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# Haskell

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**Haskell**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Studies in  
English, Creative Writing

By

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2015

English

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

**The University of Arkansas**

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## **Introduction**

When I began this, all I knew was that I wanted to write about my grandfather.

Ever since I was a child, I remember being amazed by his stories, which were always exciting, always funny, and no matter how many times he told them, I would never get tired of hearing them. I knew I wanted to write about him. I wanted to cement these stories on paper, in print, for me to come back to when I was older and when he was no longer there to tell me himself. A thought which scares me even as I write it. I'm not ready to lose my grandfather, and never will be.

But it was an excuse for him to write a memoir. I asked him for a print copy of his stories, of his life, for me to base my stories on. Because, after all, this is a creative writing thesis, and though like all good writing it is based in truth, it must also have some elements of fiction, mustn't it?

I spent many a summer afternoon with him my junior year, recording his voice on my computer in the living room of his new house that he insists on selling, even though it's closer to my parents than his fairy-tale cabin in the woods. I spent so many weekends there during the

summer of my elementary school days. But the mountains' winding, rocky roads lack the necessary convenience for ambulances and fire trucks, and these become infinitely more and more necessary the older you get, as I've learned from him. One of the many things I've learned from him. The EMTs wouldn't be able to find him in the middle of the forest, should the worst happen. Not when even the UPS truck gives up after fifteen minutes of searching.

Over iced water, milk and cookies, he and I spend our summer afternoons together. He tells me stories that I've never heard before, names and men I don't remember him mentioning when I was younger. He speaks in a low, hesitating voice that has somehow lost some of its gravity over the years, that has become weak, fragile and desperate. As though he has something stuck in his throat that he can't quite clear, some perpetual kind of cough. Age, I think. His hands shake from neuropathy as he drinks his tea, his handwriting is lopsided and strays off the page almost as if the words are wandering away on their own. Words tend to do that. But somehow, despite the jagged 'f's and the 'i's whose tittles aren't always above their stems, his handwriting is always legible. No matter how harsh his sickness, he shines.

I still think the neuropathy comes from the chemicals in Vietnam. Agent Orange and whatever else swam through the trees during those years. His steps are uneven because he cannot feel his feet, his white Velcro sneakers plod like heavy stumps at the end of his thin, emaciated legs, legs that used to carry him at least ten miles during his morning runs around the everglades. One of the valves of his heart has been replaced by a pig's. A disc in his spine is scarred from meningitis that should have killed him. Long white lines, parodies of Frankenstein, run across both knees where metal hinges have replaced bone ones.

I can tell that he has trouble recognizing himself in the mirror. This body that is failing him.

But I still recognize him. He has not changed to me. He is a paragon of strength, of someone who feels no emotion but anger and wry laughter, someone whose favorite sports are infuriating my parents, questioning my career choices, and sneering at our German family into which he married, most of whom he considers insufferable layabouts.

I love him desperately.

When I began writing this, I fully intended to write all of it. I wanted to begin with incidences in his childhood, move through his time in Germany and Vietnam, and end with his return to Haskell, following me and my parents from Florida after the death of my grandmother. But when the first story evolved into ten pages, and the next into twenty, I knew that what I was dealing with was impossible to tackle in such a short page length. I decided I'd deal only with the time he spent in Haskell itself during his childhood, and leave the rest for another project. Another longer collection of stories.

What you might expect to find here is his straight memories, written down by me but undeniably his. While this is, in essence, true, the majority of the following comes from my own imagination. Most of the people's names are real and the seeds of incidences did in fact occur. But the remainder of it has been left up to me, and I have written it in such a way that Haskell has become a place you would not recognize if you knew it while reading this.

Nevertheless, in this work of fiction any resemblance to any person living or dead is entirely and unapologetically intentional.

- E. T.

# The House

“Nothing is sadder than an abandoned house,” he says.

We’re driving together through the backside of Haskell, the side that I never see because the roads are made of gravel and one lane so you have to pull into the weeds to avoid oncoming traffic, and because my convertible would never survive such a foray into the ditch; it barely survives taking the occasional curb in a grocery store parking lot. Plus it frightens me a little, these back roads that wind all the way to Bauxite in a tangled web of tight turns and blind curves, bordered on both sides by wilderness and overhanging pine branches that threaten to snap in the next stiff breeze. Not even a GPS finds you out here; that 0.5 mile margin of error could put you in the middle of the woods or in the hayfield just behind it, either way making computerized navigation nearly impossible. If you manage to get a signal at all.

It only confirms my long-held suspicion that Haskell is the one last completely hidden place on Earth, invisible even to satellites. When I was younger, going to school with kids from town whose mail came early in the morning and who didn't have to drive fifteen minutes for groceries, it embarrassed me; I came from a place you couldn't find on MapQuest. I thought I should have had my own reality show. *The Girl Who Lived 15 Minutes From Nowhere*.

But since then, a cell phone tower has replaced the small, gray brick Southern Bell building that doesn't deliver free phone books anymore and whose concrete pad is cracked like an ancient Roman mosaic, lined with un-mowed tufts of pale grass. Since then the service has improved considerably, though calls still get dropped if you dare take them on the west side of the house, and Google has one grainy picture of us taken from the stratosphere in a late-2000s December. Since then, much has changed, and only now do I realize what a small, private paradise we had even ten years ago, unreachable. We had a cordless phone, one television, and maybe twenty neighbors in a square mile, all of them on the north half, because the south was one enormous pine forest and the 80 acre pasture next door.

Anyway, the house.

It's such a poetic thing to come from my grandfather, who is in himself not the most poetic of men. Or so I think. He doesn't seem like he ever had much time for poetry, or much use for it even, that English class to him was the one-hour block between Arithmetic and lunch, both of which were much worthier uses of time in his schooldays.

I realize now, writing this, that I was incredibly wrong, thinking about him like that; this man from whom more than anyone I probably inherited my fervent, ardent love of stories, telling them, hearing them, experiencing them. I don't find out until later about how he in his youth would devour at least one paperback western a day, how he worked his way through *Robinson*

*Crusoe, Treasure Island, Oliver Twist* and every other adventure tale available in the Harmony Grove Elementary school library. I don't find out until later how his teacher in fourth grade read one of my grandfather's short pieces, an assignment, aloud to the class and announced his sincere opinion that James Henry Tallent was perhaps the best writer in the group with a promising future in authorship, should he choose to pursue it. I don't find out until later how his classmates had teased him for it after class, at lunch, at recess, to the point that this young, nameless teacher's well-intended praise had embarrassed my grandfather so completely and utterly that he silently vowed within that same class period to give up writing altogether.

I wonder now how different his life—and mine—might have been if he had not.

But I don't find this out until later, and so this spontaneous burst of poetry from my grandfather surprises me. I glance at him as I wave to the four-by-four making room on the road for my convertible.

"It was someone's dream once, that house," he says. He isn't looking at me. His eyes are on the white, shuttered, faux colonial on our right, paint peeling and weeds overgrown on the front porch where a lonely, wooden bench still swings from the rafters, as if in silent hope that its seat would someday yet play host to a giggling child or two. A grandmother sipping tea with her daughter-in-law, discussing memories and love stories. On the other end their husbands smoking a pipe and a cigarette, respectively, talking about the farm and complaining about the weather.

It is an ageless thing, that house. It might have been constructed in the late 1800s or 1950; either way, it appears to have been only just abandoned. Maybe twenty years ago, now that those same imaginary children have grown old and passed on that beloved house and the memories inside to their own children, who have since forgotten about it.

And it isn't their fault, this termite-ridden, rotting skeleton of a once-living, breathing thing. They never knew the magic that once existed there, the fights that were had, the pies that were baked. The walls cannot tell them what they have seen, not in the way that they want, and anyone who could have shared these stories with them are no longer able to tell. And, for whatever reasons that honestly do not matter anymore, this simultaneously irritates and shames them. They have moved to Ohio or New Mexico, leaving this little pile of lumber to grow pale and fade in the sun and snow.

And as I look at it I cannot help but think of all the houses that the man beside me has abandoned in his time; in St. Louis, Colorado Springs, Stillwater, Hawaii, Miami. I think of the most recent abandonment, a two-story, timber-framed, one-room cabin with a loft above and a garage below that stands on a slope of the rocky, granite Ozark foothills fifteen minutes north of Hot Springs. A house that he stubbornly refused to build using a contractor, a decision which my parents call paranoid and I call genetic.

It is a family affliction, after all, this conviction that "something done right is something done yourself." That if a little is good, a lot is better. That instructions are unnecessary. That you don't need to hire anyone to do anything, that you can build a barn by yourself, pour concrete by yourself, that if a diluted solution is good, than full concentration must be better (which was how my grandfather came to ruin his wife's favorite porcelain figurines and chrome furniture. But that is another story). Both my grandfather and my father are invincible pioneers of a bygone age when to survive you had to be able to do anything in the dark during a rainstorm on a frigid November morning. They are competent at everything and experts at nothing. With the advent of the internet, nothing is beyond their reach. My father shoes his own horses and my grandfather—a 75-year-old with neuropathy, chronic bronchitis and two metal knees—shuffles about in an

April thunderstorm ferrying 70-pound table saws from the back of his truck to the back of his garage. Without a raincoat, of course. As if he is still a young soldier of 17.

But back to the house.

I say nothing and continue to drive, because honestly I don't know what to say. I like to think of myself as someone who is comfortable with spontaneous outbursts of poetry, who knows how to handle them in conversation; I like to think that I know when to laugh it away and when to stay quiet and listen. People have told me that I'm easy to talk to, that I possess some sort of look that makes me an open ear and a closed mouth, a mute oven like the one the nurse tells secrets to in the old fairy tales. With friends, it's easy to listen. I have seen them vulnerable. It isn't a new sight.

But with my grandfather, it's different. It's irreconcilable for me, this image of a practical, no-nonsense engineer who was able to retire at 50, feeling sentimental about an abandoned house that he does not recognize, because even though Haskell is his hometown, he did not return until almost 40 years after leaving. Since then it is unrecognizable.

He never liked Haskell, and when he followed my family to Arkansas after the death of my grandmother in Miami, he refused to buy a house in the adjoining suburb of Benton because he said that the people were snobs. He has never belonged anywhere.

But I find that I am unable to think of him as a young man anywhere else except this small town that was populated by a little less than 500 people when he left in the mid-fifties to join the army. Everywhere he has been has just been an extension of this little Arkansas town, this one starburst with arms that radiate from Stuttgart to Hong Kong, and several points that touch Vietnam. He always told stories of his time in Haskell, and it's difficult for me to imagine that I have lived in Arkansas longer than he ever did in his youth.

# Mr. Hackman's Goose

Mr. Elias Hackman's was a well-known name in Haskell—not because he'd done anything so illustrious as die in The Great War, place the cornerstone of the small late-19<sup>th</sup>-century firehouse, or become the first mayor of this obscure little establishment in the woods an hour south of Little Rock—but because it was the name of the only lawyer who lived there. All the other lawyers in the area lived in the not-by-much grander but infinitely-more-populous nearby town of Benton, which boasted a population three times that of her humbler sister and a prestige at least three-hundred times. But though he might not have called Benton his home, it was there that he conducted his business, running a small but respectable firm across from the Caldwell Pharmacy. He was a straightforward man who ruled his establishment with a pugnacious hand and a firm manner, which was gruff most days and no-nonsense the rest of them. He was not a harsh man, but he was not gentle, and when you tried to speak to him in the street or at dinnertime he had a

habit of removing a small, white square of thin paper and a generous pinch of tobacco from his jacket pocket with which he busied himself folding a cigarette. From there, the conversation would inevitably fade simply because a part of you knew he wasn't listening, and of course it's difficult talking to someone who obviously isn't the least bit interested in what you have to say. But then he would surprise you by prompting you—in his low, angry voice—with the last words of the last, fading sentence of your conversation. And when you glanced up in shock at his sharp, unforgiving blue eyes and his vaguely potato-shaped nose, you would attempt valiantly to resume speaking, only to ultimately let the matter drop as he again returned his attention to his cigarette which, when finished, he examined with utter fascination.

At which point you—thoroughly uncomfortable with the whole situation—would make some muttered excuse to be about your way and leave him shrugging and pocketing the fresh cigarette in a silver engraved carrying case bearing the monogram ETH, MD. A case which, interestingly enough, no one ever saw him open except to sequester a newly rolled cigarette. There was a rumor common among the town children that Mr. Hackman didn't even smoke, and only kept the tobacco handy in order to politely escape unwanted conversations—which, to him, was most of them.

His history was a common history. He had been raised well beneath the wing of Elias Hackman Sr., a self-made farmer who survived the Dustbowl by the skin of his teeth and by charging small fortunes for the miniscule, depressingly-sized eggs wrung out of his scrawny underfed chickens. From thence—the competition understandably much thinned in the Haskell farming world—Elias Sr.'s farm had risen to prosperity, and following the end of the drought when people weren't quite so poor and chickens weren't quite so hungry, he proudly delivered it into the hands of his oldest son William, who ran it now with a quiet air of resignation.

Meanwhile, his youngest son Elias Jr. he obliged with the illustrious task of attending the small law school in Fort Smith, where he worked diligently at his studies, performed moderately on his exams, and upon his return to his hometown, set up a firm outside the courthouse where he silently and steadfastly filed work and defended clients. Old Elias Sr. had been so proud of his “lawyer boy” that he’d suffered a stroke promptly after the opening of his son’s law office, and was now relegated to a wheelchair, capable of little other than drooling on a pastel-blue bib and swallowing the soft soup William’s wife ladled past his permanently crooked lips.

In such a way Elias Jr. had become Mr. Hackman, straight-backed and resolute in his rolling office chair, sitting behind a solid oak desk that his fish-eyed secretary gossiped had once belonged to a Prussian Prince, from whom the ancestral Hackmans had liberated it during a small, little-known peasant revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He drank coffee, tea on Tuesday, at precisely 8:13, and it had to be placed on his desk exactly one inch to the left of his fountain pens, being a cup two-thirds full with no more than one and a half teaspoons of sugar and a separate jar of milk (because depending on his ulcer the amount he added to it varied). He remained in his office all morning taking calls from ten to twelve at which time he walked to the grocer nearby and picked up an egg-salad sandwich for lunch, and ate it without relish at his desk. He never left before two, and his stern, broad shoulders, barrel chest and thick waist in his charcoal gray suit was never seen on the streets after nine. And you could tell when he had court days because he was particularly taciturn, his eyes particularly quick, and his manner particularly gruff, seeing as trials always interjected themselves in the midst of one of these regularly scheduled activities and disturbed this routine most unforgivably. He never spent any more time at work than was required.

Because, you see, Mr. Hackman had been afflicted with the common and incurable disease of being unable to disappoint one's father. *He* himself had never wanted to be a lawyer. That had been something his father wanted for him, a desire sprung out of some misguided sense of parental duty, stemming from the idea that improving a child's station in life meant a graduation from the plow to the pen. Having passed on the farm to one son, thus ensuring its continued existence within the family name, he determined that his other son must become a higher sort of gentleman, must go to school to be a doctor, a lawyer, or—barring both of those—a teacher. These choices he had presented to Elias Jr. who, having resigned himself to the aforementioned particular sickness, reluctantly but dutifully chose. And so Mr. Hackman performed his job stiffly, with only a slight, occasional tremble of his jowls and always a stiff upper lip.

He was only ever seen smiling when his suit had been exchanged for denim overalls and a cotton shirt, and he was standing in the cold with stains on his knees and his breath emerging in white puffs of smoke that hung in the early morning air before him like bits of cloud or the life of a locomotive.

As a rule Mr. Hackman was not a cheerful man. He had never been a cheerful child even, as the old ladies of the Benton Quilting Society would be only too happy to tell you in great detail, conjuring images of a ruddy, serious-faced little boy who preferred to play in the dirt at recess instead of chasing his classmates in a game of tag, who loved summertime not for vacation but because the chicks had hatched and the earth had been turned and shoots of green were springing from the mud like miracles. His older brother William Hackman farmed well and enjoyed his work with a loving sort of acceptance, in the manner of a king's benevolent crown prince ruling over an inherited kingdom or a vicar's even-tempered son watching over his

deceased father's parish. But never did there exist inside William the religious, unconditional devotion the likes of which Elias held for farming. Yet Mr. Hackman did not resent his older brother. Ever since childhood, some part of him had always known William was to inherit the farm, the God-given duty of tending to the soil, the plants, the growing earth, and so having come to grips with this fact relatively early in his life, he had grown accustomed to it.

And so Elias Jr. spent every waking moment he was not in the office out on the little plot of land he kept in Haskell; and he made a picture in the golden summer afternoons, standing in front of his white, moderately-sized, Spartan house, with a small front porch behind him and his small army of geese beside it.

For all Mr. Hackman's peculiarities, his fondness for geese might have been the most notable. They are, after all, a strange sort of fowl to be attracted to—in those days most poultry enthusiasts raised guineas, ducks, or most commonly chickens. But with their strangely intelligent blue eyes, their small heads, long necks, and oblong white bodies, they appeared less like birds and more like feathery army tanks, rolling smoothly over the patchy scrubland that was Mr. Hackman's goose yard. In fact, when seen side by side with Mr. Hackman in a white suit, they might have been poultry versions of Mr. Hackman himself. He fed them beef pellets from the feed store instead of poultry-purposed layer pellets, because the former was richer in protein and therefore much better for the animals' feathers. From early morning to late afternoon, his shiny, flat head could be seen bobbing around the perimeter of their yard, repairing fences, improving waterers, and washing out the small pond he'd made himself five years ago having expensively rented both an earth-mover and a concrete mixer for the purpose.

As thanks, the only attention the ornery birds gave him in return was a mandatory hiss when he opened the gate. A few might rush him, wings and beak extended, sharp pink tongue

arched menacingly in preparation to bite. But rather than flail at them in self-defense or shy away in fright, Mr. Hackman pretended not to notice at all, and as he moved brusquely away to go about his chores, he gave yet still, providing them with their favorite illusion of chasing away a marauding bi-ped. Thus triumphant, the champions would return to their ladies, heads high and honking proudly, and Mr. Hackman would merely smile. The food and water he gave them were gifts or offerings which they accepted even from such an inferior caretaker, who was not fit to tread the same mud as they. It was a dance, a routine between them, a mutual understanding that Mr. Hackman adored his geese and they accepted his admiration with the long-suffering dignity of that Prussian prince to whom his desk had once belonged.

Perhaps the only creatures Mr. Hackman loved more than his geese were children, in his own gruff sort of way. He had never married, rumors circulating that there had once been the daughter of a Rockefeller in Fort Smith who had broken his heart, and he had slipped quietly into middle age without a wife. Nevertheless he loved children. Whenever he met a mother in the street walking her child to the movies or the park, he would—quite uncharacteristically—engage in light conversation, his cigarette paper remaining in his pocket, and buy the child a vanilla ice cream cone from the vendor on the corner which he presented to them silently and without ceremony, accepting their shy thanks with a brief incline of his meaty head. Children liked Mr. Hackman too with a reluctant sort of fear they reserved for giant, stoic adults with a considerable measure of importance in the community and a penchant for treating their parents as though he hadn't time for them. He was a big, serious man who could have been a gangster from the movies if he was colored black and white. He could have been a meaner, taller James Cagney.

But any remaining sense of fear faded the instant they walked by his small white house and he called to them joyously from the yard where he knelt in the mud, repairing a wooden leg

that, wearied by the weight of so many yellow, rubbery, webbed feet, was rotting out from under the coop it supported. He waved smiling even as an irate orange bill pinched the hem of his jeans and he smacked it away with a low, loving swear. More than slightly alarmed at the sudden change in him, the children gave shy waves back and continued down the road. But inside them his warm, friendly smile had planted a seed of its own, and like the plants he loved so much was beginning to grow and strangle away the fear that had once existed in its place.

Now, Mr. Hackman in himself is a fascinating character. We could spend all day detailing his life before and after law school. We could discuss his days on the farm, loving and losing the work he held so dear because of the misplaced love of his father. We could delve into his tenure at law school, and fully describe the affair he allegedly had with the youngest Rockefeller daughter. We could even go back further, and explore just how that Prussian desk came to be liberated from the prince's palace, and how it had subsequently fallen into Mr. Hackman's hands.

But this story is not about Mr. Hackman, and he is not important to the story for these aforementioned things. He is important because he is the first thing that young Jim Tallent can remember, and since Jim is the focus of our story, his first memory deserves a special place in this work.

The Tallents, who had just moved down the street from Hackman, instantly hit it off. Like Mr. Hackman, patriarch Curly Tallent loved farming both as a hobby and as a living, much more than the foreman job he had with the Alcoa aluminum company who had required their move from a small homestead in Scopus, Missouri in the first place. Before long Curly had established a respectably sized dairy farm consisting of sixty cows which he pastured on a small plot of land in the Saline River bottoms. As such the Tallents and Hackman became close

friends, and often Mr. Hackman allowed the children to play on his property, the back half of which was mostly dense, untamed woods brimming with pine trees, holly, and lichens. It made the perfect forest for fairy tales and Robin Hood.

But it was on this particular day that Bob Tallent, Jimmy's older brother by four years, was in a terribly sour mood. In school earlier that morning, Bob had committed the most grievous crime imaginable to a child in Mrs. Myrtle Westbrook's fourth grade class—having completed his in-class arithmetic assignment, a subject at which he'd always excelled, he had amused himself with drawing a small black stickman on the lower corner of the page. Unfortunately for him, the ever-strict Mrs. Westbrook had chosen precisely that moment in her customary prowl around the classroom to pass his desk and, upon spotting this transgression which she declared in a scandalized voice was obviously a blatant depiction of Satan, Mrs. Westbrook had kept him inside transcribing Bible verses during the free period, causing him to miss the school-wide baseball game which his team subsequently lost. Understandably upset, he had sat sullenly through the rest of the day, walked sullenly home when it was over, and was still sullen when he and his little brother decided to visit Mr. Hackman's property with their older sister Shirley later that afternoon.

Mr. Hackman was away from his house that afternoon, chopping wood for a new fence in his backyard, and Curly was there helping in exchange for some firewood. Neither heard the children walk into the front yard, but the children knew that neither would mind. A part of Mr. Hackman seemed to enjoy their surprise visits and he would be only so happy to snatch an unsuspecting goose from the yard and hold it, unsmiling but with sparkling eyes, while the children approached to tenderly stroke its soft white feathers, and the goose looked on with

disdain and a reluctant amount of pride as slimy water dribbled from its mouth. For their father's part, he didn't care what they did as long as they stayed out of his way.

Today the geese were out wandering the yard, the white lattice gate to their enclosure wide open and propped behind a heavy rock. Mr. Hackman did this sometimes when he was home, allowing them into the yard to nibble the green, nutritious grass which they had all but eradicated from their own paddock; conveniently, it was in this manner that the yard was kept immaculately trimmed without any effort on Mr. Hackman's part. However, to small unwary children, it also made the yard practically impassible. If there was one thing anyone knew about geese, it was that they were notoriously aggressive—Shirley had once told Jim that she'd read a book saying the Ancient Egyptians had kept them as palace guards—and not even the kindest tending on the part of Mr. Hackman could dampen the meanness natural to their species. As such the oldest gander, the first of Mr. Hackman's herd, hissed at the three children warily when they entered the gate. He was by far the oldest and grandest of the geese, grizzled with fraying feathers and a wrinkled flap of skin that dangled from the middle of kinked neck to the point where his bill met his chin. His eyes were a milky, clouded blue, and he had just enough vision remaining to recognize trespassers when he saw them. The three sharp claws on each of his webbed feet, long and cracked with years of wandering the goose yard, dug into the earth as he spread his wings, hissing still. The other small group of geese with him retreated to a safe distance, honking alarms.

Shirley, by now in sixth grade and ever-responsible for her younger brothers, placed both hands on Jim's small shoulders and held tight to them as though to toss him behind her at a moment's notice. She eyed the old goose warily.

“Let’s go home,” she said. “We’ve got plenty to do anyway. Chores, homework. I should be helping Mama with dinner.”

But Bob, beyond having a bad day and never much one for geese anyway, ignored her. He stood off to her left, sneered at the goose, and crouched slowly to the ground, rising again with a small segment of branch that had broken off in last week’s windstorm.

“Don’t you dare, Robert Tallent,” Shirley hissed, lifting one hand from Jim’s shoulders to grab for the stick. Bob dodged and held it out of her reach.

“I won’t hurt him none,” he insisted. “I just want to get him out of the way.”

Shirley pressed her lips together but said nothing else. And Jim, who just old enough to identify that the tension radiating from her hands into his shoulders was in preparation for danger, said nothing at all.

For one suspended moment, everything held its breath. Bob hefted the branch in his hand, the goose lowered its head and glared at him, and wide-eyed Shirley didn’t even dare to blink. Then, finally, Bob lobbed it.

He missed entirely. The stick was heavier than he’d anticipated and clumsy in length, and throwing it was less like pitching the baseballs he handled so deftly that it was like using a crane to throw a battleship across the ocean. The branch landed in the grass a good six inches from the gander’s right foot, making a harmless, soft sound in the henbit. But just the fact that the bi-ped had dared even try to make contact was enough to incite the old bird’s temper and in the blink of an eye he darted forward, wings out, making a noise like a rattlesnake, murder in its eyes.

Shirley screamed and Bob yelped.

Jimmy, who had just crested his fourth birthday and was thus barely old enough to understand imminent danger, made an inspired lunge for the first elevated surface available. As

quickly as he could, he made for Mr. Hackman's front porch, toddling up the cracked steps as fast as his twig-like legs could carry him. Shirley was not far behind, deciding quickly that Bob's own brashness was what had doomed him to his fate, and that rather than risk her own life attempting to save his, she would rather die protecting her innocent, youngest brother. She crossed to the steps in three strides, leapt up to the porch in one mighty bound, and snatched Jim into her arms using the back of his overalls as handles.

Bob meanwhile, had attempted valiantly to escape the gander's wrath. But as he'd turned blindly to make a run for the nearest tree, he had tripped over his own untied shoelaces, landed hard on his chest, and as he lay stunned by the sudden loss of breath, the goose was instantly atop him, snapping viciously at his eyes with his angry orange bill and beating him soundly about the chin with his wings. Bob was a screaming and writhing mass in the grass, barely visible beneath the enormous bird, who was so large with his outspread wings and his righteous fury that he completely occluded him from view. Except for the occasional glimpse of a blue shirt and khaki shorts, the pair was a tempest of skinny limbs and white feathers, a sort of strange mythical wrestling match that had been left out of Ovid and Homer or forgotten from the Bible.

Clutched in his sobbing sister's arms, Jim was assured that what he was witnessing was surely the death of his brother, and, too stunned to say anything, was only capable of staring in shock. It was not at all how he imagined someone's death would be. The deaths he had heard on the radio or seen in the movies had been grand and slow, a bullet to the heart and a gentle crumple to the ground, and for the good guys a few last tender parting words. This was too ridiculous, too unglamorous. There were no gangsters or beautiful women. There were no cowboys or cattle rustlers. There was his brother and Mr. Hackman's goose on top of one

another on the grass, the pair of them almost indistinguishable, a blur of bird and man. He did not think that it could be happening.

He was so involved in considering how this could not possibly be the death of Bob that he almost didn't notice when his father and Hackman, torn suddenly from their work by the noise, lit up from the back fence with alarmed, taut faces. Hackman, deceptively swift despite his thick size, got there first and with one heavy, booted foot he caught the gander solidly in the center of his white breast. The air left the bird's lungs in one surprised honk as he flipped, sprawled, recovered quickly and flapped away, crying in confusion and alarm; the bi-ped who had only just this morning worshipped him and his brethren so devoutly had just kicked him. The entire flock retreated to the furthest corner of their paddock where they huddled fearfully, watching the humans with wide blue eyes. The old gander was wheezing.

Curly had by this time snatched his son from the ground and checked him over for wounds. Aside from a face wet and shiny with tears and mucous, Bob had escaped relatively unscathed, especially when considering how imminent death had seemed beneath the goose's talons. There were three long red scratches on one of his arms—the middle one just deep enough to ooze a little drop of blood down his elbow—and his trembling bottom lip was swollen and split where he'd caught himself with his own fist.

Curly gave a tired, irritated sigh and stood. "You're not hurt, boy, don't cry. Hackman!"

The lawyer, who had unnecessarily chased the geese a little ways into their yard to prevent further attack, turned, and the sharp, bright color of his blue eyes was suddenly dulled and every line in his face was as visible as a crease in a starched shirt. Bob, thus released from his father's gaze, scurried into Shirley's arms where he proceeded to cry quietly into her cotton

dress while pretending to dry his face. Shirley herself had stopped crying a while ago, the last remaining traces of tears were white tracks through the dust on her cheeks.

And Jimmy, who had never cried once through the whole ordeal and only watched the proceedings with some manner of detached awe and confusion, didn't remember much more of what happened. He was vaguely aware of being ushered away by his sister, who still held him in one arm and used the other to hold Bob's hand as she guided them down the street towards the farmhouse. His father remained behind, muttering a few things to Mr. Hackman, who stared at the grass and listened quietly while the fingers of his left hand twitched as though in silent prayer for one of his cigarettes. After a few moments, Curly pivoted and disappeared behind the little white house. Mr. Hackman stood a minute or two by himself, motionless except for the rolling motion of his fingers. Finally, he ran a palm over his thinning scalp and stalked silently away, axe in hand.

It wasn't until the next week that Shirley dared brave the Hackman place again and walked past to take Jimmy to his first week of school. As was usual, Mr. Hackman was there, walking the fences, cleaning the coop, filling the pond and the plastic waterers. But as they, a pair of children, passed by, Hackman did not smile at them. He looked up at their footsteps, gave them a cursory glance, blinked, and returned his eyes to his chores.

Shirley frowned and dropped her waving hand. "Wonder what his deal is. Old grouch."

Jim guessed that she didn't notice the conspicuous absence of the old gander, and the newly wary, hateful gazes that the geese cast at their forlorn caretaker. The Tallent children never visited him again, and there were no goslings in the spring.

# The Magician

They didn't know his name. They didn't even know where he came from. He just appeared one day, pattering into town in a shining black Cadillac station wagon that looked more like a hearse than a car, a model that was several years old, but had nevertheless been recently cleaned and maybe even waxed. He was a tall, gangly man with small darting brown eyes that glimmered with a certain mischievous sort of intelligence, a long sloped nose that hung down his face like a ski slope, and a thin mouth that seemed to be perpetually quirked up at one corner into a sort of knowing, condescending smirk. His hands were thin, white, and fluttering like newspapers flung down Main Street in a stiff wind, expressive, beautiful hands. But despite their obvious vitality and how they would have danced like birds through the air in front of him, he didn't speak with them as some men do. Instead they hung limply by his sides during conversation, with only the barest of twitches betraying the life inside of them. He seemed to be saving all their frantic energy, their smooth, graceful movements for his performances.

For even though they did not know his name, they knew he was a magician. *That* much at least he made exceedingly clear, if not at first then soon after his appearance in the designated, obscure little town of the month, or the suburb of whatever city through which he was passing. The word simply seemed to get out somehow, with an almost supernatural speed, spreading through the grocery store, the doctor's office, the local tavern. *Have you heard? Some new guy in town. Says he does magic. Shyster. I think he's cute. He's a gypsy. He seems nice enough.*

It was a strange thing for a town the size of Haskell to receive newcomers; even though US 67 ran straight through its heart, either side of it was bordered only by the school, the town hall, one four-pump gas station, and just enough houses to seem populated, houses almost purposefully inhabited by recluses who never went outside if they didn't have to. Thus the town kept to itself, putting forth to travelers such an appearance of unfriendliness that it bordered on hostility, and as such those who drove by usually kept on driving if they could help it. No one visited Haskell unless someone they knew was dying.

Obviously, the magician was different. Either unaware or unintimidated by the obvious reluctance of the town's denizens to associate with outsiders, he walked the empty streets freely, waving at the citizens who watched him from behind the lace curtains of their front windows, wide-eyed.

One of the first things to be discovered by unknown sources in the town was the fact that the magician kept—in addition to a small camp stove, a sleeping bag, and several mysterious black boxes which undoubtedly contained his magic—two things in the trunk of his Cadillac: a good-sized hammer and a small box of nails. Neither of these would be things you might typically expect to find inside the truck of a magician's car, but nevertheless their purposes illuminated themselves soon after.

See, one of the magician's first acts upon arrival at the designated town of the month (having roamed the streets and spreading the word that there was a new man in town) was to knock on the doors of the stand-offish, ivy-covered farmhouses and ask very politely of the eye that peeped around the door if it couldn't spare a few wooden planks or boards. The ingrained gene of Southern hospitality, a result of hundreds of years of evolution, would undoubtedly compel the eye to answer in the affirmative, after which it would gesture vaguely in the direction of the nearby dairy barn or chicken coop, where the magician would find a pile of discarded lumber from which he could take what he needed. Then, after thanking the eye heartily and collecting no more than two boards at the most, he would disappear back down the street, to the small field next to the old Thatcher place where he had parked his station wagon. And there when he had finally assembled enough slats, he would build the small, weather-worn, worm-eaten platform that would become his stage. On a plywood sheet that he had collected from Mr. Raper, even though it was obviously too thin to support even his frail weight, he would paint in white, well-formed lettering:

*Magic Show*

*Mon thru Sat, 3 pm*

*10c*

Later, the townspeople would say that it was precisely this activity in which he was engaged when Miss Eleanor Westbrook happened upon him for the first and definitely not the last time. To this day, no one knows exactly what was said that ensured the following events which so scandalized the town—not even the most persistent gossips of the Benton Woman's Club could ever persuade a much older Miss Westbrook to divulge this delicate exchange of fateful words. And the magician had never been in the position to talk, and certainly was not

now. But no one ever accused Jimmy Tallent of being an unimaginative child, and at the tender age of seven he was already precocious and well-versed enough in the literature left unguarded in his stepmother's armchair to envision that it went something like this:

"You're really a magician?" Miss Westbrook laughed at him gently, her warm blue eyes sparkling and her honey-brown hair blowing in the slight breeze of an early Arkansas April. Arguably the only pleasant spring month before the heat and unbelievably-sized mosquitoes made even the most transient foray outdoors unbearable.

And it would had to have been springtime, because that was when Miss Westbrook looked her loveliest. In that respect, she was the black sheep of the Westbrook clan, renowned from Powen to Traskwood of being a largely unsavory lot. Her aunt Myrtle reigned over her fourth-grade classroom with a tyrannical fist, and when she wasn't being generally unpleasant the woman was downright *mean*. Her tormented pupils secretly called her the Copperhead as she was indeed a venomous old thing sporting a set of enormous, sharp-looking teeth, and her thinning gray hair was weekly dyed an obnoxious shade of red. When coupled with her favorite aquamarine eyeshadow and pale pink lipstick, the entire ensemble combined to make her look less like a woman and more like the Bride of Frankenstein, which Jimmy and Tommy Ward had just recently seen at the Royal in Benton for a nickel each.

But her niece, Miss Westbrook, was exactly the opposite, a bird of paradise which by some cruel twist of fate just so happened to occupy the same tree as her serpentine relatives.

It was the general consensus in Haskell that what had happened to her was a total shame.

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Miss Eleanor Westbrook had been in love for a long time with the young son of a certain farmer named Gerstacker, whose family was historically German and had moved to Haskell in

the mid-1800s in hopes of building a homestead and a prosperous life. One of those two events, at least, had happened. The respectable homestead—which consisted *en masse* of a smattering of cows, a small plot of crops that rotated with the seasons, and a moderately-sized forest which they processed in a sawmill on their own property—was alive and well, and while it was not prosperous by any means, it was enough. The original Mr. Gerstacker, whose lost his eldest son in Pea Ridge fighting with the Confederacy for reasons he could not name, made barely enough to keep the place afloat. But he was a happy pioneer, living the way he had always dreamed of while working as a clerk for the salt mines near Stuttgart, and no matter how much or how little he made, you could not find a happier man.

It was this same Gerstacker who had passed down this farm to his next son, and his next, until at last it came into the possession of his great grandson Zachariah and his youngest son Hansi. And it was this self-same Hansi with whom the young Ellie Westbrook, having lived next door to him since they were each five years old, fell desperately in love. By the time they were eighteen, an ecstatic Mr. Gerstacker and a reluctant Mr. Westbrook had resigned themselves to the fact that the pair would be married, with or without their parents' permission, blessing, or money. The rumor was that on more than one occasion, Ellie had threatened to elope, and the latest threat had been so convincing that it managed to scare Mr. Westbrook into changing his mind. So a wedding was planned and arrangements were made.

But then had begun the war. Any and all Germans were declared the apex enemy of the free world, the very pinnacle of evil, with their red flags, black spiders, and fanatical devotion to a mustached man who plunged the globe into a war that decimated Europe and destroyed Pearl Harbor. A war which had begun two days after Jim had been born, and which he could barely remember. He knew only two things of the entire business: that when his mother had left, she

had found a job on the west coast with countless other women keeping the country afloat while the men were off fighting. That and, as he gathered later by listening discreetly to various conversations around Haskell, that it was the war that had finally forced young, gentle Hansi away.

Though there wasn't a black spider to be seen on Gerstacker's land except for the occasional widow in the wood pile, and though the Gerstackers had forgotten their mother tongue generations ago—the only remnant being their ancestral names—the town turned against them.

It began with the ugly glares in the feed store. The Millers and the Holiokes and the Orrs whispering loudly at the soda fountain, unafraid of the shrunken old man who passed by with a lowered head, ashamed of his own countrymen and silently accepting blame for crimes of which he was innocent. Eventually, the gossip escalated to outright backhanded insults, which culminated with the refusal to invite the family to the annual livestock competition, where Mr. Gerstacker had always loved to show his new calves and which he had heretofore never missed. That particular blow was devastating. Zachariah wore a brave face for the sake of his children, but the old man was obviously despondent. He who had prided himself so highly on the independence and pioneering spirit of his ancestors, which he felt was perhaps his greatest possession, was left shaking at the sudden loss of a community. He retreated into himself and his farm, beginning to feed his own corn to his cows rather than endure the stiff glances at the Circle B. And if he could help it, he didn't leave the homestead.

Hansi's reaction was infinitely more volatile than his father's. The boy went out of his way to goad the town, bought grain sometimes twice a week more than necessary, and looked

everyone in the eye, daring them to say something, anything. He physically dragged his father from the house, forcing their family into the public eye, and dared people to say something.

And then, just to prove it all to the people, to the town, maybe even to himself, he enlisted. One morning over eggs he told his father, and that afternoon he told Ellie. Miss Chauvenet from across the street remembered that day vividly because, as she recounted later with a gory sort of glee, she was sitting outside on her front porch enjoying a glass of tea when it happened. One moment all was still, and the next, she was hearing raised voices cutting through the summer air like lightning, one of them high and hysterical, and the other low. Like someone was trying to calm a spooked horse. And then, when she peeked casually over her hydrangea bushes, she watched the young Gerstacker boy spill from the front door of the Westbrook house, his hands over his head, as a cast-iron skillet whizzed just inches past his ear. He stumbled to the grass, landing on his knees, and turned, shouted something unintelligible at the house, which just slammed its door shut and after a few moments closed the lace drapes of one of its upstairs windows. The boy stared, paced a little around the front yard, still shouting. Finally, he turned and took off, vaulting over the fence and vanishing into the pine forest that divided his property from the Westbrook's.

He was killed in a skirmish in France not three months after. The telegram arrived at the Benton office and was carried to the Gerstacker farm by a penitent-looking boy in a small car, who didn't look at the old man as he handed it over. He stared fixedly at his shoes. But Mr. Gerstacker, who had seemed to know what was going to happen and was only awaiting the moment—like someone who had been convicted and was awaiting execution—said nothing. He smiled at the boy grimly, took the paper from his hands, and went back inside. When the first fall rain came later that evening, he went outside to put the cows in the barn, and Mrs. Chauvenet

who was watching from her dim living room, could see that he had either forgotten or neglected to wear a coat. Either way, it didn't matter; he promptly contracted pneumonia and died a month later.

Though the town wasn't necessarily repentant for forcing a handsome, able-bodied young man to his death, the denizens nevertheless offered their condolences to the Gerstacker family. But naturally, though he professed only his sincerest sorrows for Hansi's loss, Mr. Westbrook viewed the events with no small, if ever how reluctant, amount of relief; no matter how determined, Ellie could not marry a dead man.

But he was mistaken if he thought that this meant she would fall in line and do his bidding. Partly out of compassion for the condition of the Gerstacker family but mostly out of spite for the town which she viewed had killed Hansi as surely as though they themselves had pulled the trigger, she married his older brother Lukas within two weeks of the telegram's arrival. It was an understandable shock to everyone in the community, but a guilty Mr. Westbrook did not deny her, and by this point Old Gerstacker was fading in and out of delirium and was so preoccupied with wheezing pitifully in bed that he could not sway the couple one way or the other.

Lukas Gerstacker was the opposite of his brother in every way possible, dark where Hansi had been fair, broad and barrel-chested where Hansi had been lean, a Hephaestus to Hansi's blue-eyed Apollo. He accepted Miss Westbrook's hand with a gentle but poorly disguised eagerness, which only cemented the popular opinion that he had always been in love with her from afar, even while she had belonged to his brother.

Whenever the subject came up in conversation, knowing glances were always exchanged between the gathered parties. Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife, Mrs. Hunnicutt would

smirk wryly over the weekly cup of tea she shared with Jim's stepmother. As though quoting the ninth commandment was some sort of prophecy that doomed the relationship.

Which, in a way, it did. There could be no mistake that Lukas did love her—in his own sort of way. He worked hard on his father's farm which, after a few years, did begin to turn a reasonable profit, and he fastidiously made sure that his wife wanted for nothing. Every week there was plenty of money for anything she required, and always a little left over for whatever she wanted for herself. He made frequent presents to her of new curtains, new tablecloths, new baking pans, new dresses, and even on the occasion of their anniversary, a gilded necklace that he'd purchased for a bargain from an antique shop. Never did a soul see him lay a hand on her, say a harsh word to her, and when they were together, he was always looking at her with love in his eyes.

But to no fault of Lukas's, Ellie simply could not love him back. He was taciturn where Hansi had been loud, somber where Hansi had been cheerful, and quiet where Hansi would have laughed until he could laugh no more. She had made a mistake in marrying him, but it was the sort of punishment that she could convince herself she in fact deserved; she owed the Gerstacker family for all they had been through, some part of her feeling responsible for the actions of the town, and not only that, she herself felt guilty for the way she had treated Hansi the last time she had seen him. The way she had thrown that skillet.

As the years passed, she began to wither into a shell of the woman she had been. Her beauty did not diminish per say, and she was courteous and friendly with everyone she met on the streets, but with age and the years of marriage to a man she did not love, the warmth and vitality that had once shone from her eyes and radiated from her skin began to dim. She

sharpened into something cold and marvelous, an ancient, carved representation of a kidnapped Helen of Troy, beautiful, guilt-stricken, and sad.

Everyone could see it. They watched it happen. Quiet whispers of concern passed softly between worried neighbors, and occasionally someone would approach her in the grocery store, beginning the conversation under the guise of friendliness that quickly revealed a silent offer of concern, and a question if she was alright. Of course she wasn't. Anyone could see that.

But she had nothing to complain about. She accepted their concern with a warm, understanding smile before waving it briskly away and continuing on down the aisle.

Then had arrived the magician.

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She would have run out of eggs that morning, Jim decided, and that was why she would have been walking past the Thatcher place, on her way to Starsill's for another dozen. It would have happened unexpectedly and bizarrely, which for someone else might not have been an outstandingly unusual occurrence; after all, people ran out of produce unexpectedly all the time. One moment, you have buttermilk in the icebox, and then suddenly the instant you need to make pancakes, you don't. It happens.

But for Ellie Gerstacker this happening was virtually unheard of. She always made sure to keep on top of the contents of her pantry. It had become part of her routine penance, keeping the Gerstacker cupboards full, and it was odd to think that she'd missed something as vital to her husband's happiness as eggs. She was planning to bake a cake later that afternoon, since he'd hinted yesterday at dinner that he wanted one, and she would need the eggs. She wore one of her old dresses for the trip, one from before she'd gotten married and her closet subsequently

overrun with more fashionable pieces from Benton that Lukas had given her. It had once been her favorite blue cotton dress. Then she started off down the road.

She would have seen the black station wagon first, from a distance, a giant, stark dot against the pastel spring landscape and then, the closer she got, she would have seen the white letters. Ah. So *this* was the man everyone was talking about. She paused as she walked past and, for some unknown reason, found herself moving towards him, as if pulled by some invisible gravitational force. It had to be curiosity. She did not believe in fate.

His lanky legs in pinstriped trousers stuck out comically from underneath the makeshift stage. The man was so skinny that his torso fit snugly inside the six inches of clearance between the ground and the gray slats of wood. As she came closer, she realized he was hammering at something; uneven staccato thumps split the morning air like the sound of some enormous woodpecker, thumps that were punctuated occasionally by a quiet swear. He was obviously having trouble.

The whole scene was so strange and amusing that Ellie couldn't help herself. She stooped, angled her head to the side, and asked laughingly between the cracks in the wood, "Are you really a magician?"

The legs froze. And then flailed for purchase against the grass like some strangely colored frog as the magician wriggled his way out, black hair in dusty disarray. He sat on the ground and blinked owlishly up at her, blinded for a moment by the sudden sunshine.

But when her image finally resolved before him, a honey-haired and smiling silhouette, he couldn't help but grin. His teeth were brilliant and white. "I am."

“Show me a magic trick?” Syntactically, a command, but the way her voice tilted up at the end turned it into a question. After marrying Lukas, most of the things she said were questions.

He rose slowly and brushed the dust from his pants. “Got a dime?” He answered her question with one of his own, and while this usually had a habit of irritating people, she only smiled and fished one out of her pocketbook. When she handed it to him, their fingers brushed. She pretended not to notice, and even though his eyes flashed, he pretended also and examined the dime with flourish. Rolling up his sleeves, he gave her another smile.

“Don’t blink,” he said. Her eyes sparkled again.

Winking only once in the morning light, the little silver coin disappeared into his palm which, when it opened moments later, was empty. The magician gave an exaggerated gasp in fake shock, turning his fluttering hands over and over as if even he himself was often caught off guard by his own magical prowess. He turned his bewildered gaze to Miss Westbrook, who smiled a smile that dimpled her cheeks and, thus encouraged, the magician reached out, brushed a curl with his fingers, and pulled the dime from behind her ear.

“I could’ve guessed you came from money,” he said.

Her face soured momentarily, barely the flash of expression, but the magician who was watching it the same way any performer watches his audience, caught it and frowned in confusion. He, of course, being a newcomer, didn’t understand the history behind the Westbrooks who had lived in Haskell since the revolutionary war and made quite the names for themselves as pillars in the community. He didn’t know her story, the fights with her father over marrying a poor German descendent who had gone off to get himself killed in the war. He knew

none of these things, and so when this joke that usually garnered at least a modest chuckle from other people fell flat with this woman, he was understandably puzzled.

But she recovered quickly, as quickly as only comes from years of practice, and replacing her smile with another one, she gently accepted his proffered dime. A small circle of light flickered across the magician's face with the sunlight that reflected from its surface as she played with it between her fingers.

"You need to learn a new trick," she said.

The confused frown, which had not quite left his face despite the passage of the awkward moment, deepened and he, and on the cusp of answering, was stopped by the woman's act of vanishing the dime in her small hand and then, deftly, pulling it from his ear.

"When everyone's grandfather around here teaches them the same trick," she smirked, tucking the dime in his shirt pocket, "You're going to need much more than that to impress the children."

He looked abashed and gave a small smile. "Or maybe you're just a magician too," he said, and then, suddenly, with a wave of his fluttering hands, he pulled three real red roses from virtually thin air. Miss Westbrook's eyes widened. The magician merely smiled.

"Come back tomorrow at three," he asked quietly. "Bring the kids. I'll show you some real magic."

She opened her mouth to say that she couldn't possibly. She had too many things to do back at the house, things to mend, chores to do, objects to clean.

What she said instead was, "I don't have any kids."

And he shrugged that off as smoothly as a bedsheet, even as she watched him make a silent note of it somewhere in the back of his mind. "Come anyway."

And she did. The next day promptly at three she stood in the back, behind five rows of giddy children and their parents, watching the magician perform onstage in a wrinkled white shirt and pinstriped pants hitched up with colorful suspenders that were an instant hit with the audience. Somehow she'd even persuaded Lukas to come with, perhaps because she could already feel the emotions beginning, something happening in her heart when the man onstage grinned at her with his brilliant teeth, and maybe with Lukas' anchor-like weight at her side, he might prevent her from floating away like one of the magician's Technicolor handkerchiefs, flying and dancing in the thin white paper of his hands.

But Lukas's presence didn't help all. He might as well not have even been there. The magician's sharp brown eyes somehow always drifted back to Miss Westbrook's, mischievous and smiling, even as he grinned at the children and dazzled them with explosions from the tip of his black wand which somehow extended and folded in on itself, tucking neatly into a black silk hat from which he pulled a small white rabbit that he deftly transformed into a stuffed toy and gave to a little girl in the front row. Lukas tolerated the show with a good-natured patience, standing straight-faced beside his wife, supposing that at least now he'd be able to discuss the nature of this new invader with the other men at the tavern. If they hadn't yet seen him, they would be jealous of his new piece of knowledge. In the usual way, gossip was always jealously coveted by the residents of Haskell.

And if he noticed the glances exchanged between his wife and the magician, he didn't say anything. Not during the show, and not even after, when both of them had retired to their little shared bedroom in the safety of their own house.

But trouble was obviously just around the corner when Ellie Westbrook began frequenting the magician's shows. She appeared every day promptly at three o'clock, and people

said that this was the main reason that he varied his tricks day to day, entertaining both the children and more importantly, the woman with the smiling eyes in the pale blue cotton dress at the very back of the audience.

Mrs. Chauvenet remembered precisely the first time that the magician visited Ellie Westbrook at home one fine morning in late April. Lukas Gerstacker had already left the house to turn the soil in the field; having milked the cows before sunrise, he had gone inside for a brief, thirty minute breakfast and to say good morning to his wife who packed him a sandwich for lunch. Then he stomped his way through the henbit to his barn, yoked his two sturdiest horses, and steered them down through the treeline to the fields just on the other side. Out of sight of the house. He would be gone until late afternoon at the earliest.

And then, less than two hours after he'd disappeared, when Mrs. Chauvenet was enjoying a cup of warm milk at her kitchen table the magician appeared. His lanky arms swung loose by his side, but his step was quick, and though his thin lips were still quirked into his perpetual smile, his eyes darted at every unexpected sound. His long legs were virtually pinwheels over the dusty red street, and a hazy cloud followed him as he moved, the lazy road disturbed by the sudden, insistent motion. At first, Mrs. Chauvenet watched him with a casual sort of curiosity, wondering between sips what sort of business could possibly bring the magician so far away from Thatcher's field or the grocery store.

She was understandably dumbfounded when she saw, through her sheer curtains, his tall, thin shadow waltz with manufactured ease up to the Gerstackers' front door, and—after knocking only once—disappear inside. For a few brief moments, Mrs. Chauvenet sat, scandalized, her milk quite forgotten in her lap.

Surely, it was not what she thought it was. Surely, he was coming over to borrow a few nails for that infernal stage of his, an egg or two for the little camping stove upon which he cooked his breakfast. Surely that door would open any second now, and Mrs. Gerstacker would wave him away with a smile and he would be gone, borrowed item in hand.

But it was only after half the day had gone by, when the old lady was ready to swear that he had to have left already when she hadn't been looking, that the front door finally opened and the magician walked out, beaming like the sun and whistling down the street, his fluttering hands in his pockets and all traces of his earlier trepidation seemingly forgotten. He kicked cheerfully at a pinecone and was gone. Ellie Westbrook didn't appear once, but the curtains in the bedroom window lifted in a happy manner, watching until he was out of sight, and when Lukas came home, Mrs. Chauvenet watched how the utter happy bafflement bloomed across his ruddy face when his wife met him on the porch with a warm embrace and a cheery smile.

Mrs. Chauvenet would never have called herself a gossip. Nevertheless, it wasn't long after that everyone in Haskell was aware of the magician's before-show activities with Lukas Gerstacker's wife. The rumor lit up the small town faster than a brush fire, scampering from one roof to the next like it was hopping across the limbs of dry pine trees in summer. Hansi's death had been a relatively long time ago, and ever since then the sleepy Haskell had been longing to be awakened by some new entanglement, some delicious event that would occupy the tea-table, the quilting-circle, or the bar.

For his part, Lukas couldn't believe it. He wouldn't believe it. The sympathetic glances cast his way by the other men in the feed store, or the bartender in the tavern, or even the old preacher who made eye contact with him in the back row on Sundays, were determinedly ignored. Because his wife loved him and was most definitely not having an affair with some fella

from who-knows-where, Lukas had no need of their pity. And even if he did, he wouldn't have wanted any.

For her part, Ellie apparently couldn't have cared.

Mrs. Chauvenet was given the unbridled privilege of watching nearly every morning as Lukas left for the fields and the magician arrived on his front porch, in an almost synchronized, clockwise motion; one beefy, burly shadow would disappear around the right side of the low wooden house just before another long, lean one would emerge from the left. It was sickening in its mechanical efficiency.

The town began to wonder why Lukas didn't simply clean the magician's clock. Why he didn't tackle him right off his stage, throw him to the soft, green grass and threaten to kill him if he ever so much as looked cross-eyed at his wife again. Or wait for him outside Starsill's, seize him by the collar, and offer every intimate detail of just how gruesomely he could convince him to beg for death. Why he didn't at least ask for help from his fellow farmers, who would have been more than willing to ambush the black, hearse-like Cadillac that same night if he'd wanted, axe-handles and shovels and baseball bats in hand.

Perhaps the simplest explanation would be that Lukas was convinced that he didn't need to. There was no affair. The whole town had merely lost its mind, worked itself into a fury over nothing, or even invented this entire thing to play a mean joke on its most stoic, reticent member. The first and only time someone had dared mention it to him was when Josey Hale had approached him in the tavern as he was nursing his third beer, offering his condolences and suggesting that "the boys might be up for a little Caddy-smashing later that eveni—"

Gerstacker had risen in one mighty heave, knocked his stool sideways, and pulled Josey up by his shirtfront until his head nearly touched the rafters. The smaller man's legs danced like a frog's.

Lukas growled, "Don't *ever* say that to me again."

Since then the town had unanimously decided to leave the trio alone, sufficing to whisper behind their hands instead of right in front of Lukas Gerstacker and his meaty fists.

Let the poor boy bury his head in the sand if he wants, Mrs. Hunnicutt demurred as she idly stirred her tea. Me, personally, I'd run that skinny scarecrow right out of town, using *him* as the rail. Poor Lukas.

But eventually, as the days grew into weeks, and the weeks into months, the gossip began to have some visible effect on the Gerstacker homestead, in the most pathetic way. Lukas' gifts increased in frequency. It was obvious that the poor man was attempting to buy his wife's affection, doing his best to secure her to himself the only way he knew how. It was a valiant effort, but ultimately futile from the beginning. Ellie Westbrook had broken away from him and was flying free, one of those newspapers being chased down Main Street by a summer wind, and no matter how fast he ran, he could not catch up.

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One of the last times Jimmy could remember seeing the magician in public was when he was asked by the elementary-school's ever-oblivious principal Body if he would like to make a special appearance at the assembly on Friday. Of course he had been more than happy to agree. He had stayed in Haskell a long time now, nearly two months, much longer than anyone could guess he had stayed in any other part of the country. It was well-known fact why.

The parents of the children, who were of course aware of the rumors, of what was happening, objected silently. How could such an intrusive, lascivious, moral shell of a man be deemed a worthy example to make for the children? Principal Body stubbornly stood his ground, claiming that what the magician got up to in his personal life—or with whom—was certainly no one's concern but his own, and that no amount of vicious lies and rumors could eclipse what a clear talent he had for entertainment. He sincerely hoped that parents were not so careless or amoral as to gossip within hearing range of tender youths, which, after all, was one of the most grievous sins in the Bible. And besides, they couldn't very well keep their kids from going to the assembly, as every announcement, prayer, and other school business was conducted during the same meeting. Thus cowed, the parents unanimously withdrew their objections.

It was a spectacular performance, definitely the most spectacular that the magician had ever done. Fully equipped with a real stage, a curtain, and a roof, he did tricks no one had ever seen before. He appeared in a flash of red smoke and was dressed for the first time in a black tailed jacket that glittered slightly in the light. He wore white gloves that left empty streaks in Jim's vision when they whisked through the air over the stage, like comets or butterflies. They were captivating in their whiteness.

Then, just as everything was wrapping up, the magician stunned the audience by announcing that he'd culminate his show with a disappearing act. He asked for volunteers but, when dozens of excited school children raised their hand eagerly for a chance to be part of real magic, he picked none of them. His clever brown eyes scanned the crowd slowly and carefully, finally alighting on the little second grade boy in the sixth row back, sitting ramrod straight at attention, legs dangling from the edge of the metal folding chair and blue eyes wide.

“How about you, young man?” he pointed with one gloved finger. “Would you like to come up to the stage?”

For one stunned moment, Jimmy’s brain felt like it had fused together. He had been doing his best to remain inconspicuous in his chair, keeping his hands tucked firmly under his thighs in an attempt to stop them rising on their own, but nevertheless his body had betrayed him, refusing to stare anywhere but the stage, silently begging to be chosen. Apparently, their stare had been felt. With one trembling hand, he pointed to his own chest. *Me?*

The magician’s laugh sounded vaguely birdlike in his deep, smooth voice. The glove beckoned him forward to the stage. “Don’t be shy.”

Shirley, who was sitting beside her younger brother, anxiously touched the sleeve of his plaid shirt. But rather than holding him back, this gesture only spurred him on. Backed by the cheers of his jealously ecstatic classmates, he made his way to the front of the auditorium.

“Now, I’m going to warn you,” the magician said, crouching and placing one of his white, fluttering hands on Jim’s small shoulder, “I’ve never done this trick before.”

The children in the audience gasped appropriately, and Jimmy felt his chest tighten. He was just in the midst of fervently regretting every second of eye contact when the magician casually winked at him with the eye that wasn’t in view of the crowd. Jimmy felt simultaneously relieved and foolish. Of course he had done this trick before. And even if he hadn’t, he was a magician. What could go wrong?

“So someone have a doctor standby in case anything happens.” The adults in the audience gave a few, reluctant chuckles much to the confusion of the children, who were on the edge of their seats, half-convinced that they were about to witness their classmate’s final moments on this plane of existence.

The magician stood, rolled up his sleeves, and smiled. “What’s your name, son?”

“Jimmy.”

“Are you ready, Jimmy?”

Something that had suddenly lodged itself in Jim’s throat made any sort of speech impossible so, wordlessly, he nodded. With only one more wink, the magician raised his hands, performed some elaborate motions, and shouted *alakazam!* at the top of his voice. Jimmy squeezed his eyes shut just as the booming sound of a cannon rocked the gymnasium, and he for a brief moment felt the disappearance happen; for a moment he felt as though he’d been turned inside out. The gymnasium vanished in a bright flash and the acrid smell of smoke and suddenly, before he was even quite aware of it, he was behind the midnight-velvet backstage curtain. He blinked in shock, disoriented for only a second before the overwhelming sense of elation took over. He had just been part of a magic act. He had been disappeared.

He fumbled for the opening in the midnight-blue velvet to step back onstage, and only became aware of the violent kerfuffle that was occurring when he emerged and saw through the remaining haze of smoke as his fourteen-year-old sister took the stage steps two at a time and tackled the magician around his thin waist demanding the release of her disappeared little brother. The entire audience was laughing and, as he did his best to block the blows Shirley’s fist rained on his face, so was the magician.

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It was ironically that very same night that, reportedly, things between Ellie Westbrook and her husband came to a head. She hadn’t gone to the performance at the school that afternoon for what might have been several reasons, the most likely of which being that so many concentrated

judgmental glares experienced all at once would probably have set her on fire. It was pure self-preservation on her part.

And, if they were being painfully honest, no one in the auditorium missed her. It would have been a thoroughly uncomfortable situation if she had made an appearance, standing as she did toward the back of the crowd, watching with her warm blue eyes as the magician's white hands worked their magic onstage. Their gazes would lock and sheer, unadulterated magnetism would rip through the crowd like some sort of electricity, threatening to crush the entire gym with the heat, the exchange between them that no one in town could hope to understand or accept. People would have wanted to stand away from her while, simultaneously their Southern hospitality gene would force them politely closer, and they would hover in this strange, bobbing orbit of being appropriately standoffish while hoping they didn't seem rude. Ellie Westbrook had always been a lovely girl. It was a shame what had happened to her.

But she did not appear, and it wasn't until the wives had collected their children following the assembly, and returned home to their husbands, that they would learn that Lukas hadn't been in at the tavern that afternoon, which for the past few weeks had come to be his custom. There was disbelief. And then there was foreboding.

Neither of them have been seen all day, Mrs. Hunnicutt divulged with guilty relish that afternoon. I called on Eudora this morning, and she says she hasn't seen either of them since yesterday.

The very next morning, the magician's black Cadillac was gone. All that was left on Thatcher's field was a crushed gray heap of a stage that had obviously been driven over, broken wooden slats stabbing upward into the sky like the post-earthquake ruins of someone's house. A glove lay smudged in the dirt next to it, a dead white bird on the grass.

Mrs. Eudora Chauvenet practically had a line of people calling for tea that morning, with good reason; she fluffed her shawl like a self-satisfied chicken and proceeded to detail every curious event that had happened the night before.

As she had told Mrs. Hunnicutt, the morning had begun quite strangely. Lukas had not gone out to the fields, had not fed the cows which were moaning in the paddock next to the house, and as far as she knew had not been outside the house at all. His wife had not been out either, not even to fetch water from the pump or scatter grain for the chickens. Decently concerned, as good neighbors are wont to be, Mrs. Chauvenet had steadfastly watched the house for an hour or two as she drank her warm milk. Finally she was forced away by her own household chores. She returned to the window only once around the late morning, which was the time that the magician would usually appear, swaggering up the dusty street with his long, confident step. She was again surprised to find no one.

Only when she was on her front porch that evening, safely secluded behind her hydrangea bushes and nursing a freshly-squeezed lemonade, did the truly interesting events begin. It started as a low murmur that she was half-convinced she was inventing, but she stilled her rocking chair anyway to listen. Slowly, the murmur began to rise, like the swelling banks of a river or a raging summer thunderstorm, mounting on itself again and again until she a good fifty feet away on her front porch, could hear the low angry roar of Lukas Gerstacker punctuated intermittently by the high-pitched cries that was his wife.

Mrs. Chauvenet did not have the most perfect of hearing at the best of times, but she did not need to hear their words to guess what the argument was about. She scooted her chair to just out of sight behind the bushes and leaned closer, making all efforts to catch snippets of what was said.

All in vain, as became obvious. She risked lifting her head over the bushes, attempting to put some visual with the auditory in order to better make it out, when at that moment she was almost knocked from her chair.

Like a bird in flight, Ellie Westbrook spilled from the front door in her beautiful blue cotton dress, slamming everything that was possible to make noise. Her face was red, swollen, and tearstreaked, but as far as Mrs. Chauvenet could make out through the dusky evening, it was not bruised or beaten. But before she could examine it further, Lukas's wife lit out like a madwoman through the underbrush, clutching a handful of skirt in both hands as she ran. Her feet were bare and flashed like a pair of deer tails through the trees as she vanished into the woods, her golden hair disappearing into the darkness.

Lukas emerged soon after, tumbling from the porch into the dirt as he clutched what looked like a black eye. His shirt was torn in two places. He stumbled to his feet and around the corner of the house, howling his wife's name into the woods with such a wounded-animal cry that the hairs on Mrs. Chauvenet's head stood on end. Some sort of half-sob, half-shout that she in all her years had never heard come from a man's throat.

He swore just as loudly as he'd called out and ran for the old truck parked just under the eaves of the barn, throwing himself into the driver's side and standing on the gas pedal. With a roar of machinery, the clattering beast came to life and both human and vehicle took off swiftly down the street at top speed, leaving nothing behind but a cloud of orange dust. Mrs. Chauvenet watched it go until it was out of sight. Then she returned to her rocking chair and finished her lemonade.

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“Did you ever find out what happened to them?” I ask him as we sit on his small concrete patio, watching the neighbor across the street coax his dog into a reluctant squat on the manicured grass. The plastic bag in his hand flutters in the evening breeze. “Miss Westbrook, the magician, all of them?”

He scratches idly at some peeling blue paint on his cane. “Well, Gerstacker left after that. He sold the farm and headed out west for work somewhere. Railroad, I think. Or maybe an auto factory. I can’t remember now.”

“What did he do to the magician?”

My grandfather snorts. “Nothing, as far as I know. He sure didn’t tell anybody, and neither did his wife. But I don’t remember him being a violent man. Rough, yeah, a little uncouth. But I don’t think he’d beat anybody up.”

“What about Miss Westbrook?”

“She moved to Benton with her father. Poor thing. Never did figure out quite what she wanted in life. I think I heard somewhere that she went to El Dorado eventually for a teaching job. Came back here to die.” He laughs to himself quietly. “Don’t we all.”

“What about the magician?”

He shrugs. “Never saw him after that. But he sure left in a hurry. Pulled a disappearing act of his own.”

The dog across the street has finished his business and lopes across the lawn, leaving his owner behind to scoop unpleasantness out of the grass. I sip at my water.

“All in all a sordid business,” I say in my best British accent.

He nods at the dog. “It usually is.”

# Maybelline

He tried to angle his face away when he climbed into the passenger side of Sherman Ray's '53 Ford, but the Friday evening sunset was a low red in the sky and at just the right angle to shine through the windshield and illuminate the swollen lip and the sharp, angry cut on his right cheekbone. Sherman Ray stared. Jim felt his face redden and he pulled up his jacket collar.

“What the hell happened to you, Tallent?”

He refused to answer that, making a show of staring out the window. “Just drive, Ray.”

Sherman paused. “Tallent.”

“*Drive.*”

He could feel the other boy's eyes boring holes into the side of his head just as physically as he heard his low, whispered swear and felt the Ford accelerate, sliding smoothly from the little patch of gravel that was Jim's driveway and onto the road. They were pointing westward as they

drove so that the sun made a silhouette of the rearview mirror and painted the inside of the car a deep Michelangelo shade of red.

For a moment there was nothing but silence and the sound of Maybelline's purr. Then, quietly, Sherman's voice. "Was it that Hunnicutt boy again?"

Jim didn't answer. His lip wasn't bleeding anymore, but talking opened the scab and brought tears to his eyes. And besides, the less he remembered from school today, the better; his cheek had finally stopped throbbing, which was a relief because for a few hours there he thought it had been broken, and he didn't want to try convincing his father that he needed to go to the hospital. It was common knowledge to any and all involved parties that Curly would have rather had a son with a lopsided face than pay an emergency room bill.

Sherman was persistent. "Tommy Joe?"

It had been both of them, but Sherman Ray already knew that. He swore again.

"Why do you let them do that to you, huh, Jimmy? Tell me that. Why?"

This made him angry. "I don't let them do anything," he spat at the gearshift. Sherman Ray clucked in his throat.

"You gotta teach them a lesson, Jim, okay? You just got to, or it won't stop. You know it won't stop."

He glared. Ever since Bob had left home a year ago to join the Air Force and Shirley had gotten herself married, Jim had been suffering from a remarkable lapse in the older sibling department which Sherman Ray Collatt, two years his senior, was apparently doing his best to fill. It wasn't that the thought wasn't appreciated, and he did enjoy spending time with someone who was graduating next spring (since high school seniors have always been the cool crowd), but in hanging out with Jimmy, Sherman Ray's chances of becoming an older brother figure had

almost totally diminished. An older brother was someone who put velvet ants in your back pockets or tied you to a tree at lunchtime or—on one memorable occasion—told you to touch a piece of electric fence to test if it was working. He did not spend time with you voluntarily.

Jimmy turned his face to the window again. The long strips of dark trees to either side of the roadway, interrupted sporadically by clearings containing a house, formed a sort of funnel leading to the horizon. The sun was a dim orange disc, and the red haze around it was just beginning to bleed into the purple of the evening. “It’s fine, Ray. Honest.”

“Jim.”

“I said it’s fine.”

They had almost made it onto Highway 67, to pick up Tommy Ward on the way out towards Benton, when suddenly Sherman slammed on the brakes, twisting Maybelline’s wheel violently to the left. She screeched onto a side road, ran over the grass, and suddenly they were headed in the opposite direction, driving back towards the heart of Haskell with such alacrity that Jim barely kept upright, clutching his seatbelt and staring wide-eyed at his friend.

“The hell are you doing?” he cried. But except for a smile that shone white in the sunset, the youngest Collatt boy offered no other answer.

“Jimmy boy,” he said after five minutes of silent driving, “Watch and learn.” He pulled onto a small side street that might not have been recognizable as a street except for the two long dead strips of grass crushed flat by tires. “Watch and learn.”

Sherman Ray’s house was a modest bungalow, with two symmetrical windows popping up from the roof like surprised eyebrows and a long flat porch out front that reminded Jim of a sleeping cat. The siding was coming off one side of it, but the lights inside were warm and burning, and there was a gentle smoky smell from a fire earlier that afternoon that was trapped in

the summer stickiness and left hanging in the air. Late May fireflies blinked on and off like lazy headlights as Maybelline rolled into the side yard. The crunch of gravel announced their arrival, the slamming of doors announced their disembarkment, and both noises cued the opening of the Collatt's front door where a thick woman with curly brown hair stepped curiously into the twilight. When she wiped her hands on her apron, her long shadow seemed to dance, thrown as it was on the front lawn.

“Well, hello, boys,” she called to them. “I thought you two were going out for the night.”

“We are, Ma. Just forgot a little something.” Sherman Ray was already threading his way through the overgrown patches of pigweed to a small black lump at the edge of the clearing which, upon further inspection, turned out to be a slightly squashed-looking metal shed. “Come on, Tallent.”

“Nice to see you, Mrs. Collatt.”

And it was. Jim had always liked Sherman Ray's mother. She filled her pocket pies with the most delicious peach filling he had ever tasted, and deep-fried them over the stove in a tall ceramic pot that had been a wedding present from Mr. Collatt's sister. They were crisp golden little half-moons served on a blue tin plate and were always the first to disappear at bake sales, fairs, anywhere they were available. She guarded the recipe with a gentle, laughing secrecy, much to his stepmother's—indeed, the majority of Haskell's female population—poorly concealed frustration; at similar events her own cherry cobbler consistently garnered only one hesitant taste, followed by swift and unanimous abandonment. Jim suspected it might be her use of castor oil as a secret ingredient.

“Nice to see you too, Jimmy,” Sherman's mother smiled. “Y'all have fun now.”

With that, she shut the door, and as Jim made for the shed he could see her silhouette against the back window at the kitchen sink.

Sherman was already inside the squat metal building, having slid the door open with one protesting screech, and as Jim drew closer, he could see the long, dark streaks of rust streaming from the shed's bolts and hinges.

"This was here when Pa bought the place," Sherman explained. His voice sounded muffled and hollow from inside the black hole that was the open shed in the twilight. "Lots of junk in here. We just left it because we couldn't think what to do with it all. Always knew it'd come in handy."

There was a cardinal rule of living on a farm that, if Jimmy in his life forgot everything else, had been so ingrained in his head that it was impossible to remove: never throw anything away. Almost every homestead in Haskell sported at least a few small piles of what appeared to be junk at first glance, but which upon further inspection resolved themselves into old tools, canvases, or spare tractor parts salvaged from long-ago dismantled machines. Of course it irritated the wives, but even in this respect, the hoarding performed a duty; you could always tell the houses of henpecked husbands by how uncluttered the yard looked. After all, you never knew when a stray piece of rope, a nearly-bald tire, or a box of rusty screws might become useful. Better to sacrifice the aesthetic appeal of a few clean acres in exchange for preparedness. It was only logical.

Jim began to step over the metal threshold towards where he could just see Sherman Ray's dark blue shirt bobbing from one shadow to the next, flashing in and out of existence like a broken movie, "What are you looking for?"

But the older boy hissed at him and he quickly retreated.

“Don’t, you’ll trip over something,” he said. Then he was gone again, vanished into the darkness. Jimmy heard lots of metallic and then wooden noises, and occasionally a sharp scrape as Sherman kicked something across the floor. He was muttering to himself. “Come on, where is it? I just saw it in here the other day—a-ha.”

Suddenly he appeared again as though out of nothingness, popping out of the door with a lopsided cardboard box in his hands that looked as though it had gotten wet more than a few times. It smelled of mold, and Jimmy was fairly sure he saw a fuzzy gray wolf spider thus disturbed from its sleep scamper into a deeper, better-hidden corner. Sherman Ray dropped the box to the ground and began to rummage through its contents which, Jimmy could now see, largely consisted of what seemed to be various cables, wires, and other electric supplies. He picked up a radio tube from the grass where it had fallen, dislodged by Sherman’s searching. He stared through its glass into the pine forest, and the ghost of his distorted reflection stared back at him. Funnily enough, this way his lip didn’t look quite so swollen. He tried not to smile wryly, failed, and winced when the scab cracked open again.

“What is all this stuff?” he asked. Sherman had by now apparently collected what he needed and stood, kicking the discarded box aside. His arms were a mass of wire, a flashlight, and what looked like a few thick, oblong pieces of dark glass.

Again, rather than answer him, Sherman Ray only grinned mysteriously and strode for the car, a happy bounce in his step. “You’ll see! Come on, let’s get this show on the road. We still gotta pick up Tommy after this.” Jimmy was distinctly reminded of his mother’s smile when someone asked her for her pocket pie recipe.

He popped Maybelline’s hood and vanished waist deep inside while Jim leaned against the passenger side door, watching with arms crossed. He had never seen Sherman Ray—the most

calm, collected, bordering-on-graceful boy he knew—so excited about anything before, and even though the sun was almost completely gone from the sky and stars were beginning to punch through the evening, and he did sort of want to catch the 9 o'clock showing of the latest Barbara Stanwyck, he didn't want to interrupt.

After a few moments, during which Sherman affixed a few wires some places and a few more some others, and fastened the shining pieces of red glass behind the grill, he turned off the flashlight and slammed the hood shut.

"That ought to do it," he muttered half to himself, wiping his hands on his back pockets. "Come on, Tallent, get in. We gotta get Ward and then off to the county line."

Jim slid into the passenger side seat, frowning. There was only one reason teenagers went to the county line, and tonight that particular activity was impossible. "We can't, Ray, we're not old enough to buy liquor. You know that."

Sherman Ray only gave him the most mischievous grin he had ever seen on a human being. "Who said we were buying any?"

He revved Maybelline's engine and rolled onto the paved street. The headlights illuminated the darkness in front of them while behind them, the little silhouette at the kitchen window continued to scrub dishes.

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It was a quick drive to Tommy Ward's house, which was on an open field and actually bordered on both sides by real neighbors. The porch of the house on the left was presently occupied by a group of laughing men enjoying a late evening pipe. They whistled at Maybelline as she passed.

“You boys keep out of trouble now, you hear?” called a voice that Jim recognized as Reg Finley. Sherman Ray gave a wave and honked his horn for Tommy Ward who, on cue, emerged from the screen door in a flash of light and charged down his lawn. Jim, easily the smallest of the trio, slid into the back seat and Tommy replaced him on shotgun.

“What’d you do to your hair, Ward?” was the only greeting he got from Sherman Ray who laughed and poked at the slick helmet of black with his finger. “You larded it!”

Tom slapped at his hand, turned in his seat to look at Jimmy, and grinned. In the fading evening, Jimmy could make out his short red nose and the freckles splashed across it, and his ears that stuck out slightly at the sides of his face. Like him, Tom was from up north, somewhere like Illinois or Idaho, and his parents had crossed the Mason-Dixon Line for work after the war had ended and with it his father’s job. Tom was older than him by two months, and they were good friends.

“So, I got it all planned out,” he said, straightening his white shirt. “First, a movie, then ice cream, and then a little cruising down Main Street, huh? Donna Scribner told me she’s going to be at the Royal tonight, and I said I might see her there.”

“Forget your plans,” Sherman answered as he pulled onto the highway. “We’re hitting the county line tonight.”

Tommy Ward deflated; clearly the thought of spending the night with Donna Scribner was infinitely more appealing than even the possibility of getting smashed and, since none of them were old enough to buy alcohol, Jimmy had to agree with him.

“Come on, Collatt,” Tommy said. “We can’t. You know we can’t. What are you thinking?”

“Look, I’ll take care of it, alright? And if this pans out, we’ll still go see Donna Scribner and Verna Mae and whoever else you want, okay? Is that alright with you, James Dean?”

Thus assuaged, Tommy Ward settled from outright complaining to sullen muttering, still unwilling to believe in Sherman’s promises. But it was Sherman’s car, and when in Sherman’s car one did what Sherman said. Jim settled in the backseat, envisioning the little gaggle of his female classmates standing in line for a ticket to *From Here to Eternity*, and then began to wonder if Mary Lynn Ryder would be with them. He winced and was suddenly very grateful for Sherman’s insistence on this little side trip; she still had not completely forgiven him for running out of gas on their way to the drive-in and making her walk a mile in heels to the nearest filling station.

Finally, after nearly thirty minutes of driving during which Tom became more and more impatient and Jim more and more convinced that Sherman was a secret Satanist and meant to sacrifice them in the forest, they reached the county line. But instead of following the highway into town and toward the liquor stores, Sherman smoothly steered Maybelline into a hidden side street behind a long peach-colored building whose sign announced it was the Trout Motel. Except a few of the neon lights were broken, so it actually said ‘out Mo.’ The Ford rolled to a stop in the patchy, yellow grass beside the dumpster, and Sherman shut off the engine and the headlights. Everything around them was plunged into darkness, illuminated only intermittently by the flashing yellow ‘out Mo’ over their heads.

“What’s going on, Ray?” Though the Satanist theory was still buzzing in the back of his mind, Jim decided to give Sherman the benefit of the doubt and slung his arms over the front seat. “Something wrong with the car?”

Watching Sherman fish around under Maybelline's hood for what must have been fifteen minutes reminded him painfully of the time the youngest Collatt had barely scraped by with a passing grade in auto-shop class. Jimmy seriously doubted his mechanical abilities.

But Sherman just shook his head with that ever-present, mysterious smile and reclined in his seat, folding his hands behind his head. "Just watch," he answered.

Ward huffed, clearly fed up with Sherman Ray's mysteriousness. He reached for a knob on the dashboard. "Can we at least listen to the radio?"

"No. Total silence, alright? I promise. You'll see."

They waited for a little over thirty minutes in complete darkness and quiet. When Tom shifted irritably in the front seat, his pants made a squeaking noise on the leather that sounded like a wounded elephant, and just as loud in the stillness. Jimmy was getting increasingly antsy, his Satanist theory evolving into an elaborate murder novel in his mind, a thoroughly convoluted entanglement involving a cult of twenty well-to-do Benton citizens of which Mr. Collatt was the leader, and his son the heir trialed with sacrificing two young handsome men to the Dark One himself. For his part, Tommy seemed less concerned about gruesome, ritualistic death and more worried about missing his movie. He seemed to be on the verge of throwing open the passenger door and walking to Donna Scribner, when suddenly there was a low rumble from somewhere off in the distance.

Sherman Ray smiled. "Bingo."

Maybelline roared to life with a turn of the key and edged forward onto the street. Sherman didn't turn on the headlights, using the right front wheel on the grass to guide them over the track of the road. Suddenly, without cause, Jimmy could feel his heart thumping in his

chest and he sat perched on the edge of the backseat, holding onto the front and staring through the windshield into the dark. To his right, Tommy Ward had stiffened.

“Collatt,” he began, but Sherman Ray shushed him and for once, he obeyed without question. Maybelline edged to the very juncture of the side road and the highway. The skinny green street sign to their right blinked on and off in time with the ‘out Mo.’

The Ford idled for all of two minutes.

And then a sea-green truck appeared at the end of the road, roaring past them at top speed like an animal through the dark. In the brief instant that Jimmy could see into its cab as it flashed by in the neon lights, he could see that its windows were down, he could hear the tinny music blasting from its speakers, and he could see it was full of laughing teenagers. It was a familiar truck. His lip throbbed and he said, as it disappeared around the turn and careened off into the night:

“Hey, isn’t that Tommy Joe’s—“

But the rest of his sentence vanished as Sherman Ray punched the gas, turned on the headlights, and peeled out behind them. Maybelline’s tires screeched in protest, her back end fishtailing wildly and Jimmy, who had long ago removed his seatbelt while they were waiting, was tossed to the left like a limp sack of potatoes. Tommy Ward yelped and clawed at his seatbelt.

*“What the hell, Collatt?”*

“Watch!”

The truck, unaware that it was being pursued, drove at a modest sixty down the highway. With a little coaxing from Sherman, Maybelline caught up to them quickly, her headlights illuminating the tailgate in front of her. The occupants of the truck were flashes of shadows

against the back windshield until they realized they were being followed. Then all activity stilled except for the occasional flair of hair when a head whipped around, attempting to identify the car behind them. All they could see were headlights on the darkened street. An arm in a plaid shirt extended from the driver's side window and gestured them to go around.

But Sherman didn't go around. Without taking his eyes off the truck's license plate, he stooped and took something from the floor beside the middle console, which, when his hand emerged, was revealed to be two ends of red wire. The plastic had been stripped a good half inch from the end, and long silver spikes sparkled mischievously in the truck's brake lights. He passed them authoritatively to Tommy Ward, who, flustered, fumbled them in his hands.

"When I tell you," Sherman said, "touch those two wires together."

Tommy stared. "What do they do?"

Everything was dark inside Maybelline except what the dim red lights from the truck illuminated. Sherman's face was cast into a sharp, crimson shadow, and Jimmy's Satanist theory which had subsided the moment they'd started to give chase, was brought once more to the forefront of his mind. When the older boy grinned, he could have sworn he had fangs.

"Why, those are my patented world famous magic beer wires, Ward. Now!"

Before he gave himself time to fully process Sherman's cryptic, unexpected, and seemingly random answer, Tom Ward touched the two wires together and held them. Instantly the entire front of Maybelline was lit up like a Christmas tree with red, flashing lights.

Jimmy almost jumped out of his skin for an instant, whirling behind them to see how in the heck a cop had snuck up on them with no headlights. But when the reaction in the truck was instantaneous and violent, he remembered the red glass that Sherman had secured behind Maybelline's grill earlier that evening. He gaped openmouthed.

On cue, the truck in front of them sprang into action. The driver panicked. For one brief moment the vehicle swerved on the road, one tire passing first into the grass and then over the center. The entire cab was a flicker of shadows of activity. Over the rumble of the truck and Maybelline's gentle purr, Jim was sure he could make out the sound of girls' surprised screams and boys' panicked shouts.

And then, from both sides of the cab, a sudden expulsion of large silver bullets, some singles and opened, spraying their liquid insides into the darkness, others connected with plastic loops, and still others in cardboard boxes. Glass bottles shattered on impact with the asphalt and landed in soft flumps on the grass.

Sherman acted like he was surprised, giving a little swerve as he braked as though caught off guard by the sudden ejection of contraband artifacts, and taking its chance, the truck sped away into the night, almost to the haplessness of one last white-faced individual attempting to throw his Miller into the forest. With the sudden acceleration, he almost slid from the window like a banana from its peel, and only at the quick thinking of one of his compatriots catching hold of his belt loops did he manage to remain mostly inside the truck.

But Jimmy had seen his face. And with that he howled in laughter, joining Sherman and Tommy Ward who had both by now spilled from the Ford and were illuminated by headlights. With his curly brown hair and grinning smile, Sherman Ray Collatt could have been Bacchus, and Tom Ward his grinning satyr companion.

"I think the bottles are a lost cause," Sherman announced, kicking one away to the side of the street that was spewing amber foam into the air. "But the cans should have survived. Look around!"

Tommy took the flashlight from the passenger seat and cast it at the grass, whooping and laughing. “God, I wish I could’ve seen their faces! They must’ve shit themselves!”

And Jimmy had to agree as he plucked a six pack from a tuft of ragweed. The image of Eugene Hunnicutt hanging halfway out of a speeding pickup truck held onto life by the elastic band of his underwear was seared delightfully deep into his memory.

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“See, those are the guys you should look up,” I say. I’m driving with him to the house in Hot Springs to check mail and make sure nothing has caught fire. That last part only kind of a joke. I haven’t seen the house in nearly three years. “Tommy Ward and Sherman Ray Collatt. Do you know what happened to them at all?”

“No. I left, remember? Two years after that.” The enormous white Dodge chokes when his neuropathic foot slips on the clutch. He says ‘damn’ under his breath—because an officer never swears—and takes his eyes off the road to look for the pedal. A blue Nissan speeds around us.

With the windows rolled down I can smell the pine forests and the fall, and I can see the blue sky above, completely clear of clouds. The highway department carved this interstate out of the Ouchitas, blasting away the rock until they’d created an artificial valley wide enough to accommodate this flat, black river and the cars upon it that speed toward Oaklawn and what had once been Al Capone’s paradise. I stick my hand out the window and cup the air, feeling my arm weightless and abandoned.

“You and Tommy Ward were buds, huh.”

He switches lanes to turn up the gated hill that leads into Summit Ridge. “He was a good friend.”

“Wasn’t he the one in your watermelon story?”

He smiles at the memories, both of the incident in question and how my brother and I would laugh until we cried every time he told it.

“One of them,” he says. “There was somebody else with us. I was outside the fence, and there were two boys inside. I can’t remember him now.”

He keys in the code and the gate swings shakily open; it was struck by lightning in the thunderstorm last week and has obviously not been repaired.

As the truck rumbles over the road, which eventually turns from paved to gravel the closer we come to his half-mile driveway, I close my eyes and inhale the scent of the woods.

“I have to write that one down.”

He turns up the side street and plunges into the trail through the pine trees. The house is almost completely obscured by overgrown foliage and unkempt grass. Its brown wooden A-frame blends seamlessly with the surrounding woods like it’s slowly being swallowed by the mountain. Or maybe meshing back with it after a too-long separation.

“Someday,” he says.

I nod. “Someday.”