





*De anima*: An Exploration Using the Short Story

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this project, I set out to illustrate each of the human faculties identified by Aristotle in his *De anima* in order to examine their role in shaping the perceptions of the individual: a conceptual, singular entity. In doing so, I ultimately strive to establish an understanding of the nature of what Aristotle calls the human soul, which is more likely known to the modern reader as the human psyche. In order to accomplish such a task, I have written a collection of five short stories. Each is an attempt to illustrate one faculty, in particular, of those listed by Aristotle as comprising the soul: desire, reason and understanding, imagination, memory, and emotion. Together, these stories form a collection which suggests that the soul is not only comprised of an individual's faculties but is also intertwined with the souls of those who surround the singular individual.

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## PREFACE

When I set out to create these short stories, I hypothesized that my work may shed light on the nature of the human psyche or, as Aristotle calls it, the human soul. I sought out the ancient philosopher's help in doing so, which I found in his *De anima*, and in his descriptions of the basic human faculties I found a way to form my own illustrations about them, a process by which I came to understand the faculties from a point of view with which I hope the world is both less and more familiar: more, I hope, to the extent that I desire for empathy to run rampant in the folds of each community; less, I hope also, in relation to the unfortunate causes for such empathy. I say this, of course, because of the angle of the works to follow.

In the case of each of the faculties named by Aristotle, I have written a short story in which I hope to have illustrated not only each faculty, itself, but also its destructive tendencies. In this way, I recall the sense of the Dionysian, of that wild, dark nature of the human soul in which our pain becomes our strength, and place the reader in the truest set of the psyche that I can possibly imagine or create. The goal, then, became to gain insight into the workings of the mind, to pose and answer questions about the nature of the human faculties in the hope that I may uncover some new understanding of what Aristotle calls "the soul." As a collection, I feel that these short stories may offer such an understanding.

Each of the five stories is an individual snapshot of the lives of one or more characters, lived and filtered through an often subjective lens—or lenses—of experiences. The reader, then, is expected to adopt such perspectives in order to understand two things in particular, the first being the notion of the inescapable: within each story there is the



illustration of an inherent, unavoidable connection between the characters and their surroundings. They are immersed in their lived experiences, and this is the source of their function as well as their purpose. In recognizing this notion, the reader arrives at the heart of the collection, the conceptualization of the related: together, the stories not only demonstrate the ties between the character and his or her surroundings but allude to the ongoing, uninterrupted nature of the human soul, an entity which functions always in relation to the souls of others. In this way, a grander picture forms as the stories progress which suggests that the soul is bound not to the singular individual and his or her faculties; instead, the collection points in the direction of a conceptual nature of the human psyche and suggests that the soul—in its entirety—is not only *hindered* by the faculties and their distinctions—hindered until all faculties are purely, knowledgably, and wholeheartedly employed—but that the so-called individual human soul is also inherently intertwined with the souls of those who surround the individual, a process from which human consciousness may never escape.

## CHAPTER I

Paul

“He’s at it again, son,” comes the sound of Elwood’s voice as he walks out of the house, but Carson is not startled from his chair on the porch. He has expected to hear the words since the phone rang inside five minutes ago, and had he not heard it, the particularly high-pitched screech of the screen-door’s opening has been equally as indicative of what the remainder of this humid, June evening will look like for the both of them.

“At Margaret’s again this time?” Carson asks his father.

“At Margaret’s.” Elwood wastes no time before walking down the steps towards the truck. “Is the bat still in the back?”

Carson stands and follows at a quick pace before answering. “I think so,” he calls from behind his father, but Carson is certain of the bat’s location. He stopped using it for its intended purpose over a year ago. The truck doors creak open and close in harmony.

“Good,” Elwood says as he ignites the engine. “Don’t forget what I told you last time.”

Carson nods and sighs quietly as the truck rolls off of the gravel driveway and onto the main road. Never trust Paul when he’s drunk, he reminds himself, glancing occasionally at his father as they make the short drive to his aunt’s house. He studies the coarse hands on the steering wheel and wonders how many times the hands have punched someone in the face. Then he uses his own to turn down his window, leaning towards the

breeze. The cabin fills with sweet, damp air as he closes his eyes and allows it to toss his hair about his head. Elwood stares down every turn in the road as though his mind is already in a room of the future. Eventually the sound of the tires crushing gravel draws them both out of a suspended state.

“I can hear him yelling from out here,” Carson whispers as the truck comes to a halt in front of Margaret’s sparse Appalachian house.

“Don’t forget the bat,” Elwood reminds his youngest. He turns his head slightly to prevent his son from seeing the sorrow on his face, but Carson notices regardless.

The boy’s cheeks rush with the heat of empathy. Carson, too, turns his head.

The two of them exit the truck and Elwood advances to the porch. The area looks abnormally dark while framing the projection of light which escapes from the kitchen through the front door. Carson’s eyes remain on his father while retrieving the baseball bat from the truckbed and making his own way through the dewing grass of Margaret’s yard. He climbs the stairs onto the porch and steps into the projection of light that falls on the wooden planks. Elwood has long since crossed the threshold. Carson hears the sound of Paul’s voice from somewhere within the small house and hesitates to enter. He feels an apprehensive tension in his stomach and turns his attention back to the yard, taking note of the enchanting blue tint which the last minutes of dusk have brought on his surroundings. His mind is quick to compare the setting to those which occur on particularly static evenings and cast the world in an ominous orange hue through rainclouds that never lose a raindrop. Carson reflects on his older brother telling him that it meant a tornado would come and he wonders why it is that older siblings lie for no

reason, but his thoughts are tossed aside by the sound of one of Margaret's cast iron skillets crashing into the kitchen wall.

"Paul," Carson hears his father voice, "how many times do I have to come up here and whoop your ass for you to get it through your thick skull that you aren't wanted around here?"

"You can't tell me what to do, dammit!" Paul's reply is childishly defiant. Carson hears bodies stumble onto the kitchen floor as Margaret's warning follows them.

"Woody, you be careful!" she says. "He's got a knife!"

Carson's spine straightens. His right hand tightens on the bat and, before he knows it, he runs through the door and into the kitchen where he stands looking down at his father wrestling Paul to pin his brother's arms to the ground.

"You drunk son of a bitch," Elwood says plainly as he secures the hand wielding the knife, and Margaret, as if on cue, steps into Carson's view from the den to place a booted foot on Paul's right hand. The liquored man yelps and releases his hold on the switchblade, and Margaret kicks it back into the living room, out of his reach, as though she is spitting in disgust than doing away with a weapon.

"You done broke my hand!" Paul whines. "Some sister you are!"

"Shut your trap, Paul," Elwood says before landing a right hook on his brother's cheek. Carson winces.

"Serves him right for thinking he can come in here and cuss me in my own house," Margaret says as she wets a dishtowel. Carson notices the blood on her face and assumes that Paul has somehow busted her lip. Elwood climbs to his feet.

“It’s not *your* house,” Paul drones, holding his jaw as he remains on the floor. “It’s just as much mine as yours.” He looks up at his younger brother, tears in his eyes. “Daddy left it to all of us! And everything in it!” he says.

But Elwood remains unaffected, turning his attention to his sister. “Is he up here trying to get into your wine cellar again?” he asks as he motions for Carson to put down the bat and pick up the skillet. Carson bristles, startled by the sudden reminder of his own presence in the room. He leans the bat against the doorframe and quietly makes his way across the kitchen.

“He’s up here threatening me for money so he can go and buy more liquor, I imagine,” Margaret says. Carson hands her the skillet and she places it on the countertop, studying her nephew’s face. “Thank you, sweetie.”

“What about your lip?” Elwood continues. Carson studies Paul on the floor, whose mumbling continues unacknowledged.

“I’ve had worse, brother,” she says, raising her voice, “but next time I won’t hesitate to use the shotgun on him.” She tosses the dishtowel into the sink and directs herself to finishing the task at hand. “Just help me get this good-for-nothing drunk out of my kitchen.”

“Don’t anyone of y’all lay a hand on me!” Paul exclaims as he notices the trio advancing, but his body moves independently from him in his drunken state. What is intended to be a rapid gathering of his physical bearings proceeds to be a clumsy turn about the floor, causing him to kick the leg of the long-bench that sits in the small dining area.

“I’ve never been able to knock any sense into you,” Elwood observes, reflecting on the right hook, “but at least I know that I’m able to knock some of that liquor straight to your head.”

Carson grins at the words until he sees his father’s face, which displays a look far from that of humor. Instead the expression reveals a deep pity, and Margaret’s is that of a similar countenance. Elwood reaches down and grabs the collar of his brother’s shirt. Paul jerks away with enough force to tumble himself over.

“Get the hell off of me!” he cries. His face is that of a spoiled child who is being upbraided. “If y’all want me gone so bad, I’ll get gone by my damn self!”

“Then you can start by getting your ass up and off of my kitchen floor,” Margaret declares as she gathers her skillet from its recent placement on the counter.

“Marge, you be careful now,” Elwood warns, but her face is red with anger and he knows that she has had more than enough of the evening’s events for his words to sway her will. Paul, too, despite the thick haze of alcohol that veils his senses, is struck with fear at the sound of Margaret’s approach. His body curls in vulnerability.

“Take it easy, sis’,” he pleads in a newly collaborative tone. “You know I don’t mean to be an imposition. I just came to get the money that you owe me for fixing the roof on your barn, and...”

“Paul,” Margaret interjects, her voice acquiring the low pitch of wrath, “if you weren’t such a drunken disgrace to this family, you would remember that I paid you that money over eight months ago.” She draws back her right arm, skillet in hand, and Carson closes his eyes in an effort to brace himself for the sound of iron smacking against his uncle’s skull. But all that comes is the sound of Paul’s voice:

“I’m going! I’m going!” he says, fearful and scrambling to his feet. He falls past his sister and across the threshold of the living room, crashing onto his hands and knees. He stays in this position long enough to appear defeated and Carson concludes that his uncle has lost all motivation. But the sound of Elwood’s steps moving intently across the kitchen floor are quick to announce that Paul’s falter will not be observed patiently.

Carson watches in disbelief as Paul rises to his knees without warning and uses the force of his entire upper body to swing his right arm outward. It flashes in a wide radius, allowing Paul’s closed fist to slash below his sister’s waistline in passing. Margaret cries out in pain and grabs the top of her right thigh just as Elwood reaches their brother and kicks him violently to the floor.

“The knife!” she announces, officially transforming the evening into night.

Carson stands paralyzed as Elwood lands several more hard kicks onto Paul’s body, cursing him.

“Carson,” Margaret calls, her voice sounding distant in her nephew’s ears, “hand me that dishtowel.”

He is quick to comply but is overwhelmed by the sight of Margaret’s hand, coated in the blood that runs from her thigh, as she reaches for the dishtowel. His mind wanders to the only other time that he has seen so much human blood at once: a night of nearly two years ago in late April when he had decided to cross a barbed wire fence without any foresight. He didn’t tell his father, then, that he had been drinking with his friends at the Russels’ house next door. But he knew how ironic the injury had been in that Elwood always warned him about patience when dealing with barbed wire. Regardless, Carson

decided to hop the fence, and now he remembers how lightheartedly his father had burst into laughter at the sight of the five-inch gash on the back of his son's left thigh.

"Move, Carson," Elwood commands as he drags Paul through the kitchen by the arms. Carson is as startled as though he has been roused from a deep sleep. "Better yet," Elwood corrects himself, "open that door." His son obeys without a second thought and, within the moment, Elwood has pulled his brother through the door and out of their childhood home. He flings Paul down the wooden steps into the yard as Carson follows the pair outside. The boy stands on the porch and watches intently as his father observes Paul groaning in pain. Elwood then turns and makes his way back up the stairs and into the kitchen. Carson remains outside.

"Is it bad?" Elwood asks as he walks through the door. Margaret sits calmly on the long-bench.

"There's quite a bit of blood, but it's not as bad as it looks," she says.

"You don't need me to run you to the hospital?" He stands looking down at her.

"No," she reassures him. The two of them grow silent for a moment. "Can you imagine what Momma would say if she knew what he's done this time?"

Elwood sighs and places a hand on his sister's shoulder.

"She'd probably say what she always did: Paul has never been able to listen to the right voice in his head."

Margaret nods in pity. "You know he's already drank up all of that money from fixing the barn."

"I know."



“And you know that I paid him more than was due because I felt sorry for him and his daughter and her side of the family.” Margaret’s voice begins to strain, hinting at the formation of tears.

Elwood glances back over his shoulder to see that Carson observes the two of them through the closed screen-door. “Is he still laying out there?” he calls to their observer, and Carson is embarrassed by the acknowledgement.

“He hasn’t moved much from where you left him,” Carson says, pausing before he opens the door and rejoins his family in the kitchen. “Are you alright, Aunt Marge?”

“I’ll be fine as soon as your uncle is gone from here, honey,” she assures him.

Elwood grows impatient at the scripted nature of the conversation. “Carson,” he says, breaking up the moment, “you stay in here with your aunt while I haul Paul off somewhere.” Before a reply can be made, Elwood walks out of the kitchen and down the porch-stairs.

Carson stays by Margaret’s side, maneuvering his view into a position from which he can see his father pulling Paul to his feet. He wonders whether or not adrenaline gives his father the strength to lift his uncle’s drunk weight before noticing that Paul, who has always been unnaturally able to take a beating, is doing at least half of the work of lifting himself. Elwood lowers the tailgate and hoists his brother into the truckbed as Carson strains to hear the words that his father utters to Paul. The words are inaudible. The door on the driver’s side slams shut, the engine starts, and the truck backs out onto the main road before heading off in the direction of town.

“I wonder if he’s taking him to jail,” Carson says aloud to his unusually silent aunt.

“The jail is too good for him,” she replies. Carson studies Margaret’s face and decides that she is wearing an expression of relief. This calms him and, for the first time since leaving home with his father, he sighs from deep within himself.

“You’re sure you don’t need to go to the hospital or anything?” he asks, suddenly remembering the cut on the top of Margaret’s thigh.

“I’ll be alright,” she assures him. “Don’t you worry. I’ve been through worse in my life.” She looks at the disbelief on Carson’s face and decides to lighten the atmosphere: “Though I certainly never imagined I’d be slashed by my own brother.” She laughs easily, but Carson struggles to join her. “I don’t know what time your father will be back,” she continues, “so how about you go ahead and get us some tea put on the stove while I go and clean up this mess.” She gestures to her bloody hands and apron. Carson nods and remains silent as Margaret stands and rounds the corner into the den, heading towards her bathroom. He places the kettle on the burner and waits for her to return.

When his father left with Paul, the light had faded just enough for cause to use the headlights. Now the darkness is pliable only by the lightning bugs that float across the yard and in the tops of all the trees. Carson sits quietly on the long-bench, watching as the various tiny spotlights shine whenever they please. Before too long, his aunt rejoins him in the kitchen. Her hands and clothes are free from all traces of familial betrayal as she suggests the two of them vacate to the den. There, they sit holding mugs of warm tea, listening to the swaying pendulum of the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. Carson wastes no time in finishing his share of the brew. His eyes begin to close without his permission. The last thoughts to cross his mind contrast the lateness of the perceived hour and the earliness of its reality.

The slow screeching of the kitchen door wakes him, suddenly surrounding him with the soft light of morning. He is confused by the way the day has crept up on him and rubs his eyes, attempting to focus on the hushed voices in the kitchen.

“You’re sure this isn’t some kind of a mistake?” Margaret questions.

“I’m positive.” The voice is Elwood’s. Carson gets immediately to his feet and walks into the kitchen to find the two of them standing solemnly by the kitchen counter.

“You had better tell this one, then,” Margaret says, gesturing to Carson as she sets two early tomatoes beside the sink to be washed. Elwood stares at the floor as Carson watches his aunt walk across the kitchen and take a seat at the dinner table. Elwood motions for him to do the same.

“You might want to sit down for a minute,” he says gently. “It’s about Paul.”

Margaret shakes her head and Carson notices that her face is flushed.

“Is he in jail?” Carson asks, feeling the need to assert that he is not as tender as his father and aunt seem to believe.

“No, son,” Elwood says, taking his own seat at the table. “When I left last night, I took Paul over to town and dumped him in the parking lot up at the church. I figured that he would come to his senses there and that maybe some kind of change would occur in him.”

“Did you come back here last night?” Carson questions, attempting to piece together a timeline.

“I did,” Elwood is quick to answer, “and you were already asleep on the couch, so I figured it would be for the best if you stayed the night here in case Marge needed any help. But I got a phone call this morning from the sheriff’s office.” At this, Carson’s ears

perk, but a look of confusion crosses his face. Margaret's eyes turn down as she states at her hands on the kitchen table.

"But you said that he isn't in jail," Carson replies.

"He's not," Elwood continues. "At some point last night, after I had already left, Paul had sobered up enough to get moving again. He walked over a mile to the tracks on the edge of town." Elwood pauses, looking for evidence of understanding on his son's face, but there is none. "The sheriff's office told me this morning that they got a call late last night from one of the conductors, who said that as he was coming through those tracks there was a man sitting on them."

"Just sitting on them?" Carson asks, unsure of where his father is leading him.

"The conductor said that by the time he saw the man in the lights all he could do was sound the whistle. He said that he laid into that whistle over and over, but the man never moved, that the man must've been drunk out of his mind or possessing a death wish."

Carson's eyes fall. "Paul?" he asks, and Elwood is silent. Margaret looks up from the table.

"They said they sent an ambulance up there and everything when they got the call," Elwood explains. "The impact killed him instantly and the conductor had no time to do a thing about it. He didn't even stop the train after it happened because of how certain he was of the death."

Carson says nothing. He looks past his father and through the kitchen door, unconsciously focusing on the spot in the grass where Paul had been. The three of them sit in silence until Margaret rises from the table.

“Well,” she says, walking to the sink, “does anyone want a tomato sandwich?”

“I’ll take one in a minute,” Elwood replies, “but first I’ve got to run over to Lola’s and tell her the news.”

Carson sits idly as his father stands.

“Are you coming with me or staying here with Marge?” Elwood asks. The sound of running water fills the room as Margaret washes the tomatoes.

“You mean he just sat there?” Carson replies. “He did it on purpose?”

Elwood studies his son’s face and sees the familiar expression: pity. Margaret shuts off the water and shakes the droplets from her hands.

“I don’t know, son,” Elwood responds, sounding agitated. Silence follows. Margaret sighs as she retrieves a cutting knife from the drawer.

“Some things we’ll just never understand,” she says as she decides which tomato to slice first. “He was drunk out of his mind. What more can we expect?” The room is filled with the sound of the knife as it chops against the cutting board. Carson stares at the bat leaning against the doorframe for a moment before he looks to his father.

“I want to go with you to Lola’s,” the boy says.

## CHAPTER II

### Father's Day

My father watches professional wrestling. He also enjoys football. When I started high school, he came to my room and told me that all he's ever wanted is a son who loves sports as much as he does. I told him that I would try out for something, so he went to the kitchen and grabbed another beer and sat on the couch to watch the game. "Damond," he called from the living room, "why don't you come in here and watch this game? It's looking like a good one." I told him that I couldn't, that I had homework. After a couple of weeks went by, I told him that I didn't make the football team and he was devastated. He wanted to attend the try-outs, but I had told him that they were closed to spectators. I didn't try out. That was almost two years ago.

"Damond," my father calls from the kitchen, "throw all of these beers into this ice cooler and load it up on the truck next to the fishing poles." I hear the crinkling of the loose tiles on the kitchen floor as he sets the cooler in front of the fridge and makes his way through the back door. I got him a card this year. It has a picture of Hulk Hogan on its front, and on the inside it says: "Happy Father's Day, brother!" Hulk Hogan's eyes look like they're about to pop out of his skull. They also look like Hulk Hogan has been to a tanning salon and like he wore the complimentary protective goggles. I'm sure my dad would say that Hulk Hogan is outside a lot and wears reflective blue sunglasses, that he probably goes fishing for bass all the time and needs to see past the light reflecting off of the surface of the water.

When I was much younger, my father would take me fishing with my grandfather, my uncle, and my first cousin, and he would put his sunglasses on my face and turn my baseball cap around on my head. His nickname for me was “Hot Rod.” It had something to do with how much I loved watching the car races that he would take me to. “Reel him in, Hot Rod!” he would say. We would catch a couple dozen rainbow trout on a given day, and then we would cover the truck-bed with a tarp and drive quickly down the mountain because the idea of a fishing permit is un-American.

As I got older, I started to watch a lot of television programs about wildlife and to skim through the conservationist magazines in the library, and fishing, along with other hobbies, began to lose its appeal. I shot and killed a groundhog when I was ten years old. When I was twelve, I shot and killed a doe, but I haven’t killed anything else since then. I still go hunting with my father in the fall because I enjoy hiking and drinking the hot chocolate that he brings in a military-grade thermos. Last fall, shortly after I had gotten my license, he stopped the truck at the bottom of the muddy hunting trail that we use to climb an isolated ridge and told me to get in the driver’s seat. I was terrified of sliding us over the edge, so he called me a pussy. When I made it to the top, he backhanded me across the chest in a congratulatory manner and told me he’d forgotten what it feels like to have a son.

I loudly pour a couple bags of ice over the cans and bottles I’ve placed in the bottom of the cooler. When I finish adjusting the cubes, I hear my dad in the backyard as he loads up the tackle boxes. I put my arms through the straps of my backpack and attempt to lift the cooler, but it doesn’t budge. I curse under my breath.

“Hey, dad,” I say as I step through the screen door that he’s propped open with a cinderblock, “could you help me out with this cooler?”

He laughs as he appears from the other side of the truck. “You mean to tell me that it’s too heavy for you?”

“It’s pretty heavy,” I say as I turn back to the kitchen. He joins me at the cooler and lifts it without my help.

“Damn, son, I thought you said this was heavy,” he says, carrying the cooler outside.

“It’s heavy to me,” I say, walking behind him.

He laughs. “Your grandma can probably lift more than you.”

We finish loading the truck and start the drive to my uncle’s house. Classic rock blares on the radio until my father reaches to turn down the volume.

“Have you got a girlfriend yet?” he asks.

“No.”

“Well, why not?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I just haven’t met any girls that interest me,” I say.

“Are you sure?” he asks in a curious voice.

“Yeah,” I reply, feeling partly confused and partly annoyed. My dad nods his head and grins as though he is relieved.

“Well, as long as you’re into girls,” he laughs. “I haven’t ever seen you bring a girl home and I was starting to wonder if you might be a queer or something.” I force myself to laugh away his statement as though it is ridiculous.



When I was eleven years old, I asked him how to know if I was in love with someone. I told him about how I felt around a girl in one of my classes at school, and he told me that women are crazy for believing men when we say that we love them. “The idea of being in love with someone came straight from the chick-flicks, and besides that, all the women nowadays act like *they* want to be the ones wearing the pants in the family. Chances are,” he said, “you’ll only feel like you’re in love if you stop thinking logically.” For some time afterwards I believed what he said. My mother left us when I was in the first grade, and when the time for a custody battle rolled around she told my dad that he could have me. She got remarried and stopped coming to see me on Saturdays. I sent her a card on Mother’s Day, but I doubt that she opened it.

My father presses his palm into the car-horn as we pull into my Uncle Dave’s driveway. The eight fox hounds that my uncle keeps in a backyard pin all run to the gate at the corner of the double-wide, barking incessantly and waving their long tails in broad strokes. My father howls like he is one of them and then laughs at himself. Dave walks out onto the porch.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen!” he calls through our open windows. “Ready to go and catch us some big ones?”

“Hell yeah, brother!” my dad replies from his seat in the truck. “You got all the camping gear loaded up?”

“Ready to go when you are. Elijah loaded up the firewood this morning.”

“Sounds good, buddy,” my dad says with a smile. “I’ve got the cold ones. Let’s get on the road.”

“Right behind you,” my uncle assures him as he turns to make his way back inside. My father turns his truck around in the driveway and pulls up to the main road. I watch through the back window as my cousin and Uncle Dave hop into another truck. Dave’s wife blows a kiss from the screen door as our convoy sets off. I look behind us occasionally as we cross the railroad tracks and meander our way through the backroads.

It was my dad’s idea to get together for a fishing trip on Father’s Day after several years of skipping the event. When my grandfather was still alive, it was a yearly tradition, but his absence turned his sons’ enjoyment into an emptiness. My grandmother seemed to deal with his death better than the rest of us. She and I began to talk with one another more often after it happened, and I think that’s because I realized death is a common ordeal. That was when I was thirteen and I questioned my father’s authority on the subject of love. My grandmother said that she will wear her wedding ring until the day she goes.

After driving upstream for over three quarters of an hour, we finally reach our favorite sinkhole. It stays hidden beneath one of the small bridges along the windy road, way up in the mountain. My dad and uncle call it Granddaddy Bear’s spot, after their grandfather. I wonder if I’ll call it Granddaddy Elwood’s spot when I get older. The doors on the trucks start flying open once they’ve come to a stop along the side of the road. Elijah joins me and my father as we lower our tailgate.

“How’s it going Uncle Adam?”

“There you are, bud!” My dad greets him with a slap on the back. “How about you help me with that drink cooler?”

“Sure thing,” Elijah replies. He grabs one of the handles and slides it to the edge of the tailgate. I stand to the side, watching. Elijah is a couple years older than me and was one of the best athletes in our high school. He graduated last month and is going to college on an athletic scholarship in the fall.

“You grab that end and I’ll grab this one, Elijah, and we’ll try to make our way down this steep bank,” my father says. The two of them hoist the cooler with ease and I make sure to step out of their way as they start the path down the side of the bank. I move back to the tailgate to grab the fishing poles and one of the tackle boxes. Uncle Dave joins me and grabs the other.

“How’ve you been, Damond?” he asks. “You’ve gotten a bit taller in the last few weeks, haven’t you?”

I nod my head. “Just a little bit,” I say, “but I’ve been good. It’s nice to be out of school.”

“Good, good,” he replies as we make our way down the embankment. “Have you thought about trying out for any of the sports teams in the fall?” I watch my dad’s ears perk as he overhears my uncle’s question.

“Maybe,” I say, not wanting to make myself an outsider. “I’ve thought about going out for something this year. I just don’t know what yet.”

“That’ll be good, bud,” Dave encourages me. “Sports were Elijah’s favorite aspects of high school. Ain’t that right?” Elijah nods his head with a grin.

“There’s an idea,” my father chimes in. “Maybe you and Elijah could get some conditioning done together over the summer?” Neither Elijah nor I are interested in this, but we both play along after exchanging a look of acknowledged differences.

“Maybe,” I say, waiting on Elijah’s response.

“That sounds good.” He looks at me. “We might give it a try. You’ll have to catch up though, Damond, so that we can really get to work.” The three of them laugh and I force myself to join them in an effort to play off my embarrassment. Dave makes another trip to the truck to get a smaller cooler and two more canvas chairs. The four of us then busy ourselves with getting the fishing gear situated. The best part about these trips is that, once everybody finishes catching up, we spread out along the streambank and keep to ourselves. No one says much until he starts reeling something in.

The first couple of hours go by quickly. I spend some time searching for a forked branch, which I then press into a muddy spot on the bank. I cast out my line and prop the pole between the fork, reeling in my line occasionally to pass the time and to act like I’m busy with situating more bait. In reality, I’m not using bait. I’m thinking about what I read in those magazines.

Elijah is the first to catch a sizeable trout and not a single one of us is surprised. He reels it in and grasps it without hesitation as I make my way up the stream to his spot on the bank. My dad is already by his side.

“Whew!” he calls to my uncle, raising Elijah’s arms. “Look at this fish that your boy caught!”

“That’s a keeper!” Dave replies from farther up the stream. “Unhook it and throw it in the cooler!” I watch as my father rummages through the tackle box to find a pair of pliers. He hands it to Elijah, who pauses before removing the hook.

“You want to do it?” he asks, gesturing to me. I shake my head.

“No, thanks, man,” I say. “You caught it. You should get to do all of the fun stuff.” He laughs and gets to work.

“Blame,” my dad says after a moment’s observation, “if that fish hasn’t swallowed the whole damn thing.” I watch as it opens its mouth wide. Its gills flap open and close repeatedly while it occasionally flexes its entire body from side to side. Elijah maneuvers the pliers without hesitation but to no avail.

“I’ll just have to cut the line,” he finally says. “I can’t get the pliers deep enough.”

My father laughs. “You got it, buddy. I’m going to get back to my line.” He turns to me before he goes. “Anything biting down at your end?”

“A little,” I reply, “but nothing seems to want to latch on.”

“Be patient,” he says, patting me once on my upper arm as he walks upstream. He wears a grin. I stay by Elijah’s side while he cuts the line and tosses the fish into the cooler with the beer. I see it jerk once before Elijah shuts the lid, and then I make my way in the opposite direction. When I get to chair, I reel in my line and hold the hook in my hand, contemplating whether or not I want to apply either of the two types of bait placed at my feet. I imagine what it would feel like to puncture the lining of my stomach and decide against it.

The afternoon eventually fades into the evening and the four of us begin to gather our belongings. We meet at the cooler and take a look inside to see that quite a lot of beer has been replaced by quite a lot of rainbow trout. My uncle kept five, Elijah kept eight, and my dad kept seven. I hope that they assume that mine are somewhere in the mix. We load up the trucks and make our way farther up the mountain to get to our usual campsite. It sits along a section of the Appalachian Trail, not more than a mile off the main road,

and the dirt path we drive to reach it is, as usual, grown up with tall grass. When we arrive, the four of us meet at the back of Dave's truck as he lowers the tailgate.

"Just start grabbing what you can, boys," he says to us all. I take the tents and the sleeping bags. Elijah stacks a pile of firewood in his arms. Dave carries the canvas chairs. My father, seeing that the rest is taken care of, returns to his own tailgate to retrieve the cooler. Within a half hour, our campsite is up and running. Uncle Dave starts a fire and we gather around it, sitting in our chairs. Its dry warmth wards off the gnats and mosquitos and revives us by airing the dampness out of our clothes. My dad grabs a bottle from the cooler and opens it.

"Here," he says, handing it to me, "have one." I can tell by his open expression that this gesture is meaningful to him, so I grin.

"Sure, thanks." I take the beer from his hand and hold it for a moment before taking a sip. When the taste hits my tongue, I wrinkle my eyebrows and force myself to swallow. I've never tasted beer before despite my dad's assortment in our fridge. He and Dave laugh at my reaction.

"Ah, you'll get used to it," my father assures me. "It's an acquired taste."

Dave nods in agreement. "Though some are much better than others." He looks at his son. "Elijah, go ahead and grab yourself one, too. You like it, don't you?" Elijah grins as he stands and makes his way to the cooler.

"It's not bad," he replies. He opens the lid and the smell of the dead fish hits my nostrils. I take a gulp of my beer in an effort to bypass my nose.

Through the many camping trips that I've been a part of, I've learned that nighttime reaches the woods faster than anywhere else. This night is no exception to the

rule. The visible sky above the treetops is still a bright blue when our vision below is limited to the light of the fire. This is my favorite time to be beneath the trees; this is my favorite part of the trip. It isn't long until a stillness drifts into the bones of each one of us, a quietness brought on by the fading skylight and the occasional pop of the burning wood. The air is cleared of anxiousness and is filled with the silence of our human existence, that intense awareness of our living bodies. This is what keeps men going, though I'm sure they won't admit. When the stars appear, my father and uncle bid my cousin and me a goodnight. The two of us are careful in allowing enough time to pass for the snores to begin.

“Do you want to drink some more?” Elijah eventually whispers. “There's a few left in the cooler and my dad brought a couple six-packs. They're in the truck.”

“Sure,” I say, smiling. I wait in my seat by the fire as Elijah makes his way to Dave's truck and returns carrying the six-packs. He presses his finger to his lips and smiles excitedly before placing the bottles in the cooler.

“I'm always surprised by how long the ice lasts in this thing,” he says. “This will get them nice and cold. In the meantime, here's one of the others.” He hands me a can and I open it quietly. It doesn't take long for the others to chill.

For a long time we sit in silence, sipping by the fire. I finish my second and move on to my third. The warmth of the alcohol is as calming as the warmth of the flames, and I pay little attention to Elijah as he finishes each of his drinks. He begins humming quietly to himself for some time. When he falls silent, my eyes return to him. I laugh quietly, feeling giddy.

“How many have you had?” I ask. Elijah leans back in his chair, his legs sprawled out in front of him as he holds a bottle at the end of a dangling arm.

“This is my seventh,” he says, and I fight to contain my laughter before counting the empty containers at my feet: two cans and two bottles. I sip from the half-empty bottle in my hand. Elijah stares into the fire.

“Are you alright?” I ask, more amused than concerned. He looks at me.

“You know, Damond,” he starts, pausing to take a drink, “I envy you.”

“Why?” I reply. His statement feels ridiculous to me, but he continues.

“You don’t have all of these expectations, this weight on your shoulders. Your dad’s happiness and pride isn’t built onto you.”

The giddiness fades from my legs. “Well,” I say, “he does have expectations. I just don’t make the cut.” Elijah shakes his head.

“You’re lucky,” he says in a firmer tone. Silence falls again on the two of us. I decide to turn my attention back to the fire, but my mind tumbles Elijah’s words as though they are clothes in a washing machine. I say nothing when I see him wipe his face. I want to hug him. I don’t. Instead, I stand and place new logs on the dying fire and wait for them to catch. When they do, Elijah adjusts his position and I return to my seat. The cicadas buzz around us. They’re early this year.

“When I look at you, I see a guy who has everything,” I say. I don’t think about the words. They fall from me as though they have bypassed my mind. I question whether or not they sound sincere. Elijah finishes his beer.

“Everything is too much.”



I lean back into my chair and decide to leave it at that. The fire cracks and burns bright, and moths of all sizes are drawn from the woods. I watch as one lands on a rock situated next to the embers, their heat forcing it to flutter backwards, but it isn't deterred. The moth blindly strives to reach the light-source. I sit quietly as it is killed by the exposure.

## CHAPTER III

### Playing Opossum

“Well?” Damond asks as Malissa closes the door behind herself. She sighs, and he can see that she is pleased to be engulfed by the chill of their apartment after driving home in the heat of the late afternoon. He remembers her car’s broken air conditioner.

“I didn’t get it.” She walks through the living room and towards their bedroom as Damond scans her face for any sign that she has cried on the way home. There isn’t one, and he sits up from his reclined position on the couch, recalling yet again that he hasn’t seen her cry in nearly a year.

“You’re kidding,” he scoffs, causing Malissa to stop before she turns into the hallway. She faces him as he continues to look up at her.

“You sound pissed off.” She places a hand on her hip and stands casually.

“Aren’t you?” Damond stares wide-eyed at her, his mouth somewhat open after his question, one eyebrow higher than the other.

“I mean, yes, Damond. For Christ’s sake, I’m pissed off, but it’s not that big of a deal.” Her hand rises from her hip and meets the other in the air, both gesturing palm up as she speaks before falling to her sides with the end of her response. She sighs.

“Not that big of a deal?” Damond’s mouth closes and the corners of it tighten into an unnatural smile, more of a smirk, as he looks down. His head shakes from side to side. “Oh, now you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Malissa stares at him, mouth open now that his has closed. Her hands return to the air, palms facing up again in a silent question.

“What the hell is your problem?” she asks, and Damond’s eyes lift to meet hers once more. Her hands drop and she looks away to the kitchen, then down as in thought, and back up to take on his stare. He is quiet for a moment, watching the silent, feminine body language.

“My problem,” he begins slowly, the corners of his mouth relaxing into a position more suitable for anger, “is that my grandmother is dying, Malissa. She’s dying, and you care more about moving up at your shitty job than you care about being here for your boyfriend of almost, what, three years now?” Damond watches her closely for a reaction. Her eyes empty in a way that reminds him of a sunset fading from gray clouds, but she doesn’t look away. She blinks slowly. Damond feels his face warming and looks down. “I wouldn’t be so ‘pissed off’ if you had at least managed to actually get the raise.”

“What?” Malissa asks, and he looks up at her face, eager to see what his words have done. “Am I not working hard enough for you?” Her palms are up again and the gesture is wider, sarcastic. She rolls her eyes and turns her face toward the kitchen as her hands fall and she begins to walk away. Damond is silent for a moment, deciding whether or not he wants to escalate the situation.

“I was there for you when you needed *me*, Malissa,” he says to her back. “Why aren’t you here for me now?”

Malissa stops and turns to him, hands now on her hips. Her mouth is slightly open and an angry smile forms oddly with her squinting eyes. “You did not just fucking say that.” She stares at him, motionless. “Christ, Damond,” she finally says, turning away. “I’m sorry that I was raped.” Damond watches her round the corner into the hallway as she moves to the bedroom. His face is hot and red.

“It was almost a year ago, Malissa,” he calls after her, “and I was there for you. My grandmother is dying right *now*, and where are you? Busy trying to get a raise that you can’t get even when you try? You’re so fucking self-absorbed.” Damond sits in silence as he waits for Malissa’s reaction. There isn’t one. He stares at the corner of a black picture frame hanging above the hallway lightswitch, thinking briefly that he has made a mistake in belittling her. He stands and walks slowly to the hallway, listening for any sounds that might indicate that Malissa is crying. He hears only the sound of cold air blowing through the vent in the ceiling above him. “Malissa?” She doesn’t respond, and he quietly returns to the sofa. She emerges from the bedroom over an hour later.

“Let’s go for a drive.”

“What?” Damond looks up at her figure standing at the end of the couch, startled by her voice breaking the silence. She does not appear as though she has been upset, and this agitates him.

“A drive... let’s go for a drive.” Malissa walks to the door and turns, waiting patiently on Damond to follow. “Come on, we can take your truck. The air conditioner in my car is still broken.” He eyes her curiously, examining her dry face. Her eyes aren’t red nor puffy.

“Okay,” he says as he gets to his feet. A wave of guilt passes through him as he notices an honest smile beginning to appear on Malissa’s face. He thinks now that he may have been in the wrong for criticizing her so harshly, that there is the possibility that she has been here for him the whole time without his noticing, but these thoughts are interrupted by his remembrance of her tearless face. No, he thinks as he locks their apartment door and follows Malissa to his truck, if she really cared, she would be more

upset. They sit in silence until Damond brakes at the main road. “Well, where do you want to go?”

“It’s been forever since we’ve done this,” she says, looking over at him. He stares at her blankly in return, attempting to ruin her resolved mood. “Just take the long way to town: the one with all the backroads.” He looks from her face to the road and begins to drive, sighing audibly to indicate that he is agitated by her faux demeanor. Malissa turns on the radio, unaffected, and they sit in silence for nearly ten minutes as Damond navigates through the familiar backroads to town. He feels his agitated state begin to worsen as he thinks more about her reluctance to continue their argument. He slumps into his seat, his left elbow resting on the car door, his head resting on the closed fist. He glances over at her and, noticing that there is no longer a single trace of discontent on her face, he feels his anger begin to boil. With a sigh he sits up, returning his left hand to the wheel and wondering how she could possibly seem so unaffected if she is actually concerned about his wellbeing. He rounds the curve leading to a section of the road in which there is a long, flat straightaway through a large field.

“Watch out,” Malissa says, pointing to an opossum in the road ahead. Damond doesn’t slow down. “Hurry up, little guy, get out of the road.” She watches it intently, turning off the radio. The opossum remains where it stands, unaware of the vehicle heading towards it. “Slow down, Damond,” she insists, “he’s not going to move.”

“I won’t hit it,” Damond replies, the truck quickly approaching the opossum. “I’ll aim to center it between the wheels and it’ll be alright.” Malissa doesn’t blink. The opossum’s alarmed eyes now shine green as they reflect the beam of the headlights. It makes no move to run. Damond swerves at the final moment and Malissa shrieks as the

truck jerks. The thumps of the opossum's body echo from the front wheel to the back, and Damond continues to drive forward. Malissa stares ahead, mouth open. The sound of the truck's engine is steady.

“Damond!” she yells, looking from the road to his face. “What the fuck is wrong with you?!” He glances over at her and their eyes meet. She looks horrified, her mouth still open, visibly at a loss for words. He remains quiet and returns his attention to the road. “What the fuck, Damond,” she says, the steady, unfaltering sound of the engine now the most prominent sound in the vehicle. “I can't believe you just did that. You're fucking evil. How could you do that?” Damond looks to her once more, studying her horrified expression for any sign that may suggest the formation of tears. There isn't one.

“It was an accident,” he finally says, looking from her face to the road. Malissa's mouth remains open. Her breathing is shallow. Damond imagines that if he was to look closely enough at her neck he could see her pulse moving the skin there.

“Are you serious?” She stares at him intently. Damond recognizes a darkness forming in her tone, an insinuation of hate.

“It was just a fucking opossum, Malissa,” he says, his own distress now audible. “What are you going to do? Cry about it?” He glances at her once more. Her astonished expression remains unchanged save for the anger forming in her eyes. “What?” he digs. “It was an accident.”

“It wasn't a fucking accident!” Malissa exclaims, not taking her eyes from him. She waits for a rebuttle but he is silent. Her mouth closes and she turns her face away. “Just because your grandmother is dying doesn't mean that everything else should have to.”

By this, Damond is enraged. His hands tighten on the steering wheel, but neither he nor Malissa speaks another word to the other for the duration of the drive. Several hours after they return home, Damond crawls into bed with her. He is aware that she isn't asleep but, rather than attempting to talk through the mess, he decides to remain silent.

He continues his silence in the morning, not bothering to wake her when he leaves for work, and comes home that evening to discover that Malissa has already made dinner. He opens the door and is greeted by the smell of his favorite meal. She appears from around the corner leading to the kitchen and stands there, waiting for Damond to say something first.

“BBQ ribs?” he asks, noticeably caught off-guard.

“Yes,” Malissa says, smiling, “they’re almost ready.” She walks towards Damond, hoping that he will see that she would like to hug him, and he complies. He wonders why she would decide to make him dinner after everything that he did and said to her yesterday. He feels her arms loosen from around his sides and looks down at her.

“Malissa,” he starts, but she interrupts him.

“I’m sorry,” she says, looking up at him. Damond remains silent, eyes wide. He feels his face warming. She continues. “I understand that you’re going through a really difficult time right now, and you’re right. You were there for me when I needed you. I should be here for you while you need me.” She looks to him for some kind of a response but recognizes that he wants her to say more. “I shouldn’t have said what I said last night about your grandmother, and I’m sorry. Believe me when I say that.” At this, Damond looks down, his face red, before lifting his eyes and forcing a smile. Malissa smiles genuinely in return. She gives him another quick hug before backing away and turning

towards the kitchen. “The ribs are probably ready.” He watches her as she goes, attempting to analyze her behavior, and thinks briefly about whether or not he should consider her actions sincere. The two of them take a seat at the small dinner table, which annoys Damond. They hardly ever eat their dinner here, even if they have guests, and he is overwhelmed with a sense of superficiality. If Malissa really does feel badly about not being here for him when he needs her, he wonders why she wouldn’t choose to eat dinner with him on the couch as usual.

“It looks pretty good,” she says, interrupting his train of thought. Her eyes meet his and he realizes that he has been staring at her. She smiles, and he smiles quickly in return while attempting to refocus his thoughts on the food, but his agitated state continues to worsen. He picks up a rib with both hands and, taking a bite, is disappointed to discover that Malissa has cooked it perfectly. He struggles to hide his irritation. “Oh,” she says, seeing his discontent, “I forgot to grab some napkins.” She rises from her seat at the table and Damond watches in near disgust as she wets a paper towel for him with cold water and rings it out into the sink, just the way he likes it. She returns and hands it to him, but she notices now that there is something else on his mind. “Are you okay?” she asks as she retakes her seat at the table. Damond leans back in his chair and wipes the BBQ sauce from his face with the damp paper towel.

“It tastes different,” he finally says, and Malissa looks at him with an expression of concern on her face.

“It does?” she asks questionably. “It shouldn’t. I mean, I made it the way that I always do.” Damond struggles to maintain eye contact with her and says nothing. “What



tastes different about it?" she persists. He remains silent, and Malissa begins to get impatient. "Damond?"

"Forget it," he says suddenly, confusing her further.

"Forget what?" she asks.

"Nothing, okay? It just tastes different is all." He looks at her defensively and sees that she is still confused. "What, Malissa? I don't know how to describe it. You act like I graduated from the fucking Cordon Bleu or something." Damond realizes that he has lost his composure and attempts to laugh off his outburst, picking up his fork, but he recognizes in Malissa's expression that she is unsure as to whether or not he is trying to be funny.

"Damond," she starts, assuming that his behavior is related to something that has happened to him during the day, "is everything alright? How is your grandmother?" He drops his fork abruptly and flashes her a look of anger.

"Since when do you care about my grandmother?" he snaps. Malissa's eyes widen and she is still looking at him. She leans back in her chair.

"Jesus Christ," she says with a sigh.

"I'm sorry," he says hurriedly, attempting to regain control of himself. "I didn't mean to snap at you, it's just..." He pauses, struggling to think of a logical excuse for his behavior. Malissa crosses her arms and waits on him to continue. He thinks again about the possibility that her apology was all just a show, and his anger overwhelms him. "I mean, really, Malissa, why are we eating dinner at this fucking table?"

"What?" Malissa scoffs, smiling in disbelief. "You're kidding, right? Please tell me that you're joking right now." Damond stares at her, but says nothing. "Fine!" she

exclaims, picking up her plate. "Let's eat in the fucking living room." He watches her stand and carry her things over to the couch. She sits down and looks back over her shoulder at him. "How is this, Damond?" she asks before turning to her meal. "Is this good enough?" Damond sits in silent rage, thinking of what his response will be.

"No," he says after a moment, and Malissa turns to face him yet again. "No, it's not good enough." He watches as a sarcastic smile spreads across her face. She sets her plate down on the coffee table and stands up before walking slowly towards him, cat-like but with intent.

"Then please tell me," she says as she stops in front of him and crosses her arms, "what the hell do you want me to do?" Damond studies Malissa's face, questioning how she could have possibly given him a sincere apology only minutes ago if she can so easily challenge him now. He is certain that it is all an act.

"Well," he says, aiming to hurt her, "you could start by actually being competent in your line of work, which you obviously aren't, otherwise you would've gotten that raise after weeks of ignoring me." Malissa laughs up at the ceiling and shakes her head before turning back to get her food. She picks up her plate and moves toward the hallway, stopping in front of Damond for a final time.

"Enjoy your dinner, asshole," she says. He watches her walk to their bedroom and shut the door behind herself, beginning to feel as though he has made a mistake in belittling once more. He thinks briefly about going and apologizing, but decides to eat his dinner instead, certain that she is too mad to receive an apology at the moment. Several half-hours go by, during which Malissa emerges from the bedroom and places her dishes in the sink before returning indefinitely. Damond watches her intently, but she doesn't

glance at him a single time. He concludes that he will have to apologize for his behavior soon if he hopes for things to begin to get back to normal—to the way that they were nearly a year ago. When it starts getting late, he makes his way to the bedroom door and knocks quietly.

“What do you want?” she asks, her voice sounding angry through the door.

“Can I come in?” He is careful to adjust his tone enough to sound defeated. There is silence.

“If you want,” Malissa replies, and Damond slowly enters. She is already in bed, but she is reading in the light of her bedside lamp, and he is unsure as to whether or not she will want him to sleep on the couch.

“Can I join you?” he asks, still monitoring his tone. She looks at him for a long moment and sighs.

“I guess so,” she finally says, and he thanks her. He climbs onto his side of the bed, preparing for his apology. He is unsure how to begin, causing several minutes to elapse.

“Malissa?” he starts, turning to look at her. She says nothing in return, but looks up from her book and allows her eyes to meet his. “I’m honestly, very fucking sorry. There isn’t really anything else that I can say.” She returns her gaze to the pages of the book in her hands, and Damond can tell that this apology isn’t enough for her. He sits up and moves closer to her, thinking of apologetic techniques that have worked in the past. “I’m an asshole,” he says, and this seems to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, I think so, too,” Malissa agrees, a smirk flashing across her lips. At this, Damond feels as though he may be able to gain some ground. He grins, careful not to look too happy.

“Ever since I found out about my grandmother’s cancer, things just haven’t been the same with us, and I know that it’s mostly my fault.” He notices her raise her eyebrows and decides to revise his statement. “Okay, entirely my fault.” This is suitable enough, and she rewards him by making eye contact with him again. “Can you forgive me?” he asks directly, feeling as though he has, in the least, made an effort. Malissa stares at him for a moment before a grin appears on her face.

“I’ll think about it,” she says, still grinning, and Damond grins wider in return. He leans towards her in the hope that she will kiss him, and she obliges. Their lips touch softly, but Damond does not pull away. To his surprise, neither does Malissa. He continues to kiss her more forcefully with each passing moment, and thinks briefly about the possibility that having sex could potentially be a solution to their current problems. Their kissing intensifies as the two of them sink into the bed and Damond places himself on top of her, but she stops him as he begins to lift her shirt.

“Not tonight,” she says somewhat playfully, “but I’ll keep kissing you.” At this, Damond straddles Malissa’s stomach, and she laughs as he continues to attempt to lift her shirt, but the laughter begins to sound forced. “Damond, stop,” she finally says, quickly growing tired of his ignoring her commands, but Damond carries on, beginning to get angry over her attempts to stop him. He is certain that she wants it just as much as he does, that she is just being resistant to turn him on, but he is tired of this game. He places his right hand on Malissa’s neck, pressing down hard, and Malissa grabs his wrist with

both of her hands, unable to breathe easily. Damond sees her struggling, and he hates her for it. He doesn't understand why she would fight him like this if she cared about him the way that she claims, if she was really being honest when she said that she tried to fight off the man who raped her. He needs her, he thinks to himself, and she isn't ever here for him, not even as he is losing his own grandmother.

Damond's train of thought is interrupted by his realization that Malissa is no longer struggling as much as she was a moment ago. His eyes focus on her face just in time to see a tear fall from her eye and disappear into her hairline, and he abruptly removes his hand from her throat, his eyes wide. Malissa gasps as Damond falls backwards off of her body and onto the bed. She sits up quickly as his weight is removed from her abdomen but she falls to the floor where she catches her breath. Damond watches helplessly as she gets to her feet and grabs her phone before she runs out of the bedroom, her left hand on her neck. He hears the sound of their apartment door closing and his eyes begin to fill with tears as the realization sets in him that he has lost her.

His guilt, however, recedes as he begins to see his actions as justified. He is certain that she will be back in the morning and that he will be able to find a moment to apologize to her, knowing that she feels just as guilty for her apathetic treatment of him in his time of need. These thoughts circle through his mind enough to make him sleepy and he drifts off feeling secure. But he wakes several times throughout the night, jolted from his dreams by an image of the opossum's bright eyes disappearing underneath him.

## CHAPTER IV

### Mother's Day

When the kids delivered breakfast into her bedroom half an hour ago, Malissa was certain about not visiting her mother's house. Now she sits and rolls cold bites of scrambled egg back and forth on her plate with a pink plastic fork. She listens to the shrieks and giggles of her two young daughters echo through the hallway as Kenneth excites them by taking over her usual routine for the day. Since marrying him eight years ago, Malissa has had a convenient excuse for skipping every other year of the Mother's Day celebration on her own side of the family, and using the excuse became even easier when her oldest was born six years ago. After all, she would say, her mother-in-law is just as much of a grandmother by right. It was then that she and Kenneth decided that his mother would be a better choice as the part-time caretaker of the girls throughout the week, and lately the young parents have noticed that the girls often forget the existence of their maternal grandmother. A pang of guilt rings across Malissa's abdomen. She sighs.

It took her longer than usual to fall asleep last night given that her mind, charged with thoughts of the approaching tomorrow, twirled images through her consciousness in an endless fashion. They folded themselves into heavy ocean waves, crashing over the shore of Malissa's eyelids until her head filled with saltwater, and in their cloudiness she watched as visions of her past sprang to the surface. Several lingered long enough for her to hang artwork on the fridge in her mother's kitchen or to admire her stuffed animal collection, but in that crucial stage at which the mind unfolds itself of worries in order to

rest, a vivid memory recaptured Malissa's awareness. She found herself tip-toeing through the hallway of her childhood home, her mother's voice heard muffled and harsh nearby before a yelp, familiar sounding, resonated through the living space. As she leaned around the corner to discover its source, her wide eyes registered the image of her mother moving towards the opposite end of the house. A stiffened black dog dangled from her right hand by the collar around its neck. Malissa did not blink. Instead, she listened as her mother left her sight and entered the laundry room. A weight was flung against the wall, followed sharply by another yelp and, after that, the slamming of a door. The taste of brine was brought to Malissa's mouth, reminding her of what it feels like to be thrown to the ocean floor and forced to inhale there. The imagined weight of such a wave brought her out of the memory and left her feeling sick to her stomach in the wake of it all. Now she sits in the fresh sunlight, chewing on a pink plastic fork as Kenneth walks into the bedroom. His shirt is drenched.

"Well," he says as he walks to the foot of the bed, "I don't know how you manage to get those wild animals to cooperate during bath time, but I had to promise them some ice cream."

"Nice play," Malissa says with a smile. "You promised them something that was already in the day's agenda." She watches as he removes his damp clothing.

"Speaking of that, are you still against going to your mom's?"

"Hmm," she pauses. Kenneth takes a seat on the bed and studies his wife's face. She looks not at him but to the side and through a window. "It's not that I *want* to go," she says, studying the yellow daffodils around the mailbox, "but we didn't have the time to take the kids to see her in the last few weeks and that's normally our routine before

skipping out on Mother's Day." She looks down at Kenneth's hands before returning her gaze to his face. "What do you think?"

"I think I get what you're saying," he says with a smile. "Don't worry. I'll be sure to ease the tension there with some award-winning humor." He stands and kisses Malissa's forehead before making his way to the master bath. She watches him with a sense of relief.

Not long afterward the couple is unbuckling the straps of their daughters' car seats and making its way to the front door of Malissa's childhood home. She carries her youngest in her arms and counts her steps in a subconscious manner, a habit leftover from the past. It takes an average of seventeen steps to get from the edge of the walkway to the welcome mat. Once there, Kenneth pauses to look at his wife, who is reminded by his wink to breathe normally. The doorbell rings at his touch.

"I forgot how big Grammy's house is!" Eliza exclaims as chimes are heard playing inside.

"You're right, Eliza," Malissa says as she scans the entryway for any approaching shadows, "there is quite a bit of space." Eliza gleefully embraces the stuffed purple giraffe that Malissa's mother gave her for Valentine's Day. The locks on the door are heard shifting before it swings open to reveal the face of Malissa's younger brother.

"Hey there!" Will says with a smile. "We were just talking about you. No one had heard if you were coming." Malissa's sarcastic expression causes Will to chuckle. He opens the door wider before gesturing the small family across the threshold. "Come in! Come in! Kenneth, it's good to see you! You've got a nice beard going these days." The men laugh and Malissa finds herself drifting into an alternate state of awareness, a



familiar place of detachment. She absent-mindedly registers the banter between her husband and brother while her ears scan the large home for the voices of others. She hears her sister-in-law and stepfather in the kitchen.

“Where’s mom?” she asks quietly.

“She’s on the back porch with Aunt Holly and Uncle Caleb. Cooper is playing with the dog in the backyard.”

Malissa nods in confirmation and looks at Kenneth, who springs into action.

“Alright, Bear Cub,” he says to Eliza while taking Percy from Malissa’s arms, “let’s head to the kitchen with the little one.” The girl smiles and trots off bravely with her giraffe. Kenneth follows in her wake.

“Thank God, you showed up,” Will continues. “It’s always less stressful when you and Kenneth are here to joke around with: the more, the merrier.”

“I didn’t plan on being here, to be honest,” she says as she kicks off her sandals beside the coatrack. “I slept like shit last night.”

“Well,” he pauses, “I simply *cannot* imagine why.” His feigned ignorance results in their mutual laughter which precedes them as they make their way to the kitchen.

“Speak of the devil,” gestures Malissa’s stepfather as she enters the room. She grins and feels her face warm.

“Eliza,” Kenneth says abruptly, “how about we take your little sister into the yard and see what Cooper is up to?” He herds the child through the kitchen and glances at his wife with a smile to suggest that he is doing her a favor.

“You must be allergic to the inside of this house, Ken,” Eddie says playfully.

“I think he’s just allergic to me,” Malissa replies, smiling as the door closes behind her husband. Muffled voices sound from the patio.

“It’s good to see you, Malissa,” her sister-in-law says in an attempt to revive the room’s conversation. “What have you been up to?”

“Well,” she starts, struggling to overhear the interactions occurring outside, “we’ve been rather busy lately with the girls. Some days I wish I could skip the rowdy years and get straight to the teenage rebellions.”

Will chuckles as he makes his way to his wife’s side at the kitchen island.

“Part of me is glad that I have no idea what you’re going through, then,” Sarah jests. She turns to Will and hands him a refilled glass of blackberry wine before calling a toast: “Godspeed, sister!” She raises her glass in Malissa’s direction. The group caters to Sarah’s enthusiasm with a laugh.

“I’ll drink to that,” Will says before taking a sip.

“You’ll drink to anything if the alcohol is free,” Malissa corrects him in a big-sisterly manner, “or if the toast reminds you of how great your childless lifestyle is.” The two of them keel over. Sarah wears a puzzled expression in her attempt to understand the siblings’ banter.

“You’re right,” Will retorts after composing himself. “All I need are our three pets back home to remind me of that!”

Sarah playfully slaps him on the shoulder in reprimand. “Why don’t you get your girls a pet, Malissa?” she asks. “I bet Kenneth would love to have a dog.”

Eddie chuckles. “You could get a Scottish terrier, like your mom,” he suggests, the expression of a rhetorical statement dawning on his face. “The girls would love it!” Malissa wrinkles her nose at her stepfather’s comment and Will nearly spits out his wine.

“Isn’t Ike mom’s fifth Scottish terrier or something?” Will asks after a hasty gulp, gesturing to the backyard.

“I believe so,” Eddie replies. Malissa locks eyes with her brother across the kitchen island as her mind busies itself with the task of picturing all of her mother’s previous dogs. Will sees her wheels turning and waits in anticipation.

“What is it?” he asks, and Malissa realizes that she is staring.

“Oh, nothing important. I was just remembering all of their names.” She crosses her arms and leans the small of her back against the breakfast bar. “Let’s see,” she says. “There was Scottie, the first one—properly named. Then came Max, Razz...”

Will sets his drink abruptly on the countertop at the mention of the dog’s name. Malissa’s attention is pricked by his movement.

“I swear I used to hear that dog’s footsteps in the hallways after he died,” he says, and Sarah laughs at her husband’s eccentricity. “No, really, sometimes I couldn’t fall asleep because of what sounded like the clicking of a dog’s toenails on the hardwood floor.”

“I remember that,” Malissa says, her thoughts wandering back to last night’s recollections. “I remember quite a bit about that dog, in particular.”

“Can’t be too hard,” Eddie replies. “Don’t they all look the same?”

Malissa lightheartedly rolls her eyes as Will and Sarah coddle the humor.

“I wasn’t really talking about the way he looked but about the memories I have of him with... us.” She looks again at Will.

“Oh,” her brother replies, nodding his head in understanding, “I get what you’re saying.” His brevity sparks interest.

“What is it?” Sarah coos.

“Well, I was pretty young at the time. Malissa probably remembers more than I do.” The group awaits her response. Malissa chews on her bottom lip.

“That brings us to the fourth dog,” Eddie jumps in. He pauses dramatically, his glance shifting among each of his three audience members before he continues:

“Whiskey.”

Will and Sarah erupt. Malissa smiles quietly.

“That wasn’t his real name, Ed,” Will says between laughs. “We’ve been over this.”

“Exactly,” Sarah agrees. “You don’t want to disrespect the name of the dead. Nigel was a sweet dog.”

“Of course,” Eddie continues, “and he was the only dog I ever saw who would drink straight whiskey.” He turns from the countertop of the island and opens a cabinet. “Here,” he says, sporting four shot glasses, “the true honor will be given in a drink to his name!” His liveliness is interrupted by the opening of the patio door. Malissa feels her body tense.

“What are you all laughing about in here?” her mother asks in a curious tone as she makes her way inside. She closes the door behind herself and smiles at her daughter.

“Hi, mom,” Malissa says, bending to give her mother a hug.

“Hi, sweetie, I didn’t know you would be here! Kenneth took me by surprise when he and the girls came outside.” She examines the room, eyeing the shot glasses before continuing. “Ed, honey, do you *really* have to get that stuff out right now?”

Malissa’s stomach tightens as her mother’s greeting is cleared from the air around her.

“I guess not,” he says, turning to restock the glasses without hesitation. Will and Sarah exchange a glance as they take a sip of wine. The room falls silent, save for the sound of Eddie’s activities. Malissa shifts nervously on her feet.

“Is anyone getting hungry?” she asks, looking at her brother in a wide-eyed manner. He straightens his posture in comprehension.

“Definitely!” he confirms, elbowing Sarah. She steadies the wine in her glass.

“I’m always hungry,” she says, squinting at her husband. “And thirsty, too.”

“Great,” Malissa smiles, “I’m starving. I’ll go get the rest of them.” She walks past her mother and makes a conscious effort to prevent her smile from fading as she makes her way outside. There she finds her aunt and uncle sitting at the patio table. They are framed by a number of softly blooming flower baskets which hang from the awning, as well as by several flower pots along the edge of the patio, and for a moment Malissa feels herself falling back into the days when her mother would catch her popping open the early, pink buds that draped from the baskets of fuchsia. In the yard, beyond the haze of the memory that plays before her, she sees her husband, children, and cousin kicking a soccer ball amongst themselves as Ike attempts to disrupt its trajectory.

“There you are!” Holly calls as Malissa shuts the door. “Kenneth has been catching us up on you two. It sounds like things are going really well.”

Malissa grins as she approaches the back of an empty chair and places her hands on the corners of its backing. She and Caleb exchange a nod of greeting. “They have,” she replies as her eyes follow the black dog. “Eliza starts the first grade in the fall and she’s beyond excited.”

“I bet she is,” her aunt replies. “I remember when Cooper was starting grade school.” She looks at her husband across the table.

“It’s hard to believe how fast it’s going by.” His response sounds scripted. The trio falls silent for a moment as each person glances into the yard.

“How old is Cooper now?” Malissa asks between Ike’s barks.

“He’ll be fourteen in October,” Holly replies, tucking some loose strands of her red hair behind an ear. Caleb’s eyebrows raise as though he could have never known such information. Malissa takes notice of his graying hair and remembers how black it was when he was younger and funnier.

“I was actually just saying to everyone inside that I wish I could skip straight to the rebellious teenage-years.” She laughs to herself.

“Ah, you don’t mean that,” Holly says with a smile. “The bigger they get, the more they eat.”

Caleb chuckles and pats his round stomach. “Ain’t that the truth,” he says. Malissa grins and thinks back to the years in which Caleb’s conversational input revolved solely around his obsession with half-marathons.

“Speaking of that,” she breaks off, “I’m supposed to be letting y’all know that we’re getting ready to eat in there.” Caleb begins to hoist his tall body out of the patio chair.

“Oh, good,” Holly says, “I was starting to get hungry.” She, too, begins the process of leaving her seat. Malissa walks past them into the yard.

“Good news, kiddos,” Kenneth announces with a gesture towards his wife, “she’s here to tell us that it’s dinner time!” The children cheer around him, causing Ike to bark in excitement. Malissa smiles. “Inward, minions!” Kenneth continues, pointing to the patio. “To the kitchen sink!” Cooper and Eliza dash for the door and Malissa extends her hand for high-fives as they pass.

“I’ll tell you, sir,” she calls to her husband as he gathers Percy in his arms. “Your way with the kids will never fail to bring a smile to my face.”

He laughs as he approaches her, placing his free arm around her waist as she turns and the two of them make their way to the patio. They reach the door and Kenneth leads the way inside.

“That’s the last of them,” Malissa declares as they cross the threshold into the kitchen and she closes the patio door behind herself.

“Finally!” her brother replies. “I thought you two lovebirds would never make it back.” Will winks at Kenneth and Malissa’s sarcasm manifests itself into an intentional stare.

“Come pour the drinks,” their mother calls, and Malissa makes her way to the cupboard, knowing from experience that she is who the command is for.

Within a few minutes, the scrambling family settles at the dining-room table and each adult begins to scoop food onto plates. Malissa sets the last drink—her own—in its place on the table and takes her seat. Her first instinct is to serve her children, but she studies their plates to see that Kenneth has nearly finished doing so. She smiles at him in

thanks and he returns the gesture, but she feels her face warm at the idea of what her mother may think of her inactivity. Malissa glances across the table to study the familiar face and is relieved to see that her mother appears entirely unaffected. She sighs. An anxiousness fills her stomach as she turns her attention back to the food on the table. She fixes herself a plate. Her hands begin to feel cold. Small talk fills the air.

“Do you remember that?” Will’s voice rings in Malissa’s ears. She looks up from her plate to realize that the table awaits her response.

“Remember what?” she says, feigning a genuine voice. “I was in another world just then.”

Will smiles before repeating himself. “Do you remember how mom would let Nigel sit in a chair at the dinner table?”

A wave of irritation passes over Malissa’s mood. She grins in an effort to hide it. “How could I forget that?” she says, attempting to soften any hints of criticism in her tone. “I’m pretty sure that she lets Ike do the same thing.”

“That, she does,” Eddie replies. “He would be in a chair right now if there was an extra one for him to jump into.”

His wife laughs innocently. “He’s just a little baby,” she says as she removes a piece of chicken from her plate and places her hand under the table. Malissa leans back in her chair to watch as the dog takes the food gently from her mother’s fingertips.

“There you go, sweetheart,” she says, patting Ike on the head.

“He’s spoiled to death is what he is,” Eddie says. Malissa hears a note of disappointment in his voice and wonders briefly if her stepfather is jealous of the dog.



“I bet he eats better than half of the people on the planet,” Will jokes. Eliza giggles with excitement as Ike makes another trip around the table in an effort to win more food. The dog stops beside Malissa’s chair and nudges her leg with a cold nose. She looks down at him and grins, but her lack of contribution towards his goal leads him back to the other side of the table. The whole group watches in silence as her mother selects another scrap. The dog takes it gently from her hand.

“He’s such a little gentleman,” the mother says in a placating voice. She wipes off the tips of her fingers on a napkin. “Does anyone want some dessert?”

Eddie stands in response to her question. “Actually, I heard that someone was promised some ice cream.” He winks in Kenneth’s direction. The girls cheer and Cooper jumps up from his spot at the table.

“I’ll help!” he calls, jogging to the kitchen. Ike barks excitedly.

“Hush, Ike,” Malissa requests in response to the noise. A glare is given from across the table. The daughter lowers her eyes.

The rest of the afternoon passes slowly in the form of a soccer ball and squealing children, and it isn’t long before Malissa finds herself rejoining her sandals by the door, a tired and pouting Percy in her arms.

“I’m still so glad that I got to see you all,” her mother says sweetly as Malissa slides each of her feet through the appropriate straps. “The girls are getting so big. You really ought to bring them around here more.”

Malissa grins politely as she looks up from her shoes. “It was really nice to be here,” she replies, suddenly noticing that her mother holds Eliza’s stuffed purple giraffe in her hands.

“I wanted to make sure that she didn’t forget this,” her mother says, handing the giraffe to her daughter. The tone of her voice is that of an unfortunate goodbye. Malissa’s eyes burn in a wave of guilt. The front door opens as Kenneth returns from the car.

“One down,” he says before extending his arms for Percy, “and one to go.” He takes his sleepy daughter from her mother’s arms. “Say ‘Bye, Grammy,’” he coos to Percy before wrapping his free arm around the shoulders of his mother-in-law.

“Be careful and drive safely,” she says while taking Percy’s hand, “and come back to see us soon!”

“Most definitely,” he reassures her, smiling. He leaves her side and makes his way through the door as he calls back: “And Happy Mother’s Day!” The silence that follows is disturbed only by the clicks of toenails on hardwood, signaling Ike’s approach from the back of the house.

“Oh, there you are, sweetheart,” her mother says as she leans down and picks up the dog.

“He must have heard us leaving.” Malissa moves closer to the duo. She pats Ike on the head before kissing her mother’s cheek. She feigns a cheery voice in an effort to lift her mother’s spirits: “We’ll be back soon!”

“I hope so,” her mother replies. She shifts Ike’s weight to one arm and moves past her daughter to see her out. Malissa watches the door swing open. “Be careful,” her mother continues, “and call me sometime.” The daughter makes her way outside and turns back to finalize her family’s departure:

“Happy Mother’s Day, mom. I love you.”

“I love you, too, sweetie. Happy Mother’s Day.” Ike stares quietly from her arms.

Malissa forgets to count the steps she takes across the walkway to the car. Kenneth waits for her by the passenger door, holding it open. She climbs in and watches as her husband makes his way around the front of the vehicle. He throws up a hand to signal goodbye. She turns her attention back to the house to see that Eddie, who returns the wave, has appeared by his wife's side.

"See," Kenneth starts as he turns the key and drives away, "that wasn't as bad as you thought it would be, was it?"

Malissa nods, grinning. "She's always courteous when there are other people around. You should see her when she's alone with me."

Kenneth chuckles to himself. "Well," he continues, "when was the last time that you two were alone together?"

His wife stares at the road ahead as she ponders the question, chewing on her bottom lip. Eventually she looks at him with a puzzled expression and utters the words: "I can't remember."

## CHAPTER V

### Persephone

“Do you know why she isn’t speaking to me?” I ask, listening for my mother’s voice to cross the phone line.

“You know why.”

I stare silently at the picture of my sister that sits on the mantle of the fireplace, next to the hourglass. It has been there for as long as I can remember. The weight of my guilt rests on my voice, preventing me from any attempt at repairing the damage I have done.

“You turned your back on this family, Persephone,” my mother says. “Did you forget what she did during my divorce with Frank?”

“I didn’t forget.” I feel sick to my stomach.

“Well,” she continues, “you can’t just go crawling back to him after all of that.”

I hang up the phone. The empty house around me feels unsafe at nighttime, but lately I question if that’s because of the emptiness or the result of the loneliness. I didn’t intend for any of this to happen. I can’t imagine what Holly is thinking, and I wonder if any word of her cold shoulder has somehow reached my father. I still don’t know how anyone found out about my talking with him to begin with. Well, I have an inkling.

I bet his new wife opened her mouth. Her name is the same as my daughter’s and she is only four years younger than I am, but I didn’t mention the latter when I went to my father’s house a few months ago. She opened the door with a smile on her face. I

smiled back and greeted her in the cheeriest voice that I could muster. When I walked into the living room and saw Frank for the first time in almost a decade, he didn't move from his seat in the recliner until she encouraged him to hug me. I almost cried in his arms. I wanted to tell him that I forgave him for the way he treated my mother. I wanted to tell him that I'm sorry for taking either side in the divorce, for encouraging my sister to seek out her inheritance. "Take what he owes you," my mother and I had said to her. "If he's going to abandon this family then he should leave us with everything he's got."

During the final years of my parents' marriage, my father spent his time building a cabin on a small section of the land they owned. He called me then and told me that a stray dog had made itself comfortable on the bridge that he had built across the creek in order to connect the driveway to the road. His elkhound, Fritz, wouldn't run with other dogs, he said, so something had to be done about the stray. I loaded up the kids and took them over there, knowing fully well that if I didn't take the dog, my father would show no mercy. We came home with it that day and I let my daughter believe that she had persuaded me to do so. I named him "Ranger" and bought extra dog food for the next four or five years. He was our "outside dog" and I was surprised that he never decided to run off, but I think he stayed because he felt like he had a family again. He seemed grateful. I didn't pet him much because he liked to roll in death, but my daughter always rubbed the top of his snout when she saw him. When he died, I replaced him with a German-shepherd puppy.

On the day we brought Ranger home, Frank gave us a tour of the cabin. I hadn't thought to keep up with his progress on the building. My daughter said she loved everything about it and that she wanted to stay the night in the lofted bedroom when it

was finished. My father never looked as happy as he did when his grandkids smiled at him. He told her that she was more than welcome to do so but I never took them back again to stay. Rumors circulated about Frank and his intentions with the cabin. I heard that he planned on leaving my mother and moving in, just across the hill. The truth made its way out of the gabble eventually and my mother was devastated. She said that she knew nothing of the cabin until Frank left her with a pen and divorce papers. After the court proceedings, she asked me what I thought about the building's worth. She called Holly the next day.

My sister is almost twenty years my junior. When she was born, people saw her with us out in public and approached to tell me that my daughter was beautiful. Now that Holly's older, my mother often jokes about her youngest daughter's status as an accident. I laugh in good humor but the joke feels bitter. My mother has never been as low as she was postpartum. In that first year, when others called Holly my daughter, they weren't entirely wrong. She grew up and became the dearest sister one can imagine. She would even babysit my daughter for me when I needed it, years later. By the time our mother called us with the news of pen and papers, Holly was adamant in defending her. Frank never spent much time with his youngest. I always wondered if my older brother fried my father's nerves.

Holly filed a lawsuit against our father in the fall of the same year that our parents' marriage ended. My mother suggested that my sister go after the cabin. "When you get it," she said, "you can sell the place and finish your degree in chemistry," but Holly never graduated. The judge ruled in her favor and our father told her that she'll

never see another dollar of his money. We thought we won the war. I look back and know that we were wrong.

I didn't tell my father of the thoughts I wished to share with him when he wrapped me in his arms, and I didn't tell him that I hoped he would refrain from sharing any news of our reunion. A part of me regrets the selfishness of my choice to speak with him. It is no small part. His new wife must have told as many of our relatives as she could remember the names of. She might have even gone directly to my sister. There's no telling what a woman from Michigan would do to stir the pot. All that I do know is that she only married Frank to get at what's left over when he dies. She must be a conniving woman.

I glance at the clock from my seat in the recliner to see that it is getting late, so I make my way to the bedroom to find Ike snoring beside a small pile of his toys at the foot of the bed. He used to help me feel safer throughout the night by growling if he heard a noise, but last year his ears got infected after playing in the snow, and now I'm fairly certain of his deafness. On one occasion, my husband returned in the early morning after working an overnight shift and made it all the way into the bedroom before Ike could detect his presence. It worried me, so I asked for a new pistol when my birthday came.

Ed has been working night shifts more often since he got promoted. The extra money is nice to have, but all he ever wants to do on his days off is fiddle around in his garage or go to see a movie. There's also the lawn, of course, and it seems to me that most husbands care more about the yard than they do about anything else. My two former husbands were exactly the same way, especially the father of my kids.

My daughter laughs and talks just like him. She has since she was little. I suppose that's the problem with having children: if you stop loving their father, they get harder to talk to. But I try. My daughter, in particular, grew especially distant from me as she went through her years in college. I found out what her hobbies were, then, and asked her if she was trying to get back at me, but she told me that she had no idea what I was talking about. I don't believe her. How could she have possibly gone through those years without her father telling her what I did? Still, I try to be as kind to her as God will allow. She named her youngest daughter after me.

My son's story is a similar one. He was grateful through his freshman year but he stopped making time for me when his sophomore year arrived. Shortly into that year's first semester, he drained the account I opened for him at the credit union and bought a plane ticket to California. The majority of that money came from his grants for school, and I knew that he would owe thousands after interest. When he left, then, I lied and told him that I had to take out a loan to pay for his tuition, hoping to change his mind about what he was doing to our family. It didn't work, so I told him that Ed and I were getting a divorce as the result of it all. I shouldn't have. I didn't see him for nearly five years after that but we made amends. Today I pretend like it never happened.

I have a harder time sleeping as the years go by. When Ed is home, his snoring keeps me up all night. When he is working, I find it hard to sleep alone. It helps to have Ike around. I pet his head before I situate myself under the covers and wait for the thoughts to leave my mind. Sometimes they never do. Tonight is no exception. My sleep comes and goes until the passerines begin their chorus. I climb out of bed and check the time to see that Ed will not be home until another hour has passed. Ike seems bothered by



my early rise. He lifts his head enough to register my activities but quickly lets it fall back into its place on the bed.

“Good morning, baby boy,” I say as I pat him on his side. He sighs. I make my way to the kitchen in an effort to think about breakfast.

The house feels unnecessary these days. Ike and I are usually the only ones who inhabit it. I always imagined that it would be filled with grandchildren running and screaming through the hallways. This thought warmed my heart on those nights when I felt alone in the world. “With them,” I would say to myself, “I will do better.” But my daughter tends to keep her distance from me unless I reach out for her. I don’t reach out to people often. She would always emphasize in her attempts to comfort me that I should try communicating my thoughts with Ed more often. He and I were on the edge of divorce more than once.

The first time was merely three years into our marriage. My daughter asked me one afternoon if something was bothering me and I broke out in tears when I told her that I thought that Ed and I might get a divorce. She told me to do what I needed to do to be happy. Then she told me that, if Ed was who I wanted to be with, I should sit down and write him a letter in which I told him everything that I wanted him to hear. I look back and know that it saved our marriage but I’ve never thanked her. I feel guilty. She never needs me the way that I need her.

Sometimes I think that she goes out of her way not to need me. Whenever I’m around her for too long I tend to say the wrong things in the wrong ways or to say nothing at all when the right words are needed. At times I have wondered if I was cursed to feel forever cut off from the rest of this world, cursed to feel nothing. When I feel

nothing, I feel the worst in me. But I haven't ever grown to know exactly what it is that leads me to this nothingness. One summer evening I heard my daughter in the kitchen and something compelled me to be with her for a moment. I went to her not knowing what I needed and she asked me if I was tired. I felt like shutting down but I told her that I must be, and I left the kitchen to sit on the patio. When she saw me crying out there, she asked me what was wrong and I told her that I had no idea, that I felt horrible about nothing in particular. No one ever seems to understand. It's a feeling that consumes my life. I get lost in my own pain, which has hurt me in the past. I miss the crucial signs.

When my daughter was fourteen years old, I took her to visit an optometrist for the first time because I couldn't make her stop squinting. I sat in the examination room with the two of them while the doctor checked her vision, and as I watched him increase the strength of the lenses before each one of her eyes, a terrible sinking feeling began to form in my gut. I wept into tears and the light-hearted optometrist asked me why I was the one crying in the examination room. I tried to laugh it off but I was crushed by the weight of my daughter's blindness. How many years had I not seen? How many moments? Since then I remind her every year to update her prescription. She probably sees it as a nuisance.

The first hour of the morning passes quickly while I sit in the recliner after drinking a glass of chocolate milk. Ed gets home from work and makes his way through the living room.

"Morning," he says. He looks exhausted.

"Morning," I reply. Ike doesn't move from his napping place on the collapsible footrest but watches as Ed enters the kitchen. I listens as he fixes himself a bowl of cereal

and heats in the microwave a scoop of the peach cobbler that he made for us two nights ago. He passes by again on his way to the bedroom to ask if there's anything that I want. "No, thanks," I say, and within the next hour I hear his snore escaping from the bedroom. He will usually sleep until the middle of the afternoon, but today is a Saturday, so he will probably linger even longer. I stopped trying years ago to wake him any sooner than he'd like. On several occasions I told him that I felt like I was wasting my life by sitting still during the weekends. I still feel that way now. The only difference lies in that I no longer make an effort to make Ed care.

I spend the morning pacing the house from one end to the other, looking for something to clean. I never thought that I would ever miss the mess of having kids. Now I fear that I make my own messes in compensation for those that I don't have to clean up anymore. I know that the shelves and tables could use a dusting, but there are pictures on nearly all of them. On one chest, in particular, there sits the only picture of my father that I have on display. Its frame is old and silver and small, and next to it there is also a single photo of my brother, John, who I haven't seen or spoken to in over thirty years. I worry that he'll die and that I won't hear about his funeral in enough time to attend. I promised myself that my relationship with my sister would never enter such a state of disrepair.

By the time Ed gets dressed it's nearly two o' clock. I heard him wake an hour ago while I sat on the couch next to the phone.

"Anything you'd like to do today?" he asks when he comes into the living room.

"Nothing, I guess."

He sighs. "Well, I'll be out in the yard if you need me or if you think of something you want to do. We could go get some dinner somewhere."

I nod and wait until he leaves the room before I adjust my sitting position. We go out to eat so often that it's no longer a special suggestion. Every restaurant within a twenty-mile radius seems to serve the same meals. I don't know how it doesn't bother him that neither of us need to browse a menu before we place our orders. For once I'd like for him to ask me if there's anything that I would like to talk about or if there's anything on my mind. He could have asked me if I've heard from Holly. But husbands are careless and sometimes I feel invisible. It's a feeling that I can only describe as watching a husband mow his yard for years at a time. Without my sister, the solitude has consumed me. I pick up the phone and send out a call.

"Hello?" My daughter answers.

"Hi, sweetie," I say, "what have you been up to?"

"Not much really. We just got back home from taking the girls to the park."

I hear her oldest daughter talking in the background. "How was it? I wish I had been there. I need to start walking again."

"It was fun," she says. "Percy got to feed the ducks."

"How sweet!"

"I took pictures. I'll have to show you sometime." She pauses. "Is everything going well with you?"

"Well," I say, "it's going." I hear the phone shifting in her hand.

"That's good," she replies. "Have you got any plans for this evening?"

"Nothing, really. Ed said something about going to eat."

"Well, that should be fun," she says. "Where are you going?"

"I'll let him decide," I reply. "I'm not very hungry today."

“Well,” she says, “I’m sure he’ll pick something good.” A silences follows. I wait for her to say more. “Have you heard from Holly lately?”

“Not yet,” I respond, sighing heavily.

“Well, don’t upset yourself about it,” she says. “Give it time. She misses you just as much as you miss her. One day she’ll wake up and regret the way she’s gone about it all.”

I feel my eyes begin to water. “I know,” I say. My voice is shaky.

“I’m always here if you need me,” she responds. “I’m just a phone call away.”

“Thank you, sweetie.” I hear her daughters squealing somewhere in her home.

“Well,” I continue, “I better get off of here and let you take care of the girls. I need to keep the line open in case I hear from Holly.”

“Of course,” she says. “I’m glad that you called. It was good to hear from you for a minute. Don’t beat yourself up and don’t let all of this eat away at you. You and one of your friends could go out sometime. Maybe that will help you feel a little better.”

“We’ll see,” I say, feigning a voice of optimism. “I love you. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“I love you, too,” she replies. “Talk to you later.”

I wait to end the call until I hear her end it first. I doubt that I will hear from Holly anytime soon but I pass the evening by the phone regardless. Eventually I leave my seat to shower and get ready. Not long afterward I hear Ed enter the house through the door in our bedroom to do the same.

“Where would you like to eat?” he asks, appearing in the living room with a clean pair of socks in one hand and his shoes in the other.

“I don’t care,” I say, and I watch as he takes a seat on the couch to put his footwear on.

The two of us sit in silence for some time while the television plays. I wish that he had woken soon enough to watch the game-shows with me in the early afternoon.

“Well,” Ed finally says, “are you ready?”

“I guess so,” I reply. He leaves his place on the couch as I coax Ike to jump down from the footrest of the recliner. Truthfully I hate to leave the dog behind, but he always greets me happily whenever I return.

While my husband drives us to a restaurant, my daughter’s words replay in my mind. I question whether or not it would astonish her for me to say that I have no friends remaining in my life. If anything, I am surrounded by acquaintances, and fostering these relationships requires a great deal of effort on my part. This has been the case since I was young, but getting older has only deterred me from expending the energy. In fact, nearly three years have passed since I last sat with a friend. Lisa and I went to lunch together. I’ve known her since our years in high school but nowadays family is just easier to come by. It was, at least.

When my daughter was a teenager, she asked me why I had children and I told her that, to me, the answer was obvious. “Who else would I have to take care of me when I get older?” I inquired before saying: “I wanted kids because I don’t want to be alone.” A puzzled expression dawned on her face and she told me, then, that she didn’t know what she thought of having kids. I told her that children are a blessing. I only wish I’d known it sooner.

## AFTERWORD

In the preface of this work, I explain that in writing this collection of short stories I sought to discover about the human soul some new quality or nature of existence. Here, I attempt to demonstrate the conceptual means by which I feel that I accomplished such a task. While each story is an individual entity, a state representing the individual human experience, it has been my desire to illustrate the overarching interconnectedness of these experiences, an interconnectedness inspired by the misgivings, the mistakes, the memories, and the pain of the human experience.

### *Desire and Freewill: “Paul”*

In the first short story of this collection, I attempt to illustrate, above all things, the faculty of desire or, in other words, freewill. More specifically, I set out to do so in a manner that highlights the inherent drawbacks of such a faculty. In his *De anima*, Aristotle identifies the faculty of desire or freewill in relation to the faculty of emotion and states that the mere existence of the latter is indicative of the former: “where sensation is, there is also pleasure and pain, and where these are there must also be desire” (77). In more basic terms, Aristotle describes desire as simply being “an appetite for what is pleasant” (81). It is clear, however, that the notion of desire also includes the actions resulting from it.

In “Paul,” desire—known also as freewill in this explication—is illustrated in a multitude of different ways, but the primary method by which I attempt to do so is found entirely in the characters and their interactions. The same is true for all of the stories in this collection. In “Paul,” however, Paul is the most readily apparent vehicle of the

message that I wish to convey about desire, and this message plays specifically on the idea that such a faculty is easily corrupted. For example, Paul's desire for fulfillment and equilibrium in the story has openly manifested itself into an abuse of alcohol, and, in the ultimate acts of freewill, Paul not only slices his sister's leg with a knife but also takes his own life. In this way, he becomes the most significant example offered by the story of the destructive nature of this human faculty, that of desire or freewill.

Other characters, however, are used to illustrate the faculty in less apparent ways, and in these demonstrations I attempt to highlight the theoretical framework of the overall collection. By this, I suggest that the characters of "Paul" can be collectively referred to as a micro-representation of the two notions of the inescapable and the related, terms I establish in the preface of the work. Elwood, for example, is characterized by an unbending enforcement of his own desire until the very last moments of the story. When his son, Carson, follows a desire of his own rather than Elwood's for what appears to be the first time, it is apparent that there is a cyclical motion at work in the story. This motion, then, is meant to inspire the reader to question the process of freewill: how is it established? And how is it disrupted? While Elwood's character can be seen as representing a form of structure for the faculty of desire—a representation which forms as the result of his tendency to manifest his own self-interests—it is also important to note that this structure appears to be abandoned when Elwood is providing Margaret with his help. This, however, is an illusion of concession, as desire does include the will to remove pain in favor of pleasure or comfort. Furthermore, it is the same faculty that allows Elwood to inflict physical damage in an amount that is as equally destructive as that employed by Paul.



*Understanding versus Reason: “Father’s Day”*

In the second short story of this collection, I attempt to illustrate, above all things, the faculties of understanding and reason and, more specifically, to do so in a manner that highlights the inherent drawbacks of such faculties. Like Aristotle in his *De anima*, I, too, combine these separate faculties into one category of illustration. Although for the modern reader the faculties of understanding and reason may sound as if they are referring to the same concept, Aristotle makes an important distinction between the two. He provides his readers with his best explanation of their definitive qualities here:

The cognitive faculty [(the faculty of understanding)] is not moved but remains still. Since one premiss [sic] or statement is universal and the other particular [(the faculty of reason)] (for the one asserts that a man in such a position should do such a thing and the other that I am a man in such a position), it is surely this latter opinion which causes movement, not the universal. Or perhaps it is both, but the universal tends to remain at rest, and the other does not. (193-5)

In other words, the faculty of understanding, as Aristotle explains, is employed through recognition as opposed to a process of thought, which is required for the employment of the faculty of reason.

In “Father’s Day,” I not only attempt to illustrate the differences between these two faculties but also the drawbacks in confusing one for the other. The characters, Damond and his father, in particular, are the vehicles through which I attempt to convey such drawbacks. On the surface, it is clear that Damond’s father represents an aging and traditional role of masculinity in an ever-changing world, but the real challenge lies in his

failure to adequately understand his son. I attempt to illustrate this miscommunication as being the direct result of a failure to exercise reason on the part of the father, who interprets Damond through a perspective that is void of any understanding except for the one that he, himself, was raised to acquire. This same pattern is seen at its most destructive through the characters of Dave and Elijah and is finalized by an illustration of a moth failing to recognize the danger of the light-source it has found in the woods. While Damond appears to exercise reason in his interactions with his surroundings, I implore my readers to focus on Damond's age as well as his status in relation to his father. Because of the dynamics established between the two, it must be questioned as to whether or not Damond truly understands where his father's behavior is coming from.

*Imagination: "Playing Opossum"*

In the third short story of this collection, I attempt to illustrate, above all things, the faculty of imagination and, more specifically, to do so in a manner that highlights the inherent drawbacks of such a faculty. In his *De anima*, Aristotle treats the faculty of imagination with specific complexity. He writes that while perceiving is impossible without imagination—he refers to the notion that “the name [Phantasia] (imagination) is derived from [Phaos] (light), because without light it is impossible to see” (163)—imagination differs greatly from discursive thinking. He also explains that imagination is different from opinion in that opinions may be either true or false, while “most imaginations are false” (159). Interestingly, however, Aristotle recognizes that:

...because imaginations persist in us and resemble sensations, living creatures frequently act in accordance with them, some, *viz.*, the brutes,

because they have no mind, and some, *viz.*, men, because the mind is temporarily clouded over by emotion, or disease, or sleep. (163)

With this in mind, the implications of the faculty of imagination not only gain notoriety for their ability to consume the entirety of human thought and action but also produce a unique interest in the complexities of the psyche.

In “Playing Opossum,” I attempt to demonstrate the faculty of imagination in all of its complexity, and I do this mainly through my illustrations of Damond, who is constantly driven and controlled by an intense form of paranoia: the direct result of the faculty of imagination. This paranoia, which is almost entirely directed toward Malissa, causes him to overanalyze her every aspect and action and to ultimately become incapable of thinking rationally or logically about his own behavior. The paranoia occurs in such a palpable manner through the course of the story that the reader will find that he or she, too, may begin to question Malissa’s words and actions—especially during the dinner scene. In this way, the faculty of imagination is characterized as being not only a hindrance but, at times, a dangerous influence in our lives.

An important quality of this story, however, goes entirely unillustrated, save for the name of the main character, Damond. As subtly indicated, this is the same Damond from “Father’s Day,” and, in fact, “Playing Opossum” is my illustration of whom I imagine the young Damond from the previous short story may eventually become. After years of dealing with the consequences of his father’s misguided expectations as well as the unhealthy dynamics established by toxic masculinity, Damond has become an emotionally manipulative abuser who is guided entirely by a destructive mental process built on paranoia and feelings of inadequacy, a direct result of the imaginative faculty.

*Memory: “Mother’s Day”*

In the fourth short story of this collection, I attempt to illustrate, above all things, the faculty of memory and, more specifically, to do so in a manner that highlights the inherent drawbacks of such a faculty. Aristotle does not write extensively on the faculty of memory within *De anima*.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, mentions in the work of how “recollection starts from the soul and extends to the movements or resting points in the sense organs” (49). In this way, Aristotle categorizes memory as being one of the major faculties of the human mind.

In “Mother’s Day,” I attempt to illustrate the faculty of memory through the character of Melissa, who is ultimately prevented from forming a meaningful relationship with her mother because of the memories that Melissa harbors from her childhood. One memory, in particular, is illustrated in “Mother’s Day” as especially destructive throughout the course of the story, though it was not my intention to limit Melissa’s memories. Instead, I sought to use Melissa’s memory about the animal abuse that she witnessed her mother commit—the memory that surfaces in her mind while she attempts to fall asleep—as a means by which to establish the ongoing reality that has formed as the direct result of Melissa’s experiences in childhood. In this way, I also set out to establish Melissa’s characterization of her mother, a characterization which is notably different from the one illustrated by the behavior Melissa’s mother as the story progresses. This distinction serves as the main source of conflict in the story and demonstrates that the existence of a meaningful mother-daughter relationship is ultimately prevented purely because of Melissa’s faculty of memory.

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<sup>1</sup> See Aristotle’s section, *On Memory and Recollection*, in his collection *Parva Naturalis* for a detailed account.

It is also worth noting that Melissa's reappearance from "Playing Opossum" carries with it several implications of the notion that Melissa's experiences in "Mother's Day" are inherently tied to those illustrated in "Playing Opossum." Melissa's behavior in the latter, for example, is directly tied to the drawbacks of her faculty of memory, though this is done in rather subtle imagery. In other words, while it is never clarified if Melissa was ever abused by her mother, Melissa's willingness to remain in a relationship with the abusive Damond in her younger years can be readily identified as an indicator of such abuse on the part of her mother. Together, these depictions of Melissa's character suggest that, in one way or another, Melissa's past continues to affect her present, a detrimental situation in regard to the potential for a meaningful relationship with her mother.

*Emotion: "Persephone"*

In the final short story of this collection, I attempt to illustrate, above all things, the faculty of emotion and, more specifically, to do so in a manner that highlights the inherent drawbacks of such a faculty. Of the emotive faculty, which he often refers to as the sensitive faculty, Aristotle writes that it is not only the source of the "affections of the soul" like anger, passion, joy, fear, and others but that it is also related to the five physical senses—and perhaps the source of them—due to the inherent connection between the emotions and the physical sensations of the body that occur in relation to them (13-5).

In "Persephone," I attempt to demonstrate the effects of the emotive faculty that occur when its negative aspects are allowed to go uncontrolled or unrecognized, and I do this entirely through the perspective of the mother from "Mother's Day": Persephone.

Through the character's narration of her life's experiences and memories, the reader may see that Persephone is plagued by a number of taxing emotions including anger, sadness, and guilt, and as the story progresses, the character is portrayed as not only being disconnected from the world around her but, unfortunately, as almost entirely incapable of receiving help. In this way, the drawbacks of the faculty of emotion are seen as some of the most damaging in the entire collection.

Furthermore, it is worth acknowledging that this in-depth illustration of Persephone, as a character, provides insight not only into the function of the emotive faculty but also into the social dynamics presented in the previous short story. In "Mother's Day," mother and daughter, alike, are overtly reserved and distant from one another, a condition that goes without explanation on the part of the mother until insights are provided in "Persephone." In this final story, I sought to clarify more than in the rest the overarching nature of the human soul. While Persephone struggles with her own emotions overtime, her subsequent actions establish an individual reality for many of those with whom she interacts and for her daughter, in particular. These established realities dictate the entire progression of the collection, thus providing my most palpable creation of the two notions of the inescapable and the related.

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