

Sundowning

A STORY

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HANNAH AND I LEFT my father's cabin for the clinic at 5:00 a.m., after I woke him for his morning pills. Rotary sprinklers were clicking every few yards, spurting across checkered grass fairways. The air was crisp with dew and the smell of wet dirt. The first tee time wasn't for an hour. Growing up, on weekends when I visited him here, this had been my favorite time of day. He'd wake me at dawn and I'd tag along as he inspected each green, mending divots and raking sand bunkers. This was when the course was at its most beautiful, everything undisturbed, more scent than sound, more nature than sport.

Hannah and I hadn't planned on spending the night. We could have left earlier, but I didn't want to go until my father fell asleep. I had told Hannah that I was worried he'd try to go to the clubhouse or wander onto the course, eager to get in a few practice strokes before teeing off for a tournament that took place fifty years ago. She didn't argue; neither of us wanted to brave another silent car ride. It was after 1:00 a.m. by the time he passed out, finally exhausting himself with stories from his rookie season on the PGA Tour.

Any minute I was expecting a call from the resident coordinator at Mount Royal Assisted Living telling me a room was available. She had called the night before about a vacancy. Hannah and I rushed over to the cabin to pick up my father. By the time we arrived, the coordinator had left me a half-apologetic, half-I'll-be-damned message that so-and-so had pulled through and would be enjoying at least one more night at Mount Royal. My father had been on the wait list for nearly six months; every few weeks I'd get updates about how much closer he was to getting a room. How excited the men were—both staff and residents—that a championship golfer would be joining their community.

I'd rush through these calls, struggling not to picture a cooling body draped with a white sheet lying in the bed my father would soon occupy. There was something guilt inducing about waiting for someone to die—to leave messages at the home and check my voice mail every hour, like I was impatient for someone else's loss.

We passed the grave diggers a half mile from the club. Dozens of them congregated along the gravel roadsides, gradually blocking off the entrance beneath the cemetery's arched cast-iron gates. Most men were holding steaming Styrofoam cups, picket signs either stick side up or at their feet, vapor flashing from their open mouths. The only sign I could make out was: "No Funerals Today. All Processions Will Be Turned Away."

Hannah rolled down her window once we passed the cemetery, exhaling like she'd been holding her breath for the length of its grounds. She sank in her seat, thumbing the metallic jigsaw puzzle

pieces on her bracelet. We were college sophomores when I first brought her to Elmhurst on Thanksgiving to meet my father. Countless visits later, and she was no less rattled by the looming timber crosses with red poppies at their center and the columbarium walls filled with urns. Watching her squirm reminded me of the cemetery games my father taught me during car rides to and from the club. He'd make me hold my breath from the sight of the first burial plot, sticking up my thumbs like Fonzie, so that I didn't breathe in the spirits of the dead.

Hannah fiddled with the radio dial, searching for a song beneath the static. Her fingers were bent into a claw and her cheeks were red. I couldn't tell if it was from the cold weather or her lupus. I asked her how she was feeling.

She huffed into her hands. "Great."

It had become difficult to talk to each other since Hannah found out she was pregnant, at least when we were alone. No matter the topic—my father's health, the Braves' prospects, whether the census would redraw our voting district—she brought everything back to the baby. I'd segue to something else, only for her to segue back. It was like linguistic trapeze, until one of us gave in or gave up. I didn't know how to be optimistic without feeding her false hope. I hated the silence. I hated that it seemed like the safest course of action. It was easier when we were around friends; other lives became our distractions, and everything seemed more manageable when we weren't thinking about it.

The cotton folds of Hannah's sweatshirt bunched at her middle. She was wearing one of my belts. Even when she was sitting, it drooped off her jeans. I had told Hannah that her pants were too big when we left our house the night before. She told me it was better to have more room than less. She was ten weeks along, and looking worse each day.

Outside, the tree line thinned into a brief pink-blue horizon that soon vanished behind miles of windowless reinforced-concrete warehouses and strip malls. A song came on the radio, a drawling country tune.

"How long will it take?" Hannah asked.

"It's just a checkup. You know how it goes. Paperwork's going to be the longest part."

"I mean the strike."

"A day. Two at the most. The union's not giving in; they know no one's going to let the bodies pile up."

"What do they want?"

"A raise, for starters. Something like fifteen percent. Also time and a half on Christmas and Easter."

"No one gets buried on Christmas or Easter," she said.

"No one has a funeral. There's always digging."

Hannah curled up in her seat. "It's not right," she said, speaking into her window reflection.

"They deserve more money."

"Even if they do, this isn't the way to get it. It's not the families that aren't paying them."

I rubbed her hand. "It'll probably be over by the end of the day. No one wants this."

She pulled away and turned up the volume.

We were at the clinic by 6:30. The waiting room was empty. The receptionist came out from behind the desk to give Hannah a clipboard stacked with forms. She offered us coffee, and then went to get the doctor. Hannah sat, and I stood beside her. This was the one place where we were better off by ourselves. The silence was more tolerable than sitting across from eager couples, those giddy with the swelling progress of each trimester, slowly beginning to chart their lives in accordance with their child, and for whom anything felt possible. Those who reminded me of who I thought we'd be.

A nurse brought us to the exam room. Hannah went in first to change into a paper gown. I waited in the hallway until the doctor arrived. He greeted me warmly, and then I followed him inside.

ON THE WAY home we stopped to fill Hannah's prescriptions. When I came out of the pharmacy, she was standing against the car with her head back and a finger plugging her nostril. There was blood smeared along her lips and dribbling off her chin. She opened her mouth and her teeth glowed red. Her joints must have been on fire. I cushioned the back of her neck with my palm and pinched her nose with my handkerchief until the bleeding let up.

"It's just the cold," she said. "You know what it does to me."

"And what's going to happen when it gets colder?"

"I'm fine."

"That's all I want."

Hannah couldn't turn away, so she closed her eyes. Not too long ago we would drive to this strip mall on Friday nights and gorge on all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet before Electric Sliding through endless gutter balls at Rock 'n' Bowl. We would feed each other Swedish Fish at a midnight matinee, and then enjoy the fruity aftertaste as we made out. Looking at Hannah now, I struggled to pinpoint that happiness. Her body was swollen yet meager. Her hair had thinned. When I looked at her, all I saw were symptoms. I didn't know how to tell her to give up on having a child. It was easier for me to catch her in the act of illness and denial, to hold her and prolong the moment in the hope she'd realize that we didn't deserve to hurt like this. Maybe I was a coward, expecting her to take cues from my disappointment. After losing one child, it seemed ungrateful, even cruel, to agree to give up another. I wanted us to do right by each other, and for no one to be the bad guy.

At home, Hannah disappeared into the bathroom. I sliced up bananas and apples and blended up a smoothie laced with vitamins. She walked into the kitchen, wearing concealer around her nose and cheeks, covering up the butterfly rash that flared up whenever her immune system was weak. Her skin tone was muted and chalky, as if she were wearing a plaster molding of her own face.

Hannah asked if I was going in to work later.

"I'll make some calls from here. Check on a few permits."

"Will you start to clear out your office?"

The soft light from the ceiling fixtures caught only the sides of her face. For a moment, I wanted to pretend I hadn't heard her over the blender's low motor.

I handed her the smoothie. “I think we have some time.” I had converted the nursery into my office after we lost the baby. I had promised to change it back when we were ready. She held the glass flat in her palm, like she was refusing to drink it until I agreed.

“It wasn’t supposed to be forever,” she said. “You have to repaint the walls.”

“I’ll do it. When it’s time. We’re not there yet.”

Hannah drank the smoothie. Afterward, I walked her upstairs and helped her into bed. Her crochet hook was on the nightstand, strung with sky-blue wool yarn that fed into a tiny blanket in a granny-square design. Her needlework was meticulous, the stitches even and precisely spaced. She’d spend hours perfecting heart-patterned hats and booties no wider than a plum, then hold them up and wait for me to gush.

Hannah kissed me as I leaned down to prop up her pillow. “I feel fine, really. Don’t worry so much.”

I sat there for a few minutes until she closed her eyes. I kissed her forehead. It was warm. I put her crochet needle and the blanket in the dresser. In the bathroom, I found clumps of her hair knotting up the shower drain. Lupus raised the risk of miscarriage; we had known this all along, but I hadn’t worried about it during the first pregnancy. Hannah had taken every precaution to ensure she didn’t get sick. A strict diet augmented by vitamin supplements and bed rest at the first sign of fatigue. She had been healthy all along. Everything had been great, until suddenly it wasn’t and she knotted with clots. Now she was weak, constantly feverish, and I could see her body attacking itself.

I went into my office and closed the door. I called it my office, but it was more like a storage closet, chock-full of blueprints and surveying data for buildings I had designed. The room couldn’t stay a nursery or, worse, sit empty, so I made sure it was something mine. I came in here because Hannah never did. I could call her specialists and nutritionist if I thought her disease was flaring up. Even with the lights on, the copper paint made the room seem dark. For a moment, I stood there with my head against the door, listening for Hannah roaming the halls, and then I called her doctor. The receptionist told me that he was with a patient. She transferred me to a nurse whose tone was friendly and casual. She asked about work, mentioning her interest in architecture as if it were something I’d heard before. I couldn’t picture her face, though I was sure we had spoken dozens of times. All the nurses and doctors knew us. They didn’t forget the ones they lost.

I told her about Hannah’s bloody nose and fever. She said that Hannah needed to rest. “You should too,” she added.

“I’m fine,” I told her.

“It takes its toll. You can’t try and take it all at once.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant, but I wanted to get off the phone. I thanked her and asked that she leave a message for the doctor. I grabbed a mechanical pencil from my desk before going downstairs to sit in the den with my sketch pad.

Thinking about the baby used to make me consider every lesson and memory I wanted to replicate and impart. I’d imagine sitting up late to shape hunks of cardboard into planets for a solar-system

diorama, and beach parking lots in the dead of winter where I'd teach stick shift, and Sunday afternoons on the putting green that offered a chance to say, You're as good as your grandfather. To me, being a parent had seemed like being a kid again, but experiencing all the first times from the other side of the table. Now the thought made me catch my breath. It was like bracing for a punch that had already been thrown and would land any second.

The first time Hannah found out she was pregnant, when her pee left a single pink line on a thin plastic strip, she danced around the bathroom while I called everyone we knew. I had told them *we* were pregnant, almost singing the news into the receiver. Everyone laughed, reminding me of the chronic back pain and scalding heartburn that Hannah alone would suffer through. But even before she started showing, the baby was my every consideration. It grew inside her and around me. It was in Hannah's awkward sleeping positions that I gladly accommodated, in the time spent comforting her in front of the mirror when she failed to button another pair of slacks, promising her she'd never looked so beautiful. We emptied our house of alcohol, caffeine, and processed foods. We lined up her ultrasounds on the windowsills in our bedroom, and at sunrise they looked like sepia photographs. Each morning we marked off a day on our refrigerator calendar with a smiley face, then, starting at the sixteenth week, we'd annotate it after dinner with the number of kicks Hannah counted over the course of the day. I held a headphone against her belly button, blaring classical music because we'd read that it increases a baby's IQ. By the beginning of the third trimester I was reading *The Giving Tree* and *The Polar Express* to Hannah's belly until she fell asleep. It was *our* pregnancy. Our dreams and expectations. Our twenty-seven hours in the intensive care unit. Our nugget-size, motionless baby girl, glossy and hot with afterbirth. Our pain.

The doctor had convinced us to hold the baby, to nuzzle her and make peace and unlearn everything we had expected to feel. I pressed the baby against Hannah's chest, and we cradled her between us. Hannah cried into the fontanel. Neither of us wanted to hold her. Neither of us wanted to let go. The baby's face was sloped inward, her mouth blue and open as if she had died mid-sound. We took pictures. The nurses stamped footprints on thin cardboard and cut off a lock of black hair that was as soft as anything I've ever touched. We made a memory box and left it at the hospital. We cried and were of no comfort to each other. It was still our pregnancy, but I didn't know the gestation of loss.

We couldn't bury her. We didn't want a place to visit. I went alone to the cremation. I told Hannah that I sprinkled our baby into the harbor along which we used to walk, though I hadn't been able to go through with it. I had driven to the harbor, the fist-size tin of ashes at my feet, but I didn't stop. I kept going until I got lost on roads I knew I'd never drive over again. I pulled over at a park. A lake. A botanical garden, but everything beautiful felt wrong. I settled on a massive sweep of plowed field, miles of dirt trenches and seedbeds. I opened the urn, but didn't look inside it. I emptied it into the tract at my feet. I didn't cry. I started a prayer, but stopped when I realized I didn't know all the words.

I DROVE BACK to my father's cabin that afternoon. The last two miles took nearly thirty minutes. Police and news vans were parked along the roadside leading to the club. Protestors had shown up, spilling out onto the street and screaming that the grave diggers would rot in hell for their greed. A garbled voice crackled across the road, someone roaring through a bullhorn. A few times over the years the grave diggers' union had threatened to strike, but it never came to that. Each time a new contract had been agreed on without work stoppage. I wondered what would happen if someone died today, where the body would go.

Wading through the bottleneck, I reached into the glove compartment for a pack of Camels hidden behind the wrench kit. I pulled out a cigarette. *Collin* was written along the tobacco rod, the *i* dotted with a heart. The next one read *Lyla. Jude. Magnolia. Sari*. Hannah had written names on each one to remind me of my promise to quit smoking once we had a baby, a promise I made when we first got pregnant. Eight boys, six girls remained in the pack, all scrawled in trim calligraphy. Beautiful names that I imagined Hannah saying aloud to herself, names she uttered to see how they tasted on her tongue. I smoked *Cara* to its butt—a name I knew she'd never really considered.

My mother's Ford was in the driveway. Cardboard boxes propped up the trunk. Inside the car, suitcases with my father's clothing obscured the rear window. She had been coming out from Kipstown at least twice a week over the past year. It was a good three-hour drive. When I was a child, she'd bring me out to see him every other weekend, complaining the whole ride that any man who chose to live in the boondocks needed a double helping of good sense.

My parents were never married. I don't think they ever dated. They met at the Harbor Glen Country Club, where he was the club pro. There are two versions of their love story: My mother's version tells of a Southern ingenue compromised by the Georgia swelter and one too many Gin Rickeys at the club's annual debutante ball, falling prey to the charms of a wily local celebrity. My father remembers it differently: that entire season my mother couldn't think up enough ways to get near him, watching her brothers take private lessons at the driving range and hanging around the clubhouse on Sunday evenings, listening to my father hold court with all the blue bloods, regaling them with stories from his years on the PGA circuit. "Can't give a man all that attention and not expect him to get to thinking," he once told me.

It's no mystery whose account is accurate. All my life, the way my mother looked at my father, a cross between hunger and curiosity, how she'd rush to drop me off but never to leave, lingering in the foyer as if pining for some small praise or frustration on which to harp, told the whole story. They agree on the aftermath, more or less: he was fired from the club, and I was born. The allowance my mother used to get from her father now came from mine in exchange for weekend visits with his son. In that way they each got what they wanted, something to hold on to.

I found them upstairs in my father's bedroom. There was an empty cardboard box by the door. My mother had unpacked

photographs and books that I had boxed up a few days earlier, decorating every empty space. He was sleeping. My mother was at the window, leaning over an ironing board. Her sweater sleeves were wet and rolled up to her elbows. Puddly footsteps trailed out of the bathroom. There was a wet towel on the radiator. She had changed his sheets and the room smelled like fabric softener.

My mother kissed me. I held up the empty box.

“We packed too much. Not enough familiar things for him to see. How’s Hannah?”

“Her iron and B12 are low. The doctor put her on a prescription multivitamin and told her to rest.”

“He prescribe anything to get that puss off your face?”

“Not my doctor.”

“Think it’s doing either of you any good? You’re half-scared to look at her.”

My mother looked over at my father buried under the covers, as if she knew I was about to raise my voice.

“It’s not her I’m scared of.”

She set the iron upright. “Fear’s fear; all looks the same and gets you ’bout as far.” She sounded like my father used to, that hard-nosed wisdom delivered like a smack on the head.

“Better I tell her everything’s going to be great? Start painting the nursery and set up a college fund?”

“The doctor says the baby’s all right?”

“So far.”

“It’s as far as you’ve gotten. You going to run off a cliff just ’cause there’s one up the road?”

She folded the shirt and pants my father had been wearing the night before and put them on the dresser. She brushed my cheek. The back of her hand was cold and smelled like soap. We walked downstairs, through the kitchen hemmed with moving boxes and cleaning supplies, and outside onto the deck overlooking the course. The wind bent heather across the rough. In the distance, a man was chopping his way out of a sand bunker as three others watched him.

There was a Styrofoam container brimming with scrambled eggs and hash browns on the table. I asked my mother if he ate any of it.

She shook her head. “One of the cooks, the tall Slav, brought it by. Wanted to know how Henry was.”

“That’s Janko,” I said. “He’s a good guy.”

“Henry didn’t recognize him.”

My mother rarely asked, How’s your father? She called him by his name even when speaking with me, as if she believed the sound *Henry* could revive dying memories. She worried that if he couldn’t remember who he was, he wouldn’t remember anyone else. I never shared that fear. Then again, I was sure his memory of me was preserved in a different place than his memory of anyone else, including my mother.

“He let you give him a bath?”

She bent down and ripped out a handful of crabgrass poking through the deck slates. “Eventually. Took a few minutes, but he came around.”

We started to clean. She took all the floors and surfaces, and I

took the attic and crawl space. She swept and dusted and mopped with a vinegar solution. I told her to use the vacuum, but she worried it would be too loud. I got a mouthful of cobwebs and ripped my jeans on a nail head as I varnished wood, buffing the finish with steel wool. I painted walls and installed a new light fixture in the foyer. I almost shuffled around the furniture to make the rooms look bigger, but then thought better of it. The realtor would be coming by as soon as we moved my father into the home. I had wanted to hire a cleaning service, but my mother wouldn't hear of it. She thought it was lazy, and she didn't want strangers in the house. She said that they'd spook my father.

Neither of us understood his mind beyond its failings, but we played the same game, aligning our needs under the auspices of his best interests. My mother wouldn't miss a chance to bathe and feed and lift him off the toilet. It was out of either love or legacy, I wasn't sure which. I'd been spending more time at the cabin since I found out Hannah was pregnant, driving over when a phone call would have sufficed. It was easier to care for him than to mollify her. I knew what he needed, more or less. I knew how to manage his lapses, how to coax him back into himself when his mind became a time warp. The scared silences that set in between us were fleeting, just until he regained his bearings, and then it was as if they had never occurred. He and Hannah were my two best friends, but I already knew how I would lose him.

I filled a few garbage bags with sweaters too big for my father's wilted frame, and brochures for five-star resorts for which he had designed golf courses. Matchbooks from restaurants long out of business. Biographies of famous people I'd never heard of. My mother had already cleared out these spaces, leaving behind all the things he couldn't take with him but that might once have been meaningful. She had salvaged, and left me to discard. I hauled the garbage bags to the side of the cabin. It was getting dark. The last tee time would be finishing up the back nine. I could see the cemetery. Judging from the traffic jam backed up to the club, the gravediggers were still going strong. I smoked another cigarette, *Ingrid*, then went inside.

My mother was in my father's office—his “trophy room.” She was polishing a silver bowl he had won at the Texas Invitational forty years earlier. Most of the house was packed up, but this room we wouldn't touch until he was in Mount Royal. It was piped with shelves full of bronze golfers and pewter trophies that looked like beer steins. There was a giant Starfire crystal bowl through which the setting sun cast a fading rainbow across the floor. My father spent a lot of time going shelf by shelf like he was visiting the museum of his life. I bet he still remembered the traction of every play-off green, and the swift crack of umpteen thousand birdies launched off his driver. More than once I'd caught him in here, idling, looking as satisfied as I'd ever seen him. There was a framed photograph on his desk; my father's white-and-brick-colored golf shoes shine in the forefront, his putter on the upswing as his caddy holds a bright-yellow Augusta National flag in the backdrop. There's a barrel-chested, tan-faced man scowling beside the hole. Arnold Palmer.

“I'll probably hear from Mount Royal tonight or tomorrow.”

My mother returned the bowl to the shelf, turning it so that the engraving faced outward. “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.”

“Says something about the place. Not even a higher power can pull people away.”

She smiled. “That must be it.” She lifted up a stainless-steel plaque. “I was here, you know. Drove twelve hours to Nashville to watch him play.”

“I bet he liked that.”

“That night he took me to the Grand Ole Opry. Tex Ritter brought us backstage after the show.”

I looked at the plaque. It was a third-place finish, dated the year before I was born. I felt like my mother was confessing something about herself that she was the last to realize. I wanted to ask why she’d never told my father how she felt. Why she had only been comfortable loving him from afar. But even the thought seemed like finger-pointing, reminding her of the life she lost out on.

“I can make him dinner,” I said. “If you have to get going.”

“I’ll make it. Just wake him. Help him down the stairs.”

Upstairs, my father was at the bay window, peering down on the eighteenth green. He was standing straight up, wrists firm and arms extended like he was practicing his swing. There wasn’t a rhythm to his dementia, but he was usually sharpest in the morning, his mind dulling as the day wore on. Sundowning, it’s called. He’d become confused, even suspicious and belligerent. It was as if his mind set with the sun, his past and present tangling in the dark and binding him in limbo. The doctors couldn’t tell us exactly what caused it. Maybe fatigue. The absence of light or excess of shadows. A few times my father had cursed at me when I woke him; once he threw a noodle-armed punch. I clasped my arms around him and repeated, “Dad, it’s me,” until he snapped back into reality and returned the hug.

I knocked, but he didn’t notice. “Dad,” I said. He relaxed his arms and turned to me. He smiled but remained silent, as if he just needed a moment to place my voice. We stood in that freeze-frame for nearly a minute. I wondered where he was. Who he thought I was.

His expression came into focus. “Want to see an honest-to-god abomination?” he said. He turned toward the window. Outside, a man was lining up an iron at the edge of the fairway. “He’s a got a better chance of being struck by lightning than landing on the green.”

“You can see the hole from here?”

“I know where it is. And I can sure as hell see his stance. Look at his knees. Like he’s taking a foul shot.”

“He’s holding the club too high,” I said.

“Bet your ass he is. The way he’s choking that thing, you’d think it owed him money and slept with his woman.”

My father continued to stare at the green. Again, he brought his hands together. His tongue crept out, the tip wetting the dimple below his nose. He sucked in his cheeks and lowered his shoulders. This was his game face, the one captured in countless magazine and newspaper photographs for more than forty years. He looked so comfortable in that pose. I almost couldn’t speak, my own

muscle memory flaring, reminding me to be silent whenever someone was readying to swing. The ball curved wide and at least five yards short of the hole. My father's shoulders tensed.

"Looks like he could have used you," I said with a laugh. He kept staring out the window. I patted his back. "Dad."

He stepped away from the window. "Doctor this morning?"

"No, Dad. You went last week."

"Not me, jackass. I know where I was this morning. You and Hannah."

"She had a checkup."

He sniffed the air. "Smells like catfish. Hannah making dinner?"

He walked over to the closet and slid open the door. His robe and a pair of jeans hung on a long row of otherwise bare hangers.

"What do you need, Dad?"

"A button-down. Where the hell—" he stopped.

"Everything's packed, remember? We packed it together, with Mom. Mom's making dinner. You don't need a dress shirt now."

"You know better than to show up at a dinner table looking like a slob."

"It's all right, Dad. You look good."

"How's she holding up, Hannah?"

"She's fine. Resting a lot."

"It's the last weeks that get you," he said. "Your mother, Lord have mercy. I had to borrow a car every time I went to see her just so no one spotted me. Me and your grandfather weren't exactly on speaking terms, remember. God, she was huge. I thought you were going to be drafted as a linebacker straight out of the womb. It's exciting, though, mercy. I'm gonna get clubs in her hands as soon as she can walk, you just watch me."

He put his arm on my shoulder and I did all I could not to look away. There was no sense in renewing an old disappointment. Some things were better left forgotten. "I can't wait for that," I said, squeezing his arm in return.

"You still not telling me her name yet, are ya?"

"Promised Hannah I wouldn't."

"Not even the old man?"

"Not even you. But you'll be the first to know."

"That girl," he said, and I wasn't sure if he meant Hannah or the baby. "You're a lucky man. You're going—"

"What was the toughest course you ever played?" I asked.

He lowered his gaze and chomped down on his bottom lip. "Oh, now, I've told you this. I should say Augusta, but I'm not going to. It's hard, no doubt, but so is a motel mattress. Now Pebble Beach. . ."

"Wind like a banshee," I said.

"Like a banshee fresh off a vow of silence." He went on for at least twenty minutes, giving me the ins and outs on every major course in the country. He barely came up for air until my mother called to him.

"Henry, wash your hands and come on down."

My father went silent. That searching countenance again washed over his face. "Your mother," he said, as if it were a question. I nodded. He followed me downstairs. There was a pitcher of sweet tea on the table between two place settings, each

steaming with a butter-sopped filet of baked catfish.

“Well, isn’t this just something.”

My mother pulled out his chair. My father sat and leaned over his plate, his eyes closed and face still as he breathed in the hearty, familiar scent.

My mother kissed my cheek. “Drive safely,” she said.

A POLICE OFFICER was wearing a reflective vest and directing traffic in front of the cemetery. Emergency flares blazed every few yards along the shoulder. A dozen more officers flanked the road. A hearse was pulled up to the gate, its hazard lights blinking. The hood was dented and the driver’s-side window was too cracked to see through. A man was bent over the hood of a police cruiser. He was all arms with a boxy frame, and I figured him for a digger. An officer stood over him while another patted down his legs. He was shouting at the officers, as if he’d been wronged. The protestors were gone; strips of cardboard from their hastily painted signs blew along the gravel. Only a few diggers remained, old men who I imagined had been working these grounds since before I was born. They stood huddled, their backs to the road.

My phone rang, but I didn’t answer it. I inched farther along the road. A gray-haired woman in a black pantsuit and satin veil was wailing, shouting at the diggers over the shoulder of an officer. Behind her, more people in suits and dresses approached the gates. They carried flowers and square-point shovels. They walked in groups of twos and threes. I wasn’t sure if they were together. Something about the distance they kept made me think they would separate once beyond the gate.

The police handcuffed the man and put him in the cruiser. He was still shouting, blind from rage, to the mourners standing just feet away. I wondered how far he had been willing to go, how much suffering he was prepared to overlook to stand his ground. There comes a point when you can’t discern the pain you feel from the pain you cause, when the long-standing hurt that bleeds inside you colors every thought until you forget you once lived without it. Until you forget you can live without it.

An officer waved the hearse through the gate and the woman trailed behind it. The car behind me honked, but I didn’t speed up. Mourner after mourner disappeared through the gate. I watched them as I rolled along. I didn’t know how long it would take to dig up six feet of earth, or how many people could dig a single plot at once. Maybe they wanted it to last until dawn, to dig and grieve until they were exhausted and aching and lacked the strength to give anything more.

We would never need the nursery, but I would start painting it when I got home. There was value in going through the motions, in celebrating the ceremony of the act itself. Eventually, the cemetery vanished from my rearview. Up the road, a hearse passed me in the opposite lane. There was another one a few miles ahead. My phone rang again. I reached into my coat and pulled out my cigarettes, crushing the half-empty pack before tossing it out the window. A second later I heard the jingle of a voice mail. I kept my hands on the wheel. I didn’t want to know who it was, not just yet. For a few more miles, I was content to be safely in transit.

