

Abstract

RUANE, ELIZABETH HELEN. For Those Who Are Awake: A Collection of Stories. (Under the direction of Dr. John Kessel.)

A collection of short stories allows a writer certain freedoms that the novel form does not. It enables the writer to explore different ideas of form, content, and voice in a limited amount of space, looking at small slices of life that should hopefully add up to more than the sum of its parts. As such, this collection of stories attempts a variety of structures and styles. The view points range between first person to third person, and the main characters vary in gender and age, letting the voices of an 13 year old country girl in "What You Can't Leave Behind," and a man in his early 30's living in the city in "The Sun and Death" stand next to each other, among others. These stories are most simply connected through the idea of exploring the way people relate to one another, and especially how families interact, in this often chaotic world.

For Those Who Are Awake: A Collection of Stories

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Ruane was born in the small town of Geneseo, Illinois, on July 13, 1979. She moved with her family to Delmar, Delaware, where she spent most of her childhood before relocating to Sherrard, Illinois her senior year in high school. She attended Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana where she earned her B.A. in English in 2001. Fresh from her undergraduate degree, she entered the master's program at North Carolina State University, and will graduate from there in 2003 with a M.A. in English. Upon receiving this degree, she will enter the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to earn her M.S. in Library and Information Sciences, after which she hopes to hang up her school books for a while.

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Here's to You

Tommy Marijuana was angry again. Tommy Crystal Meth looked at him and rolled his eyes. Tommy Marijuana always became angry during group, as if the years of depressing his emotions with pot had now left him raw and unable to cope with feeling, Cam thought.

Cam liked to think of the members of his group by their addiction rather than as people. They were all there, neatly classified by their problem, from Mary Heroin to Ben Cocaine to himself, Cam Alcoholic. Their group contained the full range, the hard-core users and the "recreational," and the drugs in any combination imaginable. Only on the weekends, before work, after work, whatever got you through work, or the day or the week; they all had their patterns and habits, but Cam didn't think talking about it would really help. Not doing the drug of choice was what helped.

"No, I don't think my father had any thing to do with my drug use," Tommy Marijuana said tightly, lips compressed, eyes narrowed and fixed upon Dr. Rose, the group leader. "I think that I just wanted to smoke, so I did. It's a simple as that."

Dr. Rose smiled. "Okay, Tom, I was just asking if you were sure that your problems didn't stem from your relationship to your father."

"No! I think I'm just weak, and I started smoking and I couldn't stop, and then I got busted at a stupid traffic check! I'm just weak and stupid, and it has nothing to do with my dad!" Tommy was out of his chair, fists clenched.

"Okay, Tom, okay. Maybe now would be a good time to take a break." Dr. Rose tried to align himself with the rest of the group, feigning surprise at Tommy's outburst, but they weren't surprised and met his look with deadpan stares. Dr. Rose cleared his throat. "Let's be back in ten minutes."

Everyone bolted out of their cracked wooden desk chairs covered with old, scratched-in fraternity letters on the top, and hardened chewing gum on the bottom. They borrowed this room from the university once a week, and Cam thought that the mixture of apathy and interest that soaked into the walls from the students that sat in these chairs every day gave the room a weird feeling. He waited as everyone else ambled outside to smoke cigarettes, and approached Dr. Rose. Dr. Rose composed his face, covering

an expression that made Cam think that he didn't want to be there any more than they did; he was just a burnt-out shrink who had gotten shuffled into rehab duty.

"I'm not feeling all that well, Doc. I was wondering if I could leave now?"

Dr. Rose hesitated. "Sure, that will be fine. I'm sorry that you won't get to speak tonight about receiving your coin, but how about you say a few words next week?"

"Sure, no problem. Thanks again for this." Cam waved the shiny coin in the air as he walked away.

"No thanks necessary. You were the one who did the work."

Cam nodded at him, then grabbed his coat and briefcase as he walked by his chair and headed down a dark hallway that led to a different exit than the one used by his fellow addicts. He could picture them, standing in an irregular circle, hunched against the brisk March wind, drawing desperately on their cigarettes and talking about how hard the weekends were. He got into his car and headed home, stopping only at a drug store to pick up a box of nicotine patches. Once inside his brownstone, he went straight into his bedroom. He pulled his gold coin out of his pocket, and stared at the shiny surface for a minute.

Six months without drinking. He imagined telling Anna, seeing the excited, supportive expression on her face. Anna, with her extra free time and limitless patience, had almost been relieved that he had a problem. For her, his alcoholism coming out into the open meant that she could take care of him and he would have to rely on her. Maybe she wanted a ring out of the whole deal, and then at Christmas parties and family reunions she could tell the story of how she saved him and then they knew they were meant to be together. He had only made it a month after his release from rehab before he told Anna she had to leave; her crushed expression had made him soften the blow by explaining it wasn't her, that he was in a bad place in his life, he would only drag her down. In reality, it was Anna. Cam couldn't handle any more of her constant questions about how he was doing each day, or any more apologies as she tried to take on the guilt of his downfall. As if she could affect his life that much. It made her look pathetic. He didn't miss her, although he still avoided the bakery they had frequented almost every Sunday.

He tossed the coin onto his dresser, next to his shot of vodka, and thought that it was time to change the glass.

Since Anna had left, he'd kept a shot of vodka in the middle of his dresser with five unopened bottles of Skyy lined up against the back. He knew that if he ever took that shot, he'd never be able to stop and he might as well drink himself to death that same night, because it would be over for him anyway. He carried the shot glass into the bathroom, careful not to spill it. The glass held the logo of the Boston Red Sox, and Cam always cheered for the Sox. He changed the vodka in the glass regularly, as other people might change the water in their fishbowls. He watched the clear liquid slowly swirl down the drain as he tipped the glass, and didn't know what to think as the vodka slid out of the sink. So slippery and liquid, so shapeless.

He opened the medicine cabinet to get the bottle he refilled the shot glass from, and as he swung the door closed, he caught his reflection. He studied his brown eyes and short brown hair. His face looked thin. He looked like a million other people, he thought. Maybe a hundred other lawyers. His lips curled in derision; he was a lawyer in Boston, no less - how stereotypical. So what was wrong with him? He left the bathroom and filled the shot glass, carefully pouring, filling the glass past the

rim until the surface tension made the liquid bubble over the top in a perfect arc.

Work hard and play hard had been the motto in law school and Cam had done both. There seemed to be always something to celebrate, or a good reason to drown your sorrows. A good grade, a not so good grade, someone passing the bar exam, a bad break-up, your baseball team won, your baseball team lost, all perfectly good excuses to belly up to the bar and toss back a few. Cam still remembered the morning when he first realized that downing a couple of shots wasn't a bad way to get rid of a hangover. It had been the morning of a final exam and his head was pounding, threatening to explode every time he tried to think about sitting up in bed. He finally got it under control and gritted his teeth to force his rolling stomach to calm down by sheer will power. He managed to gulp some vodka before he brushed his teeth and threw on some clothes. After he felt a little better, he remembered from a psychology class that a person should always take a test in the same state he studied in, so if you were high when you studied, you should spark up before you take the test. Cam figured the same would work with alcohol, and it did.

He went back into the bathroom and brushed his teeth and undressed. He picked up the package of nicotine patches, and removed three. He prided himself on the fact that he had never smoked a cigarette in his life, not after seeing what lung disease did to his father. He inspected the shaved section of skin near his groin; it was getting itchy and he would have to shave it again soon. He applied the patch to the skin there. He made sure to pick the places where the skin was the thinnest. He applied another one to his ribcage under his breast, and the last one to the side of his neck. He lay down in bed and waited. Waited for his breathing to slow, for sweat to break out in his body. He welcomed the stomach cramps and the numbness of his skin. Sometimes he felt he could feel the nicotine seeping through his skin and into his veins, and then coursing throughout his system, traveling the length of his body until the soles of his feet tingled and his head felt fuzzy and the heaviness of his limbs weighed him down.

When he woke up the next morning, his sheets were still damp from sweat and his skin felt clammy. He carefully turned off his alarm without moving his head. When he finally lifted it, he felt the expected foggy feeling and the dull pounding. He rolled out of bed and

stumbled to the bathroom. Thrusting his head under the faucet in the tub, he gulped the water, letting it soak his head in the process. He lay down on the cool tiles of the floor and waited a minute. Feeling the water seep through his stomach, feeling his cells expanding with rehydration.

When he finally stepped into the shower, he realized that last night he'd had a dream. He never dreamed anymore. Images of Anna and work and the rehab center floated out of his head. The day he was caught drinking at work. He could still kill that kid. He had been carrying around his water bottle of vodka as usual when Rogers, the senior partner, had stopped him in the hallway and corralled him into his office. Cam had never worried about getting caught drinking at work. Everyone assumed that it was water, and Cam constantly walked around sucking on breath mints, the wintergreen kind since spearmint made him nauseous. Rogers introduced Cam to his son and then had wanted to talk about his latest case.

Cam had gotten involved in the discussion, and the next thing he knew, Rogers' son was standing next to his dad taking a sip out of Cam's water bottle. The little kid spit out it immediately, and then, whining, held it up to his father, complaining that it tasted bad. Rogers had

gotten a whiff of the vodka and it was all over. Cam had thought he was about to get fired, but the partners had made the decision that based on Cam's excellent track record with the firm, he could keep his job, but he would have to go into detox for three weeks and then go to AA meeting once a week. Cam picked the AA group he did because it was small and met right after work down the street from his office.

Almost losing his job was the wake-up call. For others it was almost dying or hurting loved ones -- he had heard all the stories. What was your trigger? What was your greatest fear? As the others in the group went around and listed the usual: death, fear of God, permanent damage. How could he explain that his was being penniless and homeless? That his greatest fear was becoming insignificant, a person no one looked at twice, without a home, cold on the street. When it came time for his turn to speak, Cam had hesitated. He finally, weakly, said, "Um, I guess spiders." Then, when everyone had laughed, and fearing Dr. Rose would think he was taking this "too lightly" and report back to his bosses, he had said, "And, death."

Cam finished showering and dressing, and headed out the door to work. He was glad it was Friday. He went through the motions of the day, talking to a new client, reporting to Rogers on his six-month progress, but knowing that Dr. Rose already had. He was always tempted to carry that water bottle into work again, whether it was filled with alcohol or not, just to see what others would say, if it would be reported to Rogers in hushed whispers. He missed having it with him.

When the sun started to set and the shadows lengthened, Cam felt the excitement grow within him. He quickly finished up his work for the night, said goodbye to Marge the secretary, took the elevator down and headed up the street; the blazing sunset washed the city in reds and purples. Cam tried to remember the old weather rhyme to decide if a red sunset would mean rain tonight. Red sun in morning, sailors take warning? Was that how it went? Cabbies and frustrated commuters blasted their horns in the rush hour traffic, flocks of people escaping the city.

He stood in the doorway of "Old Bar," known for its happy hour specials, its old brick façade, bright green awning, and warm light spilling from its windows. It once had a name etched into the windows in fake gold lettering,

but the words had long since faded into illegibility. He watched the groups of women, chatting, sipping drinks. He knew that it would change soon, soon a different energy would flow from the crowd, replacing the current sedate, but relieved to be done with work for the week, feeling. Soon the alcohol, consumed on empty stomachs, would relax the bodies and the minds of the beautiful women, giving them a feverish vitality. Cam sat at the bar and ordered a tenderloin sandwich and a soda for dinner. As he ate, he scoped out certain prospects. A party of women celebrating a birthday looked promising. Though he knew he could find women drinking any night of the week in any bar, he preferred to go out only on the weekends. Weekday drinkers had a different feel; they were missing the exuberance of a Friday drinker. He finished eating. Around the bar, cheeks were beginning to flush; it grew warm in the bar from the body heat.

He watched a smooth blond woman standing across the bar from him take a shot: tequila. He approved of her choice of drink; he always avoided those women who ordered frothy, fruity drinks that came with cherries. He watched as she tipped her head, her throat muscles exposed, working strongly, smoothly, as she swallowed. Cam imagined the

fiery liquid sliding down her throat to settle in her stomach, warming it, the warmth spreading throughout her body. She bit down on the lemon, and said something to the bartender, laughing. He imagined going up to her, placing both hands on the sides of her face and kissing her. He would taste the traces of alcohol on her breath, breathing it in, trying to lick the last essence of the liquor off her tongue. Cam was a second-hand shooter. Picking one drunken woman in a bar and kissing her until his lips felt bruised, buying her drinks, trying to taste the alcoholic residue in her mouth. He thought that this blonde might be the one tonight.

He moved around to the other side of the bar to be in a better position. He watched her with her group of friends; they were the birthday party he had spotted earlier. He finally made eye contact and smiled, and the game began. She'd look away, but with a smile on her face, then catch his eyes again. He played his part, but soon grew impatient and, ignoring the looks of her friends, went up to her. Her name was Tammy and she was a lawyer too. Cam thought she was beautiful and tried to remember the last time he felt this uncertain.

"Tammy, hmmm..." He smiled. "I love that name."

"Oh yeah?" She grinned back at him, playing along.
"Why?"

"It sounds like a country singer."

She laughed. "You're in luck, Cameron is one of my favorite names also. It sounds like a baseball player."

He bought her drinks, sticking to club soda with a lime for himself, and they talked, but he hesitated to make his move. They talked about work, and she told him she specialized in communication law, and as they talked she leaned close to him and touched his arm. He couldn't figure her out, and couldn't get a good read on how drunk she was becoming.

She suggested they play darts, and they bet with quarters. When she hit the bulls-eye with her first throw he joked that she was trying to hustle him.

"Oh, I'm taking you for a ride, all right," she said, laughing up at him.

They played until it was last call, and still Cam had not kissed her. He felt paralyzed and didn't know why. He knew he'd have to do something.

"Do you want to come back to my place for a nightcap?" Cam couldn't believe those were the words that came out of

his mouth; no other woman had been in his house since Anna. Tammy looked at him for a moment.

"Well, you don't seem like you're crazy," she joked.

"Sure, why not?"

They to a cab back to his house, and on the ride home, Cam rubbed her thigh while she sat back against the seat and watched him. Once inside, Tammy wanted the tour. When they got to the bedroom, Cam sat down on the bed. He held his breath when Tammy noticed his dresser. She walked over to it, and turned towards him.

"What is this?" She asked lightly. "A shrine to Skyy?" She carefully picked up the shot glass and raised it towards him. "Bottoms up, Sparky," she said as she tossed the contents back into her throat. Cam let his mind go blank as he rose from the bed and approached her.

Lost and Found

Chris peered over the edge of the "Lost and Found" box that sat in the corner of the main office at Southwest Elementary School while he waited for his turn to talk with one of the secretaries behind the low blue counter. A mother was in front of him, dropping off a lunch in a green puffy foam bag. She had with her a little boy, about three years old, with white - blond hair wearing a green sweatshirt that said on it: "monster for sale or rent." The sweatshirt had a green tail attached to the back of it, and the little boy was hanging onto his mom's hand, jumping up and down, and making growling noises. Chris regarded the little monster for a moment, then smiled in a superior way as he thought that the boy was probably no older than a preschooler, and went back to looking in the "lost and found" box.

The sign that labeled the box was taped to the wall above it, and was printed in big letters with bright yellow marker as if the box were a fun place to be. Inside was one once white gym shoe. How could someone lose just one shoe? Tumbled in with the shoe was a notebook with its

blue cover halfway torn off, a black t-shirt, a cracked thermos. Down at the bottom of the box there would be all the little things kids smuggled into school - - squirt guns and rubber balls and plastic jewelry.

All these things that people had lost, and hadn't cared enough to look for. Chris thought briefly about digging around at the bottom of the box on the off chance that there might be a marble or two he could add to his collection. Last night, he had been watching his dad as he sat in the middle of the living room surrounded by all their boxed belongings and, unpacking, the whole time with that sad look upon his face, mixed in with something else that Chris couldn't place. Chris had started to go to him, but then his mom, whispering not to bother dad, sent him upstairs to put some things away in his bedroom. Upstairs, he had tried to arrange his toys so they looked normal, so it would look like his old room, but they just didn't seem to fit right, so he put them back in the boxes. But it would be fine, because Chris didn't think they would really be staying long and he wanted to be ready to go back home when his mom and dad said it was time.

"Did you lose something?"

Chris turned around and saw one of the secretaries looking at him. He walked over to the counter.

"Uh, no ma'am. I'm Christian Best. My mom told me to check in with the office so that she'd know that I got off the bus okay."

"Oh, Chris. I just got off the phone with your mother." The secretary leaned close over the counter, putting her face closer to Chris's, the combination of her blue eyes and blue eye shadow making it painful for Chris to look at her. "Do you remember how to get down to the fourth grade wing from yesterday?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. He didn't need, or want, anyone to walk him down there. She smiled at him in a way that Chris knew meant it was time to leave, so he smiled back and made his way out of the office.

The main hallway was mostly empty now. As Chris walked, he mumbled to himself the directions to his classroom the way he had memorized them yesterday, careful not to step on any of the thin black lines separating the patterned floor tiles. He took the first five steps, counting in his head; five steps, then comes the library. The library was an island surrounded by the school, forming a perfect square. All of the walls were half window, so it

was easy to see what was going on in there. Yesterday, a class had been watching a movie on a pull - down projector screen. It had been dark in there except for dim lights over the main desk and the blue movie light flickering over the kids' upturned faces.

When he came to the end of the library wall, at 17 and a half steps, he turned right. Down a smaller hallway, take fifteen steps, past the bathrooms and a water-fountain; twenty more steps. The halls were empty of other students, and the silence made him uncomfortable. The walk reminded Chris of a back yard scavenger hunt at a birthday party. It would go something like take nine giant steps 'till you reach the large rock; once there, take six bunny hops toward the oak tree with the flowers around it. But instead of working towards a secret stash of candy, he was making his way to a classroom full of kids who weren't his friends and who didn't know anything about him.

When he reached his destination, Chris stood in the doorway of the classroom for a moment, watching the other students put their jackets and lunches away. The teacher was sitting at her desk and noticed him. She motioned him over, and stood as Chris moved towards her. Miss Terry was beautiful and had the darkest skin he had ever seen. Her

teeth gleamed at Chris as she smiled. Her hair was pulled back in a coil and she was wearing a light pink dress, with a v-neck front, and sandals. The dark skin of her legs gleamed in a shiny strip running down the front of her shins. She was a beacon Chris moved gratefully towards.

Miss Terry showed him where to put his lunch box and then led him back up to the front of the room. Everyone else had settled into their desks, and Miss Terry put her arm around his shoulders. She had a soft, clean scent that enveloped him as she stood beside him. It smelled like the pink lotion his mom smoothed on her face every morning.

"Class, everyone remembers Christian Best, right? He was here yesterday for a half day, but today he's with us full time, and will be from now on. Let's all welcome Chris again." The class chorused hello. "Chris, you can sit behind Ben over there in the first row."

Chris walked over and sat down at his new desk. It was different from his old desk, which had a metal basket for storing textbooks that hung from the underside, so that he had always had to carefully slide into his seat so he didn't jam his knee into one of the metal corners of the basket. This one had a flip top lid that opened on hinges. Chris opened the lid a crack and peeked inside; it was

empty except for some scraps of the paper edges that come loose when a sheet of paper is torn from a metal spiral notebook. Miss Terry told him that he probably wouldn't get his books until tomorrow, but he would be able to follow along with the class since they would mostly be reading out loud and doing exercises on the board today.

He couldn't see much of the rest of the classroom because he was sitting so close to the front, but he wondered who was staring at him from behind. Yesterday, he had sat in the back of the seventh row, in the sixth seat, and had gotten a clear picture of the room. His mind started to drift, since he had already learned this multiplication and division lesson from his old teacher. He looked around the room, counting things, trying to ground himself in his surroundings. There were only five kids in the sixth row, but there was a sixth student in the next row. In the fourth row, there were only three kids, and he thought maybe some others had moved away. There were five kids sitting in both the second and first rows. Above the wall-length chalkboard, a banner displayed all the letters of the alphabet written in cursive. Chris smiled at the banner, feeling good that he had already learned to write like that. Against one wall there was a

counter with all the craft supplies. He counted all the glue sticks and packs of construction paper, some already open with only the orange, brown, and black colored paper left in them. Ten packs of thick markers were stacked neatly on top of each other, and ten packs of crayons next to them. On the wall behind the craft counter, student essays were hung on a bulletin board under the heading "My Summer Vacation" done in bright blue bubble lettering. There were 29 summer essays, but now there were 30 students.

He focused again on Miss Terry, and her voice. Her voice had a musical quality about it, gently rising and falling, holding the class' attention without her having to raise the volume. It sounded slow and thick, like the air on hot summer nights. It was like a bedtime story and a cool hand passing over the forehead before the lights were turned out for the night. By comparison, in his memory, his old teacher now sounded flat and clipped, as if she had been in a hurry to get the words out. As Miss Terry taught, she walked back and forth at the front of the room, and her powdery scent drifted over Chris in waves as she came close to him and then walked away.

Chris reached into his jeans pocket and felt the slick hardness of the green glass marble he had grabbed off of his dresser before leaving the house that morning. It was Josh's. Josh had given it to Chris when Chris left Chicago. Josh's backyard had connected with his, and they had known each other since they were babies, his mom had said. The marble was one from Josh's mom's collection. She had a big bag of marbles from when she was little, a sack full of milky cat's eyes and golden tiger's eyes mixed in with the shadowed greens and blues and the bright, sunny yellow ones. There was even a flat black one that reflected no light at all, and an all clear one that magnified the lines in your palm when you held it in the flat of your hand. On summer days, Chris and Josh would hold the marbles up to their eyes and look at the colored world through them, never seeing more than shaded areas and outlines tinted by the shade of marble they had chosen. When Josh said good-bye to Chris, he had slipped Chris the marble. But that all happened before he actually realized what moving really meant, or the downsizing of companies, or how far away South Carolina was from Chicago.

Chris pulled out the marble, and ran the smooth green glass against the desktop. Miss Terry was leading the

class in the two's multiplication table chant; Chris moved his lips automatically in time with the rest of the students. Chris grew bolder and began to shuttle the marble between his separated hands, letting the distance grow farther and farther apart, admiring the way the marble arced across the smooth, slightly bowed surface. He was absorbed in what he was doing, so much that when someone off to his left sneezed, he jumped and lost control of the marble. He watched as it hopped off the desk, landed and rolled over to the next row of desks. It hit the sandaled foot of student number 12 from the door to the classroom, and when she felt the marble hit her foot, she leaned down and picked it up.

Chris's heart stopped. She had his marble. He couldn't think of a single way to get it back. The rest of the math lesson was torture as he kept his gaze fixed to the side of the girl's head, watching as she periodically peeked out of the corner of her eyes at him. Finally the lesson ended, and Miss Terry called for them to line up to get a drink of water and to use the restroom. Chris lunged out of his seat and put his hand on the girl's shoulder to stop her.

"Hey," he said, not knowing her name.

She turned around. She had brown hair done in two thick braids down her back and a smattering of freckles across her face. She looked at him, measuring.

"That's mine," he said. "You have my marble."

She uncurled the hand that held the marble. She looked down at it, then held her hand out, the marble resting in the flat of her hand.

"Here. I just didn't want Miss Terry to take it."

Chris muttered thanks and he took it.

"I have some of those at home," she said as he turned away to go to the back of the line that had formed.

Chris looked back at her. She was smiling. He gave her a tentative smile back.

"Cool," he said. He wanted to say more, but then Miss Terry started the line moving, so he jumped to the back of it, while she was absorbed into the middle with her friends.

That afternoon after his mom picked him up from school, Chris sat outside on the back porch, holding his marble and waiting for his dad to get home. His mom had told him that his dad was starting his new job, which would be hard on him, like starting a new school was for Chris. Chris looked over the backyard, but no one else's connected

with it. There was just a thick wall of pine trees, but even these looked different from the ones he was used to. These had branches that started way up high, and thick, white-ish trunks that were rough and sticky to the touch. His mom had told him that these were white pines, and they belonged here in the south. On the other side of the woods was a train that came rumbling by in the middle of the night, and as Chris lay hot and sticky on top of his covers, listening to the hum of the ceiling fan, sometimes it would blow its whistle. The train always took a long time to pass by, and when he had asked his mom about it, she told him that it was a mile long, and that some time soon, they could make their way through the forest to see the tracks, but not when the train was going by. It would be too dangerous. Chris thought it would be cool to see, though, and he had heard stories that if you put a penny on the tracks before a train came through, it would run over the coin and flatten it. He wanted to try it, and then he could send the smooshed penny to Josh. He knew that he would like it a lot.

His mom came out and sat on the back porch steps with Chris.

"Look what I got today," she said. She was holding a plant in a pot. The plant looked like a little tree to him.

"What's that for?" he asked. He didn't know trees could be that small.

"It's for us, for our new house. We'll grow it inside this winter, and then in the spring, when it's bigger, we'll plant it outside. Then we'll have three special trees in the backyard." She pointed over to the side where two lone oak trees stood guarding the edge of the yard. "There'll be one for each of us. This one can be yours, and you can help me take care of it. We can watch it grow, and it'll be something we added to the house."

He stared at the little tree and hated it. He didn't want to add anything to the house.

He looked down at his hands. "I don't like it." He almost whispered the words. "Why do we have to stay here? Why can't we go home?" He looked up at her.

"Oh, sweetie," his mom hugged Chris to her side. "We had to move. I know it's hard for you right now; it's hard for all of us. But, you need to understand that this is our home now, we're not going back to Chicago."

Chris could feel a pressure building inside of him, and he struggled out of her arms. "I don't want to stay here. I don't think you care!" He didn't know what to do, so he flung his marble, still clenched in his hand, out into the yard, and ran into the house. He kept running, up the stairs and into his room. He stopped in the doorway, brought up short by the brown boxes, all open but still full, making a maze across the carpet leading to his bed. He gave one a kick, toppling it over and spilling neatly folded winter clothes, sweaters and thick corduroy pants, onto the floor. He ran over to the next one and grabbed it, turned it upside down and dumped the toys out of it. He did the same to all of them, until stuffed animals and plastic action figures and little cars and clothes were all mixed together and strewn about the room. He ran out of boxes to dump and stood there for a minute, breathing hard, and then slumped to the floor, where he sat cross-legged, staring at the mess for a while, not knowing what to do next.

Footsteps in the hallway made him look towards the door, and his dad appeared. Chris hadn't heard him come home. His dad leaned against the doorway and put his hands

in his slacks pockets. He looked around the room, and then at Chris.

"Mom said that you lost a marble in the yard. Do you want to go look for it before it gets dark?"

Chris mutely nodded, and his dad held out his hand to him. He got up and took it, and then, without knowing that he was going to, he started to cry. His dad knelt down and held him, rubbing his back until he quieted. Then he pulled back and wiped the tear tracks off Chris' face with his big hands.

"Okay?" His dad asked, his eyes level with Chris'.

Chris nodded. "Can we go look?"

They went out into the backyard and hunted through the thick grass, but the sun beat them, and set before they could find the marble.

"It's okay, bub. We know it's here, and you can come out and look tomorrow after school. It'll turn up."

They went back inside to wash up before dinner.

"Any luck?" his mom asked.

"Not tonight, but Chris will find it tomorrow."

Chris looked at the kitchen table. "Why are the good company dishes out?" he asked his mom.

"Well, I just unpacked them today, and realized that we hadn't used them in a while, and they're so pretty that I just thought it would be nice to use them."

His dad walked over to the stove and watched his mom scoop macaroni and cheese with green beans on the side onto the thin, fine china with its delicate flower pattern. Then his dad started to chuckle, and kissed his mom on the cheek. Chris watched them, and then asked, "Can we use the cool glasses with the long stems, too?"

"Sure, sweetie. They're already in the china cabinet in the dining room. Just be careful when you get them."

Chris ran out of the room, and over to the familiar, sturdy china cabinet and delicately lifted out three glasses, carried them back to the table and watched as his mom poured milk into them for dinner.

The Sun and Death

It was two months before Finn learned that his grandmother had died. The letter slid soundlessly through the mail slot of his front door, and lay innocently on the polished hardwood floor of the entrance hall. The letter was a disaster, stained and crumpled, with one corner of the heavy, cream colored envelop ripped. The contents of the letter were not much better. He immediately recognized his mother's elegant, flowing handwriting, penned on cream stationary bordered with a ring of blue flowers, and was reaching for the phone before he finished her note.

She picked up after the fourth ring, and sounded glad to hear from him.

"Mother, I just received your letter," Finn said, gripping the cordless phone hard as he mashed it to his ear.

"What are you talking about, dear? And clear your throat; you sound like you're growling at me."

"Your letter about Grandmother. Why didn't you call me?"

"My goodness! You just received it? I sent that months ago," she said, trying to laugh lightly. "It must have been lost in the mail."

"Why didn't you call me?" he repeated.

"Well," she hesitated. "You know how unpleasant it is to talk about death and having to deal with everything that goes along with it. I thought reading it in a letter would be easier for you."

"Easier? Mother, I live twenty minutes from you and you decided to write me a letter? I've talked to you several times since you sent this, why didn't you mention it?"

There was silence on the other end.

"What did you do with her?"

"As it says in the letter, she wanted to be cremated, so I contacted a funeral home and they took care of everything. The man I talked to, a Mr. Carroway, who was extremely nice and polite by the by, told me not to worry about a thing."

Finn took a deep breath and could feel his face flush hot. "Where is she? Were you even there for the service? I can't believe this is even happening. This isn't how it is suppose to be."

"Finn, I don't know how you think this is suppose to go, but these things happen. I didn't think that you were even that close to her. But she's in St. Martin's cemetery, and Dyke's Funeral Home made all the arrangements. Finn, I have to run. I love you. I will call you on Sunday."

"Good-bye, Mother," he said. He tabbed off the phone and placed it on the hallway table. He stood absolutely still for a moment, unsure of what came next. At a moment like this, his mind should be racing with a million thoughts, but he couldn't think of a single thing. He was empty. He stared hard at the floor, unblinking, willing something to come to him. He repeated over and over to himself, your Grandmother is dead; you didn't get to say good-bye. He picked up the phone again to call his girlfriend. They were supposed to see each other later. Charlene was sympathetic, but talking to her made Finn's stomach churn, to the point where he told her that he wanted to be alone tonight. She didn't understand.

"Finn, I don't think you should be alone tonight. You've just had a big shock." She paused. "Let me come over. I'll bring you something to eat. I bet you haven't had anything to eat today."

"Charlene, that's really sweet. But I really just want to be alone right now."

He promised he'd call her tomorrow, and eventually he was able to get off the phone.

His head hurt and he flopped down on his sofa, closing his eyes. He felt his eyes burn behind the lids. He missed his grandmother already, and felt sick that he hadn't been able to be there at the end. He started to sink into the sofa, felt the heavy fabric conform to his body, and he stretched out and felt heavy. Bright bursts of colors began to form on the insides of his eyelids, appearing and then exploding like fireworks, and then fading away, only to return. Hot pink and orange and yellow and a pure intense white began to swirl together until it was an unceasing maelstrom of color. His mouth went dry and he felt hot. Finn tried to pry his eyelids open but they were too heavy. He let himself go and felt like he was falling.

Finn jerked out of sleep when he felt his hand reach out to touch something in his dream. He sat up on the couch, trying to recapture the image, but it was gone. His mouth was dry and his tongue felt like it was stuck to the roof of his mouth. He stumbled into the kitchen for a

glass of water, and as he walked through the house, he realized that it had grown dark outside. He stood in the dark by the sink and gulped down three glasses of water in a row, forcing it down his throat until he was gasping for breath. He remembered strange dreams of being trapped on a melting sun, but when he had been violently released from the fiery world, all he had wanted to do was return. He felt gritty and dehydrated. He stared out the window over the sink, looking from the darkness into the dark world beyond, seeing the faint outline of trees and the next-door house and also the shadow of his own face reflected in the glass; it was hard to see past his own image and Finn craned his neck trying to see around it. His stomach began to protest, rebelling against the water, and he leaned over the sink, retching. The water roared back out of him, gushing out of his mouth and nose, and when he was finished, he felt weak. He rested his elbows on the counter and leaned on it for a minute. He thought he should get something to eat, and warmed a bowl of leftover spaghetti in the microwave, and sat down in front of the television to eat, but ended up falling asleep again to the sound of the seven o'clock news, his dinner untouched.

Daylight streaming through the windows finally woke him, and he opened his eyes to discover that he was slumped on the couch. His neck hurt and his stomach rumbled, and, ignoring the bowl of congealed spaghetti on the coffee table, he stumbled into the kitchen for some juice. After eating everything he could get his hands on, toast and cold pizza and a frozen burrito, he took the longest shower of his life, letting the hot, harsh water beat down upon him. He knew he'd have to call work, and when he did, he told one of the senior partners that he had had a death in the family and would need a few days off to get things in order. Then he called his secretary and told her what files to farm out to whom so the work would get done as she expressed her sympathies and sighed about how nothing ever good happened on a Monday. He didn't want to be at the office right now. As a bankruptcy lawyer he either dealt with sad old people who found themselves with no money and trying to make ends meet in one of those elderly outreach employment programs, or young, late twenty-something's, high strung and angular, their skin stretched tight across the bones in their faces, who couldn't see beyond the

mountain of educational loans and credit card debt they racked up when they found their first jobs out of college. He didn't think he'd be able to listen to either type today.

He got dressed, then left the house and started to drive over to his mother's, but half way there, changed his mind. Instead, he found himself in the public library asking for maps of Nebraska, locating the town of Wahoo where his Grandmother had lived and died. He got back into his car, and drove out of Des Moines on autopilot, mindlessly staring out the windshield as the city gave way to flat land dotted with cows and cornfields, houses few and far between. Three hours later he saw a sign as he left Iowa, "Nebraska The Good Life, and More!" He started to sweat, and he rolled down the windows. It had been over five years since Finn had seen his grandmother, but the landscape began to look familiar and he could remember eagerly pressing his face up against the car window when he was young, happy to be spending that summer month in Wahoo, happy to be leaving his unhappy parents and not having to answer their demands of who he loved more.

Forty-five minutes later, he pulled up at his Grandmother's house. A "for sale" sign was hammered firmly

down into the yard. He almost groaned from the stiffness in his legs as he swung them out of the car and stretched. He stood on the front sidewalk and suddenly he wasn't 32 anymore, but 11 and wanting to cry. He only had a vague impression of his Grandmother's face. He could close his eyes and remember her as a body in motion. He could picture her at the stove cooking, and in the backyard watering flowers and showing him how to pick the wild raspberries, which stained his fingertips. He remembered her quick motions, hugging him and firmly tucking him into bed at night, something he would never had let his mother or father do.

As he stood unmoving on the sidewalk, the front door of the house opened, and for a moment, Finn's heart stopped. He released his pent-up breath when the pleasant face of a middle-aged woman appeared and smiled at him. She hailed him from the front porch with a wave of her arm.

"Hello, there! Are you my next appointment?"

"Excuse me?" Finn asked as he walked closer.

"Are you here to see the house? Moving in from out of state?"

Finn looked behind her at the opened door of the house, where glimpses of the hallway could be seen.

"Yes, that's me. I'm moving here from Iowa."

"Well, that's great. Come on in and I'll show you around. You're going to love this place; it's so cute! What was your name again?"

Finn followed her inside. He cleared his throat.

"John. John Marks."

"Well, Mr. Marks, I have a good feeling about this."

He let her lead him around, looking at everything that was so familiar, yet different now. He felt odd walking around the house; all of his grandmother's belongings were where she had left them, but she was no longer here. They walked through the living room, and instinctually Finn's eyes sought out the deep gouge his skateboard had made in the wooden floorboards in the doorway leading into the kitchen during the first and last time he had skated in the house that summer.

"Whose furniture is this?" Finn asked.

"Oh, it belonged to the woman who used to live here." She looked away from Finn, but continued talking. "She was such a sweet person. She went to my church, but Wahoo is so small that everybody knows everybody else. Poor thing died of a heart attack in her sleep, but the nurse who took care of her said she went peacefully, which is a blessing."

Her family members gave us permission to show the house with the furniture and everything else still here since it looks so much homier and lived in this way."

They passed through the upstairs hallway, and Finn could picture the swan lamp he had knocked off the side table against the wall. The realtor looked back at him and smiled.

"Don't worry, if you choose to buy this house, everything will be cleared out by the time you are ready to move in. There will be an estate auction at the end of this month."

Finn nodded like he understood. They finished the tour, although Finn no longer wanted to be in the house, and he thanked her politely and told her he would be in touch as he tucked her business card into the back pocket of his kakis. He pulled out his cell phone and was calling his mother before he sat down in the car.

"Why are you having an estate sale for Grandmother's things?"

"Because it seemed the easiest thing to do, dear. Your Uncle Roy inherited the house and it was his decision. Are you on your cell phone?"

"Why didn't you let me look at her will?"

"Finn, you're a bankruptcy lawyer, not an estate lawyer. Why would you have wanted to look at your Grandmother's will? What good would it have done?"

"There are estate lawyers at my firm, Mother. I could have had one of them look at it to make sure everything was in order."

"Don't be silly, everything was in order, we made sure of that when she became ill. And stop ignoring me. Are you on your cell phone?"

"Yes, I'm on my cell phone. Who cares?"

"Well, I hope you are not driving while you a talking. It's dangerous and a lot of accidents happen from that." She paused and took a deep breath. "Finn, I am sorry that things happened like this, whether you believe me or not. I just thought I should protect you because you were so upset when your father died."

He ignored her last statement. "You weren't like this when your mother died; you're only acting like this because it's dad's mom. I'm just glad he's not alive to see this." Finn hung up the phone.

He wanted to scream, long and loud. He picked up the letter his mother had written him and that for some reason, he had brought with him. He opened it and skimmed the note

until he found the name of the funeral home. He drove around until he spotted a gas station and went in to ask for directions.

The funeral home was whitewashed clapboard and came complete with a tower and gables. It was a throwback structure from a different era, and seemed an odd place to house a place of business. He went inside and was immediately enveloped by the hushed atmosphere. Thick carpet muffled his steps, heavy drapery and thickly brocaded chairs seemed to absorb all sound. It was the kind of place people instinctively spoke in whispers. He walked into a room off to the side that didn't seem to be a viewing room, and found himself looking at different models of caskets. He stood transfixed by the sight until a movement he caught out of the corner of his eye made him turn his head. A man about his age entered the room with a helpful expression on his face. His hair was cut like one of the Beatles', and his suit, though not old, seemed to be an old style. He fit with the house.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked with a slight rising of his dark brown eyebrows. They seemed to cut through his pale forehead.

"Um, yes. I'm looking for a Mr. Carroway."

"I'm Jim Carroway." He smiled pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Finnigan McCollough, I was told that you handled the cremation of my grandmother about two months ago."

"Yes. Mary McCollough. I can't quite recall her plot number, though. I'll have to check my records. Why don't you follow me back to my office?" He started to turn away, and then paused. "I am assuming, of course, that is what you came for?"

Finn nodded and followed him back through the side door he had emerged from, and along a back hallway. They came to the office, and Carroway offered him some coffee. Finn declined, and sat down while Carroway went around the large cherry wood desk and began to flip through a thick record book lying on his blotter.

Carroway pulled out a photocopied map that showed the cemetery grounds that lay in back of the funeral home and the church that bordered them on another side. He walked around the desk to Finn and leaned over him, handing him the map. "This is where our columbarium is," he said, pointing to a large area not too far from the building. "This is where your grandmother's urn was placed, in number 525. I'll show you back to the front door; from there you

can just walk around the right side of this building. Enter the gates from there and follow the main path. Please let me know if you have any other questions."

He left Finn at the front door holding the map.

Finn followed his directions and walked along the cemetery path, taking in the neatly kept grounds, the bright flowers that lay on some of the plots. The few trees that dotted the grounds rustled gently in the spring breeze. He came to the columbarium, a big marbled structure made of pale, creamy stone shot through with rivers of gold. He found number 525, and touched the locked brass door, made warm by the sun, and tried to picture the urn it contained.

He backed away, and sat down on a bench in front of it, keeping his eyes on the 525. He hoped that she hadn't been in any pain, and that she wasn't in any pain now. He fought to contain the panic rising within him, churning his stomach. He remembered now the nights of terror that followed his father's death when he had just begun college. The nights where he sat on his bed, in the dark, waves of heat flashing through him at the thoughts of what it would be like to be dead, of what waited for him. He remembered his attempts to find comfort in religion, and when that

failed, of trying to simply forget, absorbing himself in school and then work so he wouldn't think about it. Those feelings came flooding back to him now. He sat for a long time, paralyzed, watching the shadows lengthen around him, and jumped when a hand fell on his shoulder.

Carroway stood next to him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to see if you were all right; you've been out here for so long."

Finn looked up at him. "Yes, I'm fine."

"You look haunted." He paused. "The cemetery is closing; they lock the gates at night. Would you like to come in for some coffee?"

Finn nodded, and rose from the bench, realizing that his butt and thighs had grown numb from the stone bench and the cooling night air. They went inside and back to Carroway's office, where he poured two cups of coffee.

"Cream or sugar?" he asked politely.

"Black will be fine."

They sipped their coffee in silence for a moment, and then Carroway cleared his throat. "I have some training in grief counseling..." he began delicately. "Would you like to talk about your grandmother's death?"

Finn looked up, surprised. "Um, no, that's okay. I mean, I'm okay; it's all just been a little sudden. Too much to take in at once."

"But wasn't your grandmother almost ninety? And it's been almost two months."

"It's not that. It's that I only recently found out about her death."

"Ah, it's difficult when one is not allowed to grieve at the proper time, right after the death."

Finn paused at Carroway's sudden formality, and blurted out, "That sounded like it came straight from a manual."

Carroway's face relaxed and he chuckled. "It did, actually."

Finn relaxed too. "You might want to tone it down next time."

Carroway sat back in his chair and regarded him thoughtfully. "I'd like to show you something that might help." He got up and walked to the left side of his office. He drew back the wood paneling to reveal a bank of television monitors. Finn walked over to him, and as he got closer, he could see that they were security monitors of the funeral home.

"There's one for each room; for some reason funeral homes are prime targets for robberies. This is how I knew you were in the display room this afternoon." He pointed at one of the screens. "Right now there is a memorial service going on, would you like to take a look?"

Finn moved closer to the screen, and stared as he watched the tiny images of people enter the room, saw how some went up to the casket, while others skirted to the edges of the room and avoided looking at it right away and then made furtive glances in its direction. He watched the people greet each other, hug and kiss cheeks, shake hands, shake their heads. He watch some sit quietly in the chairs set up, some weeping and wiping at their faces with tissues, some just sitting, faces pointed straight ahead. He watched for a long time, but when the memorial service began, he turned away and felt guilty.

Finn turned around, and saw Carroway sitting in his chair, watching him. He had almost forgotten he was there.

"How do you feel now?"

"I'm not sure," Finn said.

"You want to know, don't you?" It wasn't really a question.

"What do you mean?"

"You want to know what happens next. After you die. I could see it in your face when you were in the cemetery. You looked scared."

"I really don't know what you are talking about. Maybe I should leave." Finn made his way to the door.

"I know of something that could help, if you're interested," Carroway said to his back. Finn paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Meet me back here at eleven tonight, and I'll show you."

Finn looked at him over his shoulder and met Carroway's eyes. He nodded and then left.

After driving around for a while, he found a McDonald's and stopped for something to eat. He found a newspaper and read every word while he drank cup after cup of coffee, trying to kill time. Around 10:30, the inside closed and they switched to drive-through only, and Finn had to drive around again. He drove up to the funeral home just as it hit eleven, and he heard the nearby church bells begin to chime. There were other cars in the parking lot, and he grew slightly nervous. He went up to the door, walked in, and stopped in the entranceway. Men and women milled around, drinking wine and chatting softly. The people were dressed soberly in dark clothing. A young boy,

about eight or nine, sat in one of the armchairs placed off to the side in the foyer. His shaggy brown hair flopped in his eyes, and his legs stuck off the edge of the chair: his pants were too short, revealing green socks slouched around his ankles. He sat reading a book, ignoring everything going on around him. Finn spotted Carroway, and went over to him.

"Ah, Finnigan. You made it to our funeral directors meeting; I'm so glad." He smiled.

The others began to look at their watches and file into one of the viewing rooms.

"You're just in time," Carroway said, placing a hand on his back to lead him into the room. "It's just about to start."

He went into the room and saw that chairs were set up in neat rows. He sat with Carroway near the back, and waited as a man walked up to the podium at the front of the room. The speaker welcomed everyone.

"I'm very glad to see everyone here tonight, especially the newcomers. I would like to start with a quote from Francois de La Rochefoucauld."

He cleared his throat and placed a pair of glasses on the tip of his nose, looking nothing less than a college professor about to begin a lecture.

"Neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily by the eye." He looked up after that and gave a quick grin. "Now for our first reading, I would like to introduce Mr. Green from Chatham's Funeral Home in Omaha."

Mr. Green approached the podium, a large, beefy man with a flushed face. His thick fingers unfolded a piece of paper he drew from his coat pocket. He began to read:

The world crumbles away;
Crumbling blackness, the light fades.
A bird's shrill cry. The moon sinks slowly
Below the unforgiving horizon; the stars are deserted.
Sightless eyes haunt me; the touch of pale, cold
Flesh. Streaks of unnatural color;
The perfume of embalming fluid. Viewing at 8.

Finn listened, trying desperately not to laugh. He looked around at the serious faces around him, and took deep breathes to control himself. He watched in disbelief as reader after reader got up to read original poems on the subject of death and funerals and things related, in some kind of macabre literary reading. Finn shifted uncomfortably in his seat, not sure of what to do.

Carroway put a hand on his leg and whispered, "Not much longer now."

Then, the first speaker stood up again and announced that it was 11:45, and things should get started.

"I would like to end on La Rochefoucauld: Hope is the last thing that dies in man; and though it be exceedingly deceitful, yet it is of this good use to us, that while we are traveling through life it conducts us in an easier and more pleasant way to our journey's end."

Everyone stood, and Finn stood with them and followed as they walked down a side hallway and through a door, down a set of stairs and into a cavernous basement. He could smell the dampness as he descended the stairs. A slight chill radiated off the rough stone walls, and the bare overhead lights washed everyone in harsh light, but it was not enough to prevent deep shadows from forming in the corners. Finn shivered slightly. The room also had a faint disinfectant smell, reminding him of a hospital, and he wrinkled his nose at it. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and let the people flow around him. Carroway materialized at his shoulder. "This is where we do the embalming and other prep stuff like that."

Rows of cots were set up, isolated from each other and set with a small white pillow at the head of each bed. People began to lie down on the cots, and Carroway led Finn over to one in the back. "It's your first time and you probably want a little distance," he explained.

"What the hell is going on here?" Finn hissed, trying to keep his voice down.

"You said you wanted to know. This is one way we have developed. You'll see what happens. Now sit down and I'll be right back."

No one had really noticed Finn before in the reading, but now he was getting some looks. He tried to smile back and act like everything was normal. He sat down to wait.

Carroway returned carrying a slim vial of dark green liquid.

"What now?" Finn asked him.

"Now we wait for midnight."

"Why midnight?"

"Because that's when the best things happen."

They waited in silence, and then they heard the church bells faintly through the thick walls of the basement. Finn turned his head to see the high windows that dotted the walls near the ceiling, but all he could see was a flat

blackness reflecting the light within. Carroway, who was sitting on a folding chair next to his cot, turned to him and handed him the vial. "Drink this," he commanded.

Finn took it in hand, but hesitated. He looked around and saw that the others on the cots were shooting back the liquid and then stretching out on the cots, settling in, getting comfortable.

"What's is it?"

"Oh, a mixture of things we had lying around down here." Carroway gave a bark of laughter and it echoed in Finn's ears. "Now, bottom's up," he said.

Finn took a deep breath and tossed the liquid back in his throat and swallowed. He felt the liquid burn down his throat and into his stomach. Carroway grabbed his shoulder, guiding him until he was lying down. Finn could still hear his laughter ringing in his ears. He lay looking at the ceiling with its exposed structural beams. After some minutes, the room slowly began to spin, gaining speed until it made him dizzy. He closed his eyes, praying he wouldn't throw up. He felt a numbness start in his hands and feet and work its way through his body; he couldn't even lift his arm. Darkness crept over him and he felt disconnected from his body. A blank nothingness

pressed into him. He tried to scream, but couldn't. He was floating away, and couldn't think anymore, could only feel the darkness.

The air around him felt thick, and he moved his arms around, trying to feel something. He felt his body move with the motion of his arms, and he moved them again. His body surged forward, and then he kicked his legs and arms in a breast-stroke and felt himself swimming through the thick, black air. He swam strongly without direction until he saw a dim light up ahead. He moved towards it until it got brighter and he broke through the darkness into sunlight. He blinked and looked around, making treading motions in the air to keep himself afloat. He turned himself around, and saw his grandmother standing behind him. She smiled at him, and he smiled back. She looked exactly as he remembered her. She pulled her hand out from behind her back, and in it, she clutched a daisy the size of a man's head, the petals a pristine white. The yellow center glowed like the sun. She offered it to him and he took it, bringing it up to his face, smelling the sweet fragrance. She smiled at him again, and beckoned for him to follow her, her hand making a languorous back and forth motion. She turned and walked away, moving away in a

landscape that looked like a park scene viewed through the heat waves radiating off a camp fire, making everything blurry and wavy, and he tried to follow but couldn't make himself move. He tried to call out to her, but no sound came out. He was frozen in place, holding the flower she gave him, as he watched her grow smaller in the distance, taking the light with her.

He didn't know how long he floated like that, suspended in blankness, not moving, not thinking. Slowly, feeling returned to his limbs. When he was able, he bolted upright. Blinking, he looked around, not seeing the stone walls of the damp basement, but the cream colored walls of a generic hotel room. He surveyed the room for a moment, taking in the rose colored drapes that were blocking out the sun peeking in strips around the curtains. The television on the dresser was off and the bathroom door was cracked open. He didn't remember coming here. He thought back to after he drank the vial of liquid, and bile rose in his throat as he remembered watching his grandmother walk away from him. He was still fully dressed. He pulled on his shoes that he found neatly placed by the bed, grabbed his wallet sitting on the dresser and the plastic key card that was next to it, and left the room. He walked down a

hallway and ended up in the lobby. He went up to the desk and waited for the clerk. When the clerk came back, he smiled at Finn.

"Can I help you sir?"

"Yes, I think I need to pay for my room from last night."

"Yes, Mr. McCollough. We already have your credit card information, so we'll just ring it up when you check out. Unless you are ready to check out now?"

"Um, no, I don't think so, not just yet."

"Well, we're not booked up, so feel free to stay as long as you need to. There's no hurry."

"Thank you." Finn turned away, but then turned back. "Would you be able to tell me how to get to Dyke's Funeral Home from here?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Take a right when you leave this parking lot. Stay on that road until you see the elementary school, then take a left at the road right past that. You'll be back on Main Street. After that, it's a straight shot down the road."

"Thank you, now I remember."

Finn left and got into his car. He found his way back to Dyke's, and went inside, knowing that Carroway would

soon appear. He looked around while he waited; everything was once again quiet and orderly, no one would guess that there had been over thirty people here last night. He saw the armchair where the little boy had sat reading. Finn hadn't once seen him look up from his book; his only movements had been the turning of the pages and occasionally groping for a can of ginger ale that had rested by his chair, and he didn't remember seeing him in the basement after the poetry reading.

Carroway silently materialized from one of the rooms. Finn walked over to him, and at Carroway's surprised look, he realized how disheveled his appearance must be.

"What happened last night?" Finn wanted to yell.

"You remember."

"I don't remember going to the hotel."

"Oh. After you woke up, you were tired, so we drove you to the hotel, and you checked in and went to bed."

"That can't be what it is like," Finn said, abruptly switching topics. He didn't care how he ended up in the hotel.

"Can't it?" Carroway asked. "Did you like it?"

"No, I didn't like it," he hissed. "I don't know what happened, but it was just brought on by the drugs, it didn't mean anything."

"No? Why don't you try it again? Tonight."

Finn stilled. He had to know.

"Come back just before midnight."

Finn left and went back to the hotel. He took a nap and then got food at the restaurant attached to the back of it. He mindlessly flipped through the cable channels, nothing holding his attention, flashes of the all encompassing darkness returning to him, forcing him to get up and pace the room.

At a quarter to midnight, he pulled back into Dyke's parking lot. There was only one other car there. He went in and found Carroway waiting for him. He smiled and said, "Right on time."

They went down to the basement where there was only one cot set up in the middle of the room. He directed Finn to sit down, and disappeared into another section of the basement. He returned a few minutes later with a vial of the dark green liquid, and stood by the cot. Finn reached for it, but Carroway pulled it away.

"No, not until midnight."

They waited in silence; Finn was tense. He started a bit when they finally heard the church bells toll, and then Carroway handed him the vial. He drank it, and then lay down. He felt the spinning and the numbness return, the liquid burned in his stomach. He closed his eyes and saw tiny pinpoints of light appear. The light began to swirl in front of his eyes; suddenly, he was bombarded by images. Memories, starting when he was very young, flashed before him, jolting his brain. Memories of birthdays and graduations and friends and lovers. Good memories and bad memories, without pattern, came to him, so that he was laughing and crying at the same time. He relived his seventh birthday; a surprise party held in the park. He saw his high school graduation, saw his father and mother together. He was detached from it now, and could see the strain between them that he hadn't noticed at the time. He saw his father's funeral, and then jumped to his first date with Charlene when she introduced him to the small Italian restaurant that had the best angel hair pasta in the city. It was like a personal movie shown just to him. It went on for what seemed hours. When it finally faded away, like a movie projector at the end of its reel, he opened his eyes, and he was lying on his back, once again staring up at the

ceiling in his hotel room. This time he was not surprised to find himself there. He put a hand to his face and felt tears on his cheek. He thought about what he had seen. He rolled over onto his side, thinking. He still hadn't lost his fear, he could still feel it lurking in the back of his mind, and he tried to push away from it. He decided that he would have to go again. He spent the rest of the day in a state somewhere between awake and sleep, listening to outside noises intrude into his room, the murmuring of the next room's television comforting. When it was nearing midnight, he went over to the funeral home.

Like last night, Carroway's car was the only other one in the parking lot. He hadn't called Carroway, but when he pulled on the front door, it wasn't locked and opened silently. Carroway was sitting in the same chair as last night, waiting for him. He stood when Finn walked in.

"I had a feeling that you would be back."

"I need to do it again."

They went down to the basement and waited. This time when Finn took the liquid, the burning was familiar and he knew what to expect. This time when he began to see something, it stayed indistinct for a long time. He began to look around him, and his vision began to clear somewhat.

He was in a room with other people, and he heard a woman crying. He took in his surroundings and found himself in a hospital room. The white walls were blank, and he could see a tray of shiny, sterile instruments laying on a tray. A nurse brushed past him, her green scrubs rustling as she hurried towards the bed. A woman lay in the bed, her body bowed with pain, her stomach swollen and tight. He couldn't see her face clearly. Someone commanded her to push, and then it was silent again. Someone turned to him, handed him something. He grasped the bundle of cloth and felt it move; he heard a far off voice saying, "Congratulations, it's a boy. Now your name will live on."

Finn tried to lift the baby closer to his face, trying to see him more clearly. His vision began to fade and he struggled against it. He was breathing hard. He blinked and looked around, his vision clear. He was in the basement and he realized he was awake. Next to him, the front two legs of Carroway's chair hit the floor with a thud from the reclining position it had been propped up in. Finn turned towards him as Carroway's magazine slid to the floor. His face was startled.

"That doesn't usually happen," he said.

"I have to go," Finn said, still breathing hard. He scrambled off the table, but was still dizzy and almost fell. He leaned against the cot.

"I don't think you should try to go anywhere right now, the drugs are still in your system."

"No, I have to go now." He was frantic and staggered towards the stairs leading to the main level. Carroway grabbed his arm, led him up, and helped him towards the door.

"Maybe you should at least have some coffee. I can make some."

"No, I need to go. Some fresh air will help."

Finn stumbled down the front steps to his car. He leaned on the door handle for a moment, breathing in deep draughts of air, clearing his head. He needed to go home. He started his car and saw from the dashboard clock that it was almost two. No one else was on the road when he pulled onto the highway and headed back to Iowa, a million thoughts racing through his head. He reached Des Moines about five o'clock and went to Charlene's apartment building. When he got there, he leaned hard on the buzzer, desperate to see her. She finally answered and once she realized who it was, let him in. When he got off the

elevator, she was waiting by her apartment with the door open, her robe tightly belted across her waist, her sleep-messed hair tucked behind her ears. She was looking at him as if she had never seen him before.

"Where have you been? No one has heard from you in days. I called your mother. I called your secretary; she was practically crying she was so worried about you. I thought you might be dead; I called the police, Finn. And, you look horrible. What happened?"

He waved away her questions, and took her by the arm, leading her inside. "Let's sit down."

They sat down on the couch facing each other, and he grasped her shoulders. "Charlene, I've been doing a lot of thinking about things." He took a deep breath and got off the couch and down on one knee. "Charlene, I want to marry you. I want to start a family. Will you marry me?"

She stared, open-mouthed, at him for a moment, and then hurled herself in his arms. "Yes! Yes! Of course I will! I've waited so long for you to ask me." She clasped him to her, but then drew back to look at him. "Finn, you're shaking." Her voice softened as her statement became a question. She lifted a hand to wipe the moisture off his face. "I never thought you would be so emotional."

She threw her arms around him with renewed vigor. "I'm so happy, too!" she cried.

What You Can't Leave Behind

Mama always told me never to let a place own me. She would push her tired, droopy face close to mine, and whisper that if you let a place own you, it would break you. The land would steal your soul. But I knew she was wrong. Daddy always said that once you buried someone in the ground, that's where you belonged, and I knew he was right. He would tweak one of my braids and say that I sprang right out of the red clay of the hills instead of being born, came right from the ground, and that's how I got my red hair. And I knew that I would always live here.

Sometimes I would dance around in the loose dirt by our house and the wind and my feet would kick up the grit and I would whirl around with the dirt mixed with the dust of relatives long gone and buried on this land, and that way I could dance with grandma and grandpa to the ancient beat of the Indian drums that echoed from far away. You

could feel the drumbeat in your heart if you stood still and listened really hard. Mama would say that if I wasn't good, the Indians would come and get me. I knew she was wrong.

She and Daddy are gone now, buried in the ground with the rest of them; Mama when I was nine and Daddy when I was eleven, and last year Aunt Sally and Uncle Paul came to the farm to live with me. Paul made moonshine in the back shed and drank most of it before he could sell it, and Sally would sneak into the shed early in the morning and drink the dregs of the distiller in quick gulps, getting the last of the grain alcohol. I heard it all going on as I lay tense in my bed, a wooden wedge jammed under the door of my bedroom so Paul couldn't stumble up to it in the middle of the night and get in. During the day Sally would watch me suspiciously, muttering that nothing good could come from my Daddy.

Monday meant it was time to collect the eggs from the hen house to sell to the grocer in town. The henhouse was dark and cool, shaded from the hot August sun. I moved quietly down the rows, guided by the strip of light coming in from the open door. As I reached for an egg the room darkened, the sun blocked. I turned and saw Paul standing

unsteadily in the opening, smiling at me. His dirty overalls hung on his frame, one strap undone and hanging down his front; his graying hair was slicked back with grease, and his watery eyes squinted in the dimness, trying to see me. I ignored him, returning to my task, but he rushed across the room and grabbed my arm, spinning me around, making me drop the egg in my hand. Egg splattered on my bare legs and on his shoes, but he didn't even look down. Neither did I. I kept my eyes trained on his blurry, glazed brown ones, thinking it was like staring down a mad dog. He shifted his grip on my arm, holding tighter.

"How ya doin'" he asked, breathing hard on my face.

"Take your hands off me, Paul."

"Now don't go makin' a fuss. You'll like it."

"I'll scream."

"Who's goin' help you? These chickens? Your dumb dog? Your Aunt Sally?" He giggled.

He was right. I drew back and kicked him hard in the shins, then reached into my basket and threw an egg at his face. He howled, and stumbled backward clutching my shirtsleeve. I pushed him, and my sleeve ripped free. I dodged him as he fell, and ran out of the house and into

the yard, almost slamming into Sally. She caught me by the shoulders to steady both of us.

"What the hell were you doing in there?" She practically screamed at me.

"Nothin'," I muttered and tried to break free.

She dug her fingers into my shoulders. "I know what you were doing. I've seen you strutting around here, showing off! I know you want him."

I shook my head and tried to pry her fingers off of me.

"He's your uncle! You're sick!" She was screeching now. She threw me down in the dirt and made to kick me, but missed. She pointed her finger at me. "Get the hell out of here! I don't ever want to see you here again!"

Paul came out of the henhouse and started moving towards us.

"Get!" she screamed.

I didn't want Paul to get any closer to us. I scrambled through the dirt and got my feet under me, and ran for the woods that bordered my land, yelling for Jake as I ran. Jake barked, but I'd forgotten that I tied him up while I was with the hens so he wouldn't follow me in there and bother them. He strained at the rope, but

couldn't break free, and I knew that I'd have to come back for him later in the night.

I ran as fast as I could, barely feeling my legs move under me. I hit the border of the woods, and the thick pine trees closed around me, but I kept running, feeling my feet slip on the layer of dried pine needles on the ground. I ran until I thought my lungs would burst and the muscles in my legs burned. I collapsed on the ground, my chest heaving, trying to draw in air, and sweat, mixed with tears I didn't know I had cried, ran down my face. I figured I must be almost a mile from the house now, and I knew no one would come after me. This wasn't the first time I had escaped to the shaded protection of the woods, but this time I didn't know when it would be safe to go back. I curled up at the base of the huge old pine tree beside me to wait.

I must have fallen asleep, 'cause I woke with a start and it was all dark around me. I couldn't believe I had slept all day. I sat up and pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them, trying to decide what time it was. Being surrounded by trees made things confusing. I finally stood, dusting myself off, thinking I should take my chances and head home based on the fact I was getting

cold and my stomach was rumbling. I began walking, taking my time, wandering through the trees in the direction of the house, when I heard the snapping of a twig off to my side. I stopped still, and tried not to breathe. I didn't hear anything, except for the wind moving through the branches. It was a lonely forest at night. I started walking again, and after a moment, I heard noises again. I tried to ignore them, but they were too insistent, and I stopped again. This time, I could still hear the rustling, and could follow the noises as they moved from my right and circled around in an arc until they stopped almost directly in front of me

I peered about, but could see nothing. I knew now that some kind of animal was following me, but I didn't know how afraid to be since I didn't know what it was yet. I felt a brief flash of hope for a second that it could be Jake, that he had managed to get loose after all, but I knew that wasn't it. My Daddy had taught me to tie rope knots and I had never had one come loose ever. I stayed completely still, eyes straining in the night, until the noises came again and got closer. The forest was lit by streams of moonlight that filtered through the treetops, creating pools of light. Finally, from out of the cover of

the trees, the head of a wolf appeared. Now I was scared. The wolf started to growl low in its throat, and moved forward a few steps into a stream of watery moonlight. It slunk low to the ground, and I could see it more clearly; it was real thin, with its ribs showing through its matted fur. It didn't look pretty, probably starving since the drought had driven most of the deer away. It came closer, its yellow eyes sunk into its head, but burning brightly to me, and I could see that it limped. Probably why it was separated from the pack, and I knew it was alone since I would have known a long time ago if a pack of wolves had been following me rather than just one skinny, sick one. I knew I only had one option, so I turned and ran. I ran full out, like I had from Sally, my mind completely blank except for the thought of getting away. After a growl and an angry bark, the wolf chased me, and I could hear it crashing through the underbrush, gaining.

Off in the distance, I saw a flicker of orange light. I sprinted towards it, arms pumping wildly. As I got closer, it got bigger, orange and yellow, wavering, and I realized it was a campfire. I needed to reach that fire, as I could tell that the light was so bright, it had to be more than one fire, which meant more than one person. I

could feel the wolf right behind me, but I refused to look back to see. I knew in a second that I wasn't going to make it -- I was so close, just about 50 yards away, but the wolf was too close. I swerved off to my left, gaining a few seconds since the wolf wasn't expecting it, and straight at the tree in front of me. It had a few low branches, and I lunged up at one, flinging myself at it, and felt a rush as my fingers grasped rough bark and held on. I swung my body up and onto the branch in a familiar move I had done many times, since I often scrambled up a tree when Paul would come searching for me. I quickly climbed up a few more branches, and then looked down to see what the wolf was doing. He snarled, throwing himself at the base of the tree. I started shaking and clutched my branch tighter. I watched him for a while, until he grew tired and defeated, and slunk off. Once he had stopped making all the noise, I realized that I could hear something else: music. It was faint, but I knew the sounds of a guitar and a banjo when I heard them. With the music, I could hear singing, too. I carefully made my way around the branches until I was on the other side of the tree, looking at the flickering campfire light again, and knew it was coming from there.

I checked the ground below to make sure it was safe. I didn't see or hear anything, so slipped down the tree and crept along the ground. As I came closer, the light grew brighter and the singing louder. There were a lot of people, I could tell, and they seemed to be in a fairly large clearing in the woods, one that I had never seen before -- but I had never been this far away from my house before. I stopped at the edge of trees surrounding the clearing, and crouched down. After the darkness of the woods, for a moment the light blinded me. After my eyes adjusted, I had to blink a few times to make sure I was really seeing what I saw. I had found a gypsy camp. Three wagons were parked in the clearing with horses hobbled nearby, and there seemed to be people everywhere. They milled around, a whirl of bright colors, singing and laughing to the music, with a few people in the middle of the camp dancing by the fire. A few kids ran around with dogs at their heels. It made me miss Jake.

I didn't know how long I was there at the boundary of the camp, watching the happiness that had sprung up in the middle of this forest, but I had no warning when a hand suddenly clamped down on my shoulder. I gave a squeak of surprise, for in that moment, in the weight of the hand

against my skin, I had felt the sharp scrap of the wolf's teeth - but it was just a human hand.

I slowly turned and saw a man standing behind me, seeming huge from my crouched position. He had thick dark hair slicked back from his forehead, and his black eyes gleamed in the light from the campfires. His skin was tan and he had a flush of pink on his cheeks. He wore bright swathes of color, a shiny red vest and blue pants. I stood up, but he still seemed too tall. I tensed and made a move to dart past him. But he grabbed me around the waist and slung me over his shoulder, and walked into the camp. A few men looked up at his appearance.

"Luca, did you find the wolf?" they cried.

The man laughed. "No, but I did find this!"

He slung me off his shoulder and set me on my feet on the ground, but kept a hold of me. I struggled to get away. Luca laughed again. "She doesn't look like a wolf, but I bet she can fight like one!" He leaned down to me. "Don't be afraid," he whispered. He gave me a nudge and we started walking away, and the men seemed to lose interest and went back to their conversation.

Luca led me to one of the wagons and gestured for me to go in. I hesitated, wondering what my chances were to

escape without drawing the notice of the entire camp, but in the end decided to go inside. He followed me in. The wagon was lit with a soft glow. Inside, a woman sat at a table with an oil lamp nearby, and on the table was a glittering pile of beads that she was stringing on a strap of leather. She looked up, bright blue eyes questioning as she pushed back her thick curly black hair that tumbled over her shoulders. She was so beautiful; I wanted to touch her.

"Elaine, look what I found in the woods." Luca's voice was quiet now.

"Alone?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Come here," she said to me. I crossed the small room to stand before her. "What were you doing in the woods by yourself?"

"I was lost, ma'am," I whispered. "I was chased by a wolf and ended up here."

"And you got away?" she asked. "You must have been very brave."

I nodded.

She looked over my head at Luca. "So this is what the wolf was howling about."

I turned around to see him nod.

"Where are your parents?"

To my surprise, I found myself shaking my head. "My parents are dead."

She made sympathetic noises in her throat and reached out and ran a hand down my hair. "So young, you poor thing. Well, you must be hungry after your ordeal. Luca, bring her some food."

I hungrily ate the thick stew he brought me, and afterwards, they didn't seem to be in much of a hurry to ask me questions about where I came from and such, but instead tucked me into a bed set into a nook in the wagon, and talked in low voices around the table with the beads. I should have been nervous, surrounded by strangers in an unfamiliar place, but now I was warm and had a full belly and was nowhere near my aunt and uncle, and I felt myself drifting off.

I woke with a start a few hours later. It was a trick I could do. I could tell myself right before I went to sleep that I only wanted to sleep for three hours, and usually I would wake up three hours later. I could tell from the stillness that it was still nighttime, and that the people who had been singing and dancing outside earlier

where no longer there. I was dead-tired and my eyes kept wanting to droop shut again, but I forced them open. I still needed to get Jake back.

I crept outside, knowing how to sneak around quietly from practice. The door to the wagon was well oiled and opened soundlessly. The night air was chilly now compared to the warmth of the wagon and the bed I had just left, but I kept moving. I crept away from the sleeping camp, and not even the dogs stirred.

I made sure I entered the forest from the direction I had left at the camp's edge, and started walking, praying that I was moving in the right direction. After a while, I thought things started to look familiar, but it could have been the forest and the night playing tricks on me. It started to feel as if I had been walking forever and that I would end up somewhere totally different. I started to worry that I wouldn't even be able to find the gypsy camp again. A few tears leaked down my face. I scrubbed them away and kept walking. Finally, I realized that things did look familiar and that I was really close to the edge of the forest that bordered my land. My steps slowed and I hunched down as I walked to make myself smaller. I came to the last trees and crouched down. No light came from the

house and it was quiet. I crawled forward, hoping if someone was watching that I looked like some kind of animal.

I made my way to the side of the house, and as I knelt with hands and knees in the dirt, I prayed to my parents resting under this land to keep me safe. I moved around the house, hugging the foundation, until I could see the henhouse and off to side, Jake sat, watchful, still tied to the stake in the ground. I wanted to cry when I saw him; I was so glad to see him. I crawled away from the house, and from the direction of his face, I knew Jake was looking at me. A low whine reached me, and my heart stopped for a second. Then, it started to beat even faster, which I didn't think was possible. He had to stay quiet until we were gone from here.

When I reached him, he started to dance around a little, but when I grabbed his muzzle to show him to stay silent, he stilled. I ran my hands over his head, and when I felt sticky wet hair by his ear, I knew that they had hurt him. I undid the rope around his neck, and not caring about being quiet anymore, just wanting to be away from here, I started to sprint away with Jake bounding along next to me. He gave a couple of quick, happy barks, but we

just kept running. A little ways back into the woods, I could see that it was starting to get light out. I stopped and crouched next to Jake, who tried to lick every inch of my face. He didn't look too worse for the wear, and I threw my arms around his neck and buried my face in his fur, taking a deep breath.

I realized that we had to get back to the camp, and also that I would need an explanation for having Jake with me. Now that the forest was lightened by the first pearly strands of dawn, I could follow that path I had made during my trip in the night. I was thankful for the thick layering of old pine needles that had marked my tracks. By the time we reached the camp, the sky was really light and I knew people would be waking soon. We made our way back to the wagon, and as I rounded a corner of another wagon, I could see Luca sitting on the steps to his.

I stopped dead, and so did Jake. My mind was racing with things to say, and I pushed aside all thoughts of just walking away since I could see Luca looking right at us. I moved forward, and Jake moved with me; sometimes he was real good at sticking close to my side. As we got closer, Luca just watched us.

"Was the bed not comfortable? And who is your friend? I was wondering why the dogs were whining a few minutes ago."

I opened my mouth to spin a tale about not being able to sleep and going for a walk and then finding Jake in the woods, but I didn't really want to tell that story. Instead, I sat down on the grass by the wagon, put my arms around Jake and started to bawl. Deep racking sobs struggled in my lungs, making my chest heave with the force. I heard Luca get up and come over to me; felt his hand on my back.

"There, there," he murmured. "It can't be all that bad. You can tell me if you want."

I began to run out of steam, all that walking with little sleep starting to take its toll. Jake had begun to whine nervously, so I tried to calm him. I looked up at Luca crouched over me, and found myself spilling the whole story. I told him everything about my parents dying, my aunt and uncle coming to live with me, the henhouse and how I ended up in the forest. Luca stayed quiet for the whole thing, and just rubbed my back. After I was done, he wiped my face with the bottom of his shirt, picked me up and carried me inside. He even held the door so Jake could

follow. He gave me a cup of milk to drink and then put me back into the bed. I heard Jake moving around by the side of the bed, and then he laid down with a thump. I was asleep before I could think anymore.

When I woke, the wagon was empty and Jake was gone. I slid out of bed, rubbed my face, and opened the door. I stepped out onto the first step, and I saw Luca and Elaine right outside, and he was feeding Jake scraps of food. Elaine saw me and motioned me over. I as I neared her, I could see by her face that Luca had told her my story, but I didn't care. She gave me a quick hug when I stood next to her, smoothed my hair down, and told me a story about Luca and Jake.

No one at the camp seemed to question my presence there, and Luca and Elaine never talked to me about going back to my farm. I still missed my land with a fever, and thought about it every night before I went to sleep. The gypsy camp was a fun place to be. Everyone always seemed happy. Every afternoon, a lot of the people scrambled onto a couple of the wagons, and they drove off. They always returned by the night, but I never knew where they went or what happened because I was never allowed to go. I think they went into town to sell some things, but they always

had funny stories about each other to tell, and food for dinner that night.

After I had been with the gypsies about two weeks, Luca called me over to him one night after dinner. He pulled me away from the singers and the dancers. We sat down in the grass.

"Maggie, we are leaving this place tomorrow."

I felt panic rise up at his words. "Leaving!" I yelled, my voice rising sharply and then cracking embarrassingly. "What do you mean?"

"No, no. It's okay, Maggie. We want you to come with us. We enjoy having you and Jake around. You two make our wagon not so quiet."

I stared at him. "I can't leave here. I belong here," I whispered.

Luca looked confused. "But you said that you never wanted to go back to your aunt and uncle. This is your chance. You should come with us." He tried to hug me, but I pulled away.

"You don't understand!" I was yelling, but didn't care. "It's my land! It belongs to me."

I stood up. "I can't leave here. It belongs to me." I repeated. I backed away from him.

"But Maggie, we want you to come with us. You'll be safe and happy."

I shook my head and kept backing away. Luca rose and walked towards me. I whirled around and fled back towards the forest, back through the dark shadows of the trees looming in the inky black of the night. Shards of moonlight fell through the thick canopy of branches and pierced the darkness in places. I ran as fast as I could. I ran back towards the place like I had run from it.

I could see the path now, and recognized the trees I passed. I ran for what seemed like hours. I skidded to a halt at the edge of my land, and looked at it as it stood sleeping in the moonlight. No sound came from it. And I wondered for the first time what Paul and Sally had thought when they woke up and found Jake missing the next day. I stood still and just watched the place to a long time. Then, I walked closer, feeling the dirt beneath my feet, feeling the life in it. This was my home, the place where I was born and was suppose to die. I was supposed to be buried in the family land along with Mamma and Daddy and all the rest. Although I would make sure that Sally and Paul were buried nowhere near here.

I pictured myself walking back into the house and into my room, climbing into my bed and sleeping, and then the look on Paul and Sally's faces when they saw me in the morning. It wouldn't be easy. I felt some familiar panic churn up inside me, and felt that hardness return to the pit of my stomach; things I hadn't felt since I had gotten Jake away from here. Right now, the farm lay sleeping and still in the frosty moonlight, edging it in silver, making it look better than it was. But I could close my eyes and see the place in the harsh noon sun, see the faded gray walls of the house, the paint peeling off the wood, the dusty yard. The roof was missing some shingles now and leaked in a good rain. Mamma's bright rows of flowers had died a long time ago, and the henhouse should have been replaced last summer. I shook my head. This didn't feel right. I looked down at the ground, at the dirt under me, at the history. Then, I reached down and grabbed great handfuls of dirt and shoved them into my pockets. I dusted off my hands and then ran out of there, back to the forest and the gypsy wagons.