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A Place Between Heaven and Hell

Holley Barker

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THE PLACE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

**Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University**

**In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
M.A.
English**

by

Holley Barker

**Professor John VanKirk, Committee Chairperson
Dr. Katharine Rodier
Dr. John Young**

Marshall University

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ABSTRACT

THE PLACE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

By Holley Barker

After twenty-some years of marriage, routine, and living life without feeling, time finally catches up to Effie Crunkleton, giving her the opportunity to confront a haunting past (her hell) which thwarts peace of mind (her heaven). As inner and outer voices lure Effie to a nearby cemetery (actually found at Twin Falls State Park), she exposes herself to a lifetime of suppressed memories and emotions that have taken place in the fictional Appalachian town of Coal Hollow.

DEDICATION

Because all dreams need nurturing, this novel is as much a part of people that supported my journey in writing as it is a part of my self. Thank you, Scott, for the endless cups of tea as well as your unyielding devotion. Thanks to my parents for supplying me with a lifetime of encouragement.

Special thanks to my cat and soulmate, Grizwald, for helping me write every single word. Sometimes cats just understand writers better than people.

Last but not least, thank you, Professor VanKirk, for all your guidance and for perhaps earning a Ph.D. in patience along the way. Thank you Dr. Katharine Rodier and Dr. John Young for your expertise and encouragement. At one point or another during this project, I have had a strong desire to call each of you coach.

Thanks most of all to all the professors and fellow students in the Marshall University English Department who shared a part in my graduate career and therefore my intellectual growth. Oh, how I've grown thanks to all of you!

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CHAPTER 1

The whispering voice first kissed at Effie's ear one Sunday after Church while she stood by the kitchen stove making peppergrass sauce for the fresh fish she'd asked Lester to catch and bring home for supper. As she stirred the sauce, the whisper worked its way up from a cat fight in her stomach, through her heart and right on into her head.

Accompanied by a deluge of feelings and memories she'd spent her whole life trying to forget, there was no chance for the soft and caressing voice to settle before she began shooing away the whisper, as if nothing more than a bothersome fly whirling around her head. She hadn't learned to stop her heart from feeling, so past sensations, disguised as pleasantries, could sneak up on her, when deep down she knew more pain was sure to follow.

"Get on away from me," she warned aloud, unaware of Lester's approaching steps. "Don't you be pesterin me gain. You heard me, now. Go on and get."

Her voice did nothing to stop the whisper. Nor did her hands flailing above her head, fighting the air, make a difference. Years worth of reasoning with her intuition, which was no longer content being ignored, had finally taken its toll. To scare it away, it took the screen door slamming shut and Lester dropping a line of three dead catfish on the worn yellow cloth barely covering the table. A Mason jar of wilting daises rocked back and forth, before finding balance again, and upon hearing his entrance, Effie's hands

jumped to her heart. As she turned toward the door, her blushing face and hands in mid-air were revealed to Lester before time or rightness of mind allowed an alibi.

Pretending not to have heard Effie talking to herself, Lester went about their routine without acknowledging her change in color or her trembling hands, now lowered to her sides. Long ago he learned to always give Effie the first word when it came to questionable matters, and if she was indeed losing her mind, someone braver than he would have to speak up. Still, his feet moved across the water-spotted and wooden kitchen floor toward his wife, but stopped short of reaching her, once he remembered the role he was to play during such scenes that often brought more inexperienced couples together. Time had reintroduced them as strangers to each other, and had written new rules for their affection. A pretty thing like Effie was for looking at, and not for touching, as she had been during another era in their marriage.

They stood looking at each other, her hazel eyes meeting his recurring gray glances. When Effie looked at Lester, everything she saw about him was gray. The hairs on his head that hadn't already turned white waited for the opportunity in gray patches that rested above his ears on both sides of his head, and no amount of soap and water had ever been able to wash the farm dirt out from underneath his fingernails. Even his blue eyes looked gray. Sensing it was she who would have to speak first, Effie confronted the silence with her voice.

“I reckon I was just talkin to my ownself.”

“S’pose we all been guilty of doing that a time or two. Better than findin yourself talkin to that ol’ miner’s ghost,” he said, jokingly.

“Oh, I don’t go round believin in no ghost that lives down in em minefields. That’s just a bunch of stories youngins go round tellin, so when nighttime comes they can sit real close.”

“Reckon you’re right, but I still don’t mind hearin stories like that one.”

A week after Lester joked about talking to ghosts and Effie mistook his words for truth, a warm and gentle May breeze blew through the open bedroom window and caught her off guard just as she was putting on her Sunday dress. The whispering she’d felt a week earlier tricked her into thinking it’d been scared away when all along it hid among the surrounding hills, waiting for the right moment to return for her. Although she’d tried forgetting, the memory of that voice kept her up each night and occupied her thoughts during the day. Now, it beckoned for her to follow, offering her no choice in the matter. Not knowing what else to do, she slipped into her black dress and took one last look at herself in the mirror. Instead of recognizing the reflection of her hazel eyes and olive complexion, she saw herself a stranger whom she was meeting for the first time. The silver cross, always dangling from around her neck, drew her eyes down to where it rested on her chest, interrupting the gaze between Effie and the unrecognizable version of self looking at her from the mirror.

Gently moving to her cross, her hand rested there for a moment. Then, without further delay, Effie began listening to the voice that now sounded as if it were speaking from within her. Her legs moved her quickly from the bedroom, down the narrow hallway and past the black and white family photographs of what used to be, still hanging on the wall. She didn't stop when she got to the living room, not even long enough to say goodbye to Lester, who sat on the sofa dozing in his dress clothes, while waiting for Effie to finish getting ready. In her mind, there was no use in telling Lester about the voice, now tossing and turning inside her gut, because the language of feeling seemed so foreign to him. He didn't stir when she walked past. Only when the screen door slammed shut, announcing her departure, did he awake from his cat nap, but not in enough time for questioning or to stop her from going. Effie never bothered looking back and was half way down the road before Lester turned to look out the window.

Lester didn't go after her. Figured she had her reasons. Nothing he said ever did change the direction of her mind. From inside the house, he started pacing the floor, pretending not to miss her, and waiting. Waiting for the door to open any minute and reveal Effie. Afraid to leave in case she came back. Trying to remember whether or not she'd ever done anything like this before. Hoping she hadn't left because of something he'd done or didn't do. Praying to God or anyone listening, all the while trying to not let loneliness make itself comfortable in his heart, fearing it already had.

The recent spring rains made driving the Coal Hollow roads impossible, but Effie moved onward, mud splashing the backs of her black pumps and flesh-toned nylons. Putting on her good Sunday dress and shoes had just felt like the right thing to do, no matter the blisters that now formed on the backs of her heels. Pain had stopped her too many times in the past for her to let it catch up again to her now. She followed the Voice, and her own voice, by marching a one-woman procession through town, passing others moving in the opposite direction, despite mocking glances that yesterday would have sent her following in their footsteps. They, the members of Harmony Church, moved in the direction of the tolling bells, as Effie walked past them, heading the opposite way.

“Not gonna go hear preacher’s sermon this mornin?” Mrs. Simmons asked as she approached Effie.

“No. Got some other things to take care of,” she said. Her eyes remained focused, unable to stray from the road ahead, even as she answered.

“Everything alright with you, honey? Don’t seem quite like yourself. Sure there ain’t nothin botherin you?” Knowing all along something wasn’t quite right, Mrs. Simmons still needed a little help putting her finger on the change taking hold of Effie. There was something different about the way she was carrying herself, an unusual urgency in her step. As leader of all other Harmony hens, it was Mrs. Simmons’ unspoken duty and responsibility to be the first to put her nose exactly where it didn’t belong.

“No, Mrs. Simmons. I’m just fine. Don’t you go worrin yourself over me,” she replied, still never allowing herself to come to a complete stop. When people spend enough time around one another, it doesn’t take long to make sense of them. It seemed as though Effie was born knowing what made the people of Coal Hollow tick. Her meeting with Mrs. Simmons was no exception. A dog that takes a bone carries a bone, and deep down Effie knew Mrs. Simmons was no better than any old hound. It wouldn’t be long before the rest of the congregation started praying for Effie’s poor wandering soul.

“Just hate for you to miss communion Sunday and all.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss if I didn’t have to. I’ll catch up with you at the bible study later this week.”

Effie was on her way down the road again before Mrs. Simmons had time to notice she wasn’t standing there any more.

“Well, you go ahead then. If you’ve got business to tend to. Suppose I’ll just talk to you later,” Mrs. Simmons shouted, before she turned and took her cackling on up the road.

Others heading to Harmony Church passed Effie in their own time, none of them noticing that she seemed to have none of her own to waste.

“Mornin, Effie,” Grady Waldroop said as he shuffled past. “What’s a pretty thing like you doin walkin all alone on a Sunday mornin fine as this one we have ourselves here. Why, I don’t mind keepin you company one bit?”

“Thank ya, Grady, but I’ve got some things of my own to get done.”

“Now, what kind of things you got that’s so important. Turn on around and let me keep you company while we walk. Besides, you’re all dressed up for church anyhow.”

“I ain’t headed to church today, so I can’t be walkin with you. And if I need me some company Lester’s at home waitin on me.”

“Now, Effie, you and I both know Lester ain’t one to take up talk with people. I’d be much better suited to pass the time with. That old Lester of yours hardly speaks two words when he’s round folks.”

While Effie didn’t find Grady completely repulsive, she sure didn’t feel like explaining his lingering presence to anyone who would ask, which would surely be the case, as it had been for as long as she could remember. In small towns people wake the sun up each day by talking too loudly and put it to sleep by telling stories each night. Effie didn’t want her name to be the one turning the lights of the world on and off, so she called the match early.

“I just ain’t got the time today. You better stop your talkin and start your walkin again before the sermon’s done finished with and you’re still standin here in the middle of the road not knowin what to do with yourself.”

“Well, I guess a man can’t argue with that. Isn’t that right?”

“Goodbye, Grady.” Effie moved his feet for him.

Still focused on the direction her legs were intent on traveling, she walked a bit farther down the road, leaving Grady, a womanizer in waiting, standing alone and silently calculating at what point it all went wrong. Never being able to catch Effie’s attention had been getting the best of him for the past twenty some years, but he still wasn’t ready to give up. Although he didn’t have anything against Lester, there sure wasn’t anything too good about him from where he was standing, and he was quite content staying far enough away never to test his opinion.

Effie’s pace quickened to match the racing of her heart, which had begun to beat faster with every wasted second spent in conversation. But just as she thought her path clear, Charley and Fanny Scruggs came into view.

“Seen you talkin to Martha’s husband. Grady and her have an anniversary comin up, ya know?”

While Mrs. Scruggs spoke Charles stood by her side and practiced molding miserable into a smile.

“Nope, I didn’t know all that.”

“She’s a strong woman, alright. Have to be to keep up with that man of hers.”

“Fraid I don’t know much bout em two.”

“A lot of folks round here don’t know much bout anything,”

“Oh, he just stopped to chat.”

“How’s that Lester of yours doin anyhow? You two gettin along all right?”

“Just fine. Thanks for askin.”

“We better start headin up the road again. You want to walk with us since Lester ain’t with you?”

“You all go on ahead. I’ll catch up later.”

Effie watched as Fanny walked in the direction of open church doors and familiarity with Mr. Scruggs following at her heels all the way. When the church doors closed and her head turned to look up the path that led into the hollow and away from all which had previously consoled her thoughts, she was amazed at how effortlessly her legs carried her past the blossoming dogwoods and houses, moving her to the edge of town, even as her conscience argued otherwise. Not knowing where she was headed or why, she waited for the whispering voice and gentle caresses blowing in on the first warm breezes of spring to show her the way up the path that separated what she’d always known from the discovery of what was yet unlearned.

As she followed the winding, still well-traveled gravel road through the hollow, Eastern hemlocks played taps on her shoulders while the sky cried the last few tears from

an earlier tantrum. The frequent but brief rain showers made all the surrounding forest of trees glisten as they had during other seasons of life, before the winters came and took away their spirits. All was still, except for the gossiping birds that had stopped singing songs and the onward crunch of gravel against mud from the pressure of her feet. Her head ceased pounding as she walked onward. Movement in the direction of whispers and fresh spring grass silenced the battling voices of her mind. Some telling her to return home, others begging for her to move forward, all of them coming from what felt like within. She began to accept the whispers that carried her onward as part of her own rhythm.

Effie soon reached the top of a hill. A rusted, wire fence separated her from a garden where wildflowers grew from forgotten memories and stones commemorated human life with a name and two dates. When she happened upon the gate, she opened it and entered with only slight hesitation and then closed it behind her. Treetops intertwined to create a cathedral ceiling encircling the graves below. A presence made itself known through a heavenly light touching the mounds of earth and memories. The closed gate kept out all the mysterious secrets held by the surrounding woods. Branches and pine needles reached over the fence to shake hands with the dead, but couldn't quite reach. Only one tree grew among the dead, its bark a mix of mold and new moss.

Effie surveyed her surroundings. People from inside the earth had called her before, but this was the first time she'd truly listened. No longer afraid, she began to feel

at home in the green rolling hills of marked and unmarked graves. Guilt and the responsibility of tending tombstones hadn't led her to this garden. Her kin were buried under different blankets of earth and those souls rested in the comforts of their own minds and thoughts. Thoughts far different from the ones that kept Effie awake while the rest of the world slept peacefully at night.

From the top of her hilltop garden, Effie saw what she knew of the world below in springtime colors. For the first time, two hazel colored eyes saw injustice and unfairness in new shades of light. Judgment was spoken in new tones through the restless spirits of her garden that fought the same battles in their sleep as she did in hers. She walked to a tombstone that sat apart from the rest and read the inscription that appeared underneath a decorative design of hand-carved lines:

Until We Meet Again
Calvin Waldroop
Jan 25 1899
Feb 13 1915
Gone but not forgotten

As her eyes met the final date on the tombstone, she remembered how death had so often visited her own family. Effie sat down at Calvin's feet and bowed her head, letting her long dark and salted hair softly caress the mound of fresh grass that welcomed her presence. She didn't close her eyes, but kept them open and started to speak although the moment was quiet enough for prayer.

“I sorry to bother you. I just got the notion to come up here. Known bout this ol’ cemetery all my life and never bothered myself bout comin up here before now. Reckon I just needed some poor soul to talk with. Don’t really know why I’m here to tell you the truth. Felt like the thing to do, but now ain’t so sure. Feels stupid to take off from home like I done without no reason. Lester probably worrin bout me. All those folks from church thinkin I’m crazy. Missin church and not even knowin why.”

Effie reached to the grass with her fingertips and it was like two old hands touching for the first time. The grass trembled from a breeze and the tickle of individual blades against her untouched skin caught her by surprise.

In the beginning, Lester touched her much like the grass did now. The first-time kisses and caresses they exchanged once reddened her flesh and brought it to life. Those moments, seldom at first, eventually grew into a marriage and baby — who would have been 25 now.

But Eva died before her first birthday along with the love that created her.

And now Effie told her secrets to the souls hidden underneath the grass she now touched. Grass speaks to those who listen closely. It whispers delicately as if telling secrets from a woman’s lips and touches the skin with a coarse and callused grip. It whistles in the ear like children at play. Grass grows in gardens of human corpses and naturally assumes the shape of strong, broad shoulders supported by a backbone and legs

that eventually narrow to nonexistence at the feet. Before their time, some people feel the lure of the newborn grass that grows in these gardens.

When Effie finally listened to the grass, secrets were made known and questions found answers. She felt the feeling others knew as God.

Praying to God in church never delivered her from any of the evils and sorrows life cast in her direction, so now she came to the cemetery. Love wasn't growing from the ground, only a sense of peace. Effie had spent most of her life confined by the philosophies of men, but her Heaven was among the dead. Inside doors and windows adorned with holy images the old preacher man talked about getting saved and going to hell and how the bond between man and woman and husband and wife should not be broken. Effie felt nothing when with Lester. Had made herself stop feeling things so long ago she thought it now impossible to remember how. Time often sets aside a moment when the bond between two people is made known, but very seldom does it allow the union a similar ending. What was once love vanishes into nothingness before being noticed. Then one morning while sitting alone at the kitchen table drinking coffee and humming along with one of those old classics and static, the realization of nothing at all hits at once, reflecting life's short journey and all of its failures. That's what happened to Effie, and now living left her numb. Long after pain and hurt leave the heart, memories of what caused them settle into the undiscovered cervices of one's soul remain.

Too many leftover and unfinished feelings from what might have been remained deeply hidden inside of Effie.

Raindrops fell from the open ceiling of the sky, accompanying the tears on Effie's face, and she no longer shook, but combed the long green hair with her handmade brush. Listening to the grass, Effie slowly crawled on top of the grave and lay down on her back in the human shaped grass that was Calvin.

Nature knew Effie's story, so she closed her eyes, and prepared herself for the retelling.

CHAPTER 2

Once emotions are awakened there's no use in putting them to rest again.

Nothing stops the soul from feeling what the mind buries in excuses. Given enough time old pain makes its way to the surface again, only this time is wise to the tricks of people, and unwilling to return to the human wasteland in which it was trapped. When Effie's eyes closed, the past joined forces with the present, stirring a long forgotten version of her self. As the grass brushed up against her, she remembered how the long, dark strands of hair belonging to her mother felt to the touch. She drifted back to the days of her former self, standing in the kitchen where they used to cook together until she could smell the soap from her mother's recently washed hair mixed with apples and autumn — the scents of her childhood.

“Effie, finish peelin the rest of em apples. I need to start cuttin em and puttin em in the pot.”

“Yes, mama.”

“Cleanin jars ain't how youngins learn to make good apple butter. That was the way my mama always done me. Made me get the jars clean cause my hands were small nough to reach inside em. But I ain't like my mama. I know that you're good for more than cleanin jars. Your little hands help me with a whole world of good.”

“How much more we makin?”

“More than we’ve ever made before. Got to use all em apples up. This year’s different. We’ve got to make enough to take down to church to help raise some money. This batch ain’t just for us this time. Why you askin? You’re not gettin worn out already, are you?”

“No, I ain’t tired.”

Effie’s hands had felt the wear and tear of apple butter season during their ten years of life. As soon as the golds and oranges of autumn began to show each year, her fingers changed colors right along with the season. Mostly changed to red from too much dishwater and scrubbing. But this year was different. As she stood by the kitchen sink washing jars, her feet didn’t shift back and forth from left to right, as they had in years past. Nor did she grow impatient about having to work for so long. The things that had once been so bothersome no longer mattered. This was the first time they’d ever made apple butter for God.

Once the apples were peeled and sliced they put them in a pan of cold, salty water to keep them from turning brown. Effie stood at the kitchen sink, carefully rinsing the salt off of each apple before handing them to her mother to put in the pot. The men from the church would be arriving to help with the stirring before long.

“Tell me one of your stories, mama.”

“Now’s not the time for tellin stories, Effie. Look how much work still needs finishin.”

“But please, mama.”

“Oh, goodness gracious. You youngins and your stories. Always needin to hear one, aren't you?”

“Please.”

On this particular day it only took one smile from Effie to win her mother's affection when normally it took two.

“Alrighty. Which one you wantin to hear?”

“That one bout Gideon.”

“Again?”

“That's the best one.”

“Well, I reckon if that's the one you want to hear, then that's the one I better tell. See, once upon a time over in the land called Israel there was this youngin named Gideon who spoke with em angels up in Heaven. They told im God was wantin great big things from im. Bigger than he could have ever imagined. But Gideon didn't take to believin in no angel talk. No, that Gideon was too big for his britches.”

“No, mama. You ain't tellin it right. Tell it in the big voice preacher uses.”

“Well, if that's what Miss Effie wants,” her mother said through a smile.

She picked the story up where she left off, only now she told it with the biggest voice she could find within herself. “Like I was sayin, that Gideon was too big for his own britches. So he started in on God himself. Askin all sorts of questions of im.

Saying things like, Why me? How can little ol me save Israel? See a bunch of bad folks was plannin to take over Israel and that's why God was wantin Gideon to run em all out. God kept on sayin to trust in im, but all that Gideon kept askin for was proof."

"No, mama. Don't use your big voice no more."

"Make up your mind, child."

"You sound silly."

"I could've done told you that just as soon as you asked for it."

"Maybe if you just wave your hands up in the air like preacher does. That will make it better. Just wave your hands up bove your head."

They both smiled and laughed as the story continued, flailing hands and all. "The dear Lord gave in with all that proof Gideon was askin for. So, Gideon went on back to his house and killed this poor ol goat and then dressed it up real nice for eatin. When Gideon gave the goat to God for an offerin the Lord consumed it all up in fire and most folks would've been content by that," she said, still waving her hands in the air when the notion took to her. "But seein a goat eaten by fire still ain't proof nough for some folks. That fool Gideon was askin to see more of God's tricks."

"Stop it. You don't got to wave your hands no more."

"Are you sure that's alright with you?"

"I like it best when you tell it your own way."

“I could’ve done told you that from the beginnin. Saved us a heap of trouble. You done worn me out with all your hand wavin and expectin me to use my big voice. Think I’m goin have to take my self a break.”

“No, mama. Don’t do that.”

“Tell you what. We’ll both of us take ourselves a break from apple butter makin and sit down at the table for a just a minute or two.”

As they sat down at the kitchen table, they exchanged laughter and smiles over a snack of sliced apples and buttermilk. As her mother began speaking again, Effie became spellbound by the storytelling. Her eyes fell to the silver cross that hung around her mother’s neck. The one that had hung around her mother’s neck for as long as she could remember. The silver chain twisted and turned until it reached the cross itself, turning the intricately carved side inward toward her mother’s chest and exposing the plainer side to Effie, who couldn’t pull her eyes away from where it rested, and moved up and down to the rhythm of her mother’s storytelling. Effie sat motionless, caught in the trance of her mother’s voice and the cross.

“See, Effie. Gideon was one of em folks that had to see God with his own eyes. So even though God had gone and consumed that goat all up in fire, that ol’ Gideon still had to see more. So God got hungry gain and told Gideon to go and get a bull from his daddy’s herd so he could make another offerin. But Gideon was real scairt bout makin his daddy mad. So he done took care of his business durin the night. That way he was

sure he wouldn't get in no trouble. Didn't want to risk makin his daddy mad. But that's bout what he done. See talk gets round real fast and folks found out right quick that he'd been up to no good. They started talkin like they was goin kill im until one of his friends calmed the folks down and cleaned up the whole mess."

"Did his daddy give im a whippin?"

"His daddy was bout to whip im good, but that's when Gideon got to prayin to God right quick. And course, God went and made things all better for im. After God got im out his fix, Gideon agreed to go bout helpin the Lord like he done been asked to all along. So God told a bunch of folks to follow Gideon, and that's what they done. But Gideon still didn't have the right feelings bout things, so he done ask God for proof yet one more time."

"Didn't God get tired of im?"

"I would reckon so, but he didn't carry on that way. God went round makin magic that night and made all the ground dry. Then he made it rain, but only on one tiny blanket that was left outside. But can you believe that still wasn't good nough? That nonbeliever didn't stop and think once before askin God to do his magic in just the opposite way. But when that next mornin finally come along the earth was all wet and the blanket was dry as a bone. That's when Gideon finally started acceptin his mission.

"Whole bunches of folks — and I'm talkin bout thousands, more than you or me ever seen in one place — started out followin Gideon on his journey. God had told im to

go fight off all em bad folks that'd been tryin to take his people's land. But just as Gideon was gettin to feelin good bout all the folks willin to follow, God spoke to im and told im to make all the scairt folks go on back home. And that's just what they done. Thousands of folks took emselves back home, but that still wasn't good nough for God. He started in hand-pickin folks, sayin you better go and you better stay. God got all those folks that started out followin down to just a couple hundred and then told Gideon to start fightin im a war. Gideon got real scairt bout doin things God's way. Those nonbelievin feelings started comin back to im. But it just didn't seem right to im to keep askin to see God's magic and all.

“That's when he got this notion in his head to go on down to where his enemies were sleepin and check things out for his ownself. When those nonbelievin feelings stir inside you it's hard to run em off gain. So, Gideon got to eavesdroppin on this ol' man and heard bout a dream. The man was sayin how he'd seen certain things in his sleep. He seen how their camp was goin be destroyed. Gideon didn't go to thinkin much bout what the man was sayin, till he heard the same story from another man. That man said how he'd been havin the same dream and Gideon was the one that was goin to come after em. When Gideon heard the man speak his name that's when he knew that God was on his side.

“Gideon done got all excited after he heard the other men talkin. He went on back to his camp and rounded up all the men for a great big showin. Told all em folks to

follow his lead. When they got emselves to the edge of that enemy camp they all broke up into a bunch of different groups until they surrounded the whole camp on the outside. Then they all started blowin on their trumpets and smashin jars. Made as much noise as ten thousand men. Waved em torches in the air without any fear holdin em down. And that's what they kept on doin until all em bad folks was gone. Kept on yellin for Gideon and the Lord until they'd scairt off every last one of em. See, Effie, havin faith gets folks real far in life. Just like it done for Gideon. He had faith, and look what the Lord done for im."

"But God ain't never talked to me," Effie said, her concentration broken by concern.

"Well, God don't speak to all folks at the same time. You got to wait your own turn, that's all."

"What if he don't ever talk to me?"

"He will when the time's right."

"How long fore then?"

"Nobody knows that except God. You just got to have yourself faith that it will happen."

"When did you start talkin to God for the first time?"

"When I was bout your age, I reckon. Effie, don't start yourself worrin about it. You can always help it along."

“How’s that?”

“You got to start prayin and talkin to God himself bout it. Like the Bible says, God helps those who help emselves.”

A sense of worry accompanied Effie back to the kitchen where mother and daughter resumed their apple butter making. If Effie had been serious about making apple butter for God before talking with her mother, then nothing was going to stand in her way now. With all the determination ten-year-old hands could muster, Effie went back to washing jars. Now everything was for God. Washing jars, drying jars, carrying firewood, all in the hopes it would be enough. That it would give her faith — the same kind spoken about by her mother.

“Effie, I see em men folk headed up the road,” her mother said, looking out the kitchen window. “I’ve got to go tell em to get a fire goin under the kettle. Start bringin em apples outside to us.”

Effie did so proudly, and when the last of the apples were put in the kettle sugar and cinnamon were added to help bring out the flavor. Only hours worth of stirring remained. Effie’s mother took her turn stirring along with the three men that had shown up so far.

“Why don’t you go on and run down to the church and get some more help,” her mother said suddenly. “I’m gettin a bad feelin bout the weather.”

“Oh, c’mon now, almanac says it’s supposed to be a fine day,” one of the men said.

“That’s what it says, but I’m gettin me a bad feelin bout that sky. We’ll need help coverin the kettle if the weather starts actin up.”

“Come with me, mama.”

“Oh, you’ll be fine. It’ll just take a second with your young legs. Besides I got to stay here and help keep up the stirrin. Now go and see if anybody wants to come help us.”

On the outside, Harmony Church glistened white from a fresh coat of paint and warmly invited folks inside its rose colored doors adorned with two large iron handles. A wooden, picket fence painted the same born again white as the church itself stood guard along the perimeter of the churchyard. Crows, scattered here and there along the top of the fence, patrolled as if it were their church and their responsibility to decide who entered and who remained in the churchyard. They said nothing to Effie as she walked through the gate and headed up the gravel path to the front doors of the church. The crows only looked at her briefly before going about their business again. Beds of purple, orange, and yellow mums grew alongside the path where weeds dared not grow, as if everything outside the church knew its own place.

Once inside the bold colored doors of the church, the sanctuary competed for the same first impression of perfection. Wooden pews lined the floor in military fashion, and

blue and red hymnals alternated color, sharing a sense of usefulness and importance from where they rested on the backs of seats. A wooden cross stretched the length of the back wall as if connecting roof to ceiling. When the doors to the sanctuary opened it was the first thing anyone saw and always what they remembered most. Not even the mahogany pump organ complete with red velvet material that shone through the carvings in its wood was as memorable as the cross that held up the church. The organ sat over to the side of the church along with Preacher Justice's pulpit. It was where Effie's mother sat and played the hymns on Sunday mornings.

While chatter from the basement drifted through the sanctuary vents, Effie ignored the voices and walked into the sanctuary. Being alone in a sanctuary is sacred time. Time for thinking, for hoping, for wishing. Time for being alone with your own questions. Looking up as she walked through the heavy doors that took all of her to open, Effie saw the light fixtures hanging on chains. Light fixtures that always looked as if they could fall without warning at any moment. Frightened to be alone with the untrustworthy lights, she looked toward the stain glass windows for comfort. Windows that never let glimpses of the outside indoors, and painted painful memories and scenes in royal colors. There was Jesus nailed to the cross, wearing his crown of thorns, the pain in his face overwhelmed by color, until it was almost as if Effie saw his expression change right before her. Unable to trust the image any longer, she turned her head away in astonishment. When she peaked through the open fingers of her hand, she was sure his

face had changed. He no longer looked sadly at the people surrounding him beneath the cross. The line of his mouth changed itself into a smile, or at least in Effie's mind it did so.

Feeling more at ease with the empty sanctuary, Effie went to the organ and propped herself up on the bench, sliding herself to the edge until her feet could reach the pedals below. She sat in her mother's Sunday seat, hoping God would talk to her just as he had done so often with her mother. She waited patiently for what seemed forever and a day, but God never spoke to her. There was only silence and Effie. Her feet responded to her worn out patience as they began to take turns working the pedals back and forth, her hands imitating those of her mother. Pulling on the black and white knobs above the keyboard, Effie changed the tone of the organ from major to minor. Not knowing what sound to expect Effie's fingers formed one of the chords her mother had once shown her. Any sound is sometimes better than silence, and as the sanctuary filled with the C sharp minor chord, Effie was no longer alone.

"Miss Effie, you up there tryin to get good as your mama!" The voice bellowed from the depths of Mrs. Alice Hamby. "I didn't know what to make of all that racket."

Then again, some silences are better than sound. Like the kind that doesn't turn a face red or startle a bench out from underneath a person.

"Sorry, I was just tryin to play a little."

“You have to stay in good shape to pump em pedals like your mama. Don’t see how she does it every Sunday.”

“I ain’t sure how.”

“Well, it don’t matter no how. Some day you’ll get good as her.”

The thought brought a smile to Effie’s face, but Mrs. Hamby’s mind was already elsewhere. It had gone to the vision of apple pie and cobbler awaiting her in the church basement. A long time ago the men folks had paid Mrs. Hamby compliments. Long before ice tea became a vehicle for sugar and seconds became routine. That didn’t stop from reminding her of the beauty in Effie she’d once seen in herself.

“How bout we go on downstairs and get ourselves a little bite to eat.”

“Think I’m suppose to get home fast and help mama stir the apple butter.”

“Oh, she won’t care if you stay and eat. We’ll fix you up a plate to take on back to her. Got more food than we know what to do with. We’re livin high on the hog today. No doubt bout that.”

Effie followed behind Mrs. Hamby, all the while thinking about how she should get home soon. Then her thoughts disappeared into the sight of Mrs. Hamby’s pink cotton dress clinging to her backside as she walked down the stairs. As she jiggled side to side with each step, there wasn’t much Mrs. Hamby left to the imagination by the time they reached the basement. Once they reached the spread of food, Mrs. Hamby wasn’t shy about fixing Effie’s plate with a heaping serving of everything.

“Now, that’s how a youngin should eat,” Mrs. Hamby said. “You’ve got to eat so you’ll grow up to be good and strong.”

There was never any use in arguing with Mrs. Hamby, so Effie responded by shoveling a fork full of mashed potatoes in her mouth. After the fried chicken, the biscuits, the pickled corn, and the cobbler Mrs. Hamby insisted on for dessert, the last thing Effie wanted was to walk home. Partly because the food in her stomach was causing quite a rumble and more importantly because she knew she’d been gone too long. The autumn evening had begun settling in without warning. Every year the sky and the heavens start sneaking around on people. The long evenings of summer never officially announce their leaving. Summer is the sneakiest of seasons. The one that packs its bags and leaves town before anyone thinks to take notice. It hits all at once. Darkness settles in for good. No more evenings that linger around the front porch, asking for seconds of iced tea. No more days tucked away in simple conversation and the back and forth creaking of the old front porch swing saying good night. It’s over and just as quickly as summer packed its bags and left without telling, autumn made itself at home. Autumn and its early evenings, red leaves, and subtle breezes came along and stole the season, and hid time where it would not be found until spring. The days are lost to evening and night and there’s no use in looking for the lost daylight. It’s gone and we’re all left wondering what hour darkness falls.

Then comes the rain. Like it started to fall as Effie turned to look out the window.

The rain is what reminded her of time and of the season.

“I can’t stay. Mama’s goin be mad at me. I was supposed to get us help.”

“Help for what, Effie,” Mrs. Hamby said. “What are you carryin on bout. You got to calm down. You ain’t done eatin, are you?”

“I got to get on home. Forgot to ask for help.”

“Help for what, Effie. I don’t understand you.”

“Help with the apple butter. Mama told me to ask for help. We’re makin apple butter for God and I didn’t ask for help.”

“Well, honey. It’s too late for all that now. Can’t make apple butter in the rain.”

“I got to get home to my mama.”

“Effie, where you goin? You can’t head home in this rain. It’s startin to come down. Ain’t you still hungry? Stay and eat you some more till the rain lets up. We’ll make up a plate of food for your mama.”

Effie was running out the door before the last of Mrs. Hamby’s words left her mouth. Tears began falling to her face, just as the rain outside fell to the ground. Caught off guard by the quickness of rain and the sadness she felt, her face turned red with emotion. Getting home to her mother and the apple butter was all that mattered. She ran back up the steps, her feet barely touching them she was going so fast. Not paying much attention to anything other than what she was feeling on the inside by the time she

reached the top of the stairs, Effie nearly ran into Jone Ledford coming through the front doors of the church just as she was running out.

“Slow down there, precious. Where you runnin off to?”

“I got to get home.” Effie was barely able to find the strength to answer as her voice shook along with the rest of her body.

“Rain’s pickin up, darling. You better stay and wait it out.”

Effie looked up into Jone’s smiling face and saw evil looking back at her. Not only did she see it — she felt it, and there’s a whole lot of difference between seeing and feeling. Maybe it was because of the way Jone painted her eyelids with bright blue shadow or the way her hair was always done up high on her head. Maybe it was the way Jone sauntered into a room when everyone else just walked. Whatever it was, it was something, and Effie felt it with every atom of herself. Her soul was born knowing feelings like Jone. Feelings even an autumn rain couldn’t wash away.

That’s why Effie was out the two rose-colored doors of the church before Jone had the chance to pinch her cheeks or say anything else about staying until the rain settled down. Effie was past the beds of mums and down the sidewalk before time allowed Jone the notion to pretend concern. Past the crows and outside of the fence before she could be stopped — if there was anything powerful enough to stop her in the first place. With the rain beating down on her, soaking her before she even reached the end of the churchyard, Effie started running with every ounce of energy her young legs could

muster. All the way home she ran. With the wind hitting her in the face with leaves it sent falling from the trees, Effie ran without looking back. Ran until her lungs burned from over use and the tears streaming down her face no longer stood apart from the rain.

When she reached the house, there was only smoke where fire had burned underneath the apple butter kettle. Her mother and the men folk were nowhere to be seen. Effie's heart pounded. When she looked into the kettle, she saw the used-to-be apple butter swimming in rainwater and her own carelessness. Then she made her way to the front porch and stood in front of the door, unable to go inside. She stood there until the rain let up a little, dripping, shivering, and thinking about what she could have done differently — and God. She thought about how disappointed he must be in her. How if only she had left earlier she could have helped her mother get it inside before the rain started.

“Effie, what you doin standin outside like that. You're bound to catch cold if you don't dry yourself off right quick,” her mother's voice came from the other side of the screen door, startling her back to reality.

The tears forming in Effie's eyes answered her mother.

“Goodness, Effie. What's upsettin you. We'll get you dried off.”

“That ain't it.”

“It ain't?”

“God ain't never goin to talk to me.”

“Why you sayin that?” Her mother knelt down beside her as she spoke and brushed the wet hair away from her daughter’s eyes.

“I done gone and let im down. I couldn’t save his apple butter.”

“Well, you didn’t know nothin bout the rain. How was you suppose to know? I sure didn’t. Wouldn’t have started makin a batch if I’d seen the rain comin. Sometimes it just starts rainin before you even give it a thought.”

Words seldom cure sadness and disappointment, especially when the possibilities had been so much bigger than the person. For the first time, Effie couldn’t find comfort in her mother — not that her mother hadn’t tried. Drying off and putting on warm clothes didn’t make a difference. Rocking back and forth on the front porch swing embraced in her mother’s arms, listening to her kind words of consolation couldn’t change the sad expression of Effie’s face. It wasn’t her mother’s forgiveness that mattered. There are some failures that never leave us, ones that remain with us for whole lifetimes. This was Effie’s first lingering failure. The one that kept her up nights and awakened her once asleep — the mistake that haunted her childhood. So no matter how much her mother consoled, it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered now.

God’s apple butter was ruined.

CHAPTER 3

Effie's autumn thoughts and apple butter making memories quickly turned to winter. Just like the changing seasons, all the days of her childhood began running together and grew into one continuous feeling. One thought could no longer be discerned from another, just as winter storms evolve from earlier autumn rains until the seasons become so similar, the differences so miniscule, there's no telling them apart. Heaven is always growing one season from the memory of another, as if it becomes tired with starting over from scratch each time. The only image that sparked a change in the way Effie felt was the recollection of her mother's face. Along with the winter sky, it was taking on the same grayness that filled the season.

“Reckon we better put on our boots and head on up the road. Service starts in an hour and I need time to get my fingers good and warm before I start playin.”

“Want me to go wake daddy?”

“No Effie, let im sleep. Said he ain't been feelin good. If he feels the spirit he'll get up by his ownself. You can't move a man's feet if is head ain't just as willin to do the walkin.”

“He ain't been goin much, mama.”

“Don't worry yourself bout im, Effie. Ain't nothin you can do to make im better. That'll happen when God says so.”

The walk to church along the dirt road proved wearying to both pairs of legs. Their feet disappeared into the sand-covered surface with each trying step, and the wind forced their faces downward into the warmth of their coats. The same winter that took the long days away from them now added time to their walk. What had been only a half mile stroll became a marathon raced against weather and the bells of the church, which tolled reminders of time. But even as they traveled the road, faces buried against their coats and hugging themselves with their own arms, the cold came as no surprise.

Blackberry blooms had been heavy, tree bark grew heaviest on the north side, and the butterflies migrated early. Hoot owls had come late in autumn, the fur on the end of the rabbit's foot had grown thicker and the squirrel's tail bushier. Frost had come late in the year. Nature had written its script and the only thing left for the folks of Coal Hollow to do was wait it out. The ending would be spring, but the events of winter itself were still a mystery.

When the church was finally in eyesight, mother and daughter joined hands and with shared energy completed the last few strides of their walk. The church, upon their arrival, looked as though it had weathered the same winter storm they themselves fought against during their Sunday morning walk. A few scattered boards of the fence had blown away and lay lifeless in the churchyard, leaving spaces where the slats of wood once served a purpose, looking like missing teeth in a crooked smile. The fresh coat of paint, which had glistened just months earlier, now chipped and exposed a dark colored

wood. No sign of the once colorful flowers remained. The green leaves and blossoms had been killed by the cold, and their were roots safely hidden away underneath a shelter of earth.

“Mornin, ladies,” Pastor Justice said as Effie and her mother walked up the steps to the front door. He was always sure to stand at the front entrance, so not to miss who was coming and who was going.

“Mornin, pastor. Weather sure is mighty fierce.”

“Sure is, Grace. Looks like the Lord’s puttin up a challenge for folks this mornin.”

“No doubt bout that. Me and Effie here got the cold bones to prove it.”

“Say, where’s that husband of yours this mornin?”

“Home in bed. Ain’t been feelin right lately. Reckon it’s just a cold, is all. Should be gone before long.”

“I ain’t so sure, Grace. Seems like he’s been under the weather an awful lot this winter.”

Effie looked up at her mother and Pastor Justice and saw something behind the look exchanged between the two of them. Effie was a watcher of many things, people included. It was one of those looks that meant something more — she just didn’t know what. Effie let go of her mother’s hand. She’d begun to catch the same kind of feelings that were turning her mother’s face a darker shade of gray.

“Just the time of year, that’s all,” Grace said, continuing her conversation with Pastor Justice.

“Still, I’d maybe look into some of em old remedies. Been boilin any pine needles in his tea?”

“Done tried that a couple weeks ago.”

“What bout mixin a little honey and vinegar together to give im? That ought to do it.”

“Done tried that one too. I done tried every little trick I ever knew.”

“I seen some bad colds in my day, but this one just ain’t gettin no better. I been prayin bout it every day.”

“I been prayin bout it, too, Pastor Justice.”

“Tell you what, Grace. Don’t reckon you heard tell of this, but Jone done caught herself a mighty bad cold this winter. Maybe you better start prayin for her while you’re prayin for that Earl of yours. Go pay her a visit if you got the time and take some of em old remedies with you. If you can cure one cold maybe you’ll have you some luck with the one given you so much trouble. Besides, we don’t want little Effie catchin on to no colds.”

That’s when Grace lost her voice and relied on a forced nod and smile to get herself and Effie through the door and past their pastor. His words had somehow stopped Grace’s altogether.

“Good to see you this mornin, Miss Effie,” he said as they shuffled past him.

“You too,” she responded quietly, her eyes drifting to the floor.

Mrs. Hamby had spotted Grace and Effie from across the sanctuary and came bearing her greetings. Even in her Sunday best Mrs. Hamby couldn't help being herself. She took one look at Grace and figured out something wasn't quite right. Mrs. Hamby had always been the investigative type.

“Mornin, Grace. You must be freezin to death the way you're shakin.”

It took Grace a minute before she found the words she'd lost to Pastor Justice. After clearing her throat a couple times and with a little focus, she was able to speak again.

“Oh, I'm just fine. Don't worry yourself over me.”

“We'll, you sure ain't lookin too fine if you don't mind me sayin so.”

“It's just the cold.”

“You sure it ain't nothin else? I'm always here if you ever got any talkin that needs taken care of. Folks say I'm a real good listener.”

“Oh, let her be. She's lookin good as ever to me,” Myrtle Patterson interrupted.

“She still looks better than the rest of us poor ol hens.” Myrtle always had a way of making folks feel better about themselves. Even though everyone else could plainly see the change in Grace's complexion and the vacant look in her eyes, Myrtle did the good

Christian deed of mixing good intentions with a compliment. She knew how to add a little pinch of friendliness to make her boldface lies more believable.

“Well, I thank you for saying so,” Grace also lied.

“Mama! It’s just bout time.”

“Reckon you’re right, Effie. Why don’t you come and sit with me.”

At the organ, Grace and Effie sat beside each other on the bench. As nervous fingers pressed down on the keys, announcing the arrival of worship service, for the first time Effie began to notice the veins in her mother’s hands. Never before had she seen the veins in her mother’s petite hands so pronounced. Vessels of blue became bolder and more defined with each key she touched. Her olive colored skin became lost in the blue veins that snaked off into different directions until they covered most of her hand, consuming the usual tone of her flesh and leaving something foreign and grotesque in its place. Effie watched her mother’s body shake, legs and feet barely able to pump the organ. Grace’s eyes became more and more distant and less acknowledging of the younger set of hands that turned pages to words instead of notes, until it seemed she was altogether lost in another place and time.

Effie began to remember her mother’s emotions as if her own.

“Safely in Arms of Jesus” sounded triumphantly from the organ, but the images in Grace’s mind showed her husband in the arms of another. As she scanned the congregation, Jone Ledford was no where in sight. Never had his clothes or body hinted

of another woman. No traces of lipstick or perfume, or anything else in which the signs of affairs are so often written. Nothing, but the cold that kept her husband at home and in bed. Alone or with company? Grace wasn't completely sure, but the quickened acceleration of her heart and the turning of her stomach protested on the side of the worst. A cold can be just a cold until others begin to catch on to it, and that they had indeed. When others begin lending their advice and remedies without being asked, then it might as well be true. Truth always follows what people believe.

Beads of sweat began to cover her entire body as her eyes sunk deeper into their sockets. Effie watched her mother's strong nature weaken with the singing of each hymn. Watched her become the living dead before her very eyes.

When Grace's well-trained fingers stopped playing, Pastor Justice started preaching.

His voice bellowed from behind his towering, isolated pulpit. When he spoke, people listened. And when he stopped preaching, people prayed for forgiveness.

"Thisa mornin I'ma gonna preach bout a plan for man. Yes! Gonna tell bout the master plan. God's plan for man. See, in the beginnin, there was God and then there wasa man. God made the man Adam outa his ownself. Out of his ownself came man. Amen. Man is the closest thing there is to God hisself. Then there came the woman Eve. When man got lonely. When Adam needed hisself company, God made the woman. Made Eve from Adam's very own rib. Amen."

In a voice louder than the one he'd used in practice and with arms raised above his head, Pastor Justice spoke directly from the book:

“Thisa now the very bone of my bones

and the flesh of my very flesh,

what we've all come to call woman,

woman that was taken out of man hisself.

“And today, I'm a gonna preach bout that bond between the man and the woman.

The bond between husband and wife. A bond so strong it ain't never gonna get broken cause God made it his very ownself. You see folks, man isa the God of his woman cause she came out of his very own body. God put Eve on the earth for Adam. So Adam wouldn't be all by his ownself. And Adam named his woman Eve. Named the woman cause she was his very own.

“And God made Adam good. Outa his own image the Lord made Adam good.

Then that Eve came long and made em both sinners. Sinners outa both em. That woman undid all the good things of God's doin. She tooka that apple from the tree and she made Adam eat it. Adam ain't the one that went round doin the evil. Eve done took that apple from the tree and brought the whole world down with her.

“Cause a that Eve, man's a sinner.”

Pastor Justice roared on with his sermon, but Grace lost herself in all the possibilities of sin. What pain had she caused to force her husband into adultery?

Overcome by guilt, she sat on the organ bench silently retracing her marriage until every memory became so blurred with suspicion and doubt she could no longer focus. Her eyes closed, her head spun, and with the help of Pastor Justice's words she turned herself into Eve — into a sinner.

Outside, rain began to pound against the stained glass windows until the brilliant, royal colors seemed to fade and were drowned out by the sound of the storm. When Grace looked to the window, she no longer saw angels hovering over the crucified body of Christ. A couple of windows down the angels surrounding the baby Jesus were no longer part of what her eyes saw either. Grace only paid attention to the image of Christ himself. She saw Jesus himself and without the angels. Without them he took on the look of an ordinary man, and it was just Jesus and the voice of the storm pounding hard against the windows.

“Let us pray,” Pastor Justice commanded.

With respectfully bowed heads and closed eyes, the congregation obediently prayed.

“Our father who art in Heaven

Hallowed be thy name...”

Grace watched while the others prayed. With her eyes firmly shut and never once missing a syllable, Myrtle spoke the words to shrill perfection. Not to be outdone, Mrs. Hamby belted the words in a zealous baritone. Fanny Powell held her red bible with gold

leafed pages close to her chest. She lagged behind the rest of the congregation, only speaking every other line while her husband, Harv, carried the majority of the prayer on his own tongue. Next to them sat Harriet and John Kelly, who held newly-wedded hands while they boldly recited the prayer from memory.

The spirit caught hold of Pastor Justice and in one overzealous motion his arms raised high above his head. Shortly thereafter, his speech, now possessed by the spirit and the Lord's very own tongue, became foreign to the congregation in its entirety.

But Grace was beyond the point of comprehension anyhow. With her eyes scanning the sanctuary a second and third time, her mind hoping to spot the only one that mattered, she was let down again and again. The brightly painted lips of Jone Ledford were nowhere in sight. A twitch in Grace's leg worked its way into uncontrollable shaking. Her skin turned red, her brown eyes fought back tears.

But for all of Grace's watching the congregation, she'd overlooked one pair of eyes, the same color as her own.

“What's a matter, mama?”

Startled, Grace answered weakly. “Nothin, sweetheart. I'm just fine. Just turn my pages for the last song.”

Sour notes and wrong chords called the congregation to attention. Grace's legs were shaking so much they slid right off the pedals and before long whispering outdid the singing.

“Poor thing. Looks awfully sick.”

“Maybe we ought to go get her some crackers to chew on.”

“Reckon she caught that cold goin round. This sure is a bad year for the cold.”

“Sure did hit her all the sudden.”

“Like she don’t even know what notes to hit.”

As the song ended, concerned onlookers began approaching the organ, but Grace was on her way out the door before they could get close.

“C’mon, Effie. Give me your hand. We’ve got to get ourselves home real fast. Mama ain’t feelin so good. I just got to get myself home.”

Confused looks and concern followed them out the door.

“You feelin alright, Grace?”

“You done lost all your color, honey.”

“Little snack might make you feel better.”

“Let me walk you home.”

There was no time for small talk. Small talk was for sunnier afternoons and today there was a storm raging outside. Grace ran through the two rose colored doors with Effie and the need for her own answers following at her heels. Still, the voices of Harmony Church followed them down the sidewalk and out the front gate.

“Can’t believe she’d be takin off like that.”

“We was just tryin to look after her, is all.”

“Sure don’t seem very Christian of her to take off like she done.”

“Could’ve at least taken a minute and said goodbye.”

They ran and ran as the rain pounded against them. Mother and daughter felt the same burning sensation in their lungs, but both kept running. Grace ran for answers and Effie ran for her mother. As they came to the front porch of the house their hands automatically reached for each other. Effie didn’t know why they waited outside for a minute before going inside, only that it began to sleet just as the cold finished eating its way through the bottom layer of her clothes. Grace stood there for the longest time, letting the sleet answer her questions.

When the front door flung open, there he sat. Husband and father, freshly shaven and dressed, sitting alone on the couch, holding a recently lit cigarette and truth in his hand.

But Grace was too late. She had already caught cold from the storm.

CHAPTER 4

The church bell tolled thirty-one times, once for every year Grace lived. When the townspeople heard death's count, they stopped their work in mines, in barns, and in houses and started preparing for a burial. Before long the men had gathered enough pinewood to build a coffin and the women enough black material for a dress. In places like Coal Hollow it takes a whole town to bury one of their own. Everyone had been putting off death's chores to stall it from coming, all the while praying Grace would be left alone until another time. And for a short spell it looked as though their plan was working. The color came back to Grace's face and she sat up in bed. Even got a little bit of her appetite back. Death fooled everybody into thinking it left town when, if the truth were known, it just waited behind closed doors where no one was looking. Death teases, but never truly forgets why it came to visit and always returns home carrying the soul of what once was living. It came for Grace two months after she first caught cold. Two months after the life was first knocked out of her, death came along and finished what the pain of knowing started.

Effie answered the knock at the front door and was greeted by sorry eyes and dutiful hugs from the dressmaking parade of Harmony ladies. Without her mother there to do the talking, Effie was left not knowing what to say. So she just sat stoically at the kitchen table in her Sunday dress — the one her mother had made from the old floral

bedspread. Had there been any tears left to cry she would have welcomed them. Instead she sat silently wishing her own life away, as the faces she'd known for forever turned unfamiliar and took over her home.

“It'll be just fine. Your mama is goin be with the Lord now,” Myrtle said while petting Effie's head.

“Myrtle's right, honey. This is what all us Christian folks are waitin for. Bet your mama just couldn't wait to get to Heaven,” Mrs. Hamby added.

Beulah Perry was not to be outdone. “God just needed im another angel. That's what he does when there's people that's too good for the rest of us folks. He comes and takes em before they gets too old. He just needed im another little angel up there by his side.” A towering lady with broad shoulders and blue hair always done up in a bun, Beulah lowered herself to match Effie's seated position. “God just couldn't help himself,” she continued, now rubbing Effie's back. “Your mama was just too good for this here world. You can't blame God for wantin your mama all for his ownself.”

It was already too late. Blame had taken matters into its own hands after comprehension had failed Effie. As she sat at the kitchen table trying to act grown up in the mist of woman talk, all the while nodding her head, and pretending adulthood, her place outside the circle of once-upon-a-time friends to her mother only became all the more obvious. Maturity always arrives a little while after the death of a loved one, but seldom does it come when needed most. It takes time before anything good comes of

death, before the empty words of religion are replaced with acceptance and the natural progression of feelings. Just as grass never immediately grows from freshly plowed ground, self-forgiveness must first be planted and properly cared for among the unearthed emotions from which it emerges. For Effie, forgiveness felt as though it was a lifetime away, incapable of blossoming once buried in self-blame. As she sat there remembering, nodding her head and smiling as her mother would've done, the rest of her body took a different approach. Unable to feign what she thought to be grown-up emotions any longer, her legs and arms began to tremble as her lost tears came out of hiding.

“Effie, you poor thing,” Maude Webb said in her tiny, child-like voice. “I reckon you don't need us talkin bout your mama right now. Where's your manners at, Beulah? She should be restin, not listenin to all our carryin on.”

“Goodness Gracious, Maude. I was just tryin to help her feel a little better. She's just a youngin,” Beulah said.

“Let's just try and get her calmed down. Effie, honey, why don't you lie down for a bit while the rest of us take care of things round here.”

Effie made it to the couch with a little push from Beulah and Maude, who then tucked a blanket around her.

“Effie, where's your daddy run off to?” Mrs. Hamby asked.

Silence answered, so they headed on back to the bedroom and got to work on Grace's dress. They measured her waist and the length of her arms and body, from

shoulders to ankles, and then cut the black fabric to match her proportions. Mrs. Hamby massaged Grace's body, starting with her face, so her eyes would go closed and then worked her way down the arms and legs.

"How's her body holdin up? Does it got any life left in it?" Myrtle asked while cutting pieces of the cheap already worn fabric.

"I reckon th' rigor mortis will take over fore long, so we better get our work done right quick," Mrs. Hamby answered.

"Her poor little body just couldn't take the cold," Beulah said. "It's an awful shame. Specially with Effie bein so young and all."

"Just look at how thin she's gotten. Wasted away to nothin. Poor thing wasn't gettin nough to eat. That's what killed her," Mrs. Hamby said.

"What killed her is that husband of hers," Maude said. "He's useless as tits on a boar hog. I ain't never seen im act like much of a man."

"You know a lot folks been talkin, Maude. Sayin how he's been keepin warm with that Jone who comes from up the holler."

"Don't I know it, Myrtle. That's been the talk all winter."

Mrs. Hamby put in her two cents. "I just think it's a cryin shame that Grace didn't handle it no better than she did. Her husband ain't the first to go find comfort in another woman. I reckon pretty women like Grace don't ever think to worry emselves bout some things, but there ain't no woman that can change the nature of a man. Good

lookin women just take it harder cause they ain't used to it. They just need to start acceptin the way things is like the rest of us."

"Don't know bout all that, but I do know that husband sure didn't make things easy on her," Beulah said. "Never did see im do much to help her out. I must've seen her carryin her own firewood least a hundred times. Seen her out choppin it a time or two as well. Now you can't tell me he didn't have no better raisin than that. To make his woman do the work of a man."

"Now we ain't got the right to talk like that," Mrs. Hamby countered. "From what I'm seein it ain't lookin like Grace did a lot of her own work round the house. Maybe she didn't take care of her husband, and that's why he started runnin round like he done. Grace was good nough folk, but looks to me like she didn't know much bout bein a woman. I've tasted her apple butter before and it ain't as good as folks make it out to be. And just look at those cobwebs up there in that corner. I reckon she ain't done any cleanin for months."

As was usually the case, Maude had heard just about enough of Mrs. Hamby. "It might do you some good to sweep your own front porch fore you start cleanin somebody else's house."

"All I was sayin is there might be a reason why things worked themselves out the way they done." Mrs. Hamby, never one to be out done, stated her final case to Maude not only verbally, but also with a glance that shot through her opponent.

As gossip faded into stitching and the sound of shears shredding fabric, the echo of their voices settle in the front room where Effie lay wide awake and injured by their comments. With arms wrapped around two knees drawn up close to her chest, she sat silently reliving their talk over and over again inside her head, trying to make sense out of what had been said. She didn't know what to think. Her thoughts were moving in all different directions, until finally her mind began focusing in on what Mrs. Hamby had said. Even though she heard the words describing her mother and father, the meaning and understanding behind them were new to her. Thinking those kinds of thoughts had never occurred to her.

Tears rested in her eyes while deciding when and where to fall. Within a matter of seconds they dropped to the quilt that her two little hands had clenched and pulled close to her face. The quilt was all there was to comfort Effie, to shield and protect her from the words drifting around the house. But the damage had already been done. There was no stopping the talk of the Harmony ladies from consuming her thoughts. No matter how much she tried to ignore their voices, there was no way for Effie to escape the words that played over and over again in her head.

Buried underneath covers and in the images that now matched her thoughts, Effie continued to lie on the couch paralyzed by sadness, anger, and worse yet — possibility. She and her daddy had never gone fishing or hunting together like other father and daughter pairs, but she'd always been content staying with her mother. Now, as she tried

to recall her father, only memories of her mother answered. There was no foundation on which to judge the talk about her father. There was no recollection of happiness that came bounding back with his image, nor did what little memory she had of him point toward mistreatment or cruelty. He was merely a distant reality, someone given a title over her and nothing more. Her mother's deceased body lay a room away, but the figure of her father proved more ghostly in life than her mother's did in death.

Feelings of caution began to consume her body, but yielded to what her mind deemed overreacting. The insides of her stomach churned, spurring a jolt of numbness throughout her entire system. All of her flesh, from fingers to toes, broke out in a sweat, until the steady pulsating rhythm of doubt consumed her entire being. Answers were revealed through her natural reaction, but her mind still had questions. Even as the image of her daddy with Jone struck fear in Effie's body, the idea was immediately rejected by her mind. Just because he had never taken her fishing or hunting was no real reason for her feelings to be changing, she thought to herself. And surely lots of women carried their own wood to the house. She didn't know exactly what the women in the other room were insinuating, but could feel the negative tone their remarks against her mother and father carried. Absence from family didn't necessarily qualify her father as a sinner. Lack of affection didn't have to mean there was no love at all, she thought to herself.

But the justification and common sense housed in Effie's mind did little to fight off the telling sensations she felt running through her veins, as her body became more independent from her mind.

Before long, the ladies had finished Grace's burial costume and fitted her body with a black dress that fastened tightly around her neck and stretched to her ankles. Their husbands along with other men from the church carried a homemade pine coffin through the door and placed it in the front room where Effie still lay bundled under the quilt.

"Is this where you women folk want the coffin?" Maude's husband, Kenny, hollered from the front of the house to the back.

The women came into the room when called and complimented the men on their work. All the boards had been smoothed, and the shape mirrored the image of a body in its own right with the width where Grace's shoulders would rest being broad and the box growing narrower toward her feet.

"It sure is a mighty fine lookin coffin," Maude approved.

"Sure is," Mrs. Hamby added. "You boys sure done good work. Any soul would be lucky to have a restin place nice as that one there."

Arrival and approval of the coffin cued the ladies to begin work on the lining, so they retreated to one of the back rooms of the house to cut more fabric. Only this time the fabric was white and from a distance gave the impression of a fine silk, when really it was probably just leftover material from curtains. Just as the Harmony women reached

the backroom and before the men had time to begin talk of their own, the door opened, announcing the arrival of father to one and widower to the rest. The men immediately recognized the look of liquor in his eyes, but ignored it with friendly greetings and consolation.

“Sorry bout your loss, Earl,” Beulah’s old man, Elmer said.

“Sure is a awful thing for the Lord to take somebody so young and pretty,” Kenny chimed in. “Woman like Grace sure will be missed round here. You sure is lucky to have a youngin to remember her by.”

All eyes moved toward the little scrap of human being under the covers, who up until this point had gone unnoticed. Her father left his condolences unattended and made his way to Effie where he placed awkward, never before comforting hands, on his daughter’s head and then began stroking her long, black hair as if he were rewarding a hound dog after a successful hunt rather than consoling a child. His touch awakened her body and sent chills similar to the ones his image had previously conjured up through every inch of her flesh. The feeling prompted Effie to expose her tear-stained cheeks and meet eyes with her father for the first time since her mother’s death.

“I sure am sorry bout your mama, Effie,” he said with the smell of liquor coming off his tongue along with his words.

His simple words could not overcome her nagging feelings of doubt, distrust, and disbelief, now urgent in their struggle to acknowledge truth. In politeness, the men still

standing around the room pretended to ignore the clumsy display of affection between father and daughter.

Then all of Effie's doubts knocked on the front door and walked in the house armed with a pot of green beans and false sympathy. Effie shot a glance of hate in the direction of the door, and Jone returned the look as she walked past everyone and right on into the kitchen and placed her green beans on the kitchen table.

The winner was announced when her father left Effie's side to greet Jone with a hug and thank you. All the women folk had caught wind of trouble and left their sewing to watch things unfold for themselves.

"Earl, honey, I know it ain't much, but I thought a little something to eat might just help you all out a little."

"Sure 'preciate the thought," he said. "Folks sure been good to us during such bad times and all."

Looking up through her eyelashes as she talked came quite naturally to Jone. So did the way she took her time leaning over the green beans long enough to make sure the whole world got a good enough look at the cleavage she worked so hard creating for herself. Grace's death granted Jone the freedom to bring her not-so-subtle side out into the open. The rest of the women in the room were too shocked to comment on the scene and only stood by with dropped jaws and eyes wide in disbelief. Earl, on the other hand, didn't seem to mind. Nor did the other men who sat back and watched from behind their

smiling faces. Jone made an even bolder move for Earl by walking over to where he stood. Her too-tight skirt and sweater made movement difficult, but she delivered a hug in what she said were the hopes he'd soon feel better. In the time it took Jone to give Earl his feel better hug, Effie learned to hate completely. In fact, it came quite quickly and naturally before she even had the chance to turn it down. Always before she'd just tried hate on for size, but this time it actually fit.

Jone never even broke her icy stare with Effie. With her arms wrapped around her prize, Jone shot Effie a victory smile from over Earl's shoulder. Once her success became unmistakable, she closed the deal by kissing Earl on the cheek and then sauntered over to where Effie sat and met her match right on.

"Effie, sweetheart. I reckon this is a mighty troublin time for you," she said while patting the top of Effie's head. "Don't be shy bout askin me for things. You're goin a need a woman to talk to."

Earl smiled in approval, but Effie responded by jerking her head out from underneath of Jone's patronizing hand while simultaneously fighting off the intensified feelings of despair that always have a way of showing up when all hope is gone.

Jone hugged Effie hello, goodbye, and I'll be seeing more of you later all at once and with assurance.

“Well, I reckon I best be on my way,” she said. “I’ve got to get back home and take care of some things. Let me know if you all need anything, Earl,” she said with a wink of her eye.

Jone walked out the front door with as much ease and confidence as when she first arrived. Only this time Jone didn’t walk through the door alone. After quickly excusing himself, Earl followed Jone and escorted her up the road a good piece, leaving his daughter officially wounded and for all to see.

It didn’t take long for the pack of women to return to the back room and for their talk to start making its way through the walls again.

“That Jone sure do think she’s something to write home bout, don’t she,” Mrs. Hamby roared. “She’s the type of woman that would gag at a gnat and swallow a camel. I ain’t got no use for no woman like her.”

“Sure she’s big feelin and all,” Beulah added. “But it ain’t like the man didn’t egg her on something fierce. She’s just doin the things the man done encouraged her to do.”

“You mean to tell me he encouraged her to come in here wearin that sweater like that. I seen more of the woman than I ever cared bout seein. She come in her actin like’s she something. Goin round puttin on the dog when she probably ain’t got nothin to show for it,” Mrs. Hamby said, working herself into a red-faced tizzy.

“I just don’t know who she think she is comin in actin that way,” Myrtle said.

“Poor little Effie probably don’t know what to make of everything that’s been goin on. I don’t know what to make of things my ownself.”

“Well I sure as hell know what to make of things!” Mrs. Hamby yelled.

“Good grief, calm yourself down,” Myrtle said.

“Well I’m just saying God don’t put up with men like im neither,” she said in a much quieter voice. “God knows the nature of a man when it comes to a woman. Man always has a way of thinkin woman was made just for im, but God don’t tolerate no moonshine on the tongue. God don’t take that from nobody. That man had the look of a drunk if I ever seen it.”

With nobody knowing how to respond to Mrs. Hamby, talk stopped itself. In its place, they went back to work and brought the lining for the coffin in the front room to make sure it fit, but their banter had not gone unheard.

“Lord in Heaven, you women sure is loud,” Mrs. Hamby’s husband, John, accused. “Not all houses are good bout keepin secrets.”

“Who you callin loud, John,” she defended. “I know I ain’t loud and ain’t never been more certain bout anything.”

“Well, I tell you one thing. If you throw a rock in a pack of dogs it sure ain’t the one who don’t get hit that does the barkin.”

“And just what do you mean by that. I ain’t goin round barkin bout anything. I’m just voicin the truth, is all.”

“You certain bout that?”

“You know, John. Don’t be like em old-time preachers. You know, the ones always goin round saying, ‘Don’t do as I do. Do as I tell you.’”

“I ain’t the one all caught up in my talk without no thought bout other folks,” he said, as his eyes darted back and forth between his wife and Effie.

“Well, John, you ol’ fool. Look what you gone and done. All your carryin on has gone and upset poor little Effie.

Mrs. Hamby took to comforting Effie with well rehearsed motherly lines and caresses while the rest of her pack and their husbands put the lining in the coffin and carried Grace’s body from the bedroom to the front room. Once the body was placed and properly arranged in the coffin that sat raised at waist level on plywood and bricks, two nickels were placed over Grace’s eyes to keep them from coming open.

After the body was laid out for viewing, other folks, who lived in nearby hollows as well as their own, came by to pay their respects. But it was the faithful followers of Harmony Church that stayed by Effie’s side deep into the night when Earl still hadn’t returned from wherever he went with Jone.

The moon was firmly stationed in the sky and it was one of those ambiguous hours between night and morning, when it seems as though the heavens cannot decide

which direction to take, before Earl finally came stumbling in to pay his respects. After he approached the coffin, he bowed his head toward his wife and closed his eyes in a way that resembled prayer. His feet shifted back and forth and his goodbye, watched by all eyes in the room, was said in a matter of minutes. He paused for a moment and looked down at Grace one last time before finding his place with the other men.

Before long it was Effie's turn.

"Effie, you better go up and say your goodbyes," Maude encouraged. "You'll lose your chance for too long and then you'll regret it."

"Go ahead, honey. Your mama wouldn't want you to be scared of her," Myrtle said in her own attempt to offer support.

"C'mon, Effie. It's time. Go on now. There ain't nothin to be scared of, just like Myrtle said," Mrs. Hamby urged.

Defeated and worn out from an overdose of emotions, Effie moved from her secure spot on the couch, the place where she'd spent the day nesting and making a temporary home for herself, and slowly crept her way to the coffin. Each step caused more trembling and by the time she made it to her mother's side, her whole body shook with trepidation. But when she looked inside the coffin she only saw a body that resembled her mother, as opposed to the person she knew in life. Curiosity calmed her trembling body and she leaned over the coffin to better examine death's expression. It had taken away her olive complexion and left her skin a paler shade of white. No other

color remained in her face. Her once rose-colored cheeks now looked as if they'd never known anything other than whiteness. The only illusion of life was in the hint of smile formed by her mouth. Before her conscience had time to argue otherwise, Effie's hands reached inside the coffin to touch her mother's face.

When leaning over she lost her balance, causing the coffin to rattle ever so slightly. The movement was just enough to disturb the two nickels resting on Grace, causing her brown eyes to pop open and stare directly at Effie.

That's when Mrs. Hamby wailed, "Her eyes are blared! They done come open! Lord almighty, th' devil done come and took that poor woman's soul."

The good people of Harmony Church started running around the room trying to figure out what to do now that the devil had come and paid them a visit. They paced back and forth across the floor in the hopes of finding an answer. When that didn't work, they got to thinking. They'd only heard of it happening, never before witnessed it in real life. But then they all agreed, men and women and husband and wives alike, that it had to be true. Superstition didn't open its eyes and stare people in the face like it had them. When Grace's eyes popped open, believers were made out of all them. There was no questioning fate. No matter how good Grace had been in life, death made her the devil in their memories. All they could do now was pray for her poor soul.

Effie had stayed mostly to herself while everyone figured out what to make of her mother. When no one was looking she'd worked her way back over to the coffin to get

another look. She wanted to see the devil for herself. Much to her surprise, the nickels had been placed over her mother's eyes again and the expression of her face remained unchanged. She saw the same pale complexion, the same smile on her mother's lips. This time the coffin didn't stir when she reached over to touch her mother's face. She felt the calm coolness of death on her mother's skin. It was no longer the same face she'd touched in life, and only an impression of her mother.

After undoing the silver cross around her mother's neck and putting it in her pocket, she took one last look at the stranger in the coffin. Effie focused her eyes and waited patiently but never did see the devil looking back.

CHAPTER 5

Still lying on Calvin's grave, Effie's eyes had opened right along with the memory of the nickels falling and the devil claiming her mother's soul. By that time the sky had darkened from afternoon to evening. Time had gotten comfortably lost in the story of self conjured by the grass. A whole day practically passed her by without hinting about routines left undone. Housework waited. Dinner waited. Lester waited. Life had stopped long enough for her to catch up to it. So often years outrun people. Leave us standing in the dust, trying to catch a breath while the days and months run on without us, without looking back to see if we're still following. And then all is lost. Our race against time is lost for good. Life keeps on moving forward, and leaves us behind with only memories for an existence. Old photographs prove life wasn't a dream, but the reflection staring back from the mirror argues otherwise. Effie had often wondered what had happened to herself between the photographs and her reflection. Wondered what had really happened during all those years that she'd spent teaching herself not to feel. Her memory defined itself by the heartache of yesterday, of a childhood and young adulthood that left her numb for years afterward. Her present was defined by what now seemed like a different lifetime. And now time, as it seldom does, had stopped long enough to let her catch up a little. Her garden had called for her, had stopped the world and life from

spinning long enough for her to see all the different versions of self there were to choose from.

No longer did the scene of her mother's death send simultaneous bolts of confusion, misunderstanding, and sadness through Effie's body. When her story was told while lying against the warm earth, Effie felt more on the verge of Heaven than Hell. As if Heaven had been hidden within her all along, and life was just now letting her know where the past was keeping it locked away. Sometimes wars for peace are fought in solitude, far away from the rest of the world. Fought far away from the routine thoughts of life, and from the self put out for everyone else to see. And sometimes such personal battles have a way of finding the truths revealed by time and patience. Effie was beginning to discover a victory all her own in the garden of God's dead where a multitude of souls rested beneath tombstones that depicted the scripture and crosses that had defined them in life.

Effie knew her mother had been no devil, and time no longer divided itself by day and night, only by past and present.

When Effie rose from Calvin's grave, she took her time looking around, not bothered by the end of day and loss of time. She stretched her arms toward God, but looked down toward the ground.

"G'bye. I better be gettin on my way," she said before thinking. As she heard her words aloud, she began to feel awkward again. More like herself. And so she began her

descending journey down the same gravel and mud covered path she had traveled earlier in the day.

She passed through the same old wire fence she'd first entered upon her arrival, which now only separated her from the spirits with whom she had begun to feel so welcome and at home. The walk home proved itself far from tiresome. Effie had found freedom in her thoughts and took her time showing it off. Alongside the gravel path, where the wildflowers grew in an abundance of colors, Effie stopped and picked herself a bouquet. Home was where she least wanted to go. It was a place that held too much of the past within its walls. So she made her way home, but slowly enough to make sure the woods that now held her secrets wouldn't be tempted to talk. Stopping long enough along the way for the moon to replace the vanishing sun.

But Lester didn't share Effie's secrets, and he was on his feet and wanting to know all about where she'd been just as soon she walked through the front door.

"Goodness gracious, woman. Where you been hidin yourself all day. I was just bout ready to send out a search party."

"Why Lester, there ain't no use in doin nothin like that. I done told you I was goin up to that ol' cemetery up the holler."

"You never told me nothin of the sort. I dozed off and next I knew you was gone."

"Why I could've sworn I yelled out I was leavin."

“Wouldn’t have spent my day wonderin where you ran off to had you done that. Since when did you go and start carin one way or th’ other bout em folks buried up on that hill? They s’ all dead and gone and you didn’t know none of em in the first place.”

“I just felt like takin a walk and that’s where I ended up. Don’t see why your feathers are gettin all ruffled up bout it.”

“Would’ve like to been told, is all. Run off and leave me sittin on the couch all dressed up for church,” he mumbled.

Effie responded by walking into the kitchen to make Lester a late dinner. He could hear the knife slamming against the counter as she cut potatoes to fry. Never could understand that woman, he thought to himself. One minute she’s acting like herself, and the next she’s not making any sense. He walked to the kitchen door and stood there looking in at her from the living room. As he looked at her long dark hair moving with the motions of her body, he couldn’t help but think how unchanged time had left her outwardly. Only the gray that mingled among the dark strands of her hair told her age. She was beautiful and he was lucky. If only time left all things unchanged. He wondered how it was that the years had taken away so much of the Effie he knew and only left a little gray as proof things were no longer the same.

When Effie turned around she looked right at Lester but saw a stranger. It was no longer the same marriage that had rescued her from adolescence. Love had long since settled. Gotten so comfortable neither of them even knew it was still there. The

bedroom, once a playground, was now deserted. Love was nowhere to be found. He stayed on his side of the bed, she on hers. Not even their feet dared cross over to the other side bed for fear of disturbing what had become a natural part of life to them. Now only the recollection of love remained.

Lester took his time seating himself at the kitchen table after Effie called him to dinner. A plate of fried potatoes, bacon, and sliced tomato were already waiting for him by the time he sat down. She waited before coming to the table, and in the meantime kept busy by wiping down the countertops and pouring him a glass of grape juice and buttermilk, and herself some sweet tea. He looked down at the table and saw the simple dinner on mismatched plates, but didn't say a word. Now wasn't the time for him to complain about the dinner. About how there were no green beans or biscuits or about how long he had waited. And for what? For a dinner he could have probably cooked himself. For a mere snack that it would have paid him to have eaten hours ago while he waited and worried for her to come home. But he knew better than to say anything to Effie about the dinner or about how he had worried. With some women it's safer for a man just to keep his mouth shut. He thought of her as that type of woman — the strong kind. Him being so worried didn't seem like something that would set well with Effie, so he didn't risk finding out. He sat contemplating what he had done to make her so angry with him to leave without saying anything, to have been so cold for so long he'd forgotten her warmth. For so long what had once passed as happiness now felt so distant

from reality it bordered on fiction. While he thought his thoughts, her mind was elsewhere. Still at the cemetery, still with the peaceful feelings she was sure she'd found in her garden.

They sat in silence until their plates were just about clean. Silence being the non-language to which they'd grown so accustomed. They sat not looking at each other, and then looking when one would think the other wasn't, their forks scraping against the plates, until Lester could stand it no more.

"How that cemetery holdin up? I ain't been up that holler in as long as I can remember. Not since I was a boy."

The break in silence startled her, causing her to look up at him. "I reckon it's lookin just fine. Grown over and all, but it ain't that bad."

"You didn't get scairt up there?"

"Scairt of what? Ain't nothin up there but the graves."

"Wouldn't be so certain bout that. That holler might be haunted. Better be careful bout goin up there. Might be where that ol miner's ghost¹ lives."

"Oh, Lester. It ain't haunted."

"Now, you don't know that. Ain't I ever told you bout that ol miner's ghost?"

¹ "The Miner's Wife," ed. Ruth Ann Musick, Coffin Hollow and Other Ghost Tales. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1977) 24.

He had. More times than she cared to remember, but there was no use in stopping him when he set out to tell a story. Lester always told ghost stories like he believed in them, even though he swore he didn't. Said it was just nonsense folks told to one another to pass the time, but the child-like gleam in his eyes never faded, no matter how many times he told the same story.

“Reckon I better tell you bout what happen with that ol' miner's ghost. You'd be better off knowin just in case something were to happen.”

“And just what do you think is goin happen?”

“I'm just sayin you ought to know the ghosts livin in your own backyard. That's just common sense,” he said with satisfaction in his eyes.

“Well you better go ahead and tell your story,” she said as she started clearing the dishes from the table.

Once Lester got the go-ahead there was no stopping him. “See there was this one time, oh been bout fifty years ago or so now, I reckon, that this ol' miner took to not feelin so good while he was workin the mines. Got to feelin so bad he had to leave work early and head on home. Folks say it wasn't like the miner at all. Say he was a real good worker. Never missed a day in the mines till this one came along. Till he got sick and had to go home all the sudden.

“Well, all he could think bout was getting home to his wife. For her to make something up for im to feel better. He hurried home fast as he could, feelin like he did and all. You listenin, Effie?”

When she heard her name, she responded, “Uh huh,” and then immediately went back to only half-listening and cleaning the kitchen. She was thinking about her mother and father. At the time she cared more about the past, about herself, than about anything Lester had to say. About anything she already had heard and knew.

“Like I was sayin, that miner rushed himself right on home to his wife,” Lester continued without missing a beat. “But when he got home do you know what he found. Do you?”

“What’s that.”

“Walked right in and found his wife with another man. Can you believe the nerve of some women? With another man right there in her husband’s home. That ol’ miner got so mad he didn’t know what to do with himself. So he did the only natural thing and gave the other man a beatin like you’ve never seen and then threw im out of the house like any man in his right mind ought to do. But do you know what that woman of his done? Do you know, Effie? Effie?”

“No, now what’s that,” she said, somewhat startled again.

“That woman of his laughed right in his face. Like she wasn’t sorry or nothin. After all she done to im. And that ain’t all. She started talkin bout a divorce. She wasn’t

sorry bout any of it. All she cared bout was her ownself. That ol miner was so tore up bout things that when he headed back to work the next day he swore to everybody that he was gonna get his revenge. What that ol miner didn't know was that God had a plan of his own for im. Before hardly any time at all passed. Not even an hour. He fainted and fell right in front of one em coal cars that was comin down the tracks. And that's what done that poor miner in. His head and legs got crushed real bad and that was the end of im. Ain't no use even prayin for im to get better. He was dead and gone that fast. Ain't nothin nobody could do.

“Wasn't until time for his funeral come round that the other miners started rememberin all that talk bout revenge right fore he got killed. That's what got em all thinkin. They all started rememberin im sayin that he was goin get revenge no matter what. That cheatin wife of his had it comin to her no matter what. He was goin to get even and the men all knew he meant it. His revenge was the kind that would be gotten dead or alive. Feelin like it was the right thing to do and all, the other miners went and told that cheatin wife what her husband done told em fore passin away. But when they done so she just laughed in all their faces. Said she was just goin marry herself a new man. All the while laughin at em. Now can you believe that woman of his?”

Effie was too far lost in her own thoughts, her own story, to even answer by now. She just looked at him with vacant eyes, and when she didn't respond Lester just went on without her.

“Well after she done laughed in all their faces that ungrateful woman went round lookin for her lover. The one her husband caught her with in the first place. But he done left town without her!” Lester said with a laugh. “And so that foolish ol’ woman was left all alone. Left without any man to take care of her. And serves her right, too. That is if you want to know what I think bout the whole thing. Ain’t nothin like gettin what you deserve. And she sure did when that other man of hers left town like he done. She didn’t know what to do with herself with no man to take care of her. That’s when folks started seein less and less of her. Figured she was just feelin too ashamed of the way she carried on to show her face round town. Why the only time she’d even come out of her house was when she had to. When she had to go get groceries or something. That’s how bad it got to be. That’s the only time folks saw her or heard anything from her. Rest of the time she just kept to her ownself. And in a way that’s how folks thought it should be. You can’t go round treatin your husband the way she done, makin a fool out of a man, and expect folks to act like you ain’t done nothing wrong.

“That’s the way things carried on for a whole year after her husband done passed away. Folks would see her go in and out of the house bout once a week with food for herself. Sometimes not even that often. Nobody cared bout callin on her, so folks was just bout convinced that’s how it would always be, till it was her time to pass away. Then they got a surprise they wasn’t expectin at all. A whole year passed em by and fore long

it got to be exactly one year since that ol' miner died. Since that wife of his treated im so bad and laughed in the whole town's face."

By this time Lester was so caught up in the sound of his voice it didn't matter if Effie was listening or not. It was the story that mattered, so he kept on telling it in his most zealous voice. "It was just a little bit after midnight when folks heard that ol' widow screamin from inside her house. Screamin like nobody had ever heard. Louder than anyone ever thought a person could scream. So all the men folk started gatherin together outside her house. They got their heads to thinkin and finally decided it would be better for her to come out than for them to go in. So they started hollerin at her to come out. They hollered and hollered till they wore their voices out. But she never did come out of that house. That's when they started gettin a bad feelin bout things. Her screamin had done stopped and everything got too quiet. So they went and broke down the door and went on inside to try to find out what had happened.

"They searched all through the front of that house for her but could find nothing. Then we they got back to the bedroom they found the door locked. They all knew something really bad had happened, but they couldn't figure out what. So they knocked down the bedroom door just like they'd done the front one. And that's when they saw her. The men started up screamin like men never scream. So scairt they didn't know what to do with emselves. There was that ol' widow. That miner's wife that'd done her husband so bad, lyin cross the bed with her face so scratched up they could barely make

out it was her. None of em men could figure out what happened. All the windows in that house were shut and locked. Nothin could've gotten in. Nothin that had to go through doors or windows, that is. That's when they all knew it was the ghost of that miner gettin his revenge."

Feeling victorious in his story telling, Lester leaned back in the kitchen chair, sporting a smile that conquered the room. Effie didn't notice. She'd moved on from simply clearing the table and cleaning the dinner dishes to washing down cabinets and cleaning for spring. Lester's smile quickly disappeared and he stood up and started to walk into the other room with his tail between his legs.

Before doing so and in one last attempt at conversation, he said, "Now didn't you like that ol' story. Pretty scary ain't it? That story bout the miner's ghost and his wife."

"Sure is," was all she could say, even though she knew he wanted to hear more. Small talk hadn't got them anywhere but into a relationship that had grown too small and didn't fit anymore. To her, no talking was better than the pointless kind. She was tired of hearing the same stories over and over again. Lester walked into the living room and sat down in his chair, deciding it best to leave Effie alone, washing down cabinets and thinking whatever it was she thought.

She stayed in the kitchen for a good, long while, until a whistle coming from the road came through the window and reached her ears. It didn't take long for the man

behind the whistle to reach the fence post in their front yard. Effie went out the kitchen door and met him on the walkway leading to the back porch.

“Howdy, Effie.”

“Howdy yourself, Grady.”

“Sure is turnin into a mighty fine evenin. Looks as though we might be in for some rain tomorrow. Em leaves showed me their backs today.”

“Is that right? And here I was thinkin the rainy season had done gone and passed us by.”

“Me too, but you can’t argue with nature. If the leaves are sayin its goin happen, then there ain’t no use in expectin anything different.”

“I reckon that’s the truth.”

Before Effie could tell him she had more chores to finish or she was going to head to bed early, Grady had talked his way through the fence gate, up the walk, and was sitting comfortably on the swing, as if he were going to stay for a while. Effie sat down beside him and before long found good company in Grady’s smooth talking ways. After they’d listen to each other for a while and run out of everyday conversation, Effie decided to see if Grady could be of any use.

“You ever been to that ol’ cemetery up the holler,” she asked.

“Why sure I have. I’ve got me some kin folk buried up there. What makes you ask?”

“I took me a walk up there today, is all. Say, did you know any of em while they was livin?”

“A lot of em was dead and gone fore I ever got the chance to know em, but I’ve heard nough stories bout some of em. It’s well known round these parts that I got myself a ghost for kin.”

CHAPTER 6

Passing time on the front porch and story telling happened to be two of Grady's favorite pastimes. Effie didn't have to ask twice about any ghosts. As soon as he realized there was an audience, Grady settled himself into the swing and the front porch instantly seemed to transform into his very own stage. He cleared his throat, preparing his voice for performance and flashed a cat-like grin at Effie, who sat quietly in anticipation.

"Suppose it's best we gets things started right from the beginnin'," Grady said, his words following the rhythm he created by the back and forth beat of his rocking chair.

Effie wanted to hear Grady's story so badly she could hardly keep from telling him to hurry up. She felt as though he had something to tell and the words weren't coming fast enough. She smiled encouragement in his direction and sat up straight, her back firmly against the swing, hands resting on her lap, her brown eyes focused on Grady, and the spring breeze blowing long strands of hair away from her face. Had Grady realized that Effie was just after his story and not him, he would've felt intimidated by her beauty instead of inspired. He looked at her through eyes that remembered every move they'd ever seen her make. Watching Effie had always been one of his pastimes, even though she had no idea. Her face, her hazel eyes, her welcoming smile hadn't changed much during her forty-five years — at least not enough for him to notice. It

seemed as though when age came along and turned everybody else older it had left her more beautiful. Scared a compliment might send her running back into the house with Lester and mean an early goodnight for him, Grady proceeded his story without any more hesitation.

“Now, all folks know that the only reason ghosts go round hauntin in the first place is cause they got unfinished business to take of. My kin ain’t no different. Calvin never did get his revenge while he was livin. He died when he was still just a youngin, so he had to come back and take care of what was still botherin im.”

“Calvin’s the name of your kin?” When Effie said this, her face turned a ghostly white.

“Well, I reckon so, that’s the name all the folks called im by. Why you sounded so surprised? Have you heard stories bout im before?”

“No, I just seen his tombstone, is all,” she said, trying to sound as though the name didn’t matter. “When I went up to the cemetery today his grave stood out more than the rest of em. It was done up real nice. That’s how come I noticed it.”

“Well you done just what folks were hopin for. Folks started feelin real bad bout what happened to im, so they done his grave up real nice hopin that would make im forgive all em. Guilt has a way of makin folks do things they usually ain’t interested in doin.”

“What did those folks need forgivin for?” Effie now sat on the edge of the swing, intent on finding answers.

But Grady didn't appreciated how her interruptions threw off the rhythm of his story and took command of the front porch again.

“I was plannin on gettin to that part, if you'd just let me tell it in my own good time,” he snapped in an annoyed tone she often heard him use with his wife.

“Sorry, Grady. Didn't mean to get in the way of your story tellin.” Her reply alerted him of his tone, and he delivered an apology with the wink of an eye.

“Now, I never did know Calvin firsthand. He died back somewhere round the early 1900s or so. Died long fore I was born, but my kin done told his story so many times I ain't bout to forget it. Think Calvin mighta been a cousin to me, but I can't quite remember that part. I ain't never been too good bout keepin all that family stuff straight. It's how he got be a ghost that's important anyhow.

“If I'm rememberin right he wasn't but bout sixteen years old when the Lord came and took im away. Folks say he always acted real strange for a boy his age. Not like the rest of em. He lived up one em hollers, out on a farm with his grandparents, and they just didn't know what to do with im. When a boy comes to be a certain age, there's things that's expected of im. He should be able to take on man's work. But Calvin didn't take to bein a man when his time come. Didn't even have stomach nough to skin a coon. Folks say that when his granddaddy took im out one mornin to learn im how, the poor

boy started shakin like the Holy Spirit done got hold of im. Folks say he got himself so worked up he done went and got himself sick over it. That's when folks started grownin real suspicious of im. Started thinkin something wasn't quite right bout im. Talk started brewin all over town. Folks began sayin he was more like a little girl than a man. Hell, even my ol' woman ain't bothered by skinnin a coon, just so long as it's dead."

"I reckon skinnin is man's work, but I sure don't see how havin a weak stomach makes you less of a man," Effie defended.

"Well, that ain't the only thing that made Calvin a sissy in their eyes. See, he was missin out on his manhood in other ways, and folks started noticin it more and more. Rumor has it he didn't have an ounce of man in im. Folks say he even started lookin like a little girl. Had real small hands and fingers and these small shoulders. Boy wasn't even able to carry a full load of firewood up to the house. Had to make a couple trips, carryin only one or two pieces at a time, fore he could get it all up there."

"I reckon I'm built bigger than some of the men folk round here and that don't say nothin bout their manhood. I stand just as tall as Lester. Can look im right in the eye when I take the notion."

Effie regretted saying Lester's name as soon as the syllables rolled off her tongue. She didn't want him to be a part of this conversation, but it was too late. Lester had become part of her cells, and conversation had a way of including him, no matter if she wanted it to or not. But Grady didn't question Effie, even though he believed no woman

ever stood as tall as her husband. He was still too caught up in the sound of his own voice.

“You might be right bout that, Effie. But none of the men folk we know s’ever been accused of tryin to touch another man in ways he shouldn’t.”

“Touchin nother man!” This revelation brought Effie to her feet in disbelief. She’d heard mention of such talk a time or two before, but this was the closest she’d ever gotten to having any feelings about it. “Now, you can’t go accusin your own kin folk of such a thing, specially when you hardly know im.”

“I ain’t the one doin the accusin. I’m just tellin you the talk of other folks.”

“They ought to be shamed of emselves. That’s what they oughta be,” Effie responed. She worked herself back down into the swing, fighting a silent battle for helpless things. Fighting for both Calvin and herself.

“Truth is, Effie. They had proof of his sin. Nother boy bout the same age told folks bout the way Calvin looked at im. Bout how he tried to touch im when they was putting up hay together in the barn. After that it didn’t take long for word to get round bout what had happened. There wasn’t no question bout it. Something had to be done. That’s when all the local boys got together and tried to drive the devil out of im.”

“And just how’d they go bout doin that? Ain’t no way to drive the devil away. Ain’t nothin you can do after the devil comes for you.”

“Em boys thought there was a way. Thought they’d scare the devil right on out of im. Bout ten boys or so got together and took off runnin after Calvin one day. They was throwin rocks and sticks, just bout anything they could get hold of with their hands. Folks say the air was full of name callin and screamin that day. Why they must’ve chased that poor boy a whole mile fore his little lungs gave out and just couldn’t take no more. He went into the woods tryin to get away from all of em. All they done was just follow after im. There wasn’t nothin he could do to get away from em. They chased im through the woods, dodgin trees left and right, till there weren’t no more.”

“No more trees?”

“No more trees and no more woods. They’d done run im off the side of Darkish Knob.”

“And that’s how he died?”

“Sure is.”

“Then what happened? That ain’t all there is to it, is there?”

“No that ain’t all. After em boys realized what they done they went back down to town and confessed what happened. Calvin’s granddaddy accused em all of murder, but nobody else found much guilt in em, not even an ounce to tell you the truth. Folks just said it was a case of boys bein boys. That it’d all been a big accident and there wasn’t nothin any of em could do to change things. But his granddaddy got real mad and said

his boy been killed for no reason. Said Calvin ain't never done nothin to that boy. That the boy had made it all up cause he never liked workin with Calvin in the first place."

When Grady paused for dramatic effect, Effie took it as an opportunity to rethink what had been said. She thought about the devil and about how everybody had said she caused the nickels to fall from her mother's eyes when he came to take her soul. Then she thought about how good the grass that grew from Calvin felt to the touch. How she had felt so at home in his presence.

By this time the evening sky had long since passed and darkened to night, causing her to fold her arms across her chest for warmth. There was a damp chill in the air, one of the last remaining signs of winter. She looked down at her feet while Grady, who was beginning to feel more awkward with each passing second, fiddled with the buckle on the strap of his overalls. He looked over at Effie, at how the moonlight complemented her eyes, and wondered what she was thinking. Hoping she might be thinking about what she missed out on by marrying Lester.

"So what made a ghost out of im, then?" she said. "Sounds to me like folks didn't know what to make out of im one way or th'other."

"He ain't never found his peace, Effie. All em folks got away with how they treated im, and he keeps comin back to get im his justice. I don't care what kind of sin he done committed. Em folks could've found another way to learn im his lesson."

"Well, how's he go bout hauntin folks?"

“They say the first time they saw im was bout a year after he died, some time in the spring. Folks say they can feel Calvin breathin on em when it gits to be this time of year. There might not be nobody else in the room, but you can feel im standin right there beside you. Some of my kin folks say when the wind picks up they can hear im screamin like he’s fallin off the side of Darkish Knob all over gain.”

“What makes you so sure it’s the sound of im fallin? Maybe it’s just the wind whistlin,” Effie interrupted. Her eyes looked over and challenged his as she matched his posture by leaning back in the swing, attempting to confront his story straight on, although she couldn’t quite make up her mind about what he was saying.

“Well, I reckon some folks might just go on thinkin it’s just the wind whistlin, but bout everybody that’s ever heard bout Calvin believe that ain’t the case. See, I wasn’t done with my story yet. Haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.”

“Go on and finish then. I sure ain’t gettin any younger out here. Ain’t gettin any warmer either.”

“I want you to listen real close now, you hear? Cause what I’m bout to tell you is the god’s honest truth, and I ain’t the type to go round tellin these kinds of stories to just anybody who’ll listen. Now you ain’t the type to go and get all scairt bout a ghost now, are you?” He grinned and fought the urge to move closer to her.

“Stop foolin round, Grady.”

“Now don’t say I didn’t give you fair warin. It ain’t a pretty story for a woman like yourself to hear.”

“C’mon, Grady.”

“Alrighty, then. See, bout a year after Calvin been dead, folks say he came back to get his revenge on that boy who done turned the whole town gainst im. That boy was out on a night, much like the one we got ourselves here, with a whole heap of friends. They’d all gone down into town to have emselves a good ol time. They was drinkin up all the moonshine they could find and just carryin on so long and so loud they’d lost track of their time. It got to be late. All the other boys he was out with lived pretty close to town, so when it was time for em to go they didn’t have to carry emselves too far. That wasn’t the case with that boy who done Calvin so wrong. He had himself a far ways to travel up the holler. His buddies all asked im not to go travelin the distance by his ownself, but he was too much a man to take their advice. So he done mounted his horse and headed out the holler all by his ownself.

“But somewhere between town and his house something mighty awful must’ve happened. Cause when folks seen im the next day he was walkin round town all beat and bruised up like he’d gone and fought himself a mountain cat. His clothes had been all ripped up to pieces and he just kept walkin round and round in circles talkin to his self like a crazy person would. Nobody ever did find that horse of his.

“Couple hours passed by fore folks could get im talkin bout anything and when he did finally take to talking they could hardly make out what he was sayin. Whatever got hold of im up in that holler done took his voice from im. Only thing folks could make out was something bout Calvin.

“So at first, the folks all thought it was just his drink doin the talkin for im. But as days turned to weeks that poor boy didn’t get no better. Couldn’t get his words out no more. He just stopped makin sense altogether. Just walked round town not makin any sense with his eyes lookin crossed and twisted as the devil’s. Nobody knew what to do with im, so they did the only thing they could think of and had im locked up. Just put im away with the other crazy folks and that’s where he stayed till the day he died.”

“I reckon that boy got what was due im and Calvin got im his revenge,” Effie said, her mind still uncertain what to make out of Grady’s story.

“That’s what folks thought for a good long while. But then they started seein signs of im everywhere they looked. Calvin mighta found im some justice had it just been that one boy that done im wrong, but it was the whole town that helped kill im in a way. That didn’t care nothin bout im livin or dead. Ain’t nobody, exceptin his granddaddy that every did stand up for im.

“So whenever a cow turned up missin or somebody took sick all the sudden, they all started sayin it was just Calvin up to his hauntin again. Some folks say they could feel im in the room with em. That he’s the kind of ghost that lets his presence be known real

quiet like. He ain't the kind to go round rattlin chains and doin all that nonsense hautin. There ain't no contest between Calvin and that ol miner's ghost folks round here always talking bout."

From where he now sat in the kitchen Lester had heard everything, and it took every ounce of him not to come running out of the house to give Grady a piece of his mind. That no good Grady and his big stories, Lester thought to himself. He'd wanted to punch Grady in the face his entire life, and this would've been the perfect opportunity but for the fact Effie would've skinned him alive if he did, so instead he sat wringing his hands and waiting for the right time to step outside.

"You alright, Effie?" Lester heard Grady ask. "I done gone and got you all scared, now didn't I? I reckon woman folk just ain't got the right skin for some stories. Grady had seen a chill jolting through Effie's body once he'd finished the story, had even seen her try to stop it from showing. Effie knew he'd seen, but wasn't about to tell the truth.

"I ain't scairt of no ghost story of yours. I reckon I just caught hold of that chill in the air."

"Is that so."

"I just caught a chill, is all."

"Maybe you need a little warmin up."

That's when Lester couldn't take it any longer, and ran out of the house before there was time to think twice. His gallant efforts caused the screen door to slam harder than usual and he was on the back porch without a good thought in his head before Effie and Grady landed back in their seats after being caught off guard.

"Goodness gracious, Lester. Scare us to death."

"Sorry bout that. Door needs fixin. Always slams a little too hard."

Effie just rolled her eyes.

"Why good evenin, Grady. Didn't know you was vistin this evenin."

"Lester," Grady responded, looking as trapped in his seat as a fox does after being run up a tree.

"You need something, Lester?" Effie asked, her patience running thinner by the second.

"Umm...just...umm...needin me a little help in the kitchen is all," he said before turning and walking back into the house.

Goodbyes between Grady and Effie were quickly spoken before she followed Lester inside the house, the door slamming behind her.

"What is it you needin so much help with?"

"Can't get that pickle jar over there on the counter open. Was just wantin me a snack fore time to go to bed."

"You can't open it your ownself?"

“I tried, but...”

It was too late. Effie opened the jar on the first try and Lester’s manhood suffered double that night.

CHAPTER 7

The day had taken all the fight out of Effie, and left nothing in its place. The walk to the cemetery and back, the rush to cook Lester's dinner, and the time spent listening to Grady's story while trying not to show care or concern had caused her bones to grow heavy with sleep. So caught up in his own thoughts and quickly vanishing manhood, Lester didn't even notice the worn out look on his wife's face, the grayness of her skin, or the far off look in her eyes. His thoughts were on Grady.

As they walked back to the bedroom, Effie first and Lester following a ways behind with his feet dragging against the hardwood floors, he had already silently begun planning his battle. He wasn't about to put up with the likes of Grady coming around his woman, questioning his manhood. Effie belonged to him, and Grady had his own woman at home if he needed an audience for telling ghost stories. Not that she'd care anything about hearing them, Lester thought to himself. That old story he'd heard him tell Effie on the front porch sure wasn't anything to write home about. His miner's ghost outdid that story of Grady's by at least a hundred miles.

There was just something about Grady that had always left Lester unsettled. Maybe it was from years worth of Grady watching. From sitting in the back pews before more church services than he cared to remember, and watching Grady work his way around to all the women, Effie included. He never really did anything other than talk and

smile, but Lester knew Grady's type. Knew that he hid bad intentions behind all of his smooth talk and grinning. Grady was the type of cat husbands had to run off their porches with a shotgun instead of a broom. He needed to be scared off for good. Women aren't the only ones able to make out the good and bad in people, the only ones who commit the actions of others to memory.

While Lester silently plotted against Grady, Effie's mind was so cluttered that thoughts came and went without her even knowing — until she was left with a feeling of emptiness. While walking the hallway to their bedroom her eyes jumped from one photograph to the next, memories flooding and overwhelming until she could no longer look. Past the black and white images of her mother and father, she walked — past the happier version of Lester and herself on their wedding day that hung on the opposite wall in a gold colored frame similar to the one around the photograph of her parents.

Even though they made it to the bedroom one right after the other, Lester was in bed and looked to be well on his way to sleep while Effie was still putting on her nightgown and brushing her hair. When she pulled back the covers on her side of the bed Lester's bare back was exposed, and before the top of his pajama pants came into view and covered his nakedness her eyes almost turned away as if seeing something they should not. She climbed carefully into bed so not to disturb him. Only his feet dared cross the imaginary line that divided their bed down the middle. His cold feet that always crept up on Effie in the middle of the night and tried to steal the warmth from her side of

the bed. She hated how they never stayed on his side of the bed and always surprised her when least expected. She thought it her duty not to let any of herself wander to his side of the bed. Thought it part of an unspoken agreement time had arranged for them. Now as they both pretended to sleep, back to back and with eyes wide open, she anticipated the shock of his cold feet against her legs, while he waited for the right moment, if any such thing existed, to break the silence that separated them in the bedroom as well as well as in all spaces.

“You awake, Effie,” Lester finally found the courage to say.

“Am now, I reckon.” Effie knew how to pretend with words just as she did with silence.

“Doesn’t matter. Didn’t mean to wake you,” he grumbled.

“Mattered nough for you to wake me up.”

“Guess I was just wonderin things,” he stammered. “Wonderin if you’d taken a likin to that Grady.”

It took Effie’s response a moment to find her. She’d been so caught up in her thoughts and feelings all evening, she hadn’t given Lester or Grady either one a second thought, hadn’t even realized jealousy was still a possibility.

“Now where you go and find an idea like that? I ain’t taken a likin to Grady. There ain’t no harm in spendin the evenin out on the porch talkin. That’s all we was doin. Ain’t nothin matter with listenin to some storytellin.”

“You don’t listen to my storytellin like you done Grady’s,” Lester blurted out before the words could be stopped.

“You ain’t makin no sense. Course I listen to your stories. He ain’t no different than you in his storytellin. He just got stories I never heard tell of before.”

“If I went round makin things up out of thin air then I might have me some new stories, but there’s truth in what I’m sayin. I tell the truth. And that’s the difference between men like Grady and men like me.”

“It was just a story, Lester. That’s all there was to it and nothin more,” Effie lied. What Grady had said was like an open doorway leading to what she’d felt in the cemetery.

“I reckon you’re right,” Lester said after thinking things over for a second, before his jealousy got in the way again. “Maybe it’s just that Grady I ain’t feelin right bout.”

“Oh, there ain’t no harm in im. Just the same ol’ Grady we’ve known for long as I can remember.”

“That’s just what I’m gettin at. Never did trust im. Always goin round smooth talkin the women folk.”

“He’s fine, Lester. Ain’t no harm in Grady,” she said through a yawn.

Lester knew there was no point in saying anything else, so he closed his eyes and pretended to sleep again. After so many years of not talking, his sudden outburst of jealousy might as well have gone unspoken. It certainly went unheard. When silence

becomes natural, words lose their meaning and become foreign from disuse. For two people who no longer even said goodnight to each other, no room for conversation existed. Even though Effie answered, her replies were empty. Worn out from the day, from fighting with memories, from living and simply breathing, her mind was in no condition to make sense out of Lester. She was too preoccupied with finding the answers to her own feelings.

As Lester mulled over all he could have said and faked sleep, Effie drifted into a dream as soon as her eyes closed. Sleep seemed to find her the instant Lester quite talking, but it did not bring a dream of her husband or of Grady. She dreamed Calvin and felt what wakefulness would have never allowed her to feel. All along Lester had been fretting over the wrong man stealing his wife. In Effie's dream, she walked hand-in-hand with Calvin.

They were standing across from each other in a barn when she first looked up and caught a glimpse of what she thought was him. His image turned from her and walked away. She followed far enough behind so not to startle him, and when he went behind a stack of hay she got close enough to softly touch the back of his shoulder. With her head bowed bashfully to the dirt floor of the barn, the first thing she saw up close were the black dress shoes worn on his feet. As her eyes slowly worked their way up his body, she saw his black pants hanging loosely on his tiny frame, as did his white dress shirt. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of her own clothes. Her hands grabbed

at the coarse fabric of her long black skirt and then at the long sleeved blouse made from the same material. As she touched the uncomfortable fabric, the image of the man turned around and revealed only the outline of a face where there should have been an expression. His face — nose, eyes, lips — all melted into one flesh colored haze that made defining any one feature impossible.

As shock turned her away, he reached for her arm and she knew. Knew that it was Calvin from the way she felt when he touched her. Then he took her by the hand and they walked to the middle of the barn and began dancing to the sound of a distant organ playing one of her mother's favorite hymns. As they whirled around and around the dirt floor, holding hands that fit together perfectly, her long dark hair rode the air before falling to her back again. She danced youth and Calvin in the same waltz, all the while trying to study his face. Each time she'd look up where his eyes should have been, his head turned away.

They began twirling faster and faster until everything turned black. She could no longer make out any part of Calvin or herself. She had feeling, but their bodies had disappeared into thin air. She could feel herself holding on to Calvin's small, girlish arms as she spun round and round, only now with her head bowed toward the ground and her eyes no longer intent on looking at his face. She felt comfort in the motions of their invisible dance until the barn doors flew open and sent them spinning out of control and into a pile of hay on the floor. Shape slowly made its way back to their bodies, but just as

it did a familiar figure of a man appeared before them in the doorway. The man smoked a cigarette while carrying a shovel in one hand and a bottle in the other. Standing there in his blue overalls with light shining on the other side of the barn doors and illuminating his image, he towered above them as they lay huddled together on the floor, with his head pointed in their direction and his face as mysterious as Calvin's.

Calvin began whimpering like a helpless animal and digging at the earth floor of the barn with his fingernails. Each time Calvin let out a cry the man would take a step closer to them. Effie now sheltered Calvin by placing her body in front of his, and tried to comfort him with empty words she thought carried meaning, but her efforts served no use. His crying only grew more and more intense until the man and his shovel hovered directly over them. Effortlessly, he lifted Effie by the back of her blouse and threw her off to the side before grabbing Calvin by the throat with both hands and strangling him. As the man was holding Calvin in the air and violently shaking him, Effie regained her senses and quietly picked the shovel up off the ground, and hit the man over the head. Calvin's body fell to the ground, but Effie only paused to look at it briefly before being drawn back to the other familiar man without a face that now lay unconscious on the ground. With the shovel still firmly planted in her hands Effie kept raising it high above her head before driving it into the man over and over again until the action became natural and methodic.

When Effie first awoke the next morning her reality was so confused by a dream
the two felt like one.

CHAPTER 8

Effie stood in front of the kitchen stove watching the bacon for Lester's breakfast sizzle in the frying pan, while her mind dissected the images from what she'd dreamed the night before. On the outside nothing was unusual about her morning. As usual, she'd gotten out of bed right before dawn and was dressed and in the kitchen cracking eggs against the side of a bowl before Lester was sitting in his seat at the table. They didn't speak as was normally the case, and he sat sipping his coffee while she scurried around the kitchen, setting the table with her mismatched collection of dishes and silverware while the eggs finished cooking. But even as the morning wore the same familiarity as always, Effie's thoughts were far from the bacon she watched fry on one side before uniformly turning it over to the other. As her mind replayed the image of herself hitting the faceless man over and over again with the shovel, she could feel her arms wanting to rise above her head and act out the motions right then and there. She resisted. Stopped her arms from doing what she'd now tried to convince her mind was nothing more than a nightmare, even though it had made her feel more alive than anything else had in years. Over and over again she felt the shovel fall and then hit the man's body, and each time her mind replayed the image, she began to sense a little more of the feeling she now knew as Calvin.

When the smell of burnt toast filled the air she was spared from the image in her mind. Lester looked up from where he sat fiddling with the knobs on an old radio that sat in the windowsill next to the table. Paranoid that anything and everything might stir

suspicion in Lester, Effie threw the burnt toast in the garbage can on the back porch and had two new slices of bread in the toaster before the scent had time to fill the air.

“That toaster not workin right?” Lester asked

“It ain’t nothin,” she said, a little startled.

“I better take a look at it after breakfast.”

“There ain’t no need in worryin yourself bout it.”

“Figure it’s time for something round here to break gain. Been too long since anything caused any headache.”

She set the grape jam on the table before he had a chance to ask, and the rest of the breakfast with nicely toasted bread soon followed. Effie sat down across the table from Lester with her face pointed toward her plate, and started acting like she was eating when really her fork never made it to her mouth and only moved the food around the plate until it gave the impression of having been eaten. Lester occupied himself with the radio dial, turning it from one static-filled station to the next. When he finally found a frequency where there was more music than crackle and pop, he stopped and ate his breakfast. The fork barely had time to cling against the plate before more food was being shuffled into his mouth. He wanted enough time to take a look at the toaster before heading off to the milk the cows that day.

As Effie stared at him from across the table, food hanging from his chin, she wondered how what would once have seemed unnatural had become so natural in its place. She remembered feeling love once, or at least what she thought was love. Remembered being happy when he proposed, and how good it felt to leave home and start a life of her own. Their own life. In the beginning, it had felt natural to cook his

dinner and clean his house — to be content with doing the expected. No alternative choice to Lester had ever entered her mind. Marriage was the uncontrived choice, as if it were a part of nature itself. But sometimes even a marriage cannot live through all of nature's seasons, just as a flower blossoms in spring then wilts away with autumn.

Now she wondered if love had ever been one of their seasons. Because she could not do so herself, life had always made decisions for Effie, and now she was paying the price. As she looked at Lester, all the things she once tolerated — the food hanging from his chin, the way he chewed with his mouth open — now felt foreign and unlike herself. It was as if their life together had been a dream, as if a distant existence somehow managed to trick reality out of its place. As Effie thought these thoughts, another world began to absorb her mind completely. Part of her sat silently watching Lester eat his breakfast from across the table, while an altogether different part of her saw the same mysterious yet familiar figure that had appeared in her dream. Again she saw the image of the man burst through the door and walk toward Calvin. Only now the image had taken on Lester's form. Maybe the man who sat across the table from her shoveling food in his mouth was the same man that had picked Calvin up by the neck, she thought to herself. Without hesitation she mentally picked up the same shovel that had aided her dream, and began ramming it down on Lester until her ears fooled themselves into hearing the sound of his bones breaking.

“Oh, goodness no. Stop it! Stop it!” she screamed out in terror.

“Stop what, Effie? What's wrong with you?” When Lester spoke his voice brought her back to reality. “Effie?”

He could see the far off look in her eyes. He'd noticed her sitting there not eating much of her breakfast, but Effie was more than just not hungry — that he knew. Still, he'd had no luck trying to follow her thoughts.

“Effie,” he said again. “You feelin alright?”

“I ain't feelin right,” she said with a trembling voice. Her eyes still refused to look at him.

Her hands were visibly shaking and when Lester saw them he got up from his seat and walked over to her. While patting her on the back he whispered, “What is it that's hurtin you.”

“My head ain't feelin right.”

“Why don't you go on back to bed for a while and take a mess off your feet. Dishes can wait.”

She nodded her head yes and went back to the bedroom, and immediately stretched herself out on the bed. After Effie was out of sight, Lester went to work on the toaster. As he took it apart piece by piece his mind remained focused on Effie. Even though she was still as beautiful as always, he just knew there was something eating at her. He could feel a difference in her. She wasn't the same Effie he'd known even a day earlier. He searched his memory for anything bad that might have happen in the past couple days to warrant such a change, but found nothing. Just as easily he gave up on fixing the toaster, deciding it could wait until he got home from the fields that night.

It was almost noon before Effie awoke from her nap, and Lester had left to do his chores hours earlier. Her morning slumber had been peaceful, and uninterrupted by dreams. She got up from the bed feeling refreshed and new again. Her first impulse was

to look in the mirror, and as she did so, it only returned the reflection of self she expected. The same gray hairs and wrinkles caught her attention as always and she was about to turn away satisfied with what she thought she knew of herself when her eyes summoned her in a different direction. Her eyes led her away from the mere physical reflection of the mirror and unlocked the side of herself that had been missing for so long. Startled at first she turned away from the mirror, but then found the courage to look directly within herself through the never changing color of her eyes. She saw the gray hairs and the wrinkles, but from within herself she reflected the image of youth again. She was looking into the past, present, and future all at once. She saw herself as both child and woman. Saw herself completely — as a little girl with long, black hair all the same color again and as an older woman with the lines of age on her face. One of her fingers lightly touched her face and ran itself along one of the wrinkles beside her mouth, proud of the age and experience it represented. For the first time she saw her own lifetime transformation as beautiful.

Effie was beginning to feel the peacefulness of her most recent sleep within her own mind. An inner heaven fought against feelings of hell and was winning the battle of Effie. No longer alone, but with Calvin's spirit, Effie felt stronger and better able to fight against the demons of her past. Her story was his story. She'd dreamed their pain and suffering as one. Her feelings in the cemetery and her dream the night before had joined them by experience. Inseparable by life or death, Effie and Calvin were of the same essence with both of their souls yearning for peace of mind.

When she finished looking in the mirror, Effie went to the closet and began rummaging through her clothes. None of the dresses she normally wore, not even the one

she had on, seemed to fit the day, so she went to the dresser and pulled out a pair of overalls. Usually, Effie only wore overalls when there was man's work to do, if she had to help take care of things outdoors when Lester couldn't manage on his own. But today felt like a day for overalls for no particular reason, even with no outside work awaiting her. She put one of Lester's blue, worn out t-shirts on underneath the overalls and tied her hair back in a ponytail, then dug for her walking boots underneath a pile of junk on the closet floor. After looking in the mirror one last time, she decided to put a flannel shirt on over the rest of her clothes, just in case it got cold.

As she was just about to leave the bedroom, a flash of color caught her eye. On the dresser underneath a mess of papers lay a bunch of purple and pink silk flowers. She had once carried them as a bouquet at her cousin's wedding, but that had been more than twenty years ago. Never one to throw anything away, she had saved them in the hopes of using them in a wreath to hang on the door, but had never gotten around to actually carrying out her plans. Arranging flowers into wreaths and doing other crafts had never been her long suit, but now her hands picked up the pink and purple flowers and began to arrange them in a full bouquet of alternating color. She tied a piece of silver ribbon around the green plastic stems to hold the flowers together, and then looked at her work with a newly found sense of pride. She took one last look at herself and straightened the silver cross that had now been hanging around her own neck for as long she could remember. Only after fixing the necklace did she feel completely ready.

She walked down the hallway, past the picture of her mother and his parents, and of her and Lester, past the kitchen, and past the living room, and on out the front door without looking back. Her mind and body were being called in one direction. She

walked yesterday's familiar path out the front door and across the yard with the breeze luring her into the same hollow as the day before, only now with confidence. She now knew the hollow belonged to Calvin. Her feet moved with ease along the gravel path, now dried by the sun and no longer muddy. Birds stopped their gossiping and began singing. Branches of trees intertwined overhead, as if holding hands. Without her mind even having to think about direction or destination, Effie's feet moved toward the cemetery, while her hands tightly grasped her homemade bouquet of silk flowers.

Already opened, the gate of the rusted, wire fence invited its guest inside the cemetery, making her once again the only living soul among the dead. She carefully walked around the human shaped hills of green earth, as she followed nature's whispering voice to Calvin's tombstone. Nature had become part of her intuition and together as one they lead her back to the foot of Calvin's grave. She took the bouquet of purple and pink flowers and placed it at the center of the tombstone and then manually blossomed each petal to its fullest bloom. Effie moved back and sat at Calvin's feet to better examine her craft and then bowed her head, as if to pray. Since her last visit, new, brightly colored grasses had grown among the darker shades of green.

"I sorry bout em plastic flowers. I thought they might last you longer, is all. I don't know how much I outta be comin up this here holler anymore. Folks might think it mighty strange of me comin up here if they was ever to find out. Suppose comin to a buryin is one thing and all, but visitin graves you don't know is another. All my kin long time dead and gone. I ain't got nobody but my ownself and Lester if you count im. And I don't reckon he really wants me comin up here like I been doin."

As she spoke, Effie began running her fingers through the grass, pausing to enjoy its softness against her skin.

“I reckon it’s a mighty strange thing for me to keep wantin to come on up to this cemetery. Maybe I’m just a crazy ol’ woman. I sure can’t make sense out of my ownself sometimes.” She talked to the ground expecting a response, but only silence answered.

An opening in the center of all the treetops shone bright rays of sunshine on Calvin’s tombstone. Effie felt the warmth from where she knelt at the foot of the tombstone, but quickly grew dissatisfied with the distance between herself and the sunlight. She crawled on top of the grave until she reached the tombstone and then began tracing the letters of Calvin’s tombstone with her index finger. She traced the first engraved words, “Until We Meet Again,” and the last, “Gone but not forgotten.” First she memorized the words physically through her sense of touch, before permanently committing them to memory.

In one moment Effie grew tired and in the next she found herself lying on top of Calvin just as she’d done the day before, only this time facing the ground. She felt quite natural and comfortable on his grave, more so than she did in her own bed, underneath her own covers. No cold feet to worry about. No more invisible line dividing the bed into her side and his, and then daring either one of them to cross. It was simply Calvin and she, together in their happiness and sadness. Memories of one growing from the other until sharing an essence known not only by themselves, but by all who have ever misplaced the peace within self, became their identity. The beauty of Calvin and Effie, one buried in death and the other in life, rested in their pain and struggles — the very experiences that sent them looking for answers.

No longer did she feel the weight of an imaginary shovel in her hands. There was no weight to her at all, as she ceased to feel any part of her body, and began only to exist within her trance. Her eyes simply closed, as her mind recalled a different version of self from what was beginning to feel like another lifetime.

CHAPTER 9

As the grass gently caressed her, Effie suddenly found herself feeling the first touch of Lester. Seven years had passed since her mother's death and brought Effie into her own sense of womanhood. It was one of those days when the sun shone brightly in the sky, and even though the air hinted at warmth, there was enough of a breeze to summon a chill to the body. A day where winter and spring still clung to each other unable to decide which should go and which should stay, but the smell of blossoming dogwoods and the born again grass blanketing the earth put hope back into the hearts of warm weather thinkers and those who'd wished their lives away waiting for the cold to pass. Reminders of winter — the sparsely leafed trees and a gray sky that refused to be bothered by the sun — didn't stop Effie from pushing the season. She took off her shoes as if it were the middle of July, and walked barefoot with grass springing up between her toes, while the rest of the church congregation busied themselves setting up for the picnic, everyone too caught up in their own part of the preparation to stop and yell for her to put her shoes back on. She walked down the hill and away from the picnic shelter that housed the old picnic tables now covered with worn-out quilts. As she made her way to the bottom of the hill she came upon the worn away shore of the lake where everyone would gather around a bon fire after supper and sit singing songs and listening to Pastor Justice tell God's stories.

Even by the lake, a hillside away from the rest of Harmony Church, Effie was not alone. She could still watch Mrs. Hamby supervising all dinner-related activities, taking her command post at the head of the largest table while the other woman followed her

orders simply because it was easier than not doing so. Their voices carried down the hill as if on a mission to force Effie to hear the routine she wanted to escape. Still, she knew there was no use trying to escape. She could get out of helping, but couldn't get away from them. Had she not been able to see and hear everything taking place, similar scenes had so often been acted out they'd invaded her vision and dialogue and become, in a sense, all too familiar and personal. She could see without using her eyes, and hear without using her ears.

“Make sure you don't go and forget to put out that other chocolate pie, Myrtle,” Effie heard Mrs. Hamby bellow.

“I'm gettin to it just as fast as I can.” Myrtle's eyes rolled, as if her only defense. A little bit of Mrs. Hamby went a long way, but Myrtle never had been one to pick a fight, especially over something so trivial as a chocolate pie.

All of them gathered around several picnic tables that had been pushed together in the middle of the shelter and now stretched its entire length. There was no harmony in Harmony Church when it came to the food table. It was every woman for herself, except for Mrs. Hamby, who took more than enough for several, and likewise every man for himself. Before long, armed with forks and spoons, the congregation would fight an all out war in the name of homemade fried chicken and cole slaw under the false impression of fellowship. In the meantime, Beulah helped out by arranging relishes and silverware, while Maude wiped the edges of all the dishes with a wet rag, making sure no food spilt over the sides. The other women followed Mrs. Hamby's long chain of orders, as usual. While all this was taking place, the men stood a couple feet from the picnic shelter and

away from the women, huddling around Pastor Justice who told a fishing story he spent more time adding to and perfecting, than all of his worn out sermons combined.

“Yep, I’ve come mighty close in my day to catchin that ol’ rascal. Come close a couple of times. Last time was bout a year ago. I was out on the lake early one mornin in that little fishin boat of mine and caught myself a glimpse of that fish. Saw im off in the distance. Far enough away for im to think he was safe, but so close I could feel my mouth startin to water just thinkin bout im. Saw im movin the water with that big ol’ tail of his, waitin for me just under the surface.”

“I swear I done seen im once,” Maude’s husband, Kenny, interrupted. “Seen im swim under my boat and come out on the other side. But that’s all I ever did see of im.”

“I ain’t never caught a glimpse of im yet,” Beulah’s husband, Elmer, said in disgust. “Biggest fish there ever was in these parts and all I got to go on is what other folks tell me.”

“Well, I felt im nibblin on my line once, but that don’t mean much when you’re talkin bout a fish like that,” Mr. Hamby said.

Listening to other men talk had always been difficult for Pastor Justice, and as soon as they finished, words exploded off his tongue as if they belonged in one of his Sunday morning sermons. “I almosta had me thata fish. Was as close as man hasa ever come to catchin im. Felt im a pullin ata my line so hard thata my boat just bout turned over in the struggle. He bit into that ol’ line of mine like there wasn’t nothin to im at all. Like he wassa just some ordinary fish livin to be caught. But whenna I started pullin im in he started fightin me like I ain’t never seen a fish do before. I’d start reelin im in and

that ol' fish would pull back with twice as much strength as my ownself. Right there and then in thata struggle of mine I heard the voice of God comin to me froma the heavens."

By now Pastor Justice had worked himself up into a frenzy of slurred words and breathless gasps for air known by the members of Harmony Church as God's very own tongue. Even though nobody could quite make out the meaning to what he was saying, all of their ears had been trained to listen attentively to the word of God coming through the Pastor. He was the Lord's very own translator, and no one ever questioned his voice — just as no one questioned it now. Pastor Justice was the shepherd, and the rest of the men his flock. And on this particular day, he told his fishing story with enough zeal and flair to mold a believer out of at least one man. As the Pastor scanned the sheep of his flock, stopping to stare each man directly in the eyes all the while flailing his arms up and down to the rhythm of his words, he came across one set of eyes looking back. Out of all the men, even the boys, only one soul paid close enough attention to memorize both the Pastor's words and motions, right down to the rise and fall of his voice. Although no words left his mouth, Lester's lips moved to keep pace with the Pastor's.

"When I heard thata voice of God acommin down from Heaven with so mucha force and power ain't nothin I coulda done but listen. God took to acallin me his fishermen, just the way you all is mine. Told me thata it was nothin but the Judas of the fish apullin at my line. Told me to let myself loose froma an ol' fish like that. One thata would come so close, puttin on the face of a fish wantin to be caught and then fightin me like he done when it come time to reel im in. I reckon I would've caught me that fish hada God his ownself nota told me to cut my line. Thata Judas fish wasn't worthy of bein caught on my fisherman's line. I cut im loose and he ain't been nothin to me since

that day. There ain't no need for a fish like that in the world. Ain't no need at all and I let im fall back down into those murky waters just like the dear Lord done told me to do.”

Lester's lips kept moving to the rhythm of the story, even though the Pastor's words no longer filled the air. Lester stood out from the crowd in all ways imaginable. His mouth moved to the words when the other men kept their mouths shut. His eyes focused directly on the pastor's while the other men looked in all different directions. He wore his flannel shirt and overalls when the other men had dressed in their good Sunday clothes. Remembering the Lester of yesterday and what he must have felt helped Effie make more sense out of him now. He didn't have a chance to see himself as different, he was too much in awe of the way God played the preacher like a perfectly tuned instrument, and wanted to hear the same melody of words in his ears as Pastor Justice did in his.

All along and from a distance, Effie had been half watching and listening to the telling of Pastor's Justice's story. A story told among men, but almost always in the presence of women. Effie had heard that same story just as often as any man, but her mind never could keep its concentration, as it was always partly thinking about what was missing. She looked away from the men and toward the dark clouds that now formed in the Heavens, so sinister looking compared to the bright sun that shone through them. Her mother should have been taking orders from Mrs. Hamby along with the other women. But seven years worth of changing seasons had covered up the memory of her mother and kept it a secret inside the earth. Effie thought herself the only one that remembered. Nobody but Effie felt Grace's presence, and even though her father stood among the other men listening to Pastor Justice, she'd seen him looking for Jone in the picnic shelter

the whole time. So, Effie walked alone and barefoot around what little shore there was to the lake, letting the grass and sand support the bottoms of her feet and her mind wander as freely as the past would allow.

“Poor little thing,” Maude said to no one in particular. “Been all these years and the poor thing ain’t never come out of her shell. Really is an awful shame.”

Mrs. Hamby was the first to answer. “Seems to me like she’s just tryin to get some attention for herself. But the way I see it is folks ain’t never goin get any stronger if they’re always gettin sympathy. Seems to me she ought to have had nough time by now to do her grievin.”

“I don’t reckon she deserves all that talk,” Maude said.

“That’s just what I’m talkin bout. She ain’t no poor little thing no more. She’s a young woman now that ought to be acceptin God’s will. Dear Lord wouldn’t have taken her mama had it not been her time to go.”

“Well, she probably ain’t never had anybody to tell her that,” Beulah added. “It ain’t like her daddy does much talkin. He’s always workin and ain’t home long enough to do much good.”

“Or he’s with that Jone,” Mrs. Hamby said.

At that point all of them turned their eyes toward Earl and Jone who now sat hand-in-hand at the other end of the shelter, oblivious of the looks being shot in their direction. No one dared speak to the couple directly. They only lowered their voices to keep them from traveling across the picnic tables.

“It sure might do that Jone some good to get to know Effie a little bit better. She could try to be more of a mother to the girl,” Mrs. Hamby tried to whisper, not that her voice knew how.

“I don’t reckon she knows much bout motherin,” Myrtle said. “She don’t know nothin bout raisin youngins. Probably only knows how to go bout makin em.”

“She’s got her tale, I reckon,” Maude said. “I sit on mine.”

“Well, she ain’t got no right carryin on that way, if you ask me,” Beulah said. “It’s a cryin shame that a grown woman has to go round actin that way.”

“That still ain’t no reason for Effie to go round bein so sad and gloomy all the time. Death comes knockin at everyone’s door at one time or another and that ain’t never gonna change. That’s just what life’s got in store for us.” Mrs. Hamby got the last word in, just as the men and the rest of the congregation began making their way to the food table.

Effie ignored the call of the dinner bell and walked out onto the wooden pier that stretched over the water. When she got to the very end, she stood there looking into the dark, muddy water, and felt hopeful. Her ears burned with fury. She didn’t have to hear the whispering women gathered in the picnic shelter to know what they were saying. She had heard their voices the day her mother died and every day since. In Effie’s mind, their way of talking never changed. Not so subtle glances in her direction didn’t make their case any better. Even now, with her eyes focused on the water, she felt them looking at her and judging her.

The steady surface of the water and Effie’s motionless body mirrored each other in stillness. Knowing she couldn’t swim made her want to dive into the water all that

much more. She could go looking for death, instead of waiting around for it to come and take her away as it had done her mother. The seven years since her mother's death had piled so many unspeakable thoughts into the corners of her mind, Effie's own way of thinking now outdid everyone else's. To Effie, the water was still on its own, not because God wished it that way, which is what everyone else would've had her to believe.

Only when everyone had finished piling food onto plates, did someone notice Effie still standing alone on the pier.

"Somebody go and tell her supper's ready," Mrs. Hamby demanded. "Bein sad all the time ain't no reason to let yourself starve to death. If there's anything she needs to be doin, it's eatin. She's turnin into nothin but skin and bones."

"Maybe it's best we just leave her alone," Myrtle said.

"Nonsense" was the reply.

Much to everyone's surprise, Effie's father got up from his seat upon hearing Mrs. Hamby's answer, and left Jone sitting there. As everyone sat at their respective tables pretending to eat and faking unawareness, they watched Earl make his way down the hillside, holding their breath each time he slipped and just about fell, and sighing relief when he made it to the pier.

"It's time Effie ate with the rest of us," they were shocked to hear Jone say.

Mrs. Hamby nodded in agreement, while everyone else looked at her in disbelief.

Effie felt her father's presence long before he put his hand on her shoulder. Felt his footsteps echo through the ground that supported them both, his movement sending

chills all through her. She stood there watching the water and anticipating his approach, waiting for him to say the expected.

“What’s a matter with you, Effie? You need to come and get you something to eat.” As he spoke, he tried grabbing her by the arm to turn her toward him, but did so unsuccessfully.

Effie said nothing. Didn’t even scream when the cold, muddy water embraced her body. Didn’t bother fighting for air as the world underneath the water slowly began suffocating life away from her. Her legs refused to kick and she kept her hands and arms against the sides of her body, as she drifted farther and farther away from the surface, the image of her father looking down at her through the water becoming less definable and more surreal with every passing moment. Before long, the murky lake colored him completely from her sight, and she was alone with the water. Floating weightlessly downward, and still farther downward, until the water blanketed her with a familiarity of coldness found only in the very depths of nature. So cold that warmth found her again through numbness, while Effie’s thoughts, like her body, sunk deeper amid the nothingness of her surroundings. Lost in the darkness that absorbed her from all sides, Effie let the water steal away her breath along with her very essence. The empty darkness of the water consumed her completely, slowly killing off her thoughts, trapping each one inside the dream of an eternal sleep. Not alive or dead, awake or asleep, Effie was caught in the place between heaven and hell. Caught in a trance so deep it kept her from feeling at all, and sealed her away from the part of self life grants people the chance to discover before it’s too late, before the spirit exists as a state of mind that keeps peace at a distance and suffering on the forefront.

Effie had heard the story so many times she could picture what happened for herself. From the other side of the water everyone had heard the splash, but Lester was the only member of Harmony Church bold enough to listen to the feeling in his gut. He sprung from where he sat at the end of one of the tables and took off running down the hill. He'd already made his way past the place on the pier where Earl stood frozen and dove into the water, when everyone else was just beginning to figure out what had happened. By the time he returned to the surface with Effie in his arms, a crowd had gathered on the pier and watched in amazement.

Lester had become the savior Effie never wanted.

CHAPTER 10

Sometimes the cold creeps up on people in ways they least expect. In wintertime it lingers in the air, spying on covered skin in the hopes of catching a scarf, gloves, or hat off guard. Frigid weather targets the most exposed parts of the body, finds the most vulnerable place to strike, and then slowly slithers its way underneath a person's armor of clothes until finally flesh and bone surrender in goose bumps and shivers. But springtime brings an altogether different kind of chill. Even though the breezes of spring are formed by the surviving winds of autumn and winter, the cold camouflages itself during warmer weather, although it remains a sensation with no intention of surrendering. Dressed in the warm look of spring, the coldness of winter can quickly creep up on the unexpected. One gust of wind can unite past with present, sending chills through all months, all seasons, and all years.

When one of the cool breezes of May sneaked up on Effie and started nibbling at her ankles, she wasn't alarmed. It wasn't the first time she'd felt a breeze leave teeth marks in her skin. Folks don't forget the first time they are bitten by a chill. The sensation she now felt while sitting beside Calvin's grave was no different than the one she felt as Lester carried her from the lake so many years ago. The shocking sensation of the light and brisk spring air against her wet body had permanently imprinted a chill in her mind — one she'd often avoided recalling.

But on this occasion, as she sat in her garden of newborn grasses and trees, Effie felt a new sense of spirit in the emotions of her past. She allowed her past to become more inviting, and a memory tucked away for years came out of hiding. Without any

thought, her hands rubbed her ankles for warmth, while simultaneously shooing off nagging chills as if no more than bothersome insects. With her knees drawn up closely against her chest, chin resting on the surface they provided, she slowly lost herself in the springtime breeze that summoned her past.

Even through open eyes, she could see the vision of Lester that she usually kept stored away in the depths of her memory. Their wet bodies clung to each other as he carried her out of the water and toward safety. The lake had stolen her shoes, leaving her feet unprotected and dangling, and transformed her blue dress from flowing and innocent into the shape of a young woman. They were so close it was as if his thoughts became part of her own. Lester held her body tightly, feeling the figure clothes usually kept secret, and lost himself in the unexplored and tantalizing shape of her curves. Effie felt the accelerated beating of his heart as she nuzzled her head against his chest, her fists full of his water heavy flannel shirt. Lester responded by tightening the grasp he had around her even more as he made his way back toward the crowd of onlookers that awaited them on the narrow shore. His breathing was heavy from the exhaustion and excitement swelling within him. She was too scared to breathe. Frightened her survival might only draw more unwanted attention.

Not wanting to open her eyes, Effie took comfort in the strength and support provided by his arms, as he found equal satisfaction in the weight that rested in them. He proudly cradled her in the curve of his arms, as if she were a living, breathing trophy won for his bravery and courage. His eyes couldn't help themselves from looking at Effie. Her long wet locks of hair swayed back and forth with each step he took, and even though her eyes remained closed, a slight hint of pink blushed her cheeks and put color

back into her lips. The air in all its freshness painted new life back into Effie's face, and so noticing, Lester, afraid of jarring the color away with his movement, carried her even more delicately than before. He didn't want her to break and carried her as cautiously as a fine china dish that if not handled properly would surely shatter into a million pieces. Still, a smile took control of his face, and no matter how many times his mind tried running it away, it remained permanently fixed where he thought a more solemn look ought to rest. Every time he looked down at the bundle of Effie in his arms, victory overwhelmed somberness. She was the first girl he'd ever held.

As they emerged further from the water, the cold air hit them at the same moment, instantly turning each of them into a human shield for the other. That's how they remained, protected from cold by the other's body, until making their way to the crowd of onlookers — the same Harmony congregation that stood by watching when Lester took off down the hill. Maude broke the silence that only moments earlier had been a companion to Lester and Effie as they walked from the water.

“Put that poor girl down here and give your arms a rest,” Maude said. “I know you're bound to be pretty tuckered out by now. I'll get that ol' fella of mine to go and fetch a quilt off one of em tables.”

Lester did as told and placed Effie down on the grass for the whole world to see. His hands, not wanting to leave her alone, reached out to touch her once again, to brush lingering strands of hair away from her eyes and offer comfort, but Myrtle intercepted the gesture and sent him in the direction of the other men. Thinking the women probably knew best, he stole one more look at Effie while her eyes were still closed, before joining the other men who now waited off to the side for Lester to come talk victory.

For the first time the men saw Lester as a hero. His legs took to moving when the rest of theirs had sat still. He wasn't like the rest of them. Intuition itself was working well, had stirred the same uneasiness in most their stomachs, but only Lester listened to the splash heard by all of them. And now the same circle of men that once stood around the old preacher formed itself all over again, only this time just for Lester.

"How'd you know to take off runnin like you done?" Grady Waldroop was first to ask.

"Just felt something inside me tellin me to go. Even fore I heard that splash, it just felt like something bad was brewin." Lester looked Grady directly in the eyes when he spoke. Grady was one of those people who had a way of turning nice words bad. Could mix a condescending look and tone with an innocent enough sounding question until its meaning changed entirely. Only Lester seemed to notice Grady's talent. Everyone else, especially the women, saw only what they wanted in Grady. Their Grady was the one who passed out compliments as if they were in endless supply, and always knew exactly which one fit best with what woman.

"I didn't even know what'd happened till you was already down the hill, swimmin underneath that water," Grady added.

"You ought to be right proud of yourself," Beulah's husband, Elmer, interrupted. "Not every man can go round sayin he saved a woman from drownin."

"I reckon Effie is as good as yours now," Kenny Hamby said, his voice crackling from disuse. Usually Mrs. Hamby was there to do the talking for both of them. "She'll make a mighty fine sweetheart. Real nice girl that Effie."

Lester blushed at the thought of having Effie for a sweetheart, exposing his true desires in the grin that now stretched across his face from one ear to the other.

Grady, no longer able to disguise his true nature, was already talking before poor Lester's brain had time to form the first sentence. "I wouldn't count Effie out just yet. Lester may have gone in after, but I reckon that don't necessarily make im the one she was wishin would save her."

Effie's recollection helped her feel Lester's emotions. All of the men, except for Lester, laughed. What they took for a joke, Lester took for a possibility — one that had never even entered his mind until this moment. His fists wanted to punch Grady in the face, knock a couple teeth out of his good looking head, but he silently fought off the notion. He didn't want to risk losing his newfound hero status over an opportunity that was sure to present itself at some other point in time.

After the men stopped talking, Pastor Justice arrived with a quilt, so Lester could dry off.

"Here, son. Thought this might do you some good," Pastor Justice said as he handed Lester the quilt. "You're soaked to the bone, that's for sure. But the good Lord is mighty proud of what you done."

"Yes, sir," was the only response Lester could muster. Recognition from the pastor had caught him off guard, but he didn't mind the surprise.

When Lester took off his shirt the kind of muscles earned by daily labor were left exposed. Hard work defined him. His strength came naturally from working the fields and doing his chores. As he stood there drying off, the other men kept themselves busy with more hero talk, no one pausing long enough to notice Lester's nakedness. After

Lester finished drying off and sat on the ground wrapped in the quilt, their talk changed back to the same everyday chit-chat as always. Men are born knowing how to change the flow of their voices from one conversation to the next, but women are different. Women are always carrying their voices against the current. They paddle through life, constantly struggling against an undertow of words.

Looking down on Effie as they hovered over her, the women of Harmony Church let a deluge of words fall from their mouths.

“Poor little thing,” Beulah said. “We’ve got to get you out of em wet clothes fore you catch cold.”

“Here comes that ol’ man of mine with that quilt,” Maude said.

Effie opened her eyes for the first time since before her head went underneath the water. Four pairs of eyes, all arranged in a circle, looked down on her, as she lay shivering on the ground. Looking at the eyes and faces of the women, Effie felt herself seeing through to their thoughts. All of the glances she received shared an expression of disapproval. First she saw the look in Maude’s eyes, then in Beulah’s and Mrytle’s, and lastly in Mrs. Hamby’s. Effie felt ashamed of her body as she watched the women trying to focus their eyes away from her clinging wet dress.

“Here, hurry and cover up with this,” Mrs. Hamby said as the women wrapped the quilt around her wet clothes.

The chill in the air was no match for the cold glances she received. Effie looked down at the ground, now more aware of herself than ever before.

“There now, don’t you feel better?” Maude asked.

She didn't. The depths of the lake had provided her with more warmth than the quilt that only covered her wet body. When she tried to respond, she could not. It felt as though the water had swallowed her words. So the other women talked on without her.

"She just needs to rest for a good long while. That was a mighty terrible thing she just went through," Myrtle said.

"She's lucky to be alive if you ask me," Mrs. Hamby added. "Could've drowned just as easy as she lived."

"Now, don't go talkin like that. We're lucky Lester came along to save her. That boy sure didn't waste no time comin to her rescue," Beulah said.

"We sure are lucky. To have a young fella like Lester and all," Maude agreed. "It could've turned out real bad."

"Well, Effie. Aren't you grateful for what Lester done?" Mrs. Hamby asked. "I bet he sure would like to hear you say so. If a boy ever came to my rescue like that I sure wouldn't be wastin no time showin my thanks."

Effie seemed not to hear Mrs. Hamby's question, and instead asked what was most prominent in her own mind.

"Where's my daddy?" she blurted out, alarmed by the sound of her own voice. Even though she could hear her own words it felt as if the voice was coming from outside of herself.

"Why, don't worry yourself bout im, honey," Maude said. "He's doin just fine. Got a little shook up is all. He's sittin with Jone up by em picnic tables tryin to get himself calmed down."

They all looked away from Effie, trying to pretend nothing was a matter while the same burning question consumed each of them. All were silent until Mrs. Hamby decided to get things out into the open.

“Now, Effie,” she said. “You just slipped and fell into that lake, didn’t you? Your daddy didn’t accidentally make you fall in by mistake, now did he?”

As they all stood silently anticipating Effie’s reply, she merely sat shivering in her quilt-covered wet dress, and gave them a vacant look, pretending not to have heard.

Only Effie knew the answer and she wasn’t about to tell. No one was brave enough to ask a second time.

CHAPTER 11

Marriage blossoms long before any church bells announce a wedding. The union of Lester and Effie began the day he swam underneath the water and brought her to the surface. The day they clung to each other's wet bodies and together formed one human shield against the cold. When molded together as they had been that day, their bodies exchanged a satisfying comfort. Safety found Effie, while a newfound sense of self-assurance overcame Lester. One shared moment revealed a natural agreement and bond between them. A moment in which their weaknesses were confronted and their strengths coupled into one existence.

So the proposal came as no surprise.

Lester mentally rehearsed his question and Effie her answer long before any lines were actually delivered. The members of Harmony Church planned for a winter wedding, had already begun dividing responsibility just as soon as they heard the news. Myrtle and Maude would help Effie sew her dress while Mrs. Hamby oversaw refreshments. The men would help Lester find a place for him and Effie to live, and the women would know how to make it a home.

By the time August had come around, Lester decided to ask Effie to marry him and had his mother's old wedding ring shined and polished until it looked good as new. Then he put the ring on his own finger and inspected it from all angles, making sure it was worthy of Effie. He ran his finger over the clustered diamond chips that rose out of the gold band. Small pieces of diamond worked together to become something much greater than what they were individually. Lost pieces of precious stone that had been

found, given a foundation, and crafted into a presentable work of art. A ring with history and experience, with a previous life and story all its own. A story, if remembered, that could teach all the joys and sacrifices of marriage in one telling. Years worth of history baked in gold with diamonds sprinkled on top. An abused gold band with scratches that had seen its fair share of fights, been held underneath dirty dishwater too long, and worn thin by everyday living. Yet the cluster of diamonds still glistened, perched high above the eternal band of gold on which it sat.

He saw no flaws in the ring, just as he had seen none in his mother. The weight, the softness, the hard edges of diamond all felt perfect in his hand and brought back the emotions of his parents' marriage. Lester sat in his chair feeling the weight of the ring in his hand, inspecting every inch of it with his finger, all the while remembering how it came into his callused hands in the first place.

After Lester's father died, his mother tried to go on living. Went about her life with the hustle and bustle of someone who has never known anything but work. Kept up with her inside chores and took over his outside duties. No time for mourning, for crying. Not when there's work to be done. Solace and comfort were found when she spoke out loud. When she had long conversations with the air. She talked to death like it was sitting in the next room. Like it wore overalls and work boots and chewed tobacco. She talked until one day it stopped talking back. Stopped answering her questions.

When she no longer felt death breathing in the room, she went around calling it by name. Playing a game of hide-and-go-seek with the air, with his spirit. Counting to three and looking underneath beds and inside closets. Never looking in the right place, behind the right door. Come out come out where ever you are! And so it did.

When she gave up and closed her eyes, death answered her call. It spoke her name. Sneaked out from underneath the living room couch and grabbed her by the waist. Death felt like her husband twirling her around the room. Dancing her up and down the hallway and then gently pushing her down on the bed. When death closed his mother's eyes it took her directly to the person, to the very soul she'd been missing. Death felt like her husband tickling his way up her dress and underneath her blouse, and then softly caressing and kissing her lips forever goodnight. They stood in the kitchen again — as if time and space had never interrupted their conversation — talking about the price of groceries. Yes. He could go without apples this week. No. She needed eggs for baking. Old souls find one another in death, just as they do in life. They settle on a time and place to meet — an old familiar moment where they can always find each other. Lester's daddy waited two long years before picking his wife up for their date.

When Lester proposed to Effie, he got down on one knee and pulled the ring out of his pants pocket, just as he'd rehearsed. They were at the lake again, and she stood there watching ripples consume the water's surface. She had dressed for the occasion. The occasion she knew the night would become when he told her where they were going. She took time fixing her hair, pulling it back on the sides so it would stay away from her face, making her lips more available, yet leaving it long and unrestrained in the back because she knew he liked it that way. Liked to run his fingers through it whenever he got the chance.

She picked the yellow dress. The one that hugged her waist more tightly than the other two that hung in her closet. It was the dress that showed the tops of her breasts and made it impossible for men to look in any other direction. When her father yelled from

the front of the house, announcing Lester's arrival, she quickly added a hint of red to her lips and lightly powdered her face. She was ready for him.

As he watched her watching the water, the moonlight complementing her features, making her more inviting, approachable even, he knew it was the right moment. Their moment. Their place in time.

"Will you marry me, Effie," he said, looking up into her eyes from where he rested on one knee. "It sure would make me real proud if you was my wife. I promise to do right by you. Give you everything you need." Lester's voice sounded soft and unsure of itself, as if he were a child just learning to speak grown-up words.

Lester found the answer to his question in Effie's face. The yes she had rehearsed was silenced by the strength of the moment. Her eyes welled up with tears of happiness that trickled down her cheeks, off her face and onto her chest. Her tears then dissolved, one by one, as they met the soft fabric of her yellow dress.

Effie's answer was official when her lips brushed against Lester's. At first she timidly caressed her lips against the corners of his mouth, gently tickling his skin. Then with hints of kisses she slowly and teasingly made her way to the center of his mouth, never losing the rhythm of her on-again off-again touch. Lester stood frozen with excitement. It wasn't until her lips were securely placed on the center of his that he responded. Once he knew her lips were serious, that her mouth wasn't just teasing his, he replied with a similar series of light kisses and touches. But the soft kisses they'd never known quickly lost their innocence and grew into something even more unfamiliar. He could feel her breath before it left her mouth and taste the unspoken words exchanged by their touching tongues.

His hands felt their way to her waist and then began testing their luck even further, moving up and down her thighs, underneath her dress. She didn't protest. She had dressed for this moment.

Mutual feeling and experience had married Lester and Effie the day she almost drowned. And now they consummated their feelings for each other. Confirmed what each of them had felt the day Lester carried her from the water. The day he came to her rescue when no one else would. When she didn't even want to save herself.

The outdoors became their bedroom, the grass their bed. The earth invited them to lie down. Lester unfastened the buttons lining the back of Effie's dress, his hands fumbling through the motions, unable to master any rhythm. At first her hands followed his lead, before they began racing, each person rushing to tear off the other's clothes as if this was their one and only second for love. And then they were naked. Naked and rolling around on top of the earth, exposed by moonlight and starlight, being watched by nature, yet unaware of all that surrounded them.

Their lovemaking ended just as quickly as it began — a race from start to finish. First time lovers fumbling around in the dark, bumping into each other's bodies, discovering how they fit together and how easily they break apart again. One moment brought Effie and Lester together, and another one separated them.

When they became two bodies again, no longer held captive by the physical bonds of each other, they became suddenly aware of their nakedness and reached for their clothes. As Effie stood up, she began wiping off the grass that clung to her back. The weight of Lester on top of her body had embedded her into the ground, causing the earth to leave the imprint of grass on her skin. Effie covered the traces of grass with her

clothes. She and Lester's secret, now hidden by her dress, rested within them. The details of Lester's proposal and Effie's acceptance were forever kept in the moment. Only the grass shared the secrets surrounding their engagement.

Once they were both dressed again, walking hand-in-hand, they left the lake behind. The gold ring fit tightly around Effie's finger and she liked the way it felt against her skin. Liked what it meant. Lester was just content holding her hand in his. Handholding was familiar. All they'd really known of each other up until that night, and what was comfortable to them both. Passion doesn't save itself for nakedness, for when the night air encourages lovemaking and clothes hastily uncover the body. Sometimes the most passionate and sensual moments happen in broad daylight. A gentle touch, a warm embrace, a simple kiss can prove all the more intense and meaningful than the complete offering of one body to another. For Effie and Lester, handholding meant just as much as sex.

The wedding took place in November. There was a large cake like Mrs. Hamby wanted, and Maude and Myrtle helped Effie make her mother's old wedding dress new again. All of Harmony Church watched as Lester stood at the front of the church, his eyes focused on his bride. When Effie's father walked her down the aisle, all the congregation watched the small steps she took toward Lester, her eyes always on the groom and never once looking where Jone sat in place of her mother. It was the first day Effie didn't take time to hate her father for marrying Jone.

It was plain for all to see that Lester and Effie only had thoughts for each other. Their story was written in glances. Their history recorded on their faces for the whole world to read, and the congregation understood every line, every silent word exchanged

between them. This wasn't the first time they'd seen young love played out on stage. They all knew the meaning behind the bride and groom's glances to each other, the love shared between them. Love they'd all watched blossom the day he pulled her from the lake.

But only after Pastor Justice spoke, did Lester and Effie become husband and wife in the eyes of God.

CHAPTER 12

Eva was born six months after the church wedding. Six months after Effie became Lester Crunkleton's wife. When first introduced to the world, Eva screamed hello and didn't quiet down until everyone knew she'd arrived. All of Coal Hollow had been waiting just outside the front door to make her acquaintance. Eva had been the talk of the town ever since people started seeing her mother's belly grow. Folks already knew her name, told their own versions of her story to one another, and had all but taken turns predicting her future.

Everyone had pretended not to notice when Effie's stomach began to stick out from her tiny frame. Effie began showing about two months after the wedding. When folks started doing their math, Lester and Effie's secret became public knowledge. While she was in the room there was never any mention of the extra weight or the tired look in her eyes. The change in Effie's figure was never addressed until after she left the room. Words have a way of changing meaning when shaped into questions, so the women didn't bother asking what was on their minds. For once, they weren't confident enough in themselves to take a chance on the tone of their voices or the phrasing of their words. The risk of words not coming out right wasn't worth taking, and they thought minding their own business best.

But good intentions aren't always compatible with human nature, especially when one thought takes command of a woman's mind and then sits itself down on the tip of her tongue, unwilling to budge. Some women never find friendship in silence. They never learn how to stop talk before it leaves their mouths. One cold January day when there

was nothing to do but talk and the women found themselves back in church again, Mrs. Hamby was the first to lose control of her words, which seemed to jumped off the end of her tongue before she knew what happened.

“Well, I’m glad to see Effie’s appetite pick up, but I’m not for certain that’s at all the reason why her belly’s gettin bigger.”

It didn’t take long for the other women to unleash their tongues, not that they were being held down that tightly in the first place. Their words jumped into the sea of conversation intent on rescuing Mrs. Hamby, only to drown along side of what she said. Mrs. Hamby had unlocked the silence that contained Effie’s non-secret.

“I don’t reckon that one thing has to mean the other,” Maude said, desperately trying to take the conversation back in the direction of innocence.

Myrtle just couldn’t contain herself any more. “She ain’t takin that shape cause she gone and ate too much. There’s a baby growin inside of her and we all know it!”

Together the women formed a circle bound by whispers. They were unaware of the separate congregation they were creating among themselves. They kept their talk in the vestibule, outside of the sanctuary, and stood together, too immersed in talk to even look over their shoulders and make sure no straggling words leaked out.

“I just didn’t think it was right for us to say it out loud,” Maude snapped.

“It ain’t like we all weren’t thinkin bout it,” Myrtle snapped back. “So what difference does it make one way or the other.”

“I don’t reckon it’s any of our business,” Maude said. “I figure this is goin be something that she has to take up with God. He’s the only one that’s doin the judgin. It ain’t up to us to decide.”

Beulah thought talk was getting too high and mighty for its own good. “Now it ain’t like they went and did anything horrible nough to deserve all that. They’s married now and that’s what counts.”

“I ain’t too sure bout that. I can’t help noticin the way Pastor’s been lookin at her. You know what he says bout women havin babies without havin husbands first,” Mrs. Hamby said.

Myrtle called things the way she saw them. “Effie’s turned herself into a sinner. That’s what Pastor Justice would say. And he tells it how God wants it told.”

“Oh, now that can’t be the case. It ain’t like she’s the first to start showin so soon into her marriage. I reckon even God gives folks a couple months,” Beulah said.

“Well she must have know what she was getting herself into,” Mrs. Hamby said. “There’s more than one way to skin a cat, but only one way to get a baby.”

“Maybe she didn’t know,” Maude said, always seeing the good in people before the bad. “Poor thing was nothin but a youngin when she lost her mama. Grace wasn’t round when it came time to teach her bout becomin a woman and catchin a husband. I don’t reckon nobody ever taught her anything she needed to know.”

“Folks ought not to be so hard on her then,” Beulah said. “I don’t think the Pastor’s said nothin to her yet. Maybe the dear Lord won’t be so hard on her since Lester went and married her.”

“How far along you all think she is?” Maude asked.

“Bout five or six months far as I can tell,” Myrtle answered.

“Maybe he only married her cause she went and got herself into such a mess,” Mrs. Hamby said.

“Well, that ain’t for us to say. That’s between the two of em and God,” Maude said.

“I just hope the baby’s raised right, but I reckon the poor thing don’t stand much of a chance,” Mrs. Hamby said.

On that particular occasion, a call to worship put an end to one of many hushed conversations the women had after Effie started showing. They kept up with their Christian duties by praying for Effie and her baby. Sometimes they even prayed for Lester, but what they didn’t know was that Effie had already made her own requests to God.

When Effie prayed, she asked for peace. Her ears had picked up on the whispering and the sound of voices growing more hushed with each passing month. Whispering that concealed individual words, not entire messages. When enough quiet and softly spoken voices join forces the result is a heralding sound. Once the whispering commenced, Effie didn’t even have to guess what was being said. She knew what the women were saying from how they looked at her and away from her.

So when Eva was born, the interest the folks of Coal Hollow showed in the baby came as no surprise to Effie. She could hear the women panting at the front door, clawing their way inside to sneak a peek at the little bundle of baby that had stirred so much talk, and kept conversation going for months. When Eva arrived she was a gift of joy to her mother and father and a record of lost time to everyone else. Lester’s and Effie’s secret was officially made known through their baby’s innocence. Once Eva arrived, people started counting in backwards time. They counted back days, and weeks, and months until time was confirmed, and so all could judge for themselves.

Lester sensed his wife's discomfort when so-called well wishers arrived, and responded to his gut feeling by herding them in and out of the house as quickly as possible. He felt a difference in Effie. A comforting silence and sense of peace calmed the house when mother and daughter were alone together, so Lester tried to keep them as happy as possible. When the baby sensed a stranger in the room, she wailed and screamed until it was a wonder her lungs didn't explode out of her chest. That was Lester's cue to escort visitors back through the house and out the door. He could hear them commenting about his rudeness before they even walked down the two stone steps that led to and from the front porch. But Lester never thought twice about the comings and goings of people. Talk didn't bother him like it did Effie.

By the time Lester returned to the bedroom, Effie was already cradling their baby in her arms. She held Eva delicately, rocking her back and forth, while quietly humming on of her made-up lullabies. Eva nuzzled her face against her mother's chest and Effie responded by holding her even closer. Lester, who became like a shadow in the doorway, could not take his eyes off the pair. They fit so perfectly together he didn't dare disrupt them with his presence. So he always remained in the background of their moments, watching without being noticed.

In Lester's eyes, Effie never looked so beautiful. Holding Eva was one of her natural motions. Effie's lips smiled whenever she looked down at her child and her long black hair swayed back and forth as she danced her baby across the room, trying to find the rhythm of sleep. Part of Lester wanted to join their dance, to cut in and take them both in his arms, but he listened to the voice that encouraged him to watch from a

distance. Not wanting to take anything away from Effie was what kept Lester in the doorway and outside of the bedroom. He gave daytime to Effie and Eva.

Nighttime brought the husband and father in Lester closer to the wife and child sleeping peacefully beside him. While Effie lay in bed, nestled under covers and pretending to be unaware of Lester's presence, he would stand over her, looking at her with admiring and loving eyes. Occasionally, he'd take his hand and lightly brush loose strands of hair away from her face and then kiss her on the forehead, but never with enough pressure to disturb her slumber. He showed his love for Eva in a similar way, always making sure she was safe and sound in her crib. At the first hint of crying, Lester would rush to Eva's side to try his hand at comforting, which almost always sent him tapping on Effie's shoulder for assistance.

Once Eva started crying she wouldn't stop until she felt the beating of her mother's heart and smelled her mother's scent. Effie never minded when Lester brought Eva to her in the night. She was aware that Lester watched over them during the night and felt safer knowing he was in the room. She felt selfish for keeping Eva to herself during the day, but the thought of sharing her seemed impossible. For the first time, Effie completely trusted the feeling of love. In her mind, Eva was incapable of betraying the bond they instinctively shared.

The eight months of Eva's life was celebrated by the daytime and nighttime routine of Effie and Lester. All was well in their home until the night she was suddenly awakened by Lester's helpless whimpering and crying. She sprang out of the bed and ran to her husband, who stood hovering over Eva's crib, unable to justify the cause of his emotion. Each of his words was cut short as he gasped for air.

Lester's voice was not needed because Effie understood his unspoken words when she looked at her daughter's lifeless face. Something had sneaked up on Eva during the night and stolen her breath.

CHAPTER 13

Death called for Eva before life had time to get to know her. Her story was written by months, left untold by years. Every moment Effie had spent cradling her baby and rocking her back and forth to sleep spawned a lifetime worth of memories that bonded them in spirit. In Effie's thoughts, Eva still laughed and giggled, still cried for her mother. Months after Eva passed away, the air still carried the memory of her sweet life and breath to Effie, even as the passing days put more distance between them. Every morning Effie would get up along side the sun and pray to Heaven, asking that God keep her baby girl safe. Nighttime brought the same requests, and so became her routine in the days after Eva died. As time continued, she dreamed Eva in her sleep, her visions always growing and blossoming, until the image was no longer the little baby she had known in life, but a stranger, a young child she only knew through dreams.

When a baby dies, people start asking more questions than usual. They look up to Heaven for answers because the world can offer no words of comfort. Effie asked God about Eva every day but never got any reply. Nothing but emptiness. Everything turned silent, and when she couldn't stand it any longer, she went looking elsewhere for answers.

She remembered the days after Eva's death and the conversations sparked by the funeral. Slowly the voices she'd forgotten during Eva's lifetime worked their way back into her mind. They were voices that knew nothing, but answered for every occasion.

"Old cat came and took that baby's breath away from her," she remembered Maude telling her.

“That’s the truth if I ever heard it,” Beulah added. “It’s not the first time a baby’s breath been takin away in the night like that. It sure is an awful shame, though.”

“Folks better start lockin their doors while there are children sleepin,” Maude said. “Keep all that trouble out of the home. Can’t be trustin cats and other vermin round no open doors. Folks got to learn to lock themselves up and keep out all the bad.”

“Em cats are sneaky little things though,” Beulah said. “Liable to come right on in no matter how safe and sound folks think they are. They’ll come right in the open window or down the chimney. Then they’ll sneak up into the crib and steal the breath right out of a baby. When a cat takes to a notion, there ain’t no way of stoppin im from goin through with it.”

After Pastor Justice gave Eva a proper burial, talk turned superstitious again. Pastor Justice talked about how the Lord sometimes needed little children by his side, and about how Eva was one of his angels. Soon after his prayer ended and everyone felt as though Eva was put to rest, people walked away from the cemetery and back into the church basement where a covered dish dinner waited and they felt more comfortable talking about that pesky old cat again.

“There’s really nothin that could have been done to save that baby from dyin,” Mrytle said. “Once the cat scratches at the front door that’s the end of things. He’s comin in the house whether you want im to or not.”

“I don’t know bout all that,” Mrs. Hamby said. “Think I’d be doin all I could if I heard the cat scratchin at my door. Grab hold of my shotgun and stand guard. That’s what I’d do. And at the first sight of that cat, I’d pull the trigger and I reckon that would be the end of his tale for good.”

“Now don’t you be goin and gettin all trigger happy on us. If it’s one thing folks round here know it’s that you can’t ever kill the cat. Every time you think you’ve done im in for good, he comes back for more. He’s got more life in im than any of us will ever see,” Myrtle said.

“I reckon we’ll just have to keep puttin a little food out for im and hope that keeps im satisfied enough and out of the house,” Mrs. Hamby said.

Effie had sat quietly, first listening to the Pastor and then to the cat talk, but neither prayer nor conversation delivered any notion of peace or comfort to her lonesome and loveless heart. She and Lester had held on tightly to each other’s hands during the service and then again when people attempted condolence. As each person failed to find the right words, the grasp that held their hands together slowly loosened, until finally the touch of flesh against flesh grew nonexistent and the energy created between them vanished in the air. That was the first time Effie and Lester went their separate ways since their marriage at the lake. The first time touching lost its feeling and they preferred being lost within their own thoughts.

Effie pleaded for her prayers to be answered — for some sign Eva was safe and at peace. Still, God didn’t answer her, at least not in a voice loud enough to be heard over all the noise and commotion in her mind. The sound of voices grew louder and louder, until her thoughts became a whirlwind of uncontrollable words that destroyed all opportunity for her to reconcile with peace of mind. As far as the old cat was concerned, Effie had always thought that foolish nonsense. Yet, she could no longer fight the image of the cat sneaking up on Eva and kissing her forever goodnight. The superstitions and

beliefs of others clouded her thoughts and controlled her feelings. She was running scared from death's cat, from whatever animal it sent to take Eva away.

Unanswered prayers piled up inside of Effie right along with the image of the animal that unceasingly clawed and scratched at her thoughts. God wanting Eva as an angel didn't settle well with her bones or with her heart, and before long Pastor Justice's poorly delivered message became just another voice that taunted and teased Effie. When people lose love, it takes more than make-believe words of kindness to fill the vacancy left in their souls. Pastor Justice only opened up Effie's soul to more pain and confusion, as did the cat. When God never answered Effie's daily prayers, she grew even more suspicious and unsettled with the idea of death. Believing and trusting in God to provide the answer never got her anywhere, so the voices inside her head rallied together until they became one hopeless flow of consciousness.

Effie felt more lost than ever before, cheated even. Love had fooled her, come along and played itself like a trick. She had forgotten the pain she felt when she lost her mother's love, and the thought of her father stirred no emotion. The love she'd felt for Lester was no comparison for her bond with Eva. When Eva was born, Effie trusted love without a second thought. Even though Lester's love had been most promising until Eva was born, the flaws of their relationship were always present, even more so after the birth of their child. Effie was never able to separate the convenience of Lester from her true feelings for him. Had he not shown up to save her life, the love that resulted could just as easily have drowned along with her, she'd often thought. After she held Eva for the first time, Effie knew true love. She was happy with Lester, but her bond with Eva confirmed her recurring thoughts about her husband.

After love played its cruel trick by bringing Eva into Effie's life for such a short amount of time, she no longer trusted her heart. She distanced herself from the emotional connection she had with Lester, but the voices inside her head only grew louder and louder and ever more persistent with increasing rage. Before long she was unable to differentiate the voices of her past with those of her present. Her thoughts constantly alternated between visions of her mother and father and those of Lester and Eva. Perpetually trapped in time, Effie's mind and perception had kept her reliving the past most her life, always remembering the horrors and disappointments and never the good. Slowly suffocating what was once happy with each hellish recollection.

As Effie rested on Calvin's grave with closed eyes, recycling the visions of the past thirty some years of her life, tears tried to keep from falling to her face. Then one by one the tears deserted her eyes to find freedom on her cheeks. No longer did she feel the need to be strong or fight away years worth of sadness that had been locked away behind the false pretenses of strength. She lost herself in the memories and voices that had controlled most of her life, no longer afraid of where either would lead. She was making apple butter with her mother...and in another thought she was dressed in black and watching the strong men of the church lower her mother's coffin into the ground and then cover it with dirt. Her daddy was holding Jone's hand as they sneaked off together. Her body felt the numbness of the lake again.

Even though she'd found warmth since that day, her veins still carried a hint of coldness throughout her body. Lester had carried her body safely to shore, but there was a part of Effie that had always been drowning and continued to do so now. A part of

herself that forever sunk deeper and deeper and lost itself in the weightlessness of the water.

In Effie's mind, the thought of Lester stirred a mixture of emotions. She felt him carrying her from the water, but didn't feel completely at home in the memory. She remembered how he'd laid her down in her wet and clingy dress for the whole world to see. Then her thoughts held on to Eva once more, before letting go and reliving the memory of watching the ground cover her up for good. All the thoughts of her past sneaked into the present to create Effie's own personal hell — a place that seemed an inescapable prison. Alone and trapped by the moments that defined her life, Effie slowly lost herself in the endless sea of voices telling her story.

Tears streamed down her face, but she remained silent and unable to cry out. She lay on the grass, slowly stretching out her arms and legs until she covered Calvin's grave. As she nuzzled her face against the earth for comfort, the grass absorbed her falling tears. The warmth of the ground consoled her, almost as if it reached out with arms of its own and wrapped them around her trembling body. And in a moment, unlike those experiences that previously haunted her soul she was overcome with an energy that cleansed her way of thinking. For the first time since Eva's death, her mind found enough freedom to break away from the inner hell that previously exhausted all her efforts.

She allowed this moment of emptiness and nothingness to take control of her thoughts. Voices exploded inside of her head, clearing a pathway for Effie to explore the horizons that existed beyond her own experiences and perceptions.

Her thoughts immediately turned to Lester. All she'd ever remembered was watching Lester walk away from the church the day Eva was buried, so caught up in her own emotion and suffering that until now his mourning had gone unnoticed by her. She remembered the two of them awkwardly holding hands while members of the church offered their condolences, but her memory of him after that point was faded and distant.

When she focused her thoughts, she remembered him walking away from the church and leaving her alone to fend for herself among the cat-talking women who called themselves friends. She looked back in time and saw Lester wiping tears from his eyes as he walked to the edge of the woods. He looked back at her and their eyes met once before losing hold of each other's glance. Then he turned his head toward the ground and walked away from everything.

The next time Effie remembered seeing Lester was at home later that night, but they had taken different paths to get there. She had followed the gravel road from the church while he made his own path through the woods. When they met each other in the kitchen, there was a strangeness neither one of them could escape. They both knew no words were capable of explaining the void that existed in their lives, so silence spoke for them. Silence became their language.

Every day following Eva's death passed in the same manner. Smalltalk kept Effie and Lester company when they passed in the hallway and when they sat down together at the dinner table because there was nothing to say to make either of them feel better. They became content not talking, both of them silently fighting their own grief.

When Eva died they lost each other as well.

As Effie began to see through the clouded thoughts that had kept her restless and silent for so many years, she started to rediscover a common bond with Lester that her own sorrow had been so quick to dismiss. No longer was Effie willing to let silence measure the time and distance between her and her husband. She was ready to unlock the one voice hiding within for so long.

CHAPTER 14

A lifetime's worth of memories sat down on Effie's thoughts all at once, with no intention of getting up. The past wouldn't stop knocking, so Effie opened herself up to its arrival and all the questions and feelings it brought along for spite. Like an uninvited houseguest, the memories of her parents and of Lester and Eva stayed longer than anticipated. Once memories come to visit, there's no telling how much time will pass before they decide to get up and leave. Some memories acquire bad habits and take to playing tricks. Memories can dress in a way that likens them to friendly and familiar acquaintances — in a way that makes them seem more approachable and sincere, even while masquerading as pain. Unsuspectingly, memories come out of nowhere and keep people so occupied in thought that remembering is the only chore that gets done.

Images from Effie's past took turns illuminating her mind, as if each experience were contained in a family photo album where the viewer could easily jump from one picture to the next. Lying quietly on top of Calvin's grave, the scenes of her life played over and over again in her mind. In her earliest memories, Effie saw herself with long black hair of all the same color, no longer speckled with white. She was seventeen again. That was the age she most liked remembering herself. It was the year Lester came to her rescue. The year Grady got so jealous he couldn't see straight, and the time she felt most beautiful. Long before any lines showed up on her face or any bags appeared beneath her eyes. Age hadn't even given Effie a second thought in those days.

Her eyes closed and Lester appeared in her mind. They were holding hands and walking beside their lake. She wore the same yellow dress that always filled the blanks

of her memory when the exact details of clothing or background could not be recalled. Effie sometimes went back and rewrote the forgotten parts of her past. For this memory, she resorted back to wearing the yellow dress that first taught her how to move her body in the way that made men take notice. If nothing else, Effie always made the recollection of her own image more beautiful, as if making up for how she felt. Lester's appearance never changed in her mind. She always saw past his age and looked back in time at the younger image of her husband. Even though the years had indeed changed him, Effie could always recall the way he looked when they first met. The picture Effie's mind kept of Lester's appearance was always flawless, until emotion came along and clouded the image.

Without her noticing, Effie's fingers began combing the grass. She brushed the long green strands back and forth, styling individual blades until they agreed on one direction to lean. She liked the way the grass felt against her skin. It touched shyly yet warmly, as if it were an old friend she hadn't seen in ages. Having the grass underneath her proved comforting and encouraging. It kept her thoughts company. Knowing how much remembering could hurt, she let the grass embrace her body and grant her permission to put emotion behind her mental images once more.

Effie breathed in happier times first. Once again, she and Lester were new to each other and she wore her yellow dress and he looked handsome as ever. He wore a white dress shirt that complemented his tanned skin. The sun had lightened his dark brown hair and his gray eyes flashed mysterious in her direction. Lester's eyes had spoken to Effie long before he ever opened his mouth, and that was the part of his body

she remembered most fondly. The look in his eyes had always been what she answered to first. Her memory recalled him teasing her with a smile before he took her up in his arms. She remembered the laughing, the playing, and the touching. Her memory was of no day in particular, but of every day they shared in the beginning, before life got in the way of things. She remembered when they were simply Effie and Lester and nothing more. Not husband and wife, not parents to Eva, and not strangers to each other. That was long before the laughter and the touching stopped.

It didn't take long for time to put its foot down. Each passing year brought more distance and more change in feelings. Feelings that Effie had tried to ignore even as they had grown ever more persistent and demanding. Before long, her feelings had started talking for themselves. Ignoring her experiences only made the voices in her head scream louder and fight harder for attention. The voices that made up her story barked orders at her thoughts, telling them which direction to take. The cat-talking women of Harmony Church hissed eternal insults at Effie. A cat fight that had nothing to do with Lester was rumbling around in her soul.

She heard Eva and her mother fighting back. In Effie's mind, her mother and her daughter were the comforting memories sent to battle the voices that haunted her thoughts. They were the peace that helped ease her mind, a weapon against the darker side of her self. However, her war of inner struggles would not be won quickly or easily. The time she'd spent trying not to remember proved successful in thwarting the good

memories as well as bad. So focused on not facing what haunted her and in her unwillingness to dispute the takeover of painful memories she cast happiness off into the shadows. Years of not confronting the voices of the other women had allowed enough time for an attack against happiness to be plotted and planned. Effie had felt the memories waiting to pounce ever since the cat came and stole Eva's breath, even though she'd never realized that when fighting off what haunted her she was also sacrificing the good. Memories come wrapped in good and bad without any way of distinguishing between the two. Even though Effie liked to reminisce about how Lester saved her from the lake, she never could stop her memory from recalling her time in the water. Her having to keep one memory at bay automatically impeded the other. Now there was nothing left for Effie to do but release all her memories out into the open and then grab the broom and scare that old cat away for good.

The cemetery encouraged Effie to feel again. Among the company of trees that fenced in the garden of human-shaped hills of earth and grass and stretched their protective branches overhead, Effie felt a newfound sense of safety and security she'd otherwise never known. Above her, the long and slender fingers of the branches reached out for one another and gently touched, forming a ceiling that guarded against too much sunlight and shaded the earth below. The springtime breeze calmly and peacefully caressed her body. Effie felt at home among the spirits that supported the weight of her

body upon the earth. The ground warmed to her touch. The air was full of an energy that whispered her name and encouraged her to plant her feet in the ground.

As Effie took off her shoes and stood up from where she had been lying on top of Calvin, she looked down with tear filled eyes and took her voice out of hiding.

“I ain’t got nothin to say. Haven’t spoken in so long and when I do I still ain’t got nothin to say for myself. All my words been stolen by a feelin. Maybe there just ain’t anything to say no more. You already know what I’m thinkin, Calvin. You and me been sharin the same thoughts and feelings for a long time now.”

Effie felt the blades of grass brush against her toes. Her eyes continued to look down, never once tempted to look away from the ground. Grass grew in between her toes, blossomed through the cracks of air between her skin. Tears dropped off her cheeks and watered the ground. Effie felt strong. The earth was supporting her, giving her power. Her feet firmly planted in the ground and Calvin giving her the strength to grow.

The time had come for Effie to battle against the war of voices that raged inside of her mind. No longer did she feel alone. She was ready to speak for herself, for her own voice to break through the outward commotion that she’d internalized. She wanted to move forward and reach her new horizons rather than live a life forever numbed by the past. Wanted it so badly she felt herself letting go of everything that had been holding her back.

The very nature of the cemetery encouraged Effie to feel again. She felt the spirit of Calvin telling her to confront the feelings of her past. Her eyes remained opened. Her mind pictured her mother again. They were making apple butter. Talking. Laughing. Holding hands. Together again, just as it should be. Her mother was telling stories and Effie was listening. She heard her mother's soothing voice. It echoed throughout her body. The comfort of her mother's happiness found Effie once again.

She smiled. Happiness was what her mother had taught her to feel. The breeze picked up and swept Effie's thoughts ahead a couple of years. Death had taken her mother. Again she saw her mother in death, just as she did in life. When she remembered the nickels falling from her mother's eyes, Effie stopped all the other voices from narrating the experience, allowing herself to fully interpret the scene with her own emotions and understanding. By doing so the image of her mother that had haunted her for so many years no longer posed a threat. Effie was learning to trust her intuition and drown the voices of the cat-talking women. She no longer heard them in the background. Their voices no longer stirred her emotions.

She was learning how to talk back to the cat. The words of Mrs. Hamby and the rest of her women friends didn't decide the direction of Effie's thoughts anymore. She still heard them hissing at her in the background. She could still hear them whispering and talking behind her back. Could still see their smiling faces turn to vengeance once

she passed by them, but Effie's true feelings helped strangle the haunting memories of her past. She was beginning to trust herself.

When Eva's memory took over, Effie again felt happiness. The tinges of pain that shot through Effie when recalling how her baby never awakened from sleep were no longer as strong as the joy she felt before Eva passed away. She chose to remember life, instead of death. The cat stopped running in and out of her thoughts. Effie kept it at bay by remembering all the happiness Eva had brought into her life. The cat took a seat on the edge of her mind, even though she was learning how to keep it from pouncing.

Once more, Effie's thoughts returned to Lester. Different memories of him flashed through her mind. He carried her from the lake again. Water dripped off his face and onto hers. His eyes looked steady and serious. It was almost as if she could feel his arms supporting the weight of her body again. That was the day love found her. Time changed the love between Effie and Lester and the feeling that initially bonded them. Love grows old right along with the people it touches. In the beginning, love demands passion and constant attention. It suffers and dies if not cared for properly. Once two people decide love is worth their time, it settles and decides on a routine. Love gets up with people in the morning and goes to sleep with them each night, but with time it no longer feels the need to share its presence with every second of every day. It leaves people alone so they can live their lives. Otherwise nobody would ever get anything done. That's when people learn to find comfort in the recollection of love.

She remembered how Lester used to hold Eva. Watching him rock Eva back and forth in the night had always given her such comfort. Lester and Eva were both young and beautiful in her memory. In the same recollection, she saw herself changed. Her hair had already begun to turn color. White hairs sprouted among the long strands of black. Age paid an unfriendly visit to her face. She remembered looking down at the stretch marks Eva had put on her stomach.

Still, Lester never changed in her thoughts, even as she aged more and more with each passing memory.

Although his image remained unaltered in her mind, the feelings she associated with him had been reconstructed many times. Years had distanced the newer representations of Effie and Lester from their original versions of self. Once lovers, then husband and wife, and now something else altogether, they were no longer the same two people that first discovered each other. Everyday talk had taken over once love left the room and they had lost the feel for each other.

Yet as Effie began to see herself differently, she slowly reconnected with the Lester of her past. Now that she had control over the voices that had rooted so much confusion in her mind, Effie felt free to lose herself in happiness. She had lost the ability to reconnect entirely, but her recollection hinted at lost peace and her thoughts began to settle, exhausted from the inner battle she had waged against herself.

No longer a prisoner trapped inside her mind, Effie was ready to explore beyond the horizons of her own thoughts. She was ready to feel Lester again.

CHAPTER 15

Effie couldn't walk the gravel path leading back home fast enough. Her feet were no longer content with their normal shuffle. They wanted to run – so the rest of her tried to keep up. Mud flung off the bottoms of her shoes before it even had the chance to do damage or make its mark. Gravel rolling underneath her shoes tried causing trouble, but was unable to throw her off balance. There was no chance of stopping Effie. Her feet were on a mission. They were running back home to Lester, and nothing was going to get in her way.

The only thing the rest of her body could do was keep up. Her heavy breathing pleaded for a break, for her legs to slow down and come to some kind of mutual understanding with her lungs. It was no use. Her feet were unwilling to listen to an argument heard only through gasps and wheezing.

There was no time to stop and look at the trees. No time to catch up on bird talk. Breathing in springtime air would have to be savored and enjoyed another day. There hadn't even been time to tell Calvin goodbye, to thank him for sharing a story with her. Those were activities reserved for days when there was no reason to leave the cemetery. Today was unlike any other day Effie had ever known. She was living life. Listening to the sound of her very own voice. Questions and doubts were becoming strangers.

Something inside of Effie told her to go home and to get there fast. Looking back wasn't an option. Effie had to listen to herself.

She crossed paths with the breeze that blew from the opposite direction and it kissed her on the cheeks and forehead. It brushed the long strands of hair away from her face. As the air picked up speed, her hair swayed back and forth, as if controlled by the current created as her movement down the gravel path met the oncoming breeze. Darker strands of hair clung to white strands for support, dancing with one another, each color encouraging the other to let loose, to be carefree and dangle in mid-air, until their differences no longer mattered. Until it became impossible to single one color out from the other.

The overalls Effie wore swished with each back and forth stride of her legs. They allowed her the freedom of movement needed to run fast, unlike the dress and pumps she'd worn during her first visit to the cemetery. No blisters formed on the backs of her heels, and no dress allowed the wind to cling against her body. She was comfortable in her overalls. Her body felt at home and no longer confined by shape defining fabrics that previously kept her from moving freely. Body and mind were both cozy in their newfound sense of self. No shoes were rubbing skin away from her feet. Her legs and feet carried her with ease. Pain, both mental and physical, no longer affected Effie like it had in the past. Without looking back, she ran in the direction of home.

Her face reddened from determination and excitement. Her flesh turned hotter and hotter and beads of sweat began to glisten all over her body. Mud and dirt flung through the air she left behind. As she focused directly in front of her, Effie began to see a clearing ahead and the roofs of houses. As she emerged from the woods, her legs carried her across the top of the hillside that overlooked her home and the homes of her neighbors. Out of the corners of her eyes, she saw a row of white houses that from a distance all looked identical in shape and size. The home that she and Lester had created sat somewhere among those houses, but she was unable to calculate its exact location through the speed of her glance. There was no time to stop and ponder whimsically or breathe in the beauty of small town from a hill side point of view. She was most concerned with finding her way back inside of their little house again.

Once she reached the road that led to the houses, Effie's feet increased their pace. They knew it wouldn't be much longer, that they had to finish the race. The town woke up long enough to hear the rhythm of her step beating against the ground. First they heard it in the distance, and then it galloped past without so much as saying hello. Curtains were pulled back from their windows, but it was too late. One blink and Effie was gone. She wasn't running so other people could see. She had a destination in mind.

People were content thinking that she'd finally lost her mind. For the time being that satisfied them enough to draw the curtains closed again. In small towns, the wink of a window shade just means somebody's keeping track of how the day is passing. There's

nothing unusual about measuring time by people passing by, instead of counting the seconds on a clock.

When Effie finally reached home, the pounding of her feet against the surface of the front porch announced her arrival. It was more action and movement than the old wooden boards that lined the floor and ceiling of the porch had seen in years. The house was caught off guard by Effie's sudden and forceful presence. Chips of blue paint fell from the ceiling and landed all around Effie. Blue snowflakes waltzed in mid-air and time ceased to exist. Speckles of blue landed on Effie's face and the world stopped moving. Her feet stopped running and stood in awe of the naked ceiling that no longer found protection in a coat of color. Effie looked up and saw gray and weathered boards of wood exposed to the world. The threshold to her home and the comforts that waited inside were no longer safe from harm.

Effie's heart began to pound. No wonder her legs and feet had carried her at such a swift pace. They had sensed trouble all along. Effie's eyes remained fixated on the ceiling and her unsettled lungs protested against the inside of her chest with short breaths. For the first time, her eyes realized other patches of gray existed. Places the blue paint had deserted long before now. She'd never noticed the decaying color. Never seen individual blue flakes fall to their deaths. There had never been the need for her to look up since the whole world had been passing by right in front of her eyes for so long.

Now she was caught in the midst of crumbling light blue. Standing there frozen, unable to move as the ceiling showered her thoughts with worry. All this time had passed and Effie had never even noticed. Her house was haunted. The blue paint had been chipping and falling to the floor all along, leaving a welcome mat for ghosts and spirits. Afraid to go inside, Effie felt a strange sickness in her stomach. Her legs had carried her home for a reason.

Her body answered her intuition before her thoughts had time to respond. Her hands reached forward and flung open the screen door. In an instant, she was inside and yelling at empty rooms.

“Lester!” She called his name over and over again, as she navigated herself from one room to the next.

Silence answered. That’s when her heart picked up more speed and her feet started walking faster. Silence was no friend of hers. That’s when she looked through the kitchen doorway and saw him lying on the floor by the table.

She was hovering over top of him, unaware that she’d even moved from the other room until she found herself touching his face. His eyes still had life in them.

“Something has done come after you, Lester,” she sobbed. “I ain’t ever goin to forgive myself.”

Her tears fell to his face. She knew some evil spirit had sneaked in and grabbed hold of him. His face had aged in the time she'd been gone. None of this would have happened had she stayed home, she thought to herself.

“Effie.” When Lester spoke her name, Effie felt the weight of his silence lift from her body. “Thank goodness you’re home.”

“Oh, Lester, I thought something had come in the house and made off with you. That’s what I thought when I saw you all spread out on the floor,” she said, still fumbling words against her shortness of breath. “I just don’t understand what’s happened.”

“Oh, Effie. It’s just my stomach that’s hurtin. That’s all. I went and tried to cook up something for myself. Must have done it all wrong. I ain’t never felt like this before.”

When Effie looked up at the kitchen counter, she understood the mess Lester had made of things. She took one look at the unmarked bottle sitting beside the stove and in an instant the missing blue paint made sense. The cap sat next to the bottle.

“I’ve got to go get the doctor. I’ve got to make you better.” Lester reached for Effie, as she started to pull away.

“Don’t leave me.”

“I don’t got no choice, Lester. You know that. I’ll be back before you even have time to miss me again.”

Lester had already started missing Effie as soon as she pulled away. He watched as she vanished through the doorway. Pain kept him occupied until she returned with the doctor. Soon, voices interrupted his thoughts with comforting words.

He only half heard them talking. The doctor said something about poison and medicine. Effie said something about making her own lye for cleaning. He didn't know anything beyond the few words that drifted in and out of his ears, until Effie knelt down beside him and spoke directly to him.

“You're goin be fine in a couple of days.” As Effie spoke, she gently brushed the hair away from Lester's eyes and put a damp cloth on his forehead. To Lester, after finishing his farm work that evening and returning to an empty house, Effie felt like home.

In bed later that same night, Effie watched while Lester slept away sickness. Even though his face showed some change for the better, as she went back through her memory and retrieved the picture she kept of him and compared it to the way he looked now, she realized age had also been a visitor to Lester. Life had written lines in his face and had stolen color from his hair. Time had been paying attention to both of them, even though she'd only seen the changes in herself.

Sleep and sickness had made him helpless, if only for a short time. Effie saw a piece of herself in Lester. She knew how it felt to be helpless. A thought crossed her mind and her lips responded with a smile. In a way, she had been there to save him, just

as he had been there for her so many years earlier. They had both been there for each other.

She spoke out loud, even though sleep separated them.

“Lester, I should have been home takin care of you in the first place, but you got to give me some credit. I was there when you needed me most. I knew how to make things better once I did find my way back to you.”

She reached down and softly touched his face. She wanted to hold him and comfort him with the same love she used to show Eva. She wanted to blanket her arms around him and provide warmth.

Instead, she watched him sleep from her own side of the bed. As the lonely hours of night slowly passed, she grew tired of fighting off the silence. Effie wasn't sure whether or not she believed in God anymore, but no one else was willing to talk. So she prayed.

CHAPTER 16

Effie's prayers only brought more of Calvin. With Lester fast asleep at her side and her head bowed in silence, Calvin began whispering peace once more. Whispered how the two of them had been born underneath a different color sky than the rest of the world. Said that the sky had already written their fate. It brought the wind and rain before the warmth. Kept the sun hidden behind the storms. Taught the meaning of death before life. While the rest of the world moved slowly — minute-by-minute and day-by-day — destiny had given them a head start on time. They'd always moved through life a little bit faster than everyone else. Walked faster. Talked faster. Even thought faster. Had discovered the heartache and pain in youth instead of waiting for old age to teach life's lessons. Calvin and Effie were born old and with entire lifetimes already behind them. Born already knowing what it took others their entire lives to find out.

The very thought of their difference brought Calvin and Effie together. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Effie felt Calvin answering her prayer. Speaking through feeling instead of words. Giving her friendship when she otherwise felt alone. Her eyes remained shut tightly as her index finger began lightly tracing the circular pattern of the quilt. Her finger following the stitch marks joining endless pieces of fabric that now covered her legs as she sat up in bed. When Lester moved ever so slightly as her finger touched the

part of the quilt covering his chest, Effie's eyes sprung open and her hands immediately jerked to her lap. She glanced over to where Lester still slept peacefully and let out a sigh of relief. Then suddenly, craving more Calvin, she closed her eyes again.

Her breathing became methodic and eased, luring her into a peaceful trance.

"Calvin. Calvin. Is that you?" she whispered into the darkness, unaware of her voice. "I know it is. I can feel you."

Gently letting her head fall to the pillow, her mouth took the shape of a smile.

"It is you. I ain't got to hear the words at all. I done felt you answering my prayers. I don't got to say nothing. You answer my thoughts. Feels like we've been talking to each other all along. I wonder how I ever got through this world with out you. Maybe I've always known you. Feels like you been a part of me for as long as I can remember."

As the steady rhythm of breathing brought sleep, Effie's prayer quietly faded into a dream.

There, in her garden and his cemetery, Effie and Calvin lay together on his grave. They both looked up into the bright blue sky and then at the clouds floating next to them. Effie breathed in the wildflowers that grew all around her and then gently took Calvin's hand in her own. They lay hand-in-hand watching each season flash before them in the sky. Watching spring turn to winter but never feeling the snow or rainfall. Never feeling

the warmth or the cold. Never feeling anything but the grip of each other's hand. They watched time pass them over as they rested outside of its grasp.

As lightening illuminated the sky above them, Effie turned toward Calvin, her eyes meeting his. Each time a bolt of lightening brightened the nighttime sky, Calvin's features became visible. The delicate jaw bone and outline of his face — his thin nose and full lips. His brown eyes looking into her own. Her looking at Calvin and seeing herself as a stranger would.

In his face she saw her own. Her own features. Her own experiences. Her complete self. She was Calvin and Calvin was Effie.

They lay there looking at each other for the longest time. Mesmerized by their likeness. Afraid to look away and yet knowing they must. He gently touched her face with the back of his hand, and then she followed his lead with her own hand. Each of them touching the other's face, all the while their bodies inching closer and closer until there was no more space between them. Forehead against forehead and nose against nose, it seemed as though they were as close as two bodies had ever been. Then their lips gently pressed together.

Effie's face showed surprise as she kissed the air. Calvin had risen from where he lay beside Effie and began laughing while tracing the words 'Gone but not forgotten' engraved on his tombstone. The sky turned bright again. The sun beamed from the sky, warming all it touched. Effie continued lying on the grave, breathing in the wildflowers

and spring grass. Breathing them as if it were the first breath of her life. The only breath she'd ever remember. Calvin ran around the cemetery dancing and singing. Singing the words 'Gone but not forgotten' over and over again. Hiding behind tombstones and trees whenever Effie looked in his direction.

"Come on out, Calvin," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "Ain't no use in playing no games. Come on now. Don't make me come huntin you."

Then as she turned around to begin her search, he was there waiting. Waiting with open arms and his hands reached out for her to grab hold. Waiting for her to simply take the time to turn around see him. Hiding right behind her all along while she looked elsewhere.

His smile helped Effie form her own. She took hold of the hand that awaited her, and he led her around cemetery. Effie now dancing Calvin's dance and singing Calvin's song. Dancing so effortlessly they floated among the tombstones, their feet barely touching the grass below. All the while singing.

'Gone but not forgotten' the words rang out. 'Gone but not forgotten' their childlike voices echoed through the woods. 'Gone but not forgotten' went the hymn of Calvin and Effie until the air and sky knew no other song.

'Gone but not forgotten' dreamed the believing Effie all the nightlong.

CHAPTER 17

When morning opened Lester's eyes, he saw Effie sitting patiently beside him on the bed. Her hand cautiously moved from her lap to Lester's forehead, but as she touched him all sense of reserve left her at once. She wanted to feel her skin against his. Wanted to forget all the years of not touching and go back to what they'd once known. Because she could not return to what was permanently changed, she got as close as nursing him back to health would allow. His forehead showed no sign of fever, and Effie's hand responded by touching the rest of his face and by brushing back the loose strands of hair that clung to his skin. When their eyes met, Effie found the courage to speak.

"I've been waitin on you to wake up. Didn't think you was ever goin to get around to openin those eyes."

Lester responded by grabbing hold of his wife's hand.

"Doctor says you're goin be fine. All you got to do is get yourself some rest and take that medicine he left. Says it'll take a week, maybe two fore you're back to your old ways gain," she said, her voice crackling.

"I sure am awful sorry, Effie. I didn't mean to cause you no trouble or make such a big mess of things like I done." As Lester spoke, he couldn't help but notice how much he liked the way Effie looked in the morning. Beauty had always come looking for her with the first break of daylight and then rested on her face the rest of the day. This was

the first morning in years he had taken the time to breathe in Effie. Life felt like he had always hoped it would. A sense of peace found him.

“Why did you go and do what you done, Lester? Why would you go and hurt yourself like that?”

“No, Effie. I wasn’t tryin to do no harm to myself. I was...”

“I just don’t understand it.” Tears welled up in Effie’s eyes, and her emotions began to get the best of her. She’d hoped that the night would have calmed her thoughts, but now worry consumed her all over again. Even though Lester had told her that he had just tried to make himself dinner, guilt pushed her thoughts and reaction in a different direction. “I don’t know why you’d go and try to cook your own dinner like you done. I would’ve done it for you. I would’ve been home in time to fix your dinner. I’d never not come back.”

“Oh, Effie. Don’t cry. I wasn’t tryin...”

“Please don’t hate me,” she sobbed, no longer able to contain the tears and the remorse that had taken up permanent residence within her. Effie’s body began to tremble as she spoke. “I’m so sorry for what happened. I never meant not to be there for you. I wouldn’t want to lose you for nothin. I know I ain’t always been good bout showin it, but you mean so much to me.”

Effie’s words caused Lester to sit up in bed. His stomach doubled over in response to his quick movements. His grimace went unnoticed by Effie, as he positioned

his body closer to hers. Before she was even aware that he had moved, Lester was sitting next to her in the bed, petting her head and back. In an uncontrollable instant, his arms wrapped themselves around her body and she nuzzled her head against his chest and grabbed fists full of his nightshirt.

“Calm yourself down, Effie. There ain’t no use in your cryin. It ain’t nobody’s fault. There ain’t nothin to what happened yesterday. Just like I already done told you. I wasn’t tryin to hurt myself. I ain’t so stupid as to try something like that. You got to have a little more faith in me than that.”

Effie tried to speak, but crying had interrupted her breathing, making it impossible to use her voice. Lester comforted her by putting his finger on her lips to let her know she didn’t have to force words that weren’t there in the first place. It was his turn to speak. His turn to make things better for her.

“Like I’ve been tryin to tell you,” Lester continued. “You didn’t do nothin to hurt me. It’s all my own stupid fault for tryin to cook myself something to eat. I should’ve waited for you to get home, but I was just hopin to do something nice. I didn’t think you should have to worry bout my dinner for once. Tryin to do you some good and went and made a mess out of things.”

Effie gained back some of her composure after listening to Lester. “Had you not seen me use that jug of lye for my cleanin? I never would’ve thought you wouldn’t know no better than that.”

“Now, you know I don’t know nothin bout cleanin house. I thought I was helpin myself to some vinegar and before I knew it I was laid out on the floor with my stomach achin so bad I could hardly stand it.”

Effie kept her head tucked tightly against Lester’s chest. He could feel the warmth of her tears seep through his nightshirt and dampen his skin.

“It ain’t your fault, Effie. I just got confused and there ain’t nothin else to it. I wasn’t tryin to do nothin else.”

“But I should’ve been home. If I’d been home it wouldn’t have happened,” she said in a much calmer tone.

“Everything is just fine now,” he answered, still rubbing her back with his hand. “Everything’s just fine. Just as it should be.”

Effie looked up at his face and into his eyes. Slowly, she was beginning to see how life had changed Lester, just as it had herself. His outward appearance no longer matched the youthful vision her memory stored of him. Gray hairs sprouted among the darker ones that covered his head while wrinkles had unsuspectingly sneaked up on his face, and gone unnoticed by Effie until now. She was seeing Lester as if for the first time. Age was keeping company with both of them, and Effie no longer felt so alone.

The last few tears that rested in Effie’s eyes fell to her face, staining her cheeks with sadness and leaving the remains of sorrow. As she sat wrapped in Lester’s arms, Effie felt his genuine love for her. And as Lester gently touched his lips to her forehead,

Effie felt lost pieces of herself and memory slowly coming out of hiding. As her breathing slowed and she began to calm down, Effie became suddenly aware of her body and moved out of Lester's arms and sat next to him on the bed. The distance between them now encouraged quick and nervous glances.

Once their eyes met and locked, both Lester and Effie saw new versions of each other. They found the look of understanding. Saw past and present all in one glance, their complete story with no deleted parts and with no pain spared to better comfort and console their memories.

No longer the same people that had met so many years ago, time had replaced the excitement of young love with the responsibilities and upkeep of marriage.

Time had put distance between them and had tested their love. Life had buried love in its many demands. But while their faces told the story of change, the look in their eyes led them back to the beginning, back to each other. Age and time had left their eyes untouched.

When Effie looked into Lester's gray eyes love looked back at her. They were the same eyes she had seen for the past twenty years, but this was the first time she had taken time to stop and look into them in as long as she could remember. Lester's eyes led to his thoughts and feelings. They helped Effie understand him better. She was beginning to see the person he had become, past the presumptions that had previously defined her point of view. She saw both the younger and older versions of Lester all in one person.

When the tears started forming in Lester's eyes, she saw pain and heartache. She began to feel all of him, not just the parts of himself he usually let people see.

As Lester looked back into Effie's hazel eyes, he found the memory of her he most enjoyed recalling. He remembered how he loved watching her hold Eva. With tenderness and sweetness, he thought back to the image of mother and daughter. Saw Eva nursing her mother. Heard Effie singing one of her lullabies. Watched them waltz across the room, dancing for sleep. Her eyes looked the same as they did in those days. They helped him find the natural Effie. He was beginning to see his wife again.

Suddenly, Lester grabbed his stomach and clenched his teeth. That's when Effie remembered her husband was also her patient.

"Oh, goodness. I've been lettin you take care of me again when I'm the one that needs to be takin care of you."

Just as her eyes started to drift to the floor, Lester placed his hand on her chin and turned her face back to his own, leveling their glances once again.

"We better get you back in bed," she continued, her lips hinted at a smile as their eyes met. He was learning how to help her feel better about things. "We've got to get you feelin good and back on your feet."

"I'm already feelin better. Gettin some of my strength back, I suspect. Won't be much longer till I'm causin you trouble again."

"I reckon that'd be just fine by me."

Later that night and after a long day of nursing Lester back to health, Effie settled down in bed beside him. He slept on his side of the bed and she was careful not to disturb him when she slid her body underneath the covers. When sleep forgot to come looking for her, Effie relived the earlier thoughts of the day that still tossed and turned inside her head. She remembered Lester sitting up in bed and comforting her. She could almost feel him rubbing her back with his calming touch. Regret started to creep up on her again. She was sorry for him having to sit up in bed, even sorrier for causing him so much pain in the first place.

Her eyes looked over at Lester and saw his chest moving up and down in the steady rhythm of sleep. Her regrets were forgotten as she watched how his body rested so calmly and peacefully. Before long her own breathing moved to the same rhythm as her husband's.

Effie carefully reached across the bed and grabbed hold of Lester's hand. Not wanting to wake him, but craving his touch, she gently put her fingers through his, stealing the affection she was too proud to ask for during wakeful hours. Her eyes closed and sleep came to take her away for the night. The heartaches of their marriage were not forgotten but settled and at rest. Love had never deserted them. Just holding hands was how it had all started in the first place.

CHAPTER 18

Two weeks passed before health fully restored Lester again. Even though life went back to normal, there was a newfound softness shared between husband and wife. Passion had walked out the front door years ago without looking back, and their marriage was forced to learn the difference between lust and love. A marriage may reminisce about what used to be, but it finds a way to keep going, to survive off of the everyday. Love grows old right along with the people it touches. It becomes comfortable. Before folks have time to argue otherwise, time invites love to take off its shoes and loosen its belt. In the next instant love props its feet up on the coffee table and naps like it's a Sunday afternoon, knowing it has nowhere to go and nothing better to keep it occupied. Only once it's settled and rested has love been known to follow folks around the house for entire lifetimes.

Sometimes love plays games, just as it did with Effie and Lester. It gets bored and starts causing problems. When love grows tired of following people around the house and resting, it takes off looking for adventure. Love packs its bags and runs away from home. That's when folks have to go hunting love. When love takes a notion to run off, then no one is spared from playing its game. No matter how hard Lester looked, he couldn't find enough love to satisfy both Effie and himself. Once love turns up missing, everyone involved must try to lure it out of hiding.

Once Effie started looking in the right places, love began piecing itself back together. Love sometimes lives in bad experiences and bad memories, in those places where people are most afraid to go. It took twenty some odd years worth of stored up courage for Effie to confront the love she'd lost. Lester getting sick forced her to find her long deserted feelings for him again. As she nursed him back to health, love slowly came out of hiding. She saw it in his eyes — both in the memory of the person she'd first met and in the man he'd become. Love touched Effie when Lester took her in his arms. He had provided comfort through his own pain.

Lester and Effie went back to living life together with the memory of their recent catastrophe vividly present in both their minds. Before either of them knew what had happened, the experience had broken down the barriers that divided their marriage. If it so desires, one moment can alter all others that keep quiet in the past. Small changes resulted from Lester's sickness, from the fresh experience that now helped define their marriage. When they passed in the hallway they no longer avoided each other with bowed heads. Instead, they felt the need to look at each other. Each pair of eyes was drawn to the other pair. Smiling became a habit while the occasional kind word often distracted silence.

Although time had brought Lester and Effie mutual understanding, it failed to rekindle the spark that first united them. Time leaves nothing unchanged, especially a marriage. While the tone of their relationship became softer again, the bedroom

remained only a place for sleeping. They slept at opposite ends of the same bed, still afraid of disturbing the other's rest, even when the temptation to reach across covers encouraged them both. Outside of the bedroom their hearts found contentment in greater affections than sex. They found gratification in the idea of each other and in the hope of what could be mended and salvaged. They both liked the idea of living out the rest of their lives in the other's company. And just as handholding satisfies the beginning of a relationship it also has a way of fulfilling and comforting the needs of marriage. All along, time had been teaching Lester and Effie how to grow old together, and only now were they beginning to get the hang of things.

One day not long after Lester had recovered from being caught in Effie's lye she stood at the kitchen sink washing the Sunday supper dishes. Earlier the same day during the morning church service, she had started feeling a little uneasy. She calmed herself by blaming her nerves on her absence from church for the past few weeks. It was just because she had to get used to going again, she thought to herself. On the way home, Lester had grabbed hold of her hand, which made her feel a little bit better.

As the afternoon wore on, Effie found herself fighting off the same nerves that had come looking for her during church. The open window above the kitchen sink had invited the early June breeze indoors. The invitation was accepted and before long the breeze had taken up a conversation with Effie. Excited to have found her again, the breeze touched her with all its force, until it sent shivers throughout her body.

Effie knew why the breeze was blowing in her house. She'd been up to her old ways of thinking again.

When she walked into the living room to where Lester was seated and watching television, he looked up and saw a familiar look on his wife's face. Sadness came over him at once.

"I need to go and take me a walk. I was thinkin bout walkin back up to that ol' cemetery gain." Effie's eyes fell to the floor when she spoke. Her voice was timid and afraid of how he would answer.

"I don't understand what that cemetery's got to do with you." Lester remained motionless in his chair, his eyes looking straight ahead of him.

"I can't even explain it my ownself."

Then out of no where Lester mustered up the courage to ask the question that had long been sitting on his mind.

"You're not goin up there to see that Grady that comes round here, are you?" Lester started feeling ashamed of himself before he could even finish speaking. It was easy for Effie to read the embarrassment on his blushing face, which pointed in the direction of the living room floor. "I'm sorry, Effie," he said just as soon as he had time to comprehend his own words.

"That's what you been worryin yourself bout all this time?" Secretly, Effie was relieved, not to mention a little taken back by Lester's sudden jolt of jealousy.

“When I heard you all talkin on the porch not too long ago it got me all stirred up. I just don’t trust the man, Effie. I ain’t never known im to cause nothin but trouble.”

“I reckon that makes two of us. He’s good for a story now and then but he sure don’t got nothin else I want.”

Once Effie told her side, Lester felt his breath coming back to him. Maybe she really was his after all.

“I always knew you to have good sense. I feel mighty foolish for sayin my thoughts before thinkin em through a second time.”

Effie answered with a smile and then walked to the front door. Before leaving, she turned and said, “I’ll be back fore you get hungry.” When the door swung shut, Lester settled back into his chair and waited for his stomach to start talking and for Effie’s return.

When Effie reached the cemetery, she walked directly to Calvin’s grave and sat down beside him. She felt as though part of her had been buried and was growing among the grass. Growing from the same grass as Calvin and from the same spirit. She had found a home in her hilltop garden, where restless souls gathered to share their stories and to talk about their lives. Through her own silence Effie could hear the voices of the garden leading her to peace. Voices so much like her own.

Love had been hiding in Lester all this time, but there were still other places left untouched. Complete peace of mind still waited for Effie. It was giving her clues,

leading her in the right direction, but questions remained unanswered. She no longer wanted to depend on Lester to rescue her, to jump into the lake and save her from drowning. She was searching for more than Lester or any other person could provide. She was slowly uncovering her own thoughts, her own sense of self. Rescuing herself from a life of not speaking and from not standing up for her own intuition.

As she began running her fingers over the grass, a sudden urge prompted Effie to remove the silver cross that hung around her neck. She sat there holding it in her hands, first looking at the engraved front and then at the smoother back side. With her index finger she traced the indentation and then felt the nothingness of the backside in comparison. She wrapped the silver chain around one finger and then dangling it in front of her watched the cross turn back and forth, exposing one side then the other. Several minutes passed by in this manner before she crawled to Calvin's tombstone and began unearthing the ground. After digging a hole about the size of a fist, she held the cross up to her eyes once more and memorized each of its markings. Then bringing it to her lips, she kissed her mother's cross goodbye and gently lowered it into the grave she'd dug on top of Calvin's. She buried the cross with the broken pieces of earth she'd uncovered just moments earlier with her bare hands, and then watered the spot with tears. With her head bowed toward Calvin and tears falling one right after the other, Effie prayed.

“Dear Lord, it's taken all my life to hear the wind callin out to me and I ain't even done learnin how to listen. Spent my whole life waitin on you to answer me. To just say

something. All I wanted was to know bout my Eva. For you to let me know she found her way to Heaven. Wanted you to talk with me like you done my mama. Then after all this time I come to find out you been tryin to talk to me all along. I heard that breeze callin from inside me all my life, but I never did think to listen. Never thought I'd hear you talkin through my ownself like you done. All along I've been so caught up in the talk of others I ain't had an empty place in my mind to put your Voice."

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Effie looked toward the sky and then down at Calvin again. Then she lowered her head to the ground and rested the side of her face against the earth.

"Help me to help my ownself, Lord," she said confidently. "That's what I need. I don't need you or nobody else comin to rescue me. I got to do it all by my ownself. I got to start trusting in my own thoughts, my own ways."

Effie kissed the ground and said goodbye to her mother's cross once more and then stood up and walked away from Calvin's grave. Evening was on its way and she knew Lester would be getting hungry before long. Even as she took her own sweet time finding her way back to the house, she arrived well before Lester ever felt the need to cook his own dinner. Then sitting at the same dinner table with their separate thoughts, Effie and Lester interrupted silence with small talk and respectful glances. After dinner was finished, Lester made his way to the living room couch while Effie cleaned the kitchen.

Even the good days can never completely undo what time has written.

CHAPTER 19

In the years that followed, Effie often returned to the cemetery, always encouraged by the first warm breeze of spring. She'd take her time walking the gravel path up the hill, absorbing the peacefulness of the woods during her comings and goings, and always seeing life in her surroundings. The trees with their born again leaves and the bright green grasses of the season bringing her back to life along with them. Their once naked branches, leafless versions of what used to be living, now restored in full again. Nature showing how life grows from death. Teaching her how to see life and death as one.

Walking her way back through the rusted gate of her hilltop garden, her body would always move instinctually in the direction of Calvin and then seat itself beside his grave. Time passed by without her knowing, with her sitting beside Calvin letting her fingers caress the grass and her thoughts wander in all different directions. Wandering back to the past, pausing in the present, and moving onward toward the future in such haste and hurry that all time and space became one. When all her memories, all those defining moments in life, confused and jumbled into one ambiguous emotion, Effie would look toward the grass once more. Look to the living grass that grew from her mother's planted cross, and there would find the disruption needed to stop and move her thinking heavenward.

In those thoughts she'd try uncovering life before death. Try searching for the peace of mind in memories that would lead her to contentment. In her garden cemetery, she'd sit calling out to the dead in the hopes of finding life. Always sitting beside Calvin's grave and always returning to Lester before dinnertime, the seasons of life passing quickly by, turning months into seconds. In the spring and summer, with the earth warm to her touch, there she would sit reliving her story in her garden of voices, forever learning how to dream life and Heaven all in one memory, forever saving herself until cold weather called her home.

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