“Jackson?” the Mayor said with raised eyebrows to add emphasis.

“Well, that’s his name for Pete’s sake!” Charlotte said and slapped the side of the convertible.

“No, it’s a racial epithet, and you know better than to—"
“Actually, sir, it is my name,” Jackson said and tipped his cap.


The mayor and his family rode on in silence, listening to the deafening roar of the crowd to the sides of them. The high school marching band finished playing “America the Beautiful,” and now the ragtag Civil War reenactment band struck up “Dixie.”

“Listen, they’re playing ‘Dixie,’” Charlotte said and began wagging her Virginia Slim like a maestro’s baton. “Away, away, away down south in Dixie. C’mon Jackson, sing with me. ‘Dar’s buckwheat cakes an’ Injun batter, Makes you fat or a little fatter. Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land!’” she sang with gusto. Jackson chuckled as he drove.

“Lord, sir, you’ve got yourself a handful,” he said, chuckling.

Charlotte stood up the car and held on to the back of the front seat. “Onward, Jackson! Onward!” she cried and raised her cigarette holder in the air as though she were leading a cavalry charge.

Paine shielded her face with a cupped hand and said, “Oh, my God. This is sooo embarrassing.”

Mayor Spencer leaned over the front seat and whispered to Jackson in a confidential tone, “I apologize for my wife’s behavior… I think she might be…”

“In her cups?” Jackson offered.

“Yes,” Everett said with a flush filling his face.

“So sorry to hear it, sir,” Jackson said and put on his serious face, jutting out his strong chin as he drove past the Holy Cross Baptist School. School children waved from the side of the road. They sang “Onward Christian Soldiers” and held a banner reading “Read for Jesus Read-a-thon.”
“Look at those poor little waifs,” Charlotte said with a sigh. She had now settled back in her seat and lit a fresh cigarette.

“They’re not orphans, Mom,” Paine said and rolled her eyes.

“No, they’re Baptists,” Charlotte said in a flat voice and drew heavily on her cigarette. The convertible rattled over a pothole, shaking its contents. “Hey, easy, Jackson. Easy. This isn’t the honey wagon, you know.”

“Charlotte…” Everett said and drew in a deep breath. “Onward Christian Soldiers” faded now in the roar of the surrounding crowd.

“No offense, Jackson,” she added.

“No offense taken, ma’am,” Jackson said.

“See that’s what I like about you and your people – that laid back no offense attitude,” she said.

“Charlotte…” Everett kneaded his brow with thumb and forefinger.

“There you go again, Mom,” Paine said and shook her head.

Worth, their youngest, a boy of 5, sat in the passenger seat beside the driver, clutching a Spiderman comic book. He wore a tweed suit and a red bow tie. His Hush Puppies dangled off the edge of the car seat.

“Worth, turn around,” Charlotte said, and with that turned him around herself. She inspected his shirt and tie, noticing several buttons undone. “Not again. What did I tell you about wearing that silly shirt?” she said and opened it to reveal a blue Superman “S” t-shirt beneath the white dress shirt. He stared at her blankly as she buttoned his shirt up to the collar and tightened his bow tie. She handled him like a doll, turning him around, straightening his shirt and tucking it in. “There, now you look presentable.”
His older brother Reggie watched the baton twirlers and with his finger thumped the tiny rubber bands stretched between his braces. The blue headband affixed to his teeth pushed his red hair up in a pronounced cowlick. Occasionally, he slurped back drool that collected in the pockets of his cheeks.

“That thing makes you look like a total retard,” Paine said and snapped Reggie’s head band.

“Ahhh! You bitch! That hurts!” Reggie said and raised a fist at his sister.

“Children, wave…and smile,” Charlotte said and gave the regal wave to the crowd. Paine waved her whole arm enthusiastically, and Reggie crossed his arms.

“No, sweetheart, like this. Like a lady,” Charlotte said and waved her cupped palm like the Queen of England. Paine followed suit, and so did Worth. Paine told him he was gay, gay for life. Worth lowered his hand and looked down his shirt at the Superman “S” on his t-shirt.

Jackson gripped the steering wheel with his large gloved hands and leaned over to the child “You ain’t gay, son.” Worth blinked understanding and laid his comic book open across his lap.

“Don’t bother talking to him. He’s mute,” Paine said.

“Nah, ah. I thought they said he was artistic,” Reggie sneered.

“Autistic,” Everett corrected.

The old black man squinted at the tiny boy beside him. Worth flipped the comic book pages over and over and back again moving his lips as though he were reading. Jackson turned his eyes back to the road stretched ahead of them flanked by girl scouts, church bake-off contestants, policemen, and other folk of Pink Hill.
“How far is it now? The cemetery?” the First Lady said as the convertible Plymouth pulled away from the Capitol Building and down the main strip of town.

“A few more blocks, ma’am. Just after Woolworth’s,” Jackson said and watched her scowling at the crowd from behind her unusually large sunglasses.

“Well, let’s hope they don’t take forever to present colors, or have one of those long winded reverends officiating over the ceremony,” she said.

“We’re here to give our respects. Now don’t you mess this up for me like you did the Lactation Awareness social,” Everett warned.

“How was I supposed to know a bunch of topless tramps in the parlor was one of your so called socials? I call it like I see ‘em, and I saw a room full of tits,” she said releasing tiny droplets of spit as she emphasized the word “tits.”

“Oh, God, you mean that time when she cussed out that group La Leche?” Paine said from the backseat and followed up with a giggle. “That was sooo embarrassing, Mom.”

“La Leche…” Charlotte said curling her lips around each syllable and simmering in the memory of the event. “A bunch of militant breast feeders with no modesty at all. I’m sorry, but that may be just fine in some ungodly place like Chapel Hill, but in Pink Hill… Well, that’s just common if you ask me,” she said and settled back in her seat.

“This man laid down his life for our country, the least you could do is be sober or at least pretend to be for an hour,” Everett said and grinned and waved at the passing crowd.

“For our freedom and –“

“Oh blah, blah, blah, save it for the stump, John Q. Public,” she said and blew a stream of smoke through her nostrils. “You’re so of the people… So transparent.”
“Well, I’m sorry you feel that way,” Everett said still grinning and waving to the crowd.

“Paine, wave for me. My arm’s tired,” she said and applied a fresh coat of lipstick to her mouth.

“He’s Pink Hill’s unknown soldier, so you better act like you’ve just lost your best friend,” Everett mumbled to her.

“I did…” she said beneath her breath and stared at the smiling faces of the crowd. They passed a group of people holding Re-elect Spencer signs with red hearts cut from construction paper glued to one of the posters. “How quaint,” she said.

“Are you drunk?” Everett leaned over and sniffed his wife’s lips. “Is that alcohol I smell on you?” Everett asked and took a closer sniff. She blew a slow and deliberate stream of cigarette smoke in his face.

“You promised, Charlotte,” Everett said.

“Oh, lighten up, Everett. You’re such a bore. That’s just what this town needs… another bore,” she said and wagged her cigarette at him.

“Put that out,” he said. And she did… on the back of the front seat, leaving a seared streak on the red leather. Worth leaned over the seat fingerling the burned upholstery.

“You still love me, don’t cha, Worth, honey? Don’t cha?” she said and patted the boy’s soft cheek. He stared at Charlotte and after a while it unnerved her. “Sit back down,” she said and watched the tombstones rise over the hill as they approached the cemetery.

At the cemetery, the Daughters of the American Revolution President Mrs. Nan Pippin and the grand old DAR matrons greeted Charlotte with air kisses and “dahlin’s” while the military dignitaries greeted Everett with salutes and hearty handshakes.
After a rapid succession of air kisses and superficial compliments, Charlotte emerged from the perfume cauldron mumbling “Those bitches.” Worth followed her every teetering step, silent and vigilant in case she should fall. She stood beside Everett on a makeshift stage set in the middle of the cemetery. Red, white, and blue ribbons and several red Chinese lanterns hung over the stage. Charlotte leaned on her husband’s arm with one hand supporting herself against the podium. Behind her Jackie O sunglasses, her eyes glassed over and the lids grew heavy. She smacked her lips occasionally hoping to taste the ghost of whiskey from that morning in the crevices of her ruby red lips. A small hand brushed against her thigh. She looked down to see Worth leaning against her like a stint holding a broken telephone pole. She gave him the “shh” sign and brushed his hair with her hand.

The wreath laying ceremony was preceded by a speech from a local colonel and a six gun salute from the local chapter of the National Guard, after which Everett and Charlotte walked arm in arm to the gravesite of Pink Hill’s unknown soldier. They carried a red, white, and blue carnation wreath and set it before the tall white tombstone. One lone Marine played “Taps” on a bugle and all stood at attention as Everett laid the wreathe on the tombstone. Charlotte stumbled, but caught her balance. The color from her face drained instantly, and she hugged her belly.

“Oh, God, Everett. I’m going down,” she said and then reared back her head and spewed forth an arc of what looked like vegetable soup over the tombstone and wreath.

“I knew it. Damnit. You couldn’t hold out just another second before making an ass out of me,” Everett said in a hushed tone.

“Well, I can’t help it if I’m sick!” she hollered and wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her red suit.
As the concerned crowd closed in, Everett fended them off with apologetic excuses.

“Oh, is she all right?” Mrs. Nan Pippin asked with her white gloved hands clasped together.

“I think so. She’s just…just…” Everett puckered his mouth, rose to his feet, and walked away, leaving Charlotte kneeling behind the tombstone. Worth placed his small hand on his mother’s shoulder and gave her the “shhh” sign. The Marine continued playing “Taps.”

“Looks like you could use a hand there, Mrs. Spencer,” a deep voice said from behind them. They looked up at Jackson’s long face shadowed by the bill of his chauffeur cap. He removed it and offered her his arm which she took and leaned on as he guided her up to her feet and across the lawn to the car.

The crowd began to murmur with gossipy whispers and a few guffaws broke the silent hush that had fallen all.

“Isn’t it a pity,” an old woman with dark-rimmed glasses said and shook her head. “When a man’s a lush it’s bad, but when a woman’s a lush, well, it’s a shame.”

Charlotte climbed into the backseat of the now covered convertible with Worth and she tugged on Jackson’s sleeve as he closed them in. “They just don’t understand people like you and me,” she said in a slurred voice.

“Watch your feet now, ma’am. This is a heavy door,” Jackson said and tipped his cap. Charlotte pulled her foot inside the car and straightened her sunglasses. She held her chin high again, forgetting to wipe away the specks of vomit from the corner of her ruby lips.

“Onward, Jackson. Onward,” she said in a flat voice, but playfully waved her cigarette holder in the air. Jackson closed the heavy door, shutting out the hum of gossip.
outside the car. The townspeople leered at them as the car passed. Paine and Reggie stood with their father near the stage watching as the car left the cemetery.
A DANDELION WISH

The door rattled with each heavy knuckled knock. Vernie adjusted and smoothed her cotton dress and primped in the mirror before opening the door. An elderly man wearing a brown suit, wide orange striped tie, and a slouch hat stared back at her through the steel mesh of the screendoor. “Morning, Mrs. Harper,” he said in a droll funeral home sounding voice. “If I could have a second of your time.”

Vernie’s small son Joel leaned in the doorway watching his mother and Mr. Dowdy discuss issues of rent and eviction on the front porch. His mother’s voice grew louder and more frantic as she tried to explain why the rent was late. “If you could just extend us another month, I’m sure my sister down in Hope Springs could wire us the money,” she said.

“You could get people to take care of that boy of yours. You know they do have services for that… For children of the destitute,” Mr. Dowdy said, stroking the gobbler beneath his chin. Vernie crossed her arms over her flat breasts. “I think we’ve had enough conversation for today, Mr. Dowdy. Now, if you’ll excuse me, my son and I were trying to finish our breakfast,” she said and disappeared inside the house with a rattling slap of the screendoor. Strips of newspaper covering the gaps in the wall boards fluttered: a photograph of grinning Harry Truman headlined with news of the atom bomb and a tattered advertisement for an upcoming Frank Sinatra concert.

She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, allowing a small whimper to escape her lips, but then she straightened up when she noticed the boy staring. “What kind of services is he talking about, Mama?” the boy asked.
“Says I ought to ship you off to some home. Well, he’s got some nerve, hasn’t he?” she said and puffed about the room, pacing and mumbling to herself. “No one’s shipping you off, honey. Understand?”

He nodded, and watched his mother pin a sun hat to her auburn hair and slip on her white gloves with lacey trim. She always wore white gloves, not just on Sundays. “C’mon, we’ve got to walk this one out,” she said and led him by the hand outside and down a worn path off the main road deep into the woods. It was their favorite walking path, carpeted in red clay and framed in honeysuckle and ferns. Joel picked a dandelion seed puff and handed it to his mother. “Make a dandelion wish,” he said.

“Well, I suppose it couldn’t hurt,” she said and blew the dandelion puff hard, sending a flurry of fuzzy seed into the air. As the cloud of fuzz cleared, Vernie saw something in the distance, something large and white. Joel followed his mother’s gaze to a rusty white automobile half covered in leaves a few feet in the distance. Vernie’s mind and mouth worked furiously as she thought out loud of all the possibilities. “If only we had a car…” she said in a slight gasp.

Joel followed her to the rusty car, a large white Ford Fairlane about 1955. She brushed away the leaves covering the windshield and peered inside the cavernous cab. “It’s so dirty, I can’t see a thing,” she said and jiggled the door handle. Finally it gave way, and with the opening of the door, the car emitted a rush of horrible, rancid air. The boy stumbled back, and Vernie covered her nose and mouth. “What on earth is that?”

She pulled the door back wider. “Joel, honey, step back real far. You hear?” Her voice had become shaky, and she winced at what she saw inside the car.
“Oh, my word,” she whispered. Across the front seat lay a suited up skeleton with a rusty metal watch dangling from the arm bone. Some of the skin and tissue were still intact, but for the most part it was bones.

“What is it, Mama?” Joel asked.

“I think it may be… or was a person,” she said.

Joel nudged past his mother to get a closer look. “A body,” he said.

Vernie grabbed Joel by the shoulders and shook her finger in his face. “Now, don’t you say a word of this to your friends. You hear?”

Joel nodded and stepped back allowing his mother to walk around the car. She brushed more leaves off the trunk and hood. She kicked one of the tires and pushed another with her gloved hand.

“Mama, the key’s still in the hole!” Joel called from the driver’s side.

“Oh, I wonder…,” she said and leaned over the body, looking at the rusty key protruding from the ignition.

“How do you think he died?” the boy asked, scratching his blond head.

“I don’t know, exactly. But it’s a shame,” she said and gently nudged the skeleton away from the steering wheel. It collapsed across the front seat, and Vernie carefully reached over it to turn the ignition key. The engine hesitated, but on the second try turned over purring alive. Black smoke belched in a steady stream from the exhaust pipes. As the Ford chugged in place, Vernie walked around it again, caressing its fins, brushing away more leaves.

“N-ew J-er-sey,” Joel sounded out as he ran his finger across the license plate.

“Where’s that?” he asked squinting up at her.
“Somewhere up North.”

“Can we keep it, Mama?” Joel asked bouncing up on his feet.

Vernie waved away a puff of black smoke and thought on it for a moment. “We sure could use it.”

“We wouldn’t have to walk to the store no more,” Joel said and smiled.

“And I could take that job in Mebane,” Vernie said and shared a grin with her son.

“And-- and you could drive me to school.” Joel grinned.

“And we wouldn’t have to walk to church anymore,” she said sharing the enthusiasm with her son.

“And I wouldn’t have to be sent away, Mama,” Joel said. Their smiles faded in unison.

“It’d be a real God-send, that’s for sure,” Vernie said and patted the hood of the car.

“Finders keepers, losers weepers, right Mama?” Joel said.

Vernie nibbled on her bottom lip. “Joel, honey, hand me that stick over there. The big one.”

The boy dutifully brought his mother the broken branch. “Here, hold my purse,” she said and handed him the pearl beaded purse. Vernie took the stick and poked it around inside the car, lifting back the flap of the body’s jacket. The shirt fabric had rotted to a thin dry sheath, which she tugged away to reveal a raw, brown tissue covering the rib cage.

“Ew, Mama.” Joel wrinkled his nose.

“Joel, stay back,” she ordered and poked at the body with the stick.
The skin tissue was sticky and tough like beef jerky, but it gave way when Vernie plunged the stick deep between two ribs, used the stick like a hook, and dragged the body out of the car and into the leaves.

“Help me cover this poor man up,” she said and they poured handfuls of dead leaves over the body. Vernie took an old newspaper from the passenger side and used it as a brush, cleaning debris from the front seat. The backseat was untouched except for old Styrofoam cups, a scattered deck of cards, and a True Detective magazine. She sat down in the driver’s seat and looked over the steering wheel at the forest ahead of her.

“Mama, look!” Joel said and held up a crumpled dollar bill.

“Put that down. It could be diseased,” she said. “Now, please get in the car.”

Joel stood back and looked at the car and then at his mother. “Well? What’re you waiting for? Get in the backseat.”

Joel hesitated and just stood there staring at the car and then at the body in the leaves.

“What about the ghost?” he asked and dropped the crumpled dollar on the mound of leaves.

Vernie sighed. “There’s no such thing as ghosts,” she said with exhaustion.

“How about the Holy Ghost?” Joel asked.

“Joel, honey, get in the car,” she said in a flat tone. And Joel did so without a word until they drove out of the woods and onto the main road. They rolled down the windows and listened as the tires hummed on the asphalt. Joel leaned out the window letting the wind blow his blond hair. “Faster, Mama!” he said. Vernie pressed the accelerator, and they both giggled as they raced past a jury of dull-eyed cows.
UNCLE FRANK

Simon held his little sister’s hand. They waited at the bus depot with small cardboard suitcases. Catherine held a one-eyed doll, and Simon held an old photograph which he stared at from time to time.

Huge buses roared and hissed in the stalls and waves of heat drifted off their grills. Catherine stood closer to Simon and squeezed his hand. “It’s okay,” he said. “Aunt Beverly will be here soon.”

Aunt Beverly, a heavy-set woman, waddled up to them and squatted down to their eye level. “Y’all remember me? Beverly? Last time I seen y’all, you were just yay high,” she said and measured out two feet with her big paw.

“Sorry about your momma and daddy. Such a shame…the accident and all. Too young to lose your parents, that’s for sure. I was just 11 when I lost my daddy—,” Aunt Beverly said and scratched her hammy arm. The children climbed into Beverly’s pickup truck and sat silent, looking straight ahead. Catherine’s lower lip began to quiver, and she hugged the doll closer to her chest. “Sorry about that,” Aunt Beverly said and started the engine.

“It’s okay. She’s a cry baby,” Simon said and pushed his glasses back on his nose.

“Am not,” Catherine said in a whispering hiss.

As the truck jostled over pits in the road, Aunt Beverly tried to make small talk.

“You like dogs?” she asked in baby talk.

“Yes,” Catherine answered.

“Do you like cocker spaniels?”

“Uh, huh,” Catherine said and so went the conversation.
Simon stared at the dog-eared photo. It was of a rugged-looking soldier with a Jesus head tattoo on his upper arm.

“You like school, Simon?” Aunt Beverly asked.

“No,” Simon said and stared at the cow pastures flying past the window.

“Your daddy always said you liked numbers.”

“No. Me and daddy played the numbers,” he said. “It’s a game we played at the drug store.”

“Oh,” she said and drove in silence for a moment. She jerked the gears and pulled the truck up to a clapboard farm house.

The children got out and wandered around. Simon surveyed the land through his spectacles. The cows looked back with heavy-lidded gazes, occasionally swatting at flies with their thick tails. A tractor motor rattled in the distance.

“Your grandmother’s waiting in the house to see you.”

“Where’s Uncle Frank?” Simon asked.

Beverly ruffled his hair and said, “Out in the field.”

Beverly rushed the children inside to an elderly lady seated in a faded armchair.

Aunt Beverly leaned over and yelled in the old lady’s hairy ear, “Momma? Got someone for you to meet.”

Grandma blinked as though waking from a nap. She leaned in close to inspect the children’s faces. “They ain’t my children,” she yelled back.


“Oh,” the grandmother said and turned her attention back to the screaming television.
Outside a tractor roared and a plume of dust drifted across the front yard. Simon leaned on the window sill and squinted through the curtain of dust. “That Uncle Frank?” he asked. Aunt Beverly ushered him away from the window.

“But I wanna meet Uncle Frank,” Simon said and held up the photograph.

Someone killed the tractor engine outside, and a dog barked. “Well, I guess this is as good a time as any,” she said and led the children outside. They shielded their eyes from the sun and looked up at a large figure straddling a bleached green tractor like a general on his stallion.

“Dinner’s about ready,” she said and stomped back to the house.

The man leaned over the steering wheel and for the first time the children saw his face; it was a large meaty face with red leathery skin. Crow’s-feet winged out from the corners of his eyes and a scar ran down the length one side of his face. The scar was raised like a freshly dug grave.

Frank climbed down from the tractor and brushed himself off. Both children dropped their mouths in astonishment at what they saw. Simon was especially surprised. This was not the same man in the photo. Surely it was not? Simon did a double-take between man and photo, but the Jesus head tattoo was the telling sign. It was the same Sgt. Major Frank Hill he had heard about all his short life—the Vietnam vet, the Purple Heart soldier. Frank stood before them wearing a frilly yellow and hot pink swirl dress, the kind you see at square dances.

“Good to meet ya,” Frank said and held out his calloused hand. Simon reluctantly shook hands.
“You got a straw in your dress,” Catherine said flatly and picked a piece of hay from the frilly pleats.

“Thanks,” he grunted and entered the house. The children followed, all the while, examining the fluffy dress and torn stockings.

Beverly fried chicken at the stove, and the grandmother sat at the dinner table chomping on a piece of celery. She puckered her face when Frank entered the room.

“Have they met him?” the grandmother asked.

“Uh, huh,” Beverly said and clanged out the dinner plates.

“Y’all pull up a chair,” Frank said to the children.

The dinner was a quiet one. Forks clinked against plates, mouths chewed, and the grandmother smacked her dentures. After a while, the grandmother asked, “Have you decided what you’re going to be this week? A man or a woman?”

No answer.

“You’re going to confuse these children, you know. Look at ‘em. They’re already confused,” she said and chomped on more celery.

The children looked at each other, searching for signs of confusion. “What did she say?” Catherine asked. Simon shrugged his shoulders.

After dinner, Simon stood alone in the hallway. Framed pictures lined the walls as well as certificates and a case of military medals.

Simon looked at them all one by one. There was a photograph of a young soldier shaking hands with a general and another of the young soldier with a young and slender Beverly leaving a church under a blizzard of confetti.
“Don’t look at them too long. They don’t mean anything,” a gruff voice said. Simon looked up at Frank’s painted face.

“Is that really you, Uncle Frank?” Simon asked and pointed to a photo. In the photo, the shirtless soldier sat in a boat, cradling a machine gun.

“Nah, that ain’t me. Ain’t me a’tall,” he said.

Simon pushed his glasses up on his nose and squinted at the photograph. “But it says your name right here.”

Frank’s eyes moistened a little.

“Did you kill anybody with that gun?” Simon asked and pointed to the machine gun photo.

Frank blinked back tears. The mascara smeared to the outer corners of his eyes, giving him a raccoon look.

The game show in the other room blasted with the upbeat voice of a game show host. “I wish she’d turn that thing down,” Frank muttered and walked away and up the darkened stairway. Simon listened as Frank’s heavy boots plodded on the floor above him. The ceiling boards whined.

After a few minutes of studying the war pictures and tracing the medals with his finger, Simon worked up enough nerve to venture up the stairway to the dark hallway. The remnants of the afternoon sunlight faded now in a yellow haze through the hallway window. Outside the green fields now looked black and the sky was an indigo blue with dark gray splotches across its expanse.

Downstairs he could hear Catherine singing “Itsy Bitsy Spider” with Aunt Beverly and the grandmother mumbling along.
Simon ran his hand along the banister as he walked closer toward the slightly opened door at the end of the hallway. Music tinkled from the room ahead, and it grew louder with each step. He peered through the crevice in the door and lingered there watching.

On the record player, a thick vinyl record wobbled as the needle hovered and hissed. Kate Smith’s heavy voice poured from the tinny speaker singing “God Bless America.”

Frank sat at a lady’s marble-top dresser before a dust-stained mirror. A thin crack ran diagonal across the glass slightly obscuring Frank’s image. A cigarette burned among the company of stale ones in a round green glass ashtray on a brass stand. Frank picked up the cigarette occasionally sucking in a lungful of smoke, holding it and then allowing it to seep through his ruby red-stained lips. The stubble around his mouth bristled through the thick layer of pancake powder foundation he applied with a large powder puff.

Simon continued to watch and this time stepped into the room; still undetected by Frank who had now unlatched a large pink makeup kit with fold-out trays. In each compartment, lay brushes, compacts, shadow palettes and other instruments for beauty. The scratched-up image of a ballerina was stenciled on the outside of the kit. Frank’s hairy back showed through the corset laces strapped loosely across his large back. He reached for a false eyelash. They lay in the trays like spiders assorted by size and volume.

“Why do you wear a dress?” Simon asked, now standing behind Frank watching him through the reflection in the mirror.

“Because I want to,” Frank said and pasted the false eyelash to his lid.

Simon studied the puffy skirt and asked, “But why?”

“I dunno. Just do,” Frank said and blinked his newly-fastened eyelash making sure it was secured to the lid.
Simon moved to the dresser top and picked up an eyelash, holding it up to the sunlight for inspection. “Did you shoot ‘em in the head?”

“Shot ‘em everywhere,” Frank said. The record playing in the background continued to belt out “God Bless America.”

“Was there blood everywhere?” Simon asked.

“Yeah. And parts all over the place.”

Simon pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Parts?”

He thought it may have looked like a dead squirrel. He thought about an earthworm impaled on a fishing hook. Then he thought about the accident. The babysitter had driven him and Catherine to the scene, but the patrolman told them to stay on an embankment away from the car. He heard the other patrolmen and a medic talking about “parts.”

“Why’d they give you medals, then?” Simon asked, leaning on the marble dresser top, studying Frank’s heavily painted face in the mirror’s reflection.

“That’s a good question…Hand me those pumps over there,” he said and pointed to a pair of scarred-up fuchsia high heels in the corner. Simon handed him the shoes, and as Frank strapped them on his calloused feet.

“Do you think they went to heaven?” Simon asked.

Frank’s cigarette flicked up and down in his lips as he spoke. “I dunno. Suppose they went to their own kind of heaven for gooks.”

“Gooks?”

“Never mind,” Frank said and straightened his back. “Tie me up in back,” he said gesturing to the loosened laces of his corset. “Just like you’re tying your shoes,” Frank said. Simon pulled the strings tight.
“Do you think my mom and dad went there, too?”

Frank looked down at the boy’s questioning face and heaved a sigh. He crushed out his cigarette and dropped it on the mound of others in the ashtray.

“Yeah.”

“With the gooks?” Simon asked.

“Do you always ask so many questions?” Frank asked and winced.

Simon shrugged.

Frank put on a blond Marilyn Monroe-style wig, tucking his natural hair beneath the wig cap. He turned his head from side to side, inspecting it in the mirror. He pursed his lips a little. Simon leaned on the dresser counter and stared intently at Frank’s face in the mirror.

“What’s it like in Heaven?” Simon asked.

Frank’s jaw marbled and his lips turned into a thin firm line but then relaxed them again and he faced the boy this time.

“When you go to Heaven and you stand before God, you get a whole review of your life. Like a movie picture, ya know? It’s like watching a long home movie. And you get all the questions you ever had about people and stuff answered,” Frank said.

“You mean like if UFOs are real?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Frank continued. “And after that you know about everything that ever happened and why. All the good and bad.”

“And then what happens?”

“I dunno. I woke up after that with this,” Frank said and hitched up his skirt to show a large chunk of his thigh missing. The skin was sunk in where muscle and tissue should have been. “They had to rebuild this leg with bolts inside.”
Simon edged back and looked at the zipper scar that ran up Frank’s leg.

“Tighten me up more in back. I’m gonna bust outta this thing if it’s too loose,” Frank said and gestured again to the corset laces. After the boy attempted to tug on the laces, Frank stood up and said, “Never mind. Bev can do it. C’mon, let’s go. Piece Goods closes earlier than most stores.” Frank’s heels clicked on the hardwood floors and down the steps.
“Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of person.” Acts 10:34

Joel Entwistle, a tall, lanky young man, guided the blind girl to a decaying tree stump behind the gas station. She was too old to be a girl, but too young to be a woman. Her face was pale and freckled, and her eyes stayed upturned most of the time, but when she was excited they rolled around in their sockets fiercely. Her blonde eyelashes and brows gave her a pale, faceless look like a rag doll.

“Do you remember this stump, Louise?”

She felt along its ragged edges and said, “Vaguely.”

“You don’t?” Joel winced.

“Not really. Why? Should I?”

“It’s where we first met,” he said and looked a bit crestfallen.

“No, it wasn’t. I met you on a milk crate,” she said. “That patrolman left me waiting there near the Minuteman grocery, remember?”

“I coulda sworn…” Joel said and scratched his ropey brown hair. “Oh well, it don’t matter,” he said and set out the two hot dogs in their white wrappers on the stump’s table top.

“I got your favorite. Chili, ketchup, and onions,” he said and handed her the hotdog.

After a few bites, she set the food down, and felt around with her hands. “Where’s my cane?”

“Here,” he said and handed her a pool cue.

“What’s this?” she asked and began feeling the length of the cue. “What happened to my cane?”
“I…I sold it,” he said and took the cue and tapped the dirt. “It does the trick. Just as good.”

“I can’t believe you sold my cane. My daddy gave me that cane,” she said and crossed her arms.

“Yeah, right before they abandoned you at that rest stop in Ramseur,” he said. She said nothing and scowled behind the mess of freckles.

“Why do you always gotta throw that in my face?” she snapped.

“I ain’t throwing nothing. It’s the gospel truth,” he said.

Louise turned away, and he wrapped his arm around her boney shoulder, caressing it with his finger. “But you got me now, and I ain’t going nowhere.”

A hint of a smile tickled her lips, and he kissed them. Her milky blue eyes rolled wildly, and he watched them as he kissed her. She pulled back and said, “Stop looking at them.”

“I ain’t looking,” he said and let go of her.

“Uh, huh. I can tell. Your eyes are hot on my skin when they’re open.”

“Okay, enough of that then. Tell me what you think, but wait till after I’m finished,” he said and jumped up on the tree stump. From a satchel of cracked leather, he pulled a worn Bible. Its leaves fluttered in the breeze as he held it up in the air and yelled, “Give us help from trouble; for vain is the help of man!” He leaned his head back and held his hands outstretched and trembling.

“And give us some gas for the car while you’re at it,” she added. She rubbed her knees and said, “My legs are sore.”
“We’re living by faith, sweetheart,” he said and began thumbing through the pages of his Bible.

“You mean we’re poor,” she said and stubbed the end of the pool cue in the red dirt. While he wailed on about sin, fornication, and wine, she finished eating the hot dog.

“I think you got that one wrong,” she said. And he stopped stone cold mid sentence and lowered his Bible.

“What?” he gasped. Sweat beads rolled down his sideburns and cheek.

“You sure that’s in there?” she asked, scrunching up her face.

“Fornication?”

“No, wine,” she said flatly and crossed her arms.

Joel went on to explain the evils of alcohol and drunkenness.

“Then why’d Jesus turn the water into wine?” she interrupted again, and leaned in for his response.

He searched for an answer.

“That just don’t make any sense,” she said.

“Maybe because it was a wedding party,” he said, grinning.

“I suppose you’re right…” she said and began rocking in place. “Will we have wine at our wedding?”

He dropped his arms in exasperation. “I’d give you the world, Louise, you know that.”

She balled up the hot dog wrapper. “Read the social pages for me, Joel,” she said and shoved the roll of newspaper into his chest. He unfolded the newspaper. Faces of brides large and small stared back with wide expectant smiles, bare shouldered holding bouquets of
pastel roses. In some photos, the groom stood behind the bride with his hands wrapped
around her waist with an unstable grin. Joel read them off one by one and after each she
asked “What’s she look like? Is she a big one?” Joel gave her an inch by inch description of
each bride. “She’s got some hammy shoulders,” he added, and she smiled a little.

“How about the dress? Does it have pearls?” she asked and leaned forward, knotting
her fingers.

“Enough to cover a whale!” Joel said, slapping his knee and letting out a guffaw. But
she did not laugh.

“I like pearls,” she said and fingered a button on her thin cotton dress. The faded
corn blossom print matched her milky blue eyes. She rocked back and forth as Joel read off
more descriptions…

“The bride wore a gown with a sheer lace corset top, strapless drop-waist, white tulle
and lace skirt by Pnina Tornai. The bride carried a bouquet of white roses, freesia,
hydrangea, stephanotis. After the ceremony, the bride and groom were whisked away in a
horse drawn carriage. After the honeymoon, the bride and groom will settle in Turkey, NC
where the groom runs a thriving septic tank business,” Joel read aloud.

“A carriage!” She clapped her hands and gasped. “I want a carriage.”

“Well, the Buick’ll have to do for now,” he said and folded up the newspaper.

“C’mon. We gotta get going if we want to reach Badin by morning.”

In the car, she rolled down the window and leaned her face in the wind letting it
ripple through her stringy red hair.

“I think we got enough to get to Badin,” he said watching the gas tank needle.

“I need to stop, Joel,” she said and twisted her hands in her lap.
“Now?”

“I gotta,” she said and leaned her head against the widow sill.

He pulled into a truck stop and led her to the counter where the clerk handed her a blue plastic paddle with a hole drilled in it and a key attached. “The bathroom’s around back,” the clerk said and went back to watching a small black and white television on the counter.

Joel led her to the bathroom. “I won’t be far. Just going to look at a fishing lure. Okay?” he said. He watched her enter the restroom, and then he hopped into the car.

As a gospel quartet sang “In the Garden” on the radio, Joel thought about the two carat diamond, the flowing gown with cathedral train, the bouquets of roses, and the carriage ride.

He watched from the car as Louise emerged from the restroom and stood on the sidewalk waiting. She stood there awkward and fidgety, turning her head slightly, listening for those stepping around her. Louise craned her neck forward listening for the slap of his worn leather soles, sniffing the air for his scent. It was the most pitiful sight he had ever seen, and he cursed himself for thinking it – for considering it.

Once he got her back in the car and they were a good ways down the road, Joel glanced over at her. She had been silent since they left the truck stop, and her eyes moistened around the rims.

“I was coming back for you, you know,” he said and pinched her elbow.

After a long silence, she said, “I know.”

A deer sprinted out from a patch of corn, and Joel screeched on the brakes, leaving a hiss of tar on the highway as the car swerved. Everything toppled from the backseat into the
floor and the Bible slid across the dashboard onto floorboards. The car settled to a halt on the shoulder as other cars passed. The deer disappeared into the corn.

“You okay?” he asked, still gripping the steering wheel.

“Yeah,” she said and straightened up in the seat, adjusting some fallen strands of her hair.

“The Bible? Where’d it go?”

“I’ll find it. You just drive,” she said and as he drove back onto the highway, she felt along the floor of the car and beneath the seat. Her hand rattled a paper bag, and she felt the contents—cold steel…a hammer… a trigger. She gasped, she sat up and rested her head against the window.

“Well? Did you find it?” Joel asked.

“Nah,” she said. “I’m sure it’s slid to the back.”

“We’re stopping up ahead anyways,” he said. “My brother’s house isn’t too far from here.”

They drove on for a few miles in silence.

“So what kind of place is Badin?” she asked, her hand still caressing the cold barrel of the gun.

He chuckled and said, “One of those towns you could pass by if you sneezed. Small. Not much. They’ve got a Woolworth’s though.”

“This job your brother’s talking about. What kind of job is it really?”

He winced at her. “Just a warehouse job. You know, inventory and stuff.” He rubbed his free hand on the knee of his trousers.

After a couple more miles of silence, she asked, “Why you got a gun?”
“What?”

“The one under the seat.”

He gripped the steering wheel. “For protection. That’s all.”

“What happened to living by faith?” She chewed on her hair.

“Even David had a sling shot, remember?”

“Yeah, but this is a gun,” she said.

“Why you worried, anyway? Don’t you trust me?” He studied her wandering eyes.

“I guess it don’t matter,” she said. “Do they have any dress shops in Badin?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I’ll give you the tour of the town,” he said and they pulled onto the main street which was lined with storefronts of chocolates, electronics, car parts, fishing lures, ladies’ dresses, and jewelry.

The first stop was the “Ever After Bridal” dress shop, and in the window stood a mannequin wearing a flowing white bridal gown. “Looks like this is your kind of store, all right,” Joel said and guided her inside. The bell above the door tinkled as they entered the store. Women held up dresses to themselves in the mirror, and others gossiped as they picked out dress patterns and materials.

“Oh, you poor dear,” a heavily made-up saleswoman said and placed her finely manicured hand on Louise’s shoulder. “Looking for a new dress?”

Louise smiled. “Yes, my fiancé says the dress in the window is stunning.”

The saleswoman noted the pool cue tapping against the marble floor. “Yes, well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Bridal gowns you know run very high these days,” she said and gave a quick sales smile. She eyed a new customer over the girl’s shoulder.
“Perhaps you’d like to look at a nice Sunday dress. Good for all occasions, you know.”

“No,” Louise said. “The one in the window…please.”

“I’m sorry, but those are made to order. The display model is simply for…display,” the saleswoman said and left them standing in the center of the store among bats of material.

At a jewelry store just two doors down, Joel led Louise to the glassed-in counter. Diamond rings and necklaces glittered in the display case. She felt the warm glass with her palm and asked him what everything looked like, how big were the diamonds, what kind of cut they were. The owner watched them with a puzzled look before his climbed off his leather covered stool and asked if they needed help.

“No, sir, just looking,” Joel said.

“What about the princess-cut diamond?” Louisa asked.

The jeweler’s eyebrows lifted and he leaned on the counter, staring at her with interest. “Yes, they’re all the rage this year among new brides.” He proceeded to pull out several engagement rings and lay them on a black velvet cloth.

“You know what they say…Diamonds are a girl’s best friend,” the jeweler said as she tried one on. She held it up to Joel and said, “What do you think?”

“I think it’s a little steep,” Joel said. “C’mon, we gotta get to my brother’s.” Joel tugged on her elbow. She handed the ring back to the jeweler and smiled. “Princess-cut, right?”

“You got it, princess,” the jeweler said.

Joel guided her toward the door. “I’m gonna buy you a nice dress. A respectable one, you’ll see.”
The local GoodWill store was a thriving establishment just three doors down from the uptown bridal shop. Inside, women old and young foraged through shopping carts carrying mounds of used clothing. A black sales lady stood nearby watching them with a look of flat disgust on her face. She fisted one hand against her bony hip and held a pencil with the other. “Y’all gotta let me put prices on them things before you can take ‘em,” she said, and shook her head.

Joel flung open the glass doors of the thrift store and said, “Here’s a load of dresses. Even wedding dresses.” He guided her to a rack where three wedding gowns hung, their trains dragging the floor. Large paper tags hung from the necklines. “This one’s a beauty.” Joel handed her a long white gown. “And it’s got those pearly little beads you like.”

She felt along the gown’s lace, satin, and beads. “It is sorta nice,” she said and held it up to herself. The dress, a little wrinkled, fell in gorgeous lochs of satin and was fit for a princess-- save for a melon-sized yellow stain on the front. “How’s it look, Joel?”

“Stunning!” he said with exaggerated hand motions. “Just like the ones in the social pages. She smiled at that. An elderly woman watched from nearby, eavesdropping on the transaction. When Joel stepped away to the men’s coats rack, the elderly woman took the girl by the elbow and whispered, “There’s a terrible stain, dear.”

“Joel!” she yelled over the racks of clothing.

Joel hurried the girl out of the store and down the walkway past the storefronts. “Billy’s expecting us,” he said. She clacked the pool cue in front of her as they walked. “Wait a minute. I just want to feel that dress at Ever After one more time,” she said and stopped.

He tugged on her arm. “You know my brother doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”
“I gotta,” she said. “Please…” He agreed and guided her back to the bridal store. The bell above the door jingled, and the same saleswoman eyed them, but this time with disdain.

“Find anything at GoodWill? I hear they carry a fair assortment of garments,” the saleswoman said with a pinched smile.

“She still wants to see the wedding dress. Just wants to feel of it,” Joel said.

“Like I said before, the window displays are off limits and –“

“I just want to feel of it. That’s all,” Louise interrupted and stepped forward toward the loud scent of *White Shoulder* perfume fuming from the saleswoman.

“How are your hands, dear?” the saleswoman said.

Louise’s face flushed with a surge of fury. She dug inside the deep pocket of her peacoat and pulled out the revolver. Both Joel and the saleswoman stepped back in horror.

“Lead me to it,” Louise ordered, waving the gun in front of her and tilting her head in order to hear their movements.

“Louise! What do ya think you’re doing? My God!” Joel flung up his arms and just as he did, Louise waved the gun his way, but aimed it at the ceiling lights and fired. The industrial fluorescents shattered, and bits of glass rained down on all of them. Joel backed up holding his shaking hands out before him.

“I want the wedding dress in the window, and I want it now!” Louise fired another shot into the ceiling, this time bringing down bits of plaster.

The saleswomen hurried to the display window and peeled the gown from the mannequin’s body. Louise waved the gun in the saleswomen’s direction and listened to them gather up the gown and its cathedral train.
“We’re getting it for her. Can you tell her that?” one of them said to Joel.

“I’m not deaf!” Louise said. “Bring it here,” she said and held out her free hand. A younger saleswoman carried it with caution and draped it over Louise’s arm like she was handing off a newborn baby. Louise held the bundle of gown up to her face and rubbed it against her cheek. “It’s beautiful. Just like the ones in the social pages,” she said softly. Joel stepped forward, and she swung back into defense mode. “Joel?”

“It’s just me, darling. Now, hand me over that gun. Nice and easy, okay?” he said, slowly reaching for the gun.

“Nice and easy? Step back with the rest of them. Whose side are you on anyway?” she hissed.

“Whoah, baby, we just need to –“

“Don’t baby me,” she said and backed into the door. She traces her fingers over the knob and turned the lock and then the deadbolt. “Where are the veils and the bouquet? I’ll need a fresh bouquet,” she said and cocked her head listening for an answer. One of the saleswomen ventured over to a glassed in freezer and pulled out a bouquet of flowers while another fetched a veil. They handed the items to Joel and he cautiously stepped forward holding them in front of Louise.

“Put the dress in the car!” she ordered and took his arm. He hurried them both to the car and threw the bundle of wedding dress into the backseat. They hopped in and spun off leaving a cloud of red dust and a huddle of shaken saleswomen.

Joel watched the gas needle quiver as they drove at a high rate of speed down the highway. Louise cuddled the gown against her and sighed. “Now, we just need a ring,” she said.
THE ANGRY NIPPLE

The sleeping pills never seemed to live up to their television advertisements. This one was the third type he’d tried, and he still woke up in the middle of the night and stared at the ceiling fan wafting above him and Annette. Annette slept soundly curled beneath a mountain of sheet and covers. The more he thought about work, their finances, the diabetic cat, and many other issues, the more he lay awake wide awake staring at the fan. The fan whined a little; something he never really noticed before. Not something one would notice if deep in sleep. A mosquito danced above the blades in a rhythmic dance, both whining.

Roger leaned over his wife’s shoulder and watched her breathe…lost in sleep. He felt a tinge of jealousy among other things.

As he lay there longer, the more he wanted to wake Annette up, the more he wanted it. That’s when he first noticed it.

There just above where the sheet fell softly over her breast, it peeked out at him from beneath the edge of the cornflower print fabric, it watched him like a large tan eye, the pupil a dark pink color. He wanted to wake her up, but he knew she would object. She had mentioned the presentation at work. Perhaps he could wake her up inoffensively by …by blowing on it.

He leaned over and pulled back the sheet and rolled his tongue across the wilted nipple and the more he licked, the plumper it grew. Annette rolled her head to the side and moaned a little but she still lay deep in sleep.

Then he began to blow around the nipple’s circumference and on the bud itself.
“Oh John! Oh my!” she moaned between her clenched teeth. He stared at her, but she fell back into the deep sleep once again. He looked down and saw the plump nipple staring back at him. Roger blew again.

“But…” she mumbled once again and chewed on her finger.

Roger lay back on his side of the bed crushed by the word…John. Who the hell was John?

In the morning he sat downstairs at the kitchen table staring into the black swill of coffee in his mug. On the side, the mug read My Wonderful Husband. “Yeah, right,” he mumbled.

“What’d you say?” a voice from over his shoulder asked. He looked back to see her standing over him wearing her terry cloth bathrobe with the word “His” embroidered over the breast pocket. Roger turned his back to her and stared at the calico cat sprawled across the cracked linoleum. “Hm, somebody isn’t a happy camper today,” she said and began rummaging through the refrigerator.

“I hate it when you drink straight from the carton,” she said, turning the carton of orange juice to inspect the bent mouth.

“How’d you know?”

She cocked her eyebrow and grinned. “I just know.” She drank from the carton. “I know where your mouth’s been,” she added and smiled a crooked smile. It seemed to smile too. “Yours and everyone else’s,” he imagined it calling out from beneath the thick terry cloth of her robe.

Annette sat across from him. Her bathrobe hung open exposing a satin camisole and matching panties. As she talked on and on about the silly next door neighbors and the retarded boy who tore up the flowerbed, Roger averted his eyes from it. But it stared. It
caught his attention. It unwaveringly followed him around the room like the eyes of a ghostly portrait in a museum.

“You could stand to cover yourself up every once in a while,” he muttered and drained the rest of his coffee.

She pulled her robe together, tying the belt tightly and with a pout asked, “What’s up with you this morning?”

Roger rattled the newspaper open and folded one page over. “It’s nothing. Nevermind.”

The doorbell rang. Roger eyed the nipple area, and he thought he heard it whisper “you know what they always say…the postman always rings twice.” The calico cat perched on the counter and eyed it as well and then exchanged looks with Roger. The cat knew it too.

Annette flung open the door and said, “Good morning.” An overweight postman stood wearing his postal blue shirt and grey shorts. His red hair hung in greasy lochs across his freckled forehead, and the remnants of a dried booger crisp lay in the thatch of his moustache.

“You’re early today,” she said and scrawled her signature on a green card. The postman tipped his cap and left.

“Since when do you keep up with the postal service’s comings and goings?” Roger asked, acidly.

“What?”

“Nevermind.” He rattled the newspaper spread-eagled between his slightly shaking hands.
On his way out the door, with briefcase in hand, Roger usually stopped to give her a peck on the forehead as she watched the morning news program and ate Cheerios on the couch. But not today.

The usual chaos of the office and water cooler banter filled the newsroom as he typed away on the next story. Copy… writing copy all day and into the night while she and “it” played away at home; not to mention the mysterious “John” whoever he was. As he typed copy about an Alzheimer’s patient found wandering along the highway, Roger thought about it and how it resembled a tiny pair of pursed lips giving up all her secrets. It was a case of divine intervention, he surmised.

“Where’s the copy for the motorcycle accident? We need that in a few minutes for the editorial meeting,” said Briley Curtis, the up-and-comer at work. He struck a Dan Rather pose and leaned over Roger holding a Channel WXNR6 coffee mug. “We need that ASAP, kid,” Briley said.

“Kid? I’ve got 15 years on you, Jimmy Olsen,” Roger said to the back of Briley’s starched blue shirt with the white collar.

“He’s like a total ass,” the intern said from a nearby desk. She thumbed over another page of her Cosmo and smacked on her bubble gum. The girl’s face was decorated in exaggerated lines of eyeliner, lip liner, a nose ring, and a lip ring that gave her a slight lisp. Roger’s attention fell on the lip ring and he leaned over her desk inspecting it as she chewed the wad of gum. She stopped when she noticed his staring.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, say, did that hurt like hell?” Roger said and pointed to her lip.
She shrugged. “I dunno. Sorta.” She thumbed another page of the magazine but watched him over the edge of the magazine.

“Is that all you got pierced?”

She smacked a bubble and stood up to leave. “I knew you were a perv.”

“No, wait. Hey, I didn’t mean it that way. Listen I – I got this… little problem at home,” he said and grabbed her arm.

“I bet you do,” she said and squirmed from his grasp. She opened her drawer and pulled out a can of mace. “Want some? Cause I got a whole can for ya,” she dared him.

“No, you don’t understand. Look, I just need a little advice,” he said and held his hands up in the air as though he were under arrest.

“About what?” she said through her teeth, keeping the mace hole pointed directly at him.

“About…those,” he said and pointed to her breasts. The last thing he saw was a blinding mist, and he spent the next thirty minutes vomiting and splashing water to clear the burn in his eyes. They sent him home in a taxi.

“Oh, my God, Roger, what the hell happened?” his wife said and guided him through the front door. Everything was still a blur, and after she paid the cab driver a tip, Annette dabbed Roger’s swollen eyes with a wet rag.

“Oh, baby, who did this to you?” she said as she dabbed.

He held her hand away and pulled her near as though to kiss. Annette’s lips parted, and she watched his teeth as he spoke. “Annette, dear… please could you do something for me?”
“Of course, Roger,” she said. “What?”

“Pierce it for me,” he said and fingered the nipple’s circumference.

“Do what?” she said and backed away.

“It’s all the fashion, honey.” And he thought how driving the ring through it would fulfill both a fashion statement and serve as a means of torture for it…like driving a stake through its heart.

“What the hell’s gotten into you, anyway?” She tossed the rag in his lap.

“At least sleep on it,” Roger said, holding the wet rag against one of his eyes.

“Forget it, Roger,” she hissed and stormed out of the room.

“I’m trying dear, I’m trying,” he said, exhausted.

That night he slept deeply for the first time. Tylenol and half a glass of wine seemed to lull him into a dreamy state. After several hours, he felt something heavy across his thighs and something wet between his legs. He opened his eyes to see Annette straddling him, leaning over like a cat sizing up its prey. Annette had a strange look in her eyes; her pupils were wide, giving her the appearance of black eyes; the green irises narrowed to a thin outline. Her eyes were focused on the area between his legs. Annette stared at his penis with a hypnotic fascination, and it seemed to stare back with its little mouth agape. She clasped his penis in her hand, leaned forward, and in his face asked, “So, who’s Margarite?”
Sister Carolyn stepped into a fresh pile of dog poo on her way to the coffee shop-- the kind of poo with an offensive odor that lingers days after the offensive step. She’d tried to scrape it off on the concrete sidewalk and pick at the treads with a stick, but the clod of poo had firmly imbedded itself in the treads of her shoe. After all, she did not want to keep Mr. Patterson waiting. Chatty shoppers and families maneuvering baby strollers hurried past her as she entered the café. Mr. Patterson was a businessman who was always dressed to the nines, the finest spun suits and tailored shirts with crisp seams. He’d called her the night before with a rush of panic in his voice. It was about a woman.

“Sister Carrie,” he said and stood up from his chair to shake hands. He patted her dry hand and said, “I can’t tell you how comforting these meetings are to me, Sister Carrie.”

“It’s Carolyn,” she said.

“I beg your pardon?” He tilted his ear toward her as though to better hear.

“Carolyn. Father Mike always calls me Carrie. I don’t know where on earth he got that from,” she said and looked down at his large cup of steaming coffee with a frothy topping. “It looks like you’ve already ordered. A latte?”

“Yes, you should try one. It’s their new one with cinnamon,” he said and tilted the cup to his lips.

After she bought a cup of plain coffee, she returned to the table and sat across from him. “So, Mr. Patterson, what seems to be ailing you this time?” she asked in a semi-sweet tone.
He was a finely manicured man smelling of sweet oils and musky colognes; shimmering cufflinks and glossy leather shoes. But no cologne could mask the odor wafting from the nun’s shoe. Patterson went into an exhaustive rehashing of how he met a woman and now how conflicted he was over his bachelor freedom and the woman in question.

Sister Carolyn closed her eyes and sighed. She kept them closed for a few seconds, and Patterson leaned in closer hoping for the right answer to seep from her pale lips; the answer to soothe his troubled mind.

“At least you’ve loved and been loved and you’ve married three times for that matter. True, three divorces can be devastating, but don’t you realize there are people out there who starve for just a taste of it? Just to know what it’s like once?” she said in a voice that grew louder and cracked here and there between words.

He focused now on her face, an oval, one clear and smooth and milky. The habit had simply become a background to a face on display before a magician’s black curtain or as though it were in a museum gallery. She was pretty in a plain way. With a little makeup, she would pass.

“I’ve never really thought about it in those terms,” he said and leaned back in the chair. The wooden chairback wined in protest. “Well, I suppose I’m one of those glass half empty fellows—a pessimist.”

The nun crossed her arms and said, “Yes, an ass.”

The short expletive hung in the air between them along with the aroma of her strong plain coffee. A glimmer of a scowl crossed her lips but quickly disappeared leaving a simple nun smile.

“I-love-you. The three loveliest words yet also the most painful,” she continued.
“You called me an ass,” he whispered as though to remind her.

“Yes,” she said.

“What kind of nun are you?” he asked, showing his teeth a little.

“A disgruntled one,” she said and munched on a raw stick of biscotti. The crumbs tumbled from her lips and down her black habit.

“I give money to the church. I tithe,” he said and slapped the tabletop with the palm of his manicured hand.

“Well, you can tithe it back if you want. We’ve got plenty of ass money,” she said and took another crunchy bite of the biscotti.

“How dare you call me an ass,” he said through clenched teeth.

She leaned over the table closer to his face. “Ass…” she hissed and then looked away nervously at the people around them. A couple giggled and playfully slapped at each other’s hands saying “No you are…” Two old men played checkers at another table and an old woman wearing half-glasses crocheted nearby, keeping one eye on the needle and the other on the nun.

“You’re a nun. You’re not supposed to be out calling people things like that,” Patterson said, now with a bit of desperation. He ran his fingers through his hair, and his face flushed.

“So report me to the nun police,” she said and shoved the remaining inch of biscotti into her mouth. “If the shoe fits…” she said between crumbs and stared darts at him.

Then he noticed the shoe and the source of the offensive odor.

“You’ve got something stuck to your shoe,” he said.
“Yes,” she said with dignity. “I’m afraid I stepped in a huge pile of poo on the way here. I trudged down five blocks in a hundred degree weather to meet you here today, and in all the times we’ve met you’ve yet to offer and buy me a cup of coffee.” She stomped her foot slightly and it made a sticky sound when she lifted it from the floor.

He noticed her fingers were dry and red. The nails had been nibbled to the quick. Her eyes now too were red around the rims and she looked away when he stared at them.

Patterson touched her hand lightly and said, “Sister Carolyn?” She sniffled and nibbled on her lower lip. “May I buy you a cup of coffee?” he asked.

Her face flushed and she looked up at the light fixtures, blinking rapidly. “Yes, that would be so kind of you, Mr. Patterson.”

“Tell me something,” he said and paused. “Have you ever been in love?”

This time she looked him in the eyes when she said, “Yes, a man much like yourself.”

“An ass?” he asked with a grin.

A smile tickled the corners of her lips. “Yes, a lovely ass.”
“Do you realize what all I put into getting you to the state finals? Do you?” Mrs. Mathers snapped as she tightened a Texas tie around the collar of her son Elian’s western style shirt. Her eighteen-year old son heaved his lanky shoulders and drew back his shaggy head making more prominent the Adam’s apple that bobbed up and down his neck like an elevator.

“Mother…” he said with a rough sigh. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you’ve done. It’s just—“

“Just what?” she asked quickly and her eyes honed in on him like a laser. “Just G-I-R-L-S? That’s it, isn’t it? All those hormones…Well, let me tell you something,” she said, gathering up her swirl dress so she could put on her white shoes with the metal taps on the soles. “If you want to be a clogging champion, you’re going to have to work for it. It takes dedication.” She slapped her tap shoe against the floor and proceeded to pull on the other one. Spider veins lined one of her legs like little firework explosions of blue, purple, and pink veins, but the other leg was stiff and brown all over; plastic.

In the weathered station wagon, Elian and Mrs. Mathers drove in silence. She insisted on listening to a folk singing station with a breathy-voiced disc jockey. “Blowing in the Wind” played through the tinny speakers. “This is what they played when I met your father at Woodstock,” she said and patted the knee of her artificial leg in time with the music. She hummed along and tilted her head with a pained expression on her face like a religious martyr. “If only I could clog,” she said in a whimsical voice.

“Mother…” Elian said, gripping the steering wheel tight, his knuckles blanching.
“I’m just saying, a young man like you should feel so fortunate he can clog. If it weren’t for that clogging accident, I’d have gone far. Far indeed,” she said staring out the car window at the blur of passing scenery. It was something she always brought up but when asked about it, abruptly and with a cross tone, she’d say, “I don’t want to talk about it.” But Elian had heard the story over and over; how a tragic misstep on the wooden planked stage of the Mule Day clogging competition ended Camille’s dreams of being a clogging champion. Of how the blood circulation was cut off in the leg that was lodged between two planks and the firemen had to use the jaws of life to dislodge the leg from the plank board stage. “It was still clogging, too,” she said with a sigh.

They arrived at the dance center – a small wood paneled building that was once a Pizza Hut. A poorly tied banner hung along the roof guttering read “Rowan County Clogging Contest 2007.” There were only two other boys on the clogging team; a boy with big hips and rosy cheeks named Michael Bowers whose mother told everyone she had always wanted a girl, but Michael would have to do, and a boy named Ashley with a noticeable lisp and a dainty strut. His eyes were tight on his face; pulled back at the ends like a squirrel’s. Elian wanted nothing to do with either of them, but his mother always encouraged him to make friends with ‘those young gentlemen and perhaps you can encourage each other in your dance careers.’ Elian wanted the girls to encourage him instead.

“Don’t blow it now over some corn blossom. There’ll be plenty of time for all that rigmarole,” she said, gesturing toward a tall blonde girl who kept eyeing Elian. He looked back at the girl and returned a shy smile. The girl giggled and looked away, going back to a group of girls she had been talking with.
Each clogging team performed their routine on stage before a phalanx of four judges. One judge, a thin elderly man, stared at their feet over his half-glasses, rubbing his knobby chin pensively. The other judges were female and studied the cloggers with deep and serious concentration. Elian’s team “The China Grove Cloggers” tapped their way up on stage and assumed their positions in a small circle. “Camptown Races” played over a boombox in the corner and they began to clog feverishly. *De Camptown ladies sing this song, Doo-da, Doo-da, De Camptown racetrack’s five miles long, Oh, de doo-da day.*

He hated that song and the one that followed, “Old Suzanna.” He clogged himself to exhaustion all the while holding a fixed gaze on his mother as she clapped and encouraged the others around her to clap along to “Old Suzanna.” Before too long the dance hall became a nightmarish maelstrom of clogging and clapping and cheeky grins on the dancers’ faces.

Elian looked at the dancers clogging beside and around him. He didn’t want to let them down; the boy with the dainty strut, the girl with the buck teeth and shy smile. They all looked toward the audience with gleeful grins plastered on their faces. The industrial lighting beat down on Elian and he tugged at his tight collared shirt. Sweat burned his eyes and he licked at the salty bubbles forming on his upper lip. But he kept clogging even though his feet had gone numb. Each pounding step sent a river of pain up his legs and the socks he wore stuck to his sore feet where the blisters had burst. Like his feet, his mind became numb with indifference and the circle of fellow cloggers became a tangle of human shapes. “Old Suzanna” seemed endless but after a while he seemed to have lost his hearing; a strange wind blew through his ears, and he saw only faces now in a swirling blur around him. His legs moved mechanically in a disembodied way as though they were someone else’s. His throat was parched and breathless, but he pressed on, pounding away at the stage
with his feet. They seemed to move in spite of him; without his permission or direction. The jeans he wore stuck to him like his damp socks. He had transcended everything even natural needs. He felt like he was the only man on earth and allowed himself to be carried away by the clogging; swept away to a dark, secret space in his mind.
After Mrs. Jeffers and her husband claimed their son’s body, collected his personal effects, and accepted a triangularly folded flag and condolences from the battalion commander, they wandered around the depot waiting for the next train home.

“And to use a forklift to carry the coffin, the nerve of them…” Mrs. Jeffers mumbled as she accompanied her husband, Ray, into the train station depot. She cradled the tri-folded American flag against her chest and patted it like a baby’s back. Christmas garlands were scotch taped along the ticket counter where a large-armed woman sold tickets with the least amount of Christmas enthusiasm possible.

“I believe a Captain McPherson was to meet us here at 1:00?” Mrs. Jeffers asked through the Plexiglas.

“I dunno nothing about that. I just sell tickets,” the woman said and leaned her puffy face against her hand, waiting with a cocked eyebrow. “So where to for you folks?”

Ray stepped forward, unfolding his wallet, and told his wife, “You find a seat, and I’ll take care of this.”

The marquees flipped with the time changes and list of destinations. Soldiers and their families hurried to and fro in the train station. Children raced back and forth tagging one another around a straggly Christmas tree near the ticket booth, and the roar of cheer echoed in the high ceiling of the station. The mosaic portrayed faces of soldiers and the flag.

Mrs. Jeffers took a seat next to a soldier seated alone on a pew near the window. She waited for him to greet her with his eyes or with a nod like most people tended to do, but the soldier
looked away. Mrs. Jeffers looked at the soldier images of the mosaic and sighed. “He looks just like Cary Grant. The one in the middle. Don’t you think?” The soldier remained silent.

“Warren was a fine boy just like his grandfather. He had movie star looks and that boyish grin made the girls go wild. I felt like I was at the prom with my boy escorting me down the aisle at church every Sunday. And for an instant I felt like I was on the red carpet at some posh Hollywood gathering, but there we were in the First Baptist Church in China Grove.” Mrs. Jeffers closed her eyes and smiled. The soldier seated beside her looked off at a group of soldiers leaning against a Coke machine talking.

“You know that boy--the one they’re always saying is the new Cary Grant? Well, that’s what Warren looked like except better if you ask me. And where he got those looks well I’ll just attribute it to my side of the family. Warren’s father Ray, poor thing, he’s as homely as they come—and his family, they’re all good country people, but the homeliest of souls. God bless them all,” she said. The soldier breathed a deep sigh, but listened out of politeness.

She rummaged through her white pearl beaded purse and retrieved a glossy wallet-sized photo of a handsome soldier dressed in full regalia with a young woman on his arm. “It’s from a dance. A ball they had last year just before they sent him over there,” she said and handed him the photo. “Never mind the little tart on his arm. She’s been long gone, and good riddance, I told him.”

The soldier offered nothing to the conversation. He looked like a dressed up stone statue seated beside her on the pew. The trains outside hissed with steam and passers-by scurried to their destinations. The marquee cards flickered above the ticket counter.
announcing new arrivals and upcoming departures. A plump woman wearing a lavender hat argued the price of a roundtrip ticket to Turkey, North Carolina.

“Reality always seems to flood back just when you manage to imagine it away for a moment – a picture from life’s other side. Isn’t there a book by that name? Hm. I read more now than I used to…try to keep my mind off Warren and that empty chair at our table. I read everything now. The newspaper, the backs of ketchup bottles, shampoo bottles, license plates…Even though I put it out back on the porch, the chair, I still see the place where he used to sit with us at dinner,” she said. The pew whined as the soldier leaned back and jutted out his leg. He kneaded his brow and closed his eyes, struggling to listen.

“It doesn’t matter that I put it away. It’s still there—the heavy nothingness.” Her smile had faded and her eyebrows gathered in the middle of her forehead in a pained look. A rather thin Santa Claus set up shop near the ticket counter with a red Salvation Army kettle and a brass bell. He rang on and on with a solemn look on his face.

And the ringing tolled him back to just a few days before when the young men were lounging on cots in a sand burned tent laughing and talking; something about a girl. An alarm sounded and within minutes they were running down the narrow streets of a nearby village, kicking in doors, and ordering residents outside. At one house, gunfire erupted from the second floor, and all he remembers was curling up in a ball holding onto the ankles of his boots staring at the grains of sand on the floor.

“And oh he loved us both. Didn’t mind telling some little sassy thing off when they teased him about staying at home. No siree. He loved his momma and daddy.” She crossed her arms over her flat breasts and tapped her foot in time to a song only she could hear.
An elderly blind man felt his way along the far end of the pew and settled in making the wood whine and the bench jostle. A child sauntered by, lingering with a cheap bank-issued sucker in her mouth. She slurped its syrup and held one of her legs up, attempting to balance on one pale leg. She watched the blind man intently.

“Children shouldn’t stare so,” Mrs. Jeffers said. After a brief moment of silence, she started again. “He told me before he left ‘Momma, you know I’m coming back. You hear now?’” and he held up my chin like this. I couldn’t help but cry. But you know I believed him. I believed if anyone could survive that war, my Warren could…and he would have if it weren’t for that damned corporal.” Her white gloved hands tightened around the purse in her lap, twisting it like a sock.

“It was a horrible incident that took our boy Warren. The corporal who shot him was found scrounging around looking for pieces of Warren to piece back together like a puzzle. He’d already done his damage. That stupid, stupid corporal.” She closed her eyes and pounded her knee with a clenched fist. She hugged the triangular folded American flag against her chest and patted it like the back of a baby.

The soldier twisted his soda jerk cap in his hands as he listened to Mrs. Jeffers carry on about her dead son—killed in action just days before.

The soldier remembered the flag-draped coffin. He watched it along with crates of rations bumping together and sliding in the cargo hold of the plane. He and the other soldiers watched in silent horror and fascination as the coffin lids rattled during turbulent air pockets. Each of them wondering who would take on the duty of replacing any remains should they jostle free of their containers.
“You didn’t know him, did you? Do you remember him? His name is Warren Jeffers?”

Something caught in his throat. He didn’t know him, but he knew many like him; whole lines of them standing shoulder to shoulder almost identical in appearance. “It’s a big army, ma’am.”

“Of course it is,” she said and blinked back tears. “It certainly is.”

After a long silence, the soldier offered, “I’m sure he was a fine soldier,” and placed his hand briefly on her shoulder.

The shoulders began jerking as she cried into a lace lined handkerchief. “You didn’t want to hear all of this I know. I’m so sorry for unloading on you. I’m sure you’ve got somewhere to go. You’re someone’s son too, and here I am taking you over all for myself,” she said and patted his knee. “I bet your mother’s proud,” she said.

He looked down at his hands. “I wouldn’t be so sure,” he said and looked at her now. Up until this time, he had only listened to her voice imagining what she looked like. She was prettier than he had imagined, especially for a woman of her age. He wanted to tell her everything. She looked like a good mother; the kind who would pat you on the hand and say, “Oh, everything’ll be all right.”

She noticed his pale freckled hands were trembling, and he stuck them under his long military green overcoat. “I’ve upset you, haven’t I? I upset Ray all the time. That’s why he’s standing way over there. Far away,” she said and gestured toward a slightly overweight man wearing a Redman Tobacco cap, madras shirt, and jeans. He paced in front of the ticket counter smoking a cigarette, occasionally staring up at the terminal signs as they fluttered changes in destinations and arrival times.
The soldier said nothing. He traced the stitching furrows of an eagle patch on his cap and stared up at the stained glass window of the bus station. Orange sunlight poured through the amber colored stained glass windows giving his hands and everyone the semblance of a sepia tan.

“It’s fixing to be a nice day, or so they say; an uncloudy day,” she said. He kept a steady gaze on the stained glass window. “Where is home? I detect a slight Charlestonian lilt in that soft voice of yours.”

“Laurens,” he said.

“Close enough,” she said and feigned a smile. “One of Warren’s good friends is from Laurens. His name…it’s right on the tip of my tongue but escapes me,” she said with a heavy sigh.

He returned his gaze to the huge Coca Cola tile mosaic of a smiling blonde with a bottle suspended just inches from her ruby red lips.

“They wouldn’t let us see inside the coffin. Said we weren’t allowed. Hmph. Isn’t that something?” She watched the child standing beneath the Cola sign staring at them with her rosebud mouth open and fingers working over a small toy in her hands. Mrs. Jeffers managed a smile and nod, but the child continued to stare.

The soldier said nothing. All that could be heard now was the flutter of the destination cards on the marquee and the lone Santa bell ringing.

“I just wanted to reach in and touch his hand. That’s all,” she said and nibbled on her lip. The Coca Cola mosaic continued to smile in the amber hue light.

“When the gun went off, we were just sitting around talking. It was some nonsense. Something about a girl,” he wanted to tell her. Over and over he rehearsed it in his mind as
she sat even closer to him; her warm thigh pressed against his. His face twisted and contorted and the folds of skin around his eyes and mouth deepened. He turned to the side and cupped a hand against his face so she could not see his ever reddening face. But his ears burned red, and he worked his chin, swallowing hard.

“Ray,” she called in a high, cracking voice. The farmer staggered to the pew and squinted down at her and then at the soldier who now had his back turned to them both. “Take me home,” she said and took her husband’s hand. “I’ve upset this poor boy.” Just as they were at the doorway and people hurried past them, she stopped and looked back. The soldier buried his face in his hands and muttered to himself. She reached over and brushed his bangs lightly as a mother would correct a wayward cowlick on her son’s head.

All around her soldier families chatted and laughed in the excitement of reunion. “I never meant to upset him,” she muttered.