Sugartown

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ABSTRACT

SUGARTOWN

Emma Moore
Old Dominion University, 2019
Director: Prof. Janet Peery

Ren Baggarly, the seventeen year old foster daughter of a local minister and his wife, goes missing the day of her boyfriend’s high school graduation. Sugartown is an examination of a small, strange, sometimes spiteful Southern town and its demons. It is told through the eyes of the three women who are inadvertently charged with piecing together the story Ren left behind.
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For Neenee.
Thank you for teaching me.
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CHAPTER I

REN

Ren remembered a lot of things. People thought she was flighty, even dumb. But she remembered most things.

For one, she remembered clearly, not the first time she saw Sam Dupont, but the first time he saw her.

Sam always loved to tell people the story. He’d caught her in the act of wedging a pair of synthetic leather flipflops behind an oversized jar of pickles in the grocery section of Walmart.

When he’d caught her eye—this was his favorite part; he always lingered here—she’d blushed and smiled at him, all embarrassed.

“Who even needs that many pickles, right?” She’d apparently said, like a dork.

And after that, Sam liked to say, he was pretty much done for.

What Sam didn’t know was that the cop who camped out in front of the 24hr Walmart at night had been following Ren around the store for a good seven minutes. Using Sam and his linebacker shoulders as a human shield, she’d removed the shoes from the waistband of her jean shorts and stashed them behind a giant pickle jar that she knew no one would buy, all so she could come back later to steal a pair of $7 flipflops that her foster mother, Birdie, would buy her if she just asked. Birdie was always good to Ren. She’d tried, she really had.

Ren obviously never told Sam the second part, the part about how thoroughly he’d misread that situation. She wasn’t sure why. It went deeper than just, shoplifting was kind of trashy and she wanted him to like her. Maybe that was what it was about at first. But what it became was a source of triumph for her like she’d pulled the wool over his eyes. Like she’d tricked poor, dumb Sam Dupont, whose only crime was liking her, into thinking that she was this sweet girl who
blushed. He thought that Ren was the kind of person who was embarrassed to get caught putting something back on the wrong shelf at Walmart.

It was so easy to make Sam happy.

If she’d made it to graduation, like she’d promised, if she’d just been there, dressed nice and acting excited for him, that would have been all it would take. He would have been so happy.

She would've pretended to be the girl from Sam’s story, she really would have. She would have done that for Sam. She liked to do things like that for him. It seemed only fair, since she’d tricked him into loving her. No one made Sam happy like that girl could.

That day, the very last day, Sam had found her awake but lying still as a corpse, laid out in the grass. A shadow loomed over her but she hadn’t been ready to open her eyes.

“You’re like a cat,” the shadow had said. “Always looking for a sunspot.”

Ren had looked at him then, at the hand Sam held out to pull her out of the grass where she’d stretched out after her shift at the Inn.

“It’s time to go,” Sam said. Ren had wanted to shout, YES, yes it is, and how did you know? But she knew that wasn’t what Sam had meant.

So, she’d ignored his hand, retied the strings of the bikini she always wore under her shorter than regulation black uniform shorts, and lifted herself up on her own.

“If your mother wanted me at this thing,” she’d tried one more time. “She would have invited me.”

“She does want you there. Mom’s just not great at reaching out.”

Sam had reached down to pull free a coil of Ren’s hair from behind her ear, brushed off her back, tidying her up and not bothering to hide it. She was covered in grass and dust and crawlies
that got stuck in the baby oil she’d doused herself in. She never brought a towel. She liked to feel all the living things around her, to know that if she died there she might just rejoin them, go on feeding the ground forever.

“Is that what you’re wearing?”

The question had sparked something in her. It should have been outrage but she’d already started missing him and she wasn’t even gone yet, so all she could muster up was a kind of listless annoyance.

“I’ve got a dress in my car.”

She didn’t mention how it had gotten there; that is, shucked on the way to work after sleeping over at the apartment of the cook at the Inn. Pickle Jar Ren would never. The morning after the real Ren, she hadn’t felt regret or happiness or joy or freedom or much of anything really. She’d changed quickly into the spare t-shirt the cook had in his closet and made do with a pair of black dance shorts she’d found in the corner of her trunk, shooting up a tiny prayer of thanks for Birdie Baggarly and those four pointless years of ballet tap, lyrical, and jazz she’d paid for. Birdie had wanted to be Ren’s mother so badly. It made hating her harder than it should've been.

Ren had been a good enough dancer to be named Sweet Potato Queen three years in a row, not good enough to take it any further. Ren wasn't really even sure what farther looked like, just that it didn’t look like tanning in the grass outside her dead end job, didn’t look like aimless hours in the sun with the bugs thinking she might just die there at any moment, but unable to move just the same.

They’d gone to the same high school, Sam and Ren. They might’ve met there if Ren had stayed a cheerleader, but she’d been kicked off before the end of freshman year, which, by then,
suited her just fine. They’d given her multiple chances. She’d been a good flyer, could’ve been a very good tumbler with some work.

Now it didn’t matter anymore, but before Ren had wondered if there wasn’t an alternate version of her existing in some parallel place, a Ren who hadn’t turned up to practice smelling like last night’s party and that morning’s joint, a Pickle Jar Ren, but for real. She wondered if somewhere, floating through high school in hair ribbons, carrying cookies for bake sales, was a Ren who knew Sam before it was too late, Ren who could be someone he deserved, someone who could be good for him, nicer to Birdie, kinder to herself. Someone who’d done better, been better. Someone who deserved better.
CHAPTER II

MEL

Mel Ivey—short for Melodee—didn’t have a lot of patience with nostalgia. She hadn’t, for example, wrapped her daughter’s baby clothes in tissue when they were too small, packing them away in boxes for them both to go through when Bonnie was older. She’d placed an ad for the outgrown items on the Facebook group for Chapel Hill moms with children about Bonnie’s age, and what didn’t sell there she bagged and dropped off in the wooden chest outside Goodwill.

Mel’s husband, Beau, blamed her lack of emotional attachment on not having childhood holiday traditions.

“What do you mean, you did something different every year?” Beau had asked, appalled, during their first Christmas together.

Those first few years she’d spent with Beau and his family, Mel had felt like an anthropological observer. It was all just so foreign. Attendance was mandatory. Every immediate family member—Beau’s parents, Bill and Ellen; Molly Caroline and Katharine, Beau’s bird-like, pearl-wearing sisters; and, Luke and Nick, their wholly interchangeable husbands—was present every year without fail.

It wasn’t that Mel would have preferred to go home. Mel’s little brother Sammy had his own life, Paw didn’t know one way or another by that point, and God knew she didn’t owe her mother more than a courtesy phone call. But, it did rankle her sometimes that the option was not even on the table.

And amongst Beau’s people, her own family situation was referred to in hushed tones like you might talk about the bad accident you drove by on the freeway.
“And just how is your mother these days,” Ellen would say over the fruitcake, her razor pointed chin tilted down and softened.

There was always fruitcake—it was a favorite of Molly Caroline—and there were cucumber sandwiches for Katharine, and roast beef for Beau, and an onion loaf that no one ever touched. For the life of her, Mel couldn’t work out why someone kept making it. There was never more than a bite or two gone when it was time to clean up, but there it sat, year after year, simply because it always had.

Traditions, Mel’s observations had informed her, were less about what people wanted and more a ritual that bound everyone together until they were all just shared experiences and symbiotic memories.

Well, Mel and Sammy, they had their own tradition: the care and keeping of Dewey, their scattered, inconsistent mother. It was too late for Mel to be bound to Beau’s family by fruitcake and uneaten onion loaf. That became clear whenever she forgot to do something obvious like thank Molly Caroline for a gift they both knew she hated. No one ever got angry with her. It was somehow worse when they exchanged looks like she was a shelter dog Beau had brought home tracking mud all through their pristine familial bliss.

Beau would sometimes make things worse by defending her.

“Hey now, nobody raised her,” he’d joke, throwing an arm around Mel’s shoulder. “My baby’s free-range.” And she’d have to pretend to laugh, pretend to find it funny.

She didn’t even want to imagine the look on Beau’s face if she were to actually tell him the truth about her mother.
Beau had a look he always got when she accidentally revealed something too dark about her upbringing. There was a forced casualness around his mouth, a practiced sympathetic tilt to his head, an undeniable panic in his eyes.

When he got that look, Mel imagined he could hear his mother’s voice in his head saying “Some wounds just don’t heal, you know.”

Mel figured out early in their marriage the best way to manage Beau whenever she went too far and revealed too much. She lied, and then she diverted.

“They were great Christmases, don’t get me wrong,” she’d tell him. And then she’d tell him the true story of the first Christmas after Dewey abandoned them at their grandfather’s. Paw, thinking he was on his own land, had cut down a fir belonging to Quigg Procter, their nearest neighbor, a half crazy man with no family and a beard to the middle of his chest.

Beau had laughed until he cried at how Quigg had turned up on Christmas day, shotgun in hand, ready to steal his tree back, ornaments and all.

And most of the time, that was all it took. A wry smile. A silly story.

“Well, you know my family,” she’d say and boom, they were back on the same team. Team Ivey. Team Normal. Team Happy Family.

She didn’t talk about how it was before Dewey left them because probably the worst case scenario those years was that their mother just didn’t come home, and that just didn’t make for a very funny story.

No, that wasn’t even right. The worst case scenario was that Dewey did come home, but she acted sullen and awful until Mel wished, not that she’d behave, but that she’d go back to wherever she sometimes spent her nights, to wherever she came back from, smelling smoky and strange with her lipstick gone and a strip of fake lashes stuck sideways to her cheek.
Even then though, Mel had always made things okay for Sammy’s sake. Whether Dewey was there or not, Mel had gone down to the 7-11—always around the corner somehow, no matter where they were living at the time—and buy or steal, depending on how old she was, cans of Chef Boyardi and Vienna Sausages and boxes of Little Debbie cakes. Then she’d set them out like a feast on the pieces of Dewey’s mother’s china that survived the latest move.

She’d wrap Sam’s presents even though they were never much, because shoplifting from toy stores became next to impossible around the holidays. Usually she gave him a book or comic, still wrapped in protective plastic coating from where she’d smuggled it out under her jacket from the school library. Sam had always liked to read.

“Yeah, you get to keep it,” she’d tell him, “long as you don’t take it to school with you,” and then she’d watch as he ran his hands over it reverently, because it was his and not on loan. It was perfect because on the small chance that Dewey actually noticed, they could just tell her it was borrowed.

There wasn’t much Mel wouldn’t do for her little brother.

Mel wasn’t at all sentimental. Even so, when she pushed through the door of the Sugartown Inn—which wasn’t an inn, had maybe not ever been an inn—for the first time in nearly a decade, she felt oddly pleased that it hardly changed at all.

In fact, the Inn looked mostly the same as it had when Mel had worked there. The black and white tiles. The long rows of booths along the back wall, the cluster of two person tables with their rickety black chairs, the pine counter with the cash register that looked like it was purchased in 1972. It probably had been, Mel noted, shifting her three year old daughter to a more comfortable place on her hip and glancing around the nearly empty restaurant for her mother.
It was just after ten when she arrived to pick up Dewey—they’d agreed to meet at 9:30 but Mel knew how her mother’s internal clock worked—and by then, the last of the breakfast crowd was just trickling out.

There were two teenage waitresses wearing black shorts, black shirts, and pink aprons, a uniform that hadn’t changed since Mel had worn it. The older of the two brushed past Mel where she stood, pointedly not looking at her. Mel knew that old chestnut: if the girl didn’t see her, she didn’t have to wait on her. It wasn’t like Mel was inconspicuous either, a pregnant lady—not, she thought with a little pride, that anyone could tell that just yet—standing stock still in the middle of a near empty room with Bonnie starting to squirm in her arms.

It was kind of funny, the way memory worked. It was almost like an organ the way it functioned of its own accord. Like her heart pumped blood without being told, her memory kept collecting and saving bits of information whether she liked it or not. Mel hadn’t worked a shift at the Inn since high school but she knew that the breakfast diners were nearly all old folks who sat at the bar and ate two dollar omelettes that they complained were too hot. They drank sweet coffee and talked about who wasn’t there because they couldn’t drive anymore and who wasn’t there because they were dead.

She remembered other things about Sugartown too.

It was a peculiar place. Every small town was peculiar, in Mel’s opinion, because people were peculiar, especially when left alone. That was what a small town was, in Mel’s opinion, a few people left alone together. Mel had plenty to compare. She’d lived everywhere. Her wild, rootless mother had given her a wild, rootless childhood. Beau had once asked the names of all the places she’d lived before Dewey had left them, and Mel hadn’t had an answer for him. But Sugartown was especially strange. It had a strange history that Paw had delighted in telling her.
“Some ten or twenty houses,” he told one evening while they sat on the front porch and watched the fireflies. “Make up the real Sugartown.”

“If you go up Center, turn left, follow the railroad tracks and just keep on going, they’re almost all still standing. That was the redlight district of the Southern states, the wildest place south of New York and north of New Orleans. You could get the company of pretty women, some who still had a few teeth left. Folks played cards and nobody bothered nobody. It was the best America has ever been, and you can take that to the bank.”

By that point, Mel knew better than to interrupt Paw when he was telling a story even if he took a maddeningly long pause. But still, she couldn’t help herself.

“Was it legal?”

“Legal the way shine is legal,” Paw had said, chewing on a piece of long grass.

“But moonshine is illegal,” she’d said.

“Not if you share it,” he told her.

“Like a bribe?”

“Like,” Paw paused to consider. A firefly lit the air beside his face and she saw him grin.

“Like bein’ a good neighbor.”

Beau loved the Sugartown story most of all. He was fascinated with the place and constantly brought up the idea of moving there.

The first time he mentioned it, Mel thought he was joking. She had laughed, albeit weakly, because the joke was one of his favorites. The punchline was, of course, Mel’s little hick town and by extension, the little hick life she’d led prior to meeting him and that whole refrain was entirely overplayed in Mel’s opinion. But Beau hadn’t been joking.
“Think about it, Mel,” he said. “We could buy one of those old whorehouses— you could live in the Best Little Whorehouse in North Carolina.”

And then he’d started singing some song she was pretty sure was from Cabaret so she’d been able to divert his attention with a strip tease.

The second and third times he’d mentioned it, Mel had pretended to take an important phone call from Bonnie’s preschool, but the fourth time he’d insisted she hear him out.

“We’d be closer to your family.”

“We live far away from my family for a reason.”

“I always wanted to live in the country.”

“There’s a whole lot of country that doesn’t have my mother in it.”

“Even you have to agree, that kind of town is better for raising kids.”

“Raising them in what? Secondhand smoke and racism?”

“Think of Bonnie getting the kind of childhood you had.”

As a matter of fact, Mel had thought about it. Nothing scared her more. It wasn’t that she hadn’t been happy there; she had. Paw had been odd, but he’d loved her. She’d been jaded and cynical, thirteen years old going on forty-five, and Paw had dragged her, kicking and screaming back into childhood. He’d given her the gift of a couple of years to actually be a kid. She’d gotten to go to school, the same school for more than a few months. She’d played in the backyard in the tall grass until her skin had turned the color of an acorn. She’d lived in a house that didn’t have wheels under it.

Paw’s house was a brown frame that might’ve been painted blue once, judging by the flecks of robin’s egg on some of the less exposed planks, the ones on the tree side or close to the foundation. It was two stories tall and shaped like a box. It had a tin roof that got so hot in the
summertime that you could fry an egg on its surface. Mel knew that to be fact because one afternoon not long after they’d arrived when Mel was still so despondent at being left behind that she hardly came out of her room to eat, Paw had rapped on her door until she’d gotten out of bed. He’d brought her to the side of the house where he’d already dragged the rusty ladder, given her an egg, and told her to climb up there and cook it. Mel had burned the tips of her fingers and the egg was over easy to be sure, but you could eat it.

Paw had ideas. They weren’t always good ones, but they were almost always fun.

Mel would always be grateful to Paw, but she didn’t believe in going backwards. And going back was always going backwards. Especially since Dewey had moved back, since she’d taken over Paw’s house and started trying to actually be a mom to Sam. The whole place had been spoiled for her. Mel’s Sugartown had taken on an eerie, unreal feeling like Dewey was a ghost haunting her old life, taking over what used to feel like a particularly cozy, if outgrown, sweater. Or maybe a pair of shoes would be a better metaphor. A pair of too small, out of fashion shoes that you couldn’t bring yourself to throw out and still reached for in moments of weakness, only to regret it later when you’d rubbed the skin on your heel raw; yes, that was how Mel felt about it when Paw was still alive.

Now when Mel was forced to return to Sugartown, she usually left again with all the relief of an escapee from a cult. Driving back to her house with Beau and Bonnie was like reentering a world where things made sense. Where the governing rules were sane and fair. Where the pace might be a little quicker, sure, but at least no one was forcing you to eat a Brightleaf hotdog and smell the hog farm where its unnaturally red parts were harvested at the same time.
The other places, the places they’d lived before with Dewey, all ran together. The trailer parks mostly seemed the same no matter what new town or city they were in. It was Dewey who changed. In the early days, when they first got to a new place, it felt different, cleaner and purer than the place before. That was due to Dewey; she had a magic to her. She could make frightening things feel like adventures, and moving on never like running away.

For the first weeks, she’d come in late— no matter where they were, she always came in late— from wherever she was working. It was always some club or another where the money was going to be “really good, so much better than that last shithole, I tell you what.” She would nudge Mel and Sam awake smelling like perfume and the smoke of the last cigarette of the night. Humming, she’d lead them back to her room where they’d all pile in bed and watch whatever was on the black and white channel.

Then Dewey would meet whoever. It didn’t really matter what he did. Dewey was just happiest, loved herself best, when she was loving somebody. For Dewey, finding a new man was her religion. Like the actress she’d always wanted to be, she slipped into the skin of the woman he could best love, and she’d be patient with him and sweet. She’d sing while she cooked (nothing more complicated than Campbell’s soup), she brushed Mel’s hair slowly, never jerking at the tangles. She tickled Sammy and swung her hips when she walked and glowed until she almost seemed too bright too look at.

But it never lasted. There would be no big fight, no final blow up, not from Dewey’s end anyway. There was never any warning for whoever he was, but Mel always knew. She could feel it. Dewey got distracted. Then her edges, blurred by affection, would sharpen back into view. She got mean. And then it was over. As if in a dark place inside her, some tectonic plate would shift. Some itch would take Dewey over, and she would tell them it was time to go. It was like
they were all trapped in a game she didn’t know she was playing and when the game was over, it was as if the man—and the woman she’d been with him—had never existed. So they would move.

To an outsider, it might’ve seemed like the crux of the problem was that Dewey didn’t like staying put. Sammy’s dad called her a tumbleweed, and Mel wouldn’t know what her own father called her. It might’ve just been that so many people called her special when she was young. Beautiful, they said, and “too good for this place,” until she got it in her head that she was too good for any one place, any one life.

But Mel thought it was something else, something deeper in her, the same instinct that a caterpillar has. Dewey was only made for moving on.

Eventually she’d moved on from her children too. Mel should have seen it coming, but that one had surprised her. They drove down to Sugartown from Tennessee where they’d rented a double-wide outside Chattanooga (“just until something better comes along”), and even by the time the three of them were standing on Paw’s doorstep, Mel still hadn’t figured out what was happening.

Mel, who had just turned thirteen, was in charge of looking after Sammy, of course. She always looked after Sam. She held his little grubby hand to keep him still and away from the patches of wood on the porch that looked rotten.

In the car on the way, Dewey told them that it had been a long time since she’d seen her daddy.

“So you had better stay quiet and let me do the talking,” she said, eyes going slitty in the way that told Mel she meant it.
Sam’s hand had felt damp like he was nervous, but that was just how his hands always felt. Maybe he was always nervous. He was a serious five year old with a round, chubby face and brown hair that hardly ever got cut and hung, long and stringy, around his face, making him look like an ugly girl.

Dewey had put on her best smile, the one that showed off her good teeth and hid all her bad ones when Paw, the grandfather Mel had never met, answered the door. He hadn’t looked especially surprised to see his daughter standing there with two kids he’d never seen.

Paw was a big man. He filled the door frame, towering over Dewey. He had a head full of still-black hair, a mustache to match, and bushy, wild eyebrows that went every which way over bright blue eyes.

“You two head on round back,” Paw had said to Mel and Sam. His voice was gruff, but Mel had liked him immediately. “You can put your feet in the creek but stay outta the woods and don’t you go past the little house.”

Then he’d held the screen open for Dewey and she’d gone inside looking younger and smaller than Mel would’ve ever thought it possible for her to look. In the backyard was a rusty car splayed upside-down like a roach on its back, the husk of a burnt out shed, and a playhouse where Mel and Sam, lulled by the cicada song, had fallen asleep in the playhouse with Dewey’s name on the front plaque; and, by the time, they woke up, the night was quiet but for Paw’s voice calling them in for some supper, and Dewey was gone.

Mel didn’t mean to remember all this—she’d be more than happy to forget, to free up some much needed space in her head for information that was actually relevant to her life—but she did.
It was the fear of all the other things she might remember against her will that had her meeting Dewey at the Inn instead of at Paw’s house to begin with.

Dewey was running late, even later than Mel’s planning had allowed. Bonnie’s diaper bag was digging into her shoulder. Bonnie never wriggled to get down like other three-year-olds might. Instead, an already solid, heavy little girl, she had the habit of somehow actually making herself heavier, pushing downward in her arms and defying the laws of physics in her bid for freedom. She was precocious, a solemn, quiet thing with heavy dark brows that hung low over her eyes always making her look serious, pensive, almost wise.

Mel settled Bonnie in a faded yellow booth that faced the bar and sat across from her. A pimple faced kid Mel didn’t recognize who must have taken over as manager was shouting something rude to the short order cook about the lunch special he’d chosen, a scene that felt eerily familiar, like watching one’s deja vu play out on a screen. The new manager stood where the old one had, stood just like him, really. It was like watching puppets suspended from the ceiling by invisible string, like scenes of another life that she knew as well, if not better, than her own.

Behind him, the two waitresses had started cleaning up breakfast. The bolder of the two, the one who was still ignoring Mel, leaned against her broom and pulled a face at the other girl. She tossed her long blonde hair and pursed her lips, mimicking the poor manager’s increasingly desperate posturing. Her friend looked unsure whether or not to laugh. Just as she’d given in and started to giggle, the young man whipped around, catching them both. Mortified, the friend ducked into the kitchen, but the blonde girl didn’t even blush.

“Sorry,” she said, not looking it. She had a pointed face and a grin like a fox, open mouthed and gleeful.
“Yeah, you look real sorry, Miss Ren,” Dewey said from behind Mel.

Mel turned around and there Dewey stood behind her, hands on her hips.

“Finally,” Mel said, collecting her bag from under the table and getting clumsily to her feet. “We’re not late yet but—“

“You might as well sit back down,” Dewey commanded, walking past Mel toward the bar. “I need a biscuit.”

Dewey wasn’t a wholly bad person, Mel knew that much from therapy. She just did things differently from how Mel—or any decent, feeling, reasonable, responsible, compassionate, or rational human being—might do them.

Despite her hackles rising at the idea of Dewey ordering her around—it was fifty-four minutes after their scheduled meeting time—there wasn’t time for Mel to throw the temper tantrum she wanted and probably deserved. They were already late and if Dewey said they were staying to eat, they were staying to eat, so they might as well get on with it.

Mel wouldn’t start a fight. It was Sam’s day. He was the only reason she didn’t jump to her feet, scoop up her daughter and leave without another word, why she didn’t get in her car and drive back to Chapel Hill where she had a house and a husband and a life that made sense. Sam’s sweet face kept Mel rooted to the booth.

Sam didn’t hate or blame Dewey. At least, not like Mel did. Maybe he’d been too young to understand or maybe he was just blessed with a more forgiving temperament. She thought sometimes that it might be easier for sons to forgive mothers.

But that wasn’t completely fair either. Hadn’t she all but forgiven Dewey up until she’d had Bonnie? It was only after she’d had her daughter that she understood fully what it was that
Dewey did the day she left them at Paw’s. It was unforgivable. Mothers didn’t abandon their children.

Sam though, he had managed to find some sort of peace with Dewey. Never mind that it was Mel who had been the only constant in his life. Never mind that Mel had filled the role of mother for so many years, even when she was just a child herself. Sam loved Dewey and he wanted her around.

When Mel was being fair, she could admit that it made some kind of sense. Dewey had, after all, been back in his life for years, since he started high school. Sam’s freshman year was also the year Paw had been found in a hospital seventy miles from the house thinking he was twenty-two and still running the numbers for Roger Bifford, the same year Mel got married, and Dewey came back for good.

Sam loved Dewey, so Mel could be civil on the day he graduated from high school, and more than that, she could make damn sure Dewey didn’t ruin things for him. Dewey would have probably missed the whole thing if she were left to her own devices. Then she would act so pitiful—she just had no idea they’d be starting so early—that everyone had no choice but to forgive her.

Mel knew the routine. So, she’d offered to ride over together. No crisis, car trouble, poor time management, or misunderstanding would keep Dewey from being there for her son today.

Settling back into the booth to wait, Mel turned and got her first look at her mother since she’d last seen her, more than a year ago before Paw’s funeral.

She looked good. Dewey always looked good.
That mama of yours,” the old church ladies always said on those rare Sundays, usually Easter and maybe once around Christmas, when Paw took Mel and Sam to church. “Won every crown in this part of the state. She could’ve been in the movies. ”

And Mel had understood. When Mel was small, Dewey had seemed almost too beautiful to be real. Mel was often told that she looked like her mother, and it was true, but a bit of a cruel comparison. Mel was the funhouse version, sharper and pointier. They had the same widow’s peak, dark hair and eyes, but Dewey’s nose was snubbed where Mel’s was long, thin, and with a bump in the middle from a softball she hadn’t caught. Dewey’s chin, tapered and delicate was a smaller version of Mel’s Wicked Witch of the West point. They even smiled the same smile with their lips closed tight, in Dewey’s case to conceal her teeth. Mel’s teeth at least were perfect, white and straight. She hardly ever even got a cavity.

But, Mel realized with a happy jolt, Dewey was finally starting to look her age. Years of smoking and tanning had begun to carve out creases and lines around her eyes and, especially, above her upper lip. She was dying her hair a true black, a heavy one dimensional shade that absorbed all sunlight.

For as long as Mel could remember, Dewey had kept diligent control of her diet and her figure—always petite—was now bordering on skinny. Dewey had always said there was an age where a woman had to choose between her ass and her face. From the looks of it, Dewey was choosing her ass. As her mother reached across the bar to pick up a menu, Mel noted the clearest evidence of all: her arms were all ropey, corded muscle.

Dewey rejoined Mel in the booth and the blonde girl, Ren, placed glasses in front of the three of them. As the she walked away, Dewey inclined her head.

“Sam’s girl,” Dewey said.
Mel looked up, watching the girl with more interest. Across the room, Ren had gone back to imitating the manager, this time to his face. He threw a rag at her and laughing, she caught it and started wiping down the counters.

To distract herself from looking again at the time on her phone screen, Mel took a sip of the drink Dewey had ordered her. Tea, so sweet it made her mouth pucker—of course. She moved the second cup up and out of Bonnie’s reach. Mel had never let her have that much sugar at one time; one sip, and she’d probably be awake until Christmas.

“Y’all eat yet?” Dewey asked. She still hadn’t, Mel noted sourly, said hello.

“Yes,” Mel said. Well, Bonnie had. Mel’s stomach had been tied in knots for the better part of the week in anticipation of a day spent with her mother.

Ren set some godawful of biscuit-gravy combination in front of Dewey. Dewey didn’t say thank you.

“Good lord, girl,” she said through an enormous bite. A bit of gravy was hanging onto her lip. “You’re going to the graduation like that?”

It was more of an accusation than a question. Ren looked up and to the right like she wanted to be anywhere else.

“I’ve got something else in my car, Ms. Dupont,” she said. The words were normal enough but there was something about her delivery; it was mechanical, too perfect, and incongruous with her shifty face. Because she was being interrogated by Dewey, probably, Mel thought with a wave of sympathy.

Dewey’s eyes narrowed.

“Sam’s expecting you,” she said.

“I said I’d be there,” the girl said looking all the more like an animal in a trap.
Mel felt it was time to rescue her.

“Dewey,” she said.

Dewey finally looked away. Ren took her dismissal and flitted away. Dewey watched her go with slitty eyes.

“Feral,” Dewey pronounced.

“Mama,” Mel said.

“I’m just sayin’ is all.”

Bonnie reached out for the cup Mel had pushed away from her and Dewey obligingly pushed it closer.

Before Mel could stop her, Bonnie had picked up the cup with both hands. At the first sip—there hadn’t been that much sugar in her birthday cake—her eyes became perfectly round.

“Thanks,” Mel said to Dewey, trying not to sound stiff uncomfortably aware that the funny thing about trying not to sound stiff was how it always made a person sound stiff.

Finally, when she’d sopped up the last of the brown gravy with the last crumb of her biscuit, Dewey stood and smacked her lips.

“All righty, sweet Melodee,” she said. “Let’s hit the road.”

Dewey stood and flipped her hair over, scrunching it for volume. Her hair was layered up for volume and sprayed within an inch of its life. She wore it too long for a woman her age. The length made her lined face all the more jarring in comparison and Mel didn’t know where she found the time to curl it every day, but she guessed it was Dewey’s job now to take time on her appearance now that she was a beautician. It had been her job back when she was a stripper too, just in a different way. As for Mel, she’d cut her long hair off three months after Bonnie was
born. It wasn’t any kind of tragic mom-cut. She’d kept it shaggy and trendy but decidedly wash and go. It suited her.

Her mother’s outfit was as ridiculous as the rest of her, black pencil skirt, leopard belt, shocking pink sweater and matching Barbie heels, but Mel didn’t say a word. It didn’t take much for Dewey to throw a tantrum, to insist they go back home for her to change, to cause them to miss the graduation ceremony altogether.

“Don’t call me that, Dewey,” Mel said. Her mother knew how much she hated the stupid name. But Dewey widened her eyes anyway, like Mel was being unreasonably rude.

“Melodee?” She made it three distinct words, the way she always had. “It’s a beautiful name.”

Dewey always did this. They’d only been together a few minutes, but already Mel was the monster and Dewey was the attacked, the poor thing who was just doing the best she could.

Mel practiced breathing deeply as she buckled Bonnie into her carseat, trying not to pull the straps too roughly in her annoyance.

This is for a good cause, she reminded herself. It helped the tiniest bit so she did it again, this time like a prayer. This is for a good cause. This is for Sam.

“It’s French,” her mother was saying as she climbed into the passenger seat. She closed the door carefully, Mel knew, so as not to slam it.

“It’s misspelled,” Mel fastened her own seatbelt with a snap.

As routines went, theirs was tired, but still Mel couldn’t seem to make herself stop. Ellen’s voice played in her own head this time, the first time Beau had brought Mel home.

“Mel,” Ellen had said in her measured way. “That’s short for Melanie?”
No, her name was short for Melodee because her mother had been a teenager and stupid, stupid enough to get knocked up in the first place, stupid enough to misspell Melody on the goddamn birth certificate. Not that Dewey would ever admit that it, like Mel’s conception, was a mistake.

“Yes ma’am,” Mel had lied to Beau’s mother who stood there in her Lily Pulitzer dress with her fake nails that were so well done they looked real.

It had made for an awkward moment when it came time to order the wedding invitations.

“M-e-l-o-d-e-e,” she’d spelled over the phone. The pause had been long. Mel had been able her almost mother-in-law’s breathing stutter and catch.

Inhale. Yes.

Exhale. *Everything you feared was correct.*

Double inhale. *Your son is marrying trailer trash.*

*Don’t worry,* she’d tried to telepathically communicate over the phone. *I love your son and I’m not marrying him for his money.*

Well, not entirely.

Driving through the streets of Sugartown with her mother, though, it was hard to deny she’d done well for herself. Having money was nice, that was for sure. A lifetime of motels and trailers had made Paw’s farmhouse feel like a palace, made Beau’s family’s wealth almost unimaginable. Bill and Ellen’s house was a huge stone thing, decorated artfully enough to warrant an Our State feature, not that they’d ever consent to anything so gauche, and the house Mel and Beau had moved into was almost as grand, sprawling across an enormous manicured lawn, in a charming neighborhood with great schools for Bonnie when the time came.
Mel had gone to the same big county school as Sam, an underfunded, understaffed behemoth that pulled from three or four other single stoplight towns in addition. Driving the familiar route from the Inn to Lightville County High felt unnatural, like going backward.

Along those well known streets, the white Dogwoods and pink Judas trees were in bloom.

“Happened overnight,” Dewey said when Mel commented on how pretty they were. As if that wasn’t how plants worked.

“Like always,” Mel said. The words were already out of her mouth when she recognized them as almost rude, or at least condescending.

She reached across the console to turn on the radio. She’d take anything. Showtunes. Rap. A political infomercial. A jingle for carpet cleaning.

The station with the least fuzz was old country, of course. As Johnny Cash warbled through maudlin lyrics that felt strangely appropriate to Mel’s mood, Dewey rolled the window down a quarter and tapped a new pack of Virginia Slims against her wrist. From her side Mel rolled Dewey’s window back up again. Dewey cut her eyes sideways but returned the pack to her purse.

In the backseat, Bonnie cried out for her favorite CD, a group of talking, singing vegetables. Mel gratefully switched from the radio to the first and only option in the changer; behind her, Bonnie’s quieting was the only indication of her joy.

Mel just kept breathing, focusing on the inhale, the exhale, and song of the carrot coming through the speakers about the importance of regular eye exams.

“So, how’s everything been?” Mel waited until they were nearly there to force herself to ask. She felt a proud of her tone. Light, but concerned, it hopefully gave no indication that she felt guilty at not coming back to check on her mother or her little brother since Paw died.
“Different,” Dewey said. She didn’t look at Mel, but there was something defiant about her tone. But then they were pulling into the parking lot of the school where an Eagle Scout was directing traffic.

It appeared that Mel’s finagling with meeting times had worked and they’d actually made it on time. She was rescued from delving any deeper into conversation with Dewey by the arrival of Sam who filled the car window with wide linebacker shoulders and an even wider grin.

He couldn’t have been waiting for them long but already he had a light film of sweat on his forehead. Was he nervous or just hot? It was only the end of April but already humidity sat heavy in the air.

Sam looked bigger. Maybe it was shapeless polyester gown, or maybe he was just holding his head up in a way Mel had never seen before. But no, when Mel hugged him, she could hardly get her arms all the way around. He was so tall it made Mel wonder if Dewey had been lying when she’d claimed the mechanic—Jeff?—was Sam’s father. The Jeff in Mel’s memory had been not much bigger than she—she’d been tall for her age—and Sam was well over six feet.

Even if it wasn’t true, Dewey had done well, naming Jeff; unlike Mel’s father who had never given her so much as a phone call, Sam’s dad had always made every child support payment on time.

Not that Jeff would be there on the football field with them. But Mel doubted Sam had bothered to call him. Her brother wasn’t one to seek attention. Sam took care of himself. Mel shouldn’t ever have to worry about him, but she did.

Sam let Mel fuss over him, then obligingly made her way over to Dewey—now standing on the grassy lot having leapt from the car before Mel had even come to a full stop and
immediately lit her cigarette—to let her do the same while Mel busied herself with Bonnie who was resisting her efforts to pull her from her carseat.

“So proud of my boy,” Dewey said straightening the tassel around his neck. Mel fought the urge to roll her eyes, but Sam looked pleased even as he brushed off her praise and led them toward the base of the bleachers.

“I have to go get in line. Do you mind waiting here for Ren?” Sam addressed Dewey, not Mel who nodded and waved him off and Sam loped off toward the section in the middle of the green where the crowd of students had gathered.

Mel hoisted Bonnie higher on her hip and made a mental note to speak to her trainer about adding in some strength training to her workouts.

“Want me to take her?” Dewey held out her free hand.

“No thank you,” Mel said instead of one of the myriad less pleasant retorts that ran through her head in the moment. From the look on her mother’s face, she might as well have said them all. But she could look wounded all she wanted. Mel knew from experience that the little round burns hurt worse, whether they were an accident or not.

“Suit yourself,” Dewey dropped the butt in the grass, stamping it out expertly with her tiny pointed heel.

“Don’t litter,” Mel muttered. In Chapel Hill someone would have noticed. Likely a someone wearing purple novelty glass and a t-shirt with a bumper sticker phrase, and carrying an emotional support animal.

But as far as Mel could tell, no one in the bleachers, no one was gearing up to lecture Dewey.
“You know all this land,” Dewey stepped up onto the first metal row and swept her arm wide, encompassing the football field. “Used to grow tobacco. It ain’t littering if you’re sending ‘em home.”

“Airtight logic, Ma.” Mel said.

Mel waffled a moment, debating telling her mother the news. She was three months along and already showing. It was, she decided, as good a time as any.

“I’d appreciate you not smoking around me until the baby’s born,” she said. Mel would actually have much appreciated Dewey not smoking around the baby after it was born either, or around Bonnie for that matter, but she’d learned to choose her battles; and besides, they saw Dewey once a year at best.

Her own heel chose that moment to sink in the mud and she overbalanced. Spry as a child, Dewey jumped back down off the bleachers and held out her arms for Bonnie.

“Come and see your grandma now,” Dewey cooed.

It was almost imperceptible how she tripped over the word. They hadn’t spent enough time together for any of them to get comfortable with Dewey being “Grandma.” Mel too felt a little alarmed at the idea. There was an awkward pause as the word hung in the air.

“They can call you Dewey,” Mel said after a moment.

“Well, we’ll see,” Dewey said, but Mel thought she looked relieved. “Another baby,” Dewey said. She wasn’t crying or screaming or collapsing into hysterics at least. “Don’t expect to lose the weight as fast as you did with the first,” she said finally. “It’s harder the second time around.”

She was still reaching out for Bonnie who buried her head in Mel’s shoulder. Dewey dropped her hands.
“I hope the next one likes me better,” Dewey said. She pulled the heavy diaper bag off Mel’s shoulder, looped it around her own arm and led the way, carving them both a path.

“You ought to make her walk some,” she added over her shoulder. “Her legs ain’t broke.”

“Didn’t Sam want us to wait?” Mel extracted her heel from the mud to follow. Without turning around, Dewey waved the idea away at once.

“I told you,” she said. “His girl’s feral. She’ll find her own way whether we wait or not.”

Mel put her bag on the seat beside to her to save a place for Ren, but Dewey was right in the end. The girl from the diner never did show up.

“What did I tell you?” Dewey said at the end of the ceremony, nodding toward the empty spot where she should have been.

Dewey pulled out a powder compact to fix the tracks of black mascara and eyeliner that ran up and down her cheeks, but Mel wasn’t sure why she was bothering to clean herself up. She’d worked hard enough to play the role of Mother: hysterical with pride. They hadn’t even called Sam’s name yet when Dewey started in on the tears. And no sooner was Sam visible at the edge of the straining plywood stage that sat on the fifty yard line was she off with heaving ostentatious sobs.

“How long have they been dating?” Mel asked. Dewey had disposed of her program by throwing it through the gaps onto the ground—“Whoops!”—so Mel folded hers and tucked it in her purse. Sam might want it someday.

“Don’t matter,” Dewey made a dismissive noise. She stood and picked up the diaper bag again. “They’re too young to be serious,” she added over her shoulder.
“Sam’s a serious kind of kid,” Mel said as she followed her.

“Well, he’s got a long road ahead with that one. I told you, she’s—“

“Feral, yeah, I got it,” Mel said. “You’d know all about that, I guess.”

She’d tacked on the last part quietly, but Dewey heard her just the same. She stopped walking and looked back at Mel, eyes narrowed.

Mel let a sigh escape. She’d been so good all day. Couldn’t Dewey let her have one?

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Mel began, but she had. She knew it and Dewey knew it too. Trying to force lightness back into her voice. “Where do you want to eat tonight?”

Dewey turned back around and didn’t answer. Someone less experienced with Dewey’s moods might’ve thought the storm had passed without an incident but Mel knew the set of her mother’s back, the stiffness of her neck.

“Didn’t you talk about it with Sam?”

“No we didn’t sit down this morning and plan out every second of the day. Goddamn, Melodee.”

A drop of sweat made its way down her neck. Another dipped between her boobs. Bonnie was all of a sudden lead in her arms, and Mel had a terrible feeling that when she put her down, there would be a damp imprint of a sweaty three year old girl on her blouse. Trying to ignore the fly that had begun buzzing around her face—probably it could tell she was about to drop—Mel put a hand on the hot metal railing of the stands to steady herself, already thinking of how she would keep Bonnie from landing headfirst on the concrete if she were to pass out.

And then Sam was there. He grabbed her elbow and helped her the rest of the way down, a shy, almost sheepish look on his face. Then he grabbed Bonnie and threw her in the air prompting a rare giggle.
This is for a good cause, Mel repeated her mantra. This is for Sam.

It wasn’t their usual dynamic, Sam helping her along. That was her job, sometimes encouraging, sometimes bullying, always for his own good.

“Oh Sammy, I’m so proud—“ she started to say, but her words were lost in Dewey’s wail.

“My baby—”

And Mel was shuffled to the side.

Dewey was an ostentatious feeler. She cried and laughed loudly, hugged when she was happy, slapped when enraged. She felt with her whole body, her whole soul, and insisted that people around her know it. In fact, she’d always felt so much that for Mel to feel anything overkill, just excess, wholly unnecessary. Mel was used to restraining herself, occupying small corners so that Dewey could fill the room.

Mel felt carefully. It suited her life with Beau, her reservation. Mel couldn’t picture Ellen red-faced with anger or crying fat tears until her mascara tattooed her cheeks. People who had money didn’t need to feel things so extravagantly.

Above the football field, a hundred red and yellow balloons had been released. She pointed them out to Bonnie. Bonnie was as silent as ever but her eyes did get big as she took in the lovely picture, a swarm of red and yellow above the clump of graduates.

Bonnie was like Sam, a solemn observer. When he was younger, Sam had been a worrier. He’d worried and fretted and frowned so intently and so often that he would get horrible headaches, sometimes lasting hours, sometimes days. Mel would close the blinds and put him to bed in a dark room until they went away.
Mel looked at her baby brother. The kid had grown up, all on his own. It was a comfort that Bonnie would never have to worry the way Sam had, would never have to look after herself, would never have to stand on her own so young the way they had, but still, Sammy done all right for himself.

In spite of Jeff and in spite of the woman who was now shouting Sam’s final GPA to anyone below the 100 yard line.

“Three point eight, and that’s with no AP courses to weigh it down—“ she was saying.

Since when did Dewey pay attention to a report card? Since when did she even know what an AP course was, much less how it factored into Sam’s GPA?

Sam’s coach, a permanently pink-faced man who always, every time Mel had seen him anyway, wore the same Alabama football sweatshirt and matching hat, to cover the swell of his beer belly and his receding hairline respectively ambled toward them to slap Sam on the back, and Dewey was momentarily distracted by the presence of a man to impress.

Mel took advantage of the quiet moment.

“I am so proud of you,” she told Sam, who shuffled his feet.

“It’s just high school,” he said, but a real smile played at the corners of his mouth. Mel started to tell him no, not to downplay his achievement, when Dewey broke in again.

“The Inn?” she asked.

“Aw no,” Mel said. “Sammy doesn't want to go there. We should go somewhere special.”

“No, the Inn works,” Sam said. “I ought to just wait here for Ren though,” he added, craning his neck to look over them, to look through the crowd. Mel turned around to look too, but saw no trace of blonde hair or a fox grin.

“We’ll meet you there then,” Mel said.
Sam nodded, still looking past her. That was how Mel and Dewey left him, and during everything that happened next, Mel would not be able to stop remembering how he’d looked in that moment; waiting, alone in the dim afternoon sun, under a sky eclipsed by an undulating sea of red and yellow balloons that, even as they rose, somehow looked just barely out reach.
CHAPTER III

DEWEY

Dewey Dupont made her own way in the world and didn’t care who knew it. Maybe that was why she hadn’t been worried when she’d first heard that the Baggarly girl had gone missing.

“Hear that?” Dewey always heard her daddy say to her mama while they watched her play with that tender mixture of anxiety and delight all new parents have watching their first child.

“That thudthudthud?” Paw would hit the sofa cushions like he was banging on bongoes. “That’s Dewey’s drummer,” he’d say.

Paw always understood. Even when her drummer took her down hard roads, even when it took her away from Sugartown, even when it brought her back again with two children in tow, Paw understood that Dewey was made of different stuff than most folks. A usual life wasn’t enough for her.

It was that drummer who sent her away from Sugartown when she was seventeen, sent her off chasing dreams of Los Angeles where she saw herself dancing in Poison videos and dating rockstars. Well, it was the drummer and someone else too who sent her running, but Dewey didn’t like to think of him.

Dewey never made it to LA, to the Poison videos or the rockstars, but she did dance. In clubs all across the USA, Dewey danced. She didn’t believe in regrets. Things happened the way they happened. Every joy and every tragedy she met found its place in her story. Regrets were for smaller minds than Dewey’s. Not that she didn’t have them, mind. You didn’t live the kind of life Dewey had lived and not have a few. But why dwell?
Dewey had come back to Sugartown for good when she realized just how sick her Paw was. That was four years ago, when Sammy was still just a freshman. And now here she was standing in her own salon.

Years of dancing in clubs had given her an eye for hair and makeup so Dewey had gone back to school late in life to get her beautician’s license shortly after coming home. Together—one of the last things he’d ever done—she and Paw had remodeled the shed in the backyard to be her shop, painting the purple walls and installing the hardly used, top of the line shampoo sink that Birdie Baggarly’s head was currently suspended over.

Regrets were for the birds, but Dewey did like to notice the little ironies. And the fact that Dewey Dupont was friends with Birdie Baggarly, well that, Dewey had to fight the urge to laugh manically as she mixed bleach in a plastic pan, was the biggest irony life had thrown her yet.

Out of the corner of her eye, Dewey watched Birdie’s face as she began painting her heavy salt, light pepper roots. It felt as though Birdie—well, all of them really—should have aged years in the past three months since the night of Sam’s graduation, but there Birdie sat, looking mostly the same as she had before Ren had disappeared. She even had some lipstick on. In fact, Dewey realized with admiration, you had to really look to see the circles under her eyes, how the lines around her mouth had deepened.

Dewey wasn’t sure the same could be said for her. She didn’t know if the change was evident to anyone looking at her, but Dewey felt like her whole body had been put in the washing machine, spin cycle, every day since Sam had stumbled into the Inn looking like a crazy person. He couldn’t find Ren, he told Dewey, and he thought something might really wrong.
It had been Mel who had been in town for Sam’s graduation and was still sitting there with her silent and— Dewey secretly thought—judgmental child, who’d suggested they call the girl’s parents. It had been a pretty reasonable suggestion.

“She’s a foster kid,” Dewey had said.

“Her foster parents then,” Mel had said, her pinched expression growing even tighter. It couldn’t be good for her face to always look like she’d swallowed a whole bunch of lemons, but Dewey guessed Mel could afford those treatments they did nowadays.

Dewey and Sam had exchanged a long look. Dewey didn’t know why Sam didn’t want the Baggarlys called. She only knew her own reasons.

Dewey and Birdie were unlikely friends to begin with. Birdie Baggarly, the preacher’s wife, was a childish waif of a woman whose immaculately maintained blonde hair— she’d once made Dewey promise that she would touch her roots in the coffin should they need attention— was soft and thin as candy floss from decades of double processing, and nearly as transparent.

But Birdie was the reason Dewey had a business at all. Sugartown was small. There was the Inn, the post office, the Piggly Wiggly, and the Baptist church and that was all of it. Most of Sugartown’s residents could track their genealogy back to the first families who settled there, and, having known one another for the better part of two hundred years, their chief occupation was talking about each other.

Had Dewey’s mother, Rose, been alive and cared enough to, she might have been able to curb some of the relentless talk that hounded her from the moment she came home. Paw was in the early stages of dementia, but even if he’d been able, he’d always been mostly exempt from the gossip as the local eccentric; that is, he’d been tolerated and left to his own devices, and he’d
always returned the favor. Dewey had been on her own, determined not to run again, especially not from this place where she’d grown up.

She could have weathered dislike and censure just fine—Dewey didn’t win every crown in six counties as a teenager without making an enemy or two—if folks had just let her earn a living at the same time. But for two weeks after she opened her doors, she didn’t have a single client; instead, she spent most of her days alternately sitting in the black spinning chair and sweeping imaginary hairs from the clean mat, unable to go into the main house and admit to Paw that no one had come and no one would be coming.

“I wouldn’t get my hair done by that whore if you paid me, and I don’t care how sick her daddy is,” Dewey had overheard in the aisles of the Pig on one of those early days. She’d been grocery shopping with Sam, then a freshman and she’d had to physically hold him back from confronting them.

“Won’t do any good,” she’d said, abandoning the near full cart near the canned vegetables and tugging him through the automatic doors by his shirtsleeve, not entirely sure that she wouldn’t have done the confronting herself had she been alone.

“They’ll come around,” her daddy had said sagely, when he was still lucid enough to comment. “Or they won’t. Either way the world’ll keep turning.”

Which was a very typical line from her father and honestly wasn’t comforting at all.

Birdie had arrived shortly after lunch one Friday without making an appointment.

“Is there any way you can fit me in,” she’d asked as though Dewey would be doing her the favor. She hadn’t looked around the empty room except to pronounce the decor “just precious.”
Then at church the following Sunday, Birdie had said in her matter-of-fact manner that, “that Dupont girl does know what she’s doing with hair,” to anyone who so much as glanced in her direction.

And that had been that. In one Sunday, Birdie lifted the stigma right off getting your hair done by Dewey Dupont.

Business picked up after that, but Dewey still left her Friday afternoons free so Birdie never had to make an appointment for her roots or her weekly wash and set. Even though Birdie had only started coming in again on her regular day the previous week, for the whole three months Dewey hadn’t dreamed of filling the space.

She knew Birdie would be back. She had dreaded it as much as she’d looked forward to seeing her friend again.

Birdie and Dewey weren’t just unusual friends because one was the wife of a Baptist preacher and one was a former stripper. Theirs was a strange friendship for another reason, one only Dewey knew. Only Dewey knew that they wouldn’t be friends if only Birdie knew what had happened between Dewey and Birdie’s husband, August, way back when Dewey was still in high school.

But Birdie would never know about that.

She could trust that Gus would never tell his wife. She sure wouldn’t if she were him. Dewey knew, or a part of her knew, that she should tell Birdie herself. But they were friends. Birdie had been the first friend she’d ever made in Sugartown. How could she tell her how wrong she’d been? That the old biddies had been right to shun her, right about her all along.

It was selfish, or maybe it wasn’t. It had happened so long ago that it hardly felt real to Dewey anymore. Some secrets were humane. It was the biggest lie anybody ever told that the
truth came out in the end. Life, Dewey knew, was long. Ends came and went every minute. Some things stayed where you put them. Some secrets stayed buried. Weeds grew up around them, and vines, and the roots of an oak tree and one day they became one with the ground where you buried them.

But even so—

Birdie had walked into Dewey’s salon that afternoon, looking much as she always had. She had sat herself down in the spinning black chair and begun flipping through the newspaper Dewey had left on the counter. It might as well have been any old day. except for the fact that on any old day, Dewey wouldn’t have had to throw away the front page of the paper when she saw Birdie’s car coming up the long gravel driveway because on it Ren’s face— an old picture, probably from Middle School when she’d still worn cheerleading ribbons in her hair—was taking up the half page.

No story could compete with the disappearance of a child so although the they had precious little news to report, the town’s newspaper ran a version of the story at least once a week: the same scant details, no new information. They could write nothing new because there was nothing new to say. They had as much information as they’d had that first, awful day. Ren Baggarly was simply gone.

Ren’s best friend, Kennedy Carlisle— who’d experienced an explosion of popularity the likes of which she’d never experienced on her own, was the subject of the day’s interview, the latest attempt at a fresh angle.

Kennedy, a tall, quiet girl with a long plain face and none of her best friend’s exuberance or charm, had thick, heavy hair she wore her waist. Lately, every time Dewey had seen her, she
hadn’t seemed able to keep her hands out of it. She pushed and pulled it over her shoulders, she
twined the ends around her fingers; even in the paper, her picture, which ran adjacent to Ren’s,
though it was not nearly as large, caught Kennedy in the act of reaching up as though to tuck a
strand behind her ear.

Dewey couldn’t tell if she was just naturally awkward or if the girl knew more than she
was saying. Dewey herself had told enough lies in her life that she was able to avoid any of
Kennedy’s obvious markers, but she did feel a tension headache coming on at the base of her
neck; and, worse, when she looked at Birdie’s face with its mask of composure held almost
steady, Dewey felt a surge of guilt.

But that was nothing new. These days, guilt was Dewey’s constant companion. Dewey
could barely look Birdie in the eye without feeling a rush of it so strong it might bring her to her
knees if she let it.

Birdie, consumed as she was by the effort of keeping up her farce of normalcy, didn’t
notice when Dewey stopped moving over her hair, stopped moving at all to fight the vomit rising
in her mouth. The girl was gone. Gus’s daughter was gone. Was it such a leap to imagine?
Dewey could still feel the heaviness of him on top of her. Such a strange feeling not to be able to
move. Overpowered. She’d hardly been able to breathe, hadn’t she?

Dewey shook her head and began moving over Birdie’s scalp again. So he’d gotten a
little rough. Men did, sometimes. Especially a man with a young woman in his office, a willing
one. Or mostly willing. She’d gone back, hadn’t she? Again and again. For Crissake, she’d let
him take those photos, those horrible photos. If anyone, if Birdie, were to see those pictures, after
Dewey had worked so hard to change.
Gus Baggarly stepped out on his wife. He wasn’t as godly as he seemed. That didn’t mean he would ever hurt a girl trusted into his care the way Ren had been. He wasn’t some kind of pervert; he was a preacher, and Dewey had been practically a grown woman. Well not when they'd first started up. But she’d always been old for her age. She’d known better. Wasn’t that what made it so awful?

And it wasn’t like August was ashamed to meet Dewey’s eyes now, the way he surely would have been if he’d ever hurt her on purpose. He met her eyes just fine from the pulpit every Sunday, held her hand kindly in both of his to pass her the peace of Christ, smiled at her over the communion loaf with those white, even teeth. Hell, Dewey wasn’t sure even remembered what had transpired between them at the start of her senior year of high school. If she hadn’t had the evidence in front of her in the form of her living, breathing daughter, Dewey might have wondered if she hadn’t just let her imagination get away from her.

No, Ren had been snatched up by some sicko, or else she’d run away for her own reasons, reasons that had nothing to do with Dewey. All she could do was support Birdie, give her whatever she needed. She owed her that.

Birdie, and August too, had suffered a terrible loss. Birdie was weighed down by it even as she sipped coffee, even as she read the paper and tried to gossip with a friend like she hadn’t been in hiding for three months. Even as she went on with the everyday things, there was a pain hanging over her, a pain heavy enough to break a person like Birdie. Her girl had been taken from her. Dewey had danced in a hundred clubs, a thousand maybe, all over the country and she’d seen how there were a thousand ways it could happen. She had seen every type of man out there and then some. Some men took what you gave them and a tiny bit more. Some men took a lot more. And some men just took. She knew it. And now Ren knew it.
What happened between Dewey and the preacher was dead and buried too. She could let it lie there. Dewey knew how to lay things to rest. Dewey was of the opinion that if you lived a real and interesting life, you couldn’t reach the end of it without having done things you weren’t proud of. If you didn’t carry any shame around, odds were good that you were choosing to remember something wrong. Sometimes, it was just living with the thing you did that was your penance for it.

“I forgot,” Birdie said, snapping Dewey out other thoughts. “The fellowship hall is available for Solomon’s party.”

Birdie insisted on using Sam’s full name, the one he hated.

“Oh, thank you for doing that,” Dewey said. She’d almost forgotten too, which was almost unbelievable because it was usually all she could think about.

She’d come up with the idea to distract everyone but before she knew it, Sam’s going away party had become the most important thing in Dewey’s life. All logic told her otherwise, but some little silly piece of Dewey couldn’t help but feel like if the party was a success, some of the awfulness of the summer would just fall away. That was why she’d invited so many people. Even Mel had said she’d be there, though Dewey— not wanting to sit through the horrible silence that was her daughter trying to come up with some excuse or lie—hadn’t exactly invited her.

But during one of Mel’s unbearably awkward, perfunctory phone calls that had grown more numerous since she’d started feeling the need to check up on Sam, Dewey had stupidly mentioned how that absolute angel, Birdie, had offered up the fellowship hall at the church after seeing how out of hand Dewey had let the guest list get, and then Dewey had gotten her horrible silence anyway. It had seemed to fill the space between them stretching all the way from
Sugartown to Chapel Hill and Dewey had realized that she’d managed to hurt them both anyway, and wasn’t that just typical?

So Mel was coming, along with her husband who— ever since the shitshow that was Mel’s wedding— spoke too loud and enunciated every word when he spoke to Dewey like she was deaf or spoke a different language. He probably just thought she was stupid. She sometimes caught him looking at her like she was a zoo animal.

Sam had shown the party in his honor as much enthusiasm as he showed any and everything these days. His stony man’s face when she’d told him about it had reminded Dewey of his father and she’d felt a flash of hot rage, the same rage she felt when Mel smiled sometimes, and she’d had to go and sit outside on the porch steps for a good hour trying to calm down. Not that her son noticed. But what did he notice anymore?

The day he’d told her he was leaving, Dewey had been moments from asking him what he might know about Ren and August Baggarly. Now she thought it had maybe been the hand of God that had stopped her.

He had been parked on the couch in the den, his eyes on the television. It was a normal enough scene, but for Dewey’s unsettling suspicion that for all his staring, Sam wasn’t actually watching anything at all. She’d been finding him that way more and more, his eyes vacant, yet somehow fixed, intent on something Dewey couldn’t see.

Not sure at all that she was making the right decision, Dewey had sat down next to him. She too had stared at the TV waiting for her better instincts to kick in and tell her that this was a bad idea. Then she’d reached across Sam and muted the History Channel. Sam didn’t react. On the screen in front of them, the white-haired Henry-the-eighth scholar carried on gesticulating wildly and silently.
“Off with his head,” Dewey said.

Sam didn’t laugh. Dewey wouldn’t have either.

“I know this is tough for you to talk about,” Dewey had started off, rooting through the pockets of her apron until she found the cigarette and lighter she’d stashed earlier in the bib pocket. With an almost detached interest, like that of a child watching the slug he’s just poured salt on come apart, Dewey had noted the shaking of her own hands; she could hardly work the lighter. After three failed attempts, she handed it to Sam.

“Help your mamma out,” she said. “I’m right under the fan.”

She needn’t’ve bothered making the excuse. Sam hadn’t noticed— this was the worrisome change Mel had been harping on and on about lately. Her son had come apart all while she’d been obsessing over Gus, picking the scab off a wound that didn’t matter anymore.

Sam had lit the cigarette mechanically, inhaled, and handed it back to his mother.

“You ok, baby?” Dewey had asked, sitting on her free hand to still the tremors.

On the television, the Henry the Eighth expert was delivering an impassioned speech in profile, under dramatic lighting. The HD camera caught a bit of spittle that flew from his mouth, before cutting back to the more flattering front view. The man’s face was red with urgency as if anything he said could be urgent. No secret that old could be so important. The man could announce to the world that Henry the Eighth had dabbled in arson or eaten children, or had webbed toes on his left foot; even then, he’d still lived and died in a time and place so far away it hardly even existed, much less mattered to Dewey. Time did that to secrets.

Sam held out a hand and Dewey handed him the smoke. He inhaled deep, closed his eyes.

“This is my last one of these,” Sam said and opened his eyes again.

“Hell, you finish it then,” Dewey said. “What brought this on?”
Sam had been smoking for years. Mel had been harassing him to quit, pretty much since he started, and even the considerable efforts of his beloved football coach— he’d tried everything from extra laps to threatening to kick him off to the team— hadn’t moved him.

Sam looked at Dewey sideways.

“Basic,” he’d finally said and it had taken Dewey a full minute to decipher the one word answer.

“Bootcamp,” Sam had elaborated unnecessarily after a moment that felt longer from the heaviness of the silence hanging over it.

Dewey had taken her cigarette back. It was nearly gone and barely lit having hung forgotten between Sam’s fingers as he’d waited for her response.

Basic. Bootcamp. Sam in the military. Her son serving his country.

They weren’t exactly a patriotic family. Dewey’s grandaddy had kept drawers of Confederate money, “just in case,” and Paw had claimed to be a draft dodger to anyone who’d listen during the ‘Nam years, though Dewey knew it was actually his poor eyesight, rather than his principles, that had disqualified him.

But she could sort of see it for Sam. The picture it called up in her mind made a kind of sense. He was physically strong. Loyal. Whether or not these were qualities that qualified a boy to fight for his country, Dewey sure as hell didn’t know. But her boy would look handsome enough in his uniform to stick on the cover of a recruitment pamphlet, that was for damn sure.

The mother of a soldier. Dewey relit the nearly gone cigarette, feeling the heat of the flame dangerously close to her nose. Sam was watching her closely. He seemed relieved that she hadn’t gone into immediate hysterics. What her children thought of her. Sam had been under his sister’s thumb too long. Which reminded Dewey—
“Have you told your sister?”

Sam looked shifty then, his expression—that of a little boy caught misbehaving—very like his Paw. Dewey was struck by the unexpected resemblance. They shared no common features—Paw was decidedly black Irish in coloring and temper, whereas Sam looked like his half Italian father. Still, the flash of likeness had been striking.

Slowly, Sam had shaken his head and Dewey had laughed.

“You’re on your own with that one, boy,” she said, but then her laughter died in her throat.

Her boy. How were they already here. Surely, Sam was still wearing his footie pajamas and lisping and frowning so hard that it made Dewey hate to look at him because it meant she was doing this whole mother wrong, that she was failing him somehow. Dewey had felt her vision blur. She cried so easily lately. It was like the tears were always there, just beneath the surface, waiting for the slightest provocation.

“My brave boy,” she’d said, smoothing his hair flat, just the way she’d done for that lisping baby, her intention when she’d sat next to Sam on the couch all but forgotten.

“My brave, brave boy.”

That had been back when Dewey had thought Sam’s decision was marking something of a turning point for her son. But since that conversation, he’d remained as cold and silent as ever. He was putting his pain somewhere remote, the way men did, but she could see it in the tendons of his hands when he gripped just a bit too tight around the door handle of his truck, slammed it just a fraction too loud behind him. He simmered. God help the soul too close when he finally boiled over.
“Look at this,” Birdie said holding up a picture of one of the local homeschooled girls who’d arranged a food drive as a 4-H project. “Poor thing.”

“Ugly,” Dewey pronounced, knowing at once what Byrdie wanted from her.

“Well, she can’t help that,” Byrdie said, as though that hadn’t been her point to begin with.

“She could stay home though,” Dewey said and Byrdie’s lips twitched. Dewey let out another long breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“And now how are you holding up?” Birdie asked her closing the paper in her lap. But, Christ, wasn’t Dewey meant to be asking Birdie that?

“With Sam,” Birdie elaborated and Dewey understood.

Dewey shook her head. “He’s a grown man. It’s his decision.”

Her strange mood had gotten Birdie’s attention now. Dewey could feel her eyes on her. Like a weight. Like an awful heaviness.

“Well, Gus found that book he wanted to give him.”

“Hmmm?” Dewey asked, looking over her work. She had been operating on autopilot, relying on muscle memory to even out Birdie’s ends, but luckily it had come out all right.


“Right, Sam’s book,” Dewey said, fluffing out Birdie’s cottony hair to busy herself.

In the mirror, Birdie’s shrewd eyes met Dewey’s fully for the first time since she’d arrived in the shop. “Everything all right?”


Birdie stood, brushing feathery hairs off the front of her cashmere sweater set and opened the door, making the little bell chime.
“Just stop by the church office anytime and get it,” she said over her shoulder. Even with the
gust of hot air that blasted the muggy trailer through the open door, Dewey’s face went cold.

She hadn’t been inside the cramped office with its dense orange shag carpet and its long olive
couch that smelled like Paw’s nursing home, but she’d walked by it, seen August or Birdie
hunched over its desk, admittedly averting her eyes so as not to be called in for a visit. Never
once though, Dewey’s grip tightened around the bottle, had she felt like she had ants under skin
at the idea of it, never had she gone cold and weak at its mention. The shears, which were all of a
sudden heavy in her hand—or else her hand had lost all its grip-strength—slipped out of her
hand before she even realized her fingers had loosened. She was wearing flipflops and they
landed metal handle down on her bare foot, connecting hard enough to bruise.

Dewey’s eyes welled at once from the pain and she let loose a word she had no business
saying in front of a preacher’s wife.

She apologized but Birdie merely waved her off insisting she let her get some ice.

It took fifteen minutes and a string of upbeat reassurances, delivered with an enthusiasm
Dewey didn’t remotely feel, to shove Birdie all the way out the door and on her way. When
she’d gone, Dewey collapsed in the chair Birdie had just vacated, glad she’d scheduled an hour
between Birdie’s appointment and her next client.

Reaching under the shampoo sink, behind the pipes, Dewey pulled out the medicinal bottle of
gin she kept there for breakups and bad bangs (sometimes both at once; the two very often
coincided), and took a long swig, the unpleasant taste making her wrinkle her nose. That was
why she’d chosen gin, after all, so she’d only reach for it in an actual emergency.
She closed her eyes and tried to regulate her breathing. She had no reason to react in such a
dramatic way. She’d rejoined the Beggarly’s church when she’d gotten back to town, determined
not to have any place in Sugartown she felt she couldn’t go.

Telling herself it was just pain from dropping the goddamn scissors, and not believing her
own excuse, Dewey took a long pull of the gin she hated, then another.

The evening of the party—scheduled for Friday night, before Sam left on Monday—arrived
before Dewey was ready.

Mel and Beau were early. They sat Bonnie, just barely walking, in a chair where she stayed
most of the evening, skinny legs dangling, as she played with an expensive looking tablet,
barely looking up when anyone spoke to her. Dewey didn’t approve but she knew better than to
tell Melodee as much.

No one had ever been able to tell Melodee much of anything. She’d always known best.

Mel, who was showing finally, a big belly under her loose black peasant blouse, immediately
found the beer cooler in the kitchen.

Dewey had of course run the idea of alcohol past Birdie first.

“Well of course,” Birdie had said. “We’re not Baptists.”

Sam was late. Nearly everyone Dewey had invited was already then when he walked in. He
tried to sneak in the back but someone shouted his name and then everyone was clapping and
cheering for him. Sam looked miserable and Dewey felt momentarily uncertain that she’d done
the right thing. But then he’d kind of half-grinned and someone had turned on a country cover of
God Bless America, and the tears came, blurring her vision.
And everyone seemed to be having a good time and it looked like Dewey had done the right thing. Even Sam seemed happy.

Dewey’s relief lasted as long as Mel’s self-control, that is, all of an hour. Because it was about an hour after Sam’s arrival that Mel cornered her brother to ask him loudly what he was most looking forward to and was it killing people?

Dewey could have hit her. She wasn’t a believer in spanking or any kind of physical punishment, but in that moment she could have slapped her drunk, pregnant daughter across her smug face.

“Well, I think it’s fantastic,” Beau broke the quiet that had fallen between brother and sister. “You’re doing a great thing for your country, son,” he said. Mel turned to look at her husband like she’d never seen him before in her life.

“My brave boy,” Dewey said. She couldn’t seem to stop saying that. Maybe she envied him his bravery. He was doing something about his pain, his guilt.

“Dewey,” Mel said.

“What?” Dewey snapped. “I’m not allowed to be proud of my my boy, going off to fight for his country? You think you know something I don’t?”

Mel downed the rest of her Bud Light. “I think I know a lot of things you don’t.”

“I know you shouldn’t be having all that beer,” Dewey said watching Mel reach for her third or fourth.

“I saw you drink every day when you were pregnant with Sammy,” Mel said. “Maybe that’s why he’s so fucking stupid.”

“Mel,” Beau said finally and it sounded like a reprimand, the same way Mel had sounded when she’d said Dewey’s name. To Dewey’s surprise, it actually made her daughter shut up, but
her eyes still flashed and the glare she sent across the table could’ve burned Sam if he’d been able to meet her eyes.

Mel put her empty bottle down with a clatter and stood. She swept from the room in a dramatic huff that Dewey couldn’t have pulled off half as well. Sam half stood to go after her but Dewey put a hand on his shoulder and pushed down hard.

“I’ll do it.”

Sam nodded. His face was listless and Dewey knew he’d retreated back into the cold shell of grief he’d been living in for months.

Dewey followed her daughter, not noticing that she was alone. It was only when she caught up with Mel at the bathroom that she realized Birdie had slipped out the side door too.

“It’s all right,” Dewey told Birdie, her voice high and bright. Mel slammed the door in her face. “I’ll take care of all this.“

She tried the door. It was locked.

“Leave me the fuck alone,” came Mel’s muffled voice from the bathroom. Dewey smiled at Birdie tightly even as she kicked the door, hard. Dewey’s toe made a clicking sound—like she probably broke it—and she stomped her foot.

“You’re being ridiculous,” she told her daughter. When she spoke, her voice wasn’t the calm, hostess voice she’d imagined it would be when she’d opened her mouth. It was raising perilously towards a scream.

Whatever Mel said was lost beneath the flushing of the toilet.

“Didn’t catch that, dear,” Birdie said.

Mel opened the door. Her hair was full of static, sticking out from her head. Her face was red from rage or beer. Probably rage. Her breath smelled like she’d just thrown up the beer.
“I said, how the fuck—“ Mel’s words died a little when she realized it was not Dewey to whom she was speaking, but the preacher’s wife.

“—I mean, how can you call yourself a mother?” she finished more quietly.

Dewey opened her mouth to answer. She really did have a reply. It was pretty good. Cutting. It would hurt Mel’s feelings even if it couldn’t cull the judgment and hate from her eyes. But she couldn’t say it. She couldn’t say anything.

Right down the hall was August Baggarly’s office. Beside her was August Baggarly’s wife. And in front of Dewey, her pretty face purple with righteous— because underneath Mel’s tantrum she was always, truly righteous— anger, was August Baggarly’s daughter.

And something of that awful realization must have crept into the air between them because Birdie took hold of her arm like she needed to someone to her up and Mel’s face turned back to a normal, human color and she said, “Mom?”

And Dewey found herself telling both of them exactly what went on between herself and August Baggarly all those years ago.

Dewey had been almost grown when she’d left home, that was true, but she’d been a child when the thing between her and Gus began. The confirmation class was small that year. Just Dewey, Wendell Parker who moved to Charlotte after college, and Sophie Brit who actually died the summer before their Senior year when her kayak flipped, out at the lake. It took the better part of a school year, of eighth grade. They spent one evening a week reading their bibles and learning how to be good Methodists with Pastor Gus.

“How’d it go with the preacherman?” Paw would ask when he picked her up and Dewey would shrug because she honestly wasn’t sure. Pastor Gus was nice, that was true. Especially nice to her. He really listened to everything she had to say.
And honestly some days, the study beside Pastor Gus’s office was her favorite place in the world. He told her she was smart. No one had ever told her that before. Folks told her she was pretty all the time and objectively Dewey knew they were right. But not one teacher ever told her she should study more because she was tremendously bright. But that was what August Baggarly said to her, he said she was “tremendously bright.”

She held onto those words like they were something real he gave her, like they were something she could put her hands on. She held onto them until the day she stopped, until the day she realized just what men would say to get what they wanted. And they wanted so much from girls folks said were pretty.

August Baggarly took so much from her.

She was thirteen when she was in eighth grade. She was thirteen the first time.

By the time she was seventeen, she’d convinced herself that what he told her was true, that she’d wanted it, that she’d seduced him, that it had been her fault.

It wasn’t until she had a thirteen year old daughter of her own that she’d begun to understand. And it wasn’t until Ren Baggarly disappeared without a trace that she understood completely.

That night Dewey heard Mel in the doorway of her bedroom, but didn’t open her eyes. Even through her closed lids, she thought she could somehow feel her daughter’s gaze from across the room. She wasn’t ready for the conversation she knew Mel wanted.

It had been sweet of her to stay. Mel hadn’t provided Beau any explanation; she’d just handed him Bonnie and told them both she’d see them in the morning. It had been a kindness. Mel had intended the gesture as a kindness. But still, all Dewey wanted was sleep.
Dewey never heard Mel leave, wasn’t sure when she gave up and went to bed herself. Part of her felt sorry for her daughter because come to think of it, she didn’t think she would ever be ready to have the conversation Mel wanted. When the sun rose in the morning, she’d just have to disappoint her daughter once again.

Dewey’s last thought before sleep finally took her someplace easier, was that she didn’t feel lighter or freer for having told Mel and Birdie her secret. Not at all. She just felt lost, like the keeping of that terrible truth had been all of her, had been the thing pumping her blood and animating her organs. Now her insides, all scooped out from the telling of it were left in that hallway, laid out on the floor of the church for anyone to walk in and see.
CHAPTER IV

BIRDIE

Birdie Baggarly was born Beverly McCleod in the Appalachian Mountains and christened Birdie by August Baggarly on their very first date. She didn’t mind him naming her. Birdie had two dead parents and no family as far as she knew. She never knew her mother and father. She thought there might have been a sister, once. When she closed her eyes she could call up vague, fuzzy memories: the warm body of a bigger girl sharing her cot in the very early days. But the only information she’d been able to find was that sickness had swept the home where they both lived. By the time Birdie was walking and talking the sister was no more.

Birdie had lived in the home until she was twelve. After that she’d been sent to earn her keep at the mills. It was still all very Dickensian in western Carolina even by then. When Birdie was younger she might’ve remembered more about her childhood but she’d spent decades forgetting. Birdie’s mind was good at recognizing what caused it pain and putting that pain somewhere else until there was only the good left. And since she’d found Gus there’d been so much good. He’d been a traveling preacher; young, but still ten years her senior. She’d been barely seventeen when they’d married and he’d been everything to her.

Together, they’d come to Sugartown where they’d built a beautiful life. A purposeful life.

Although by then his parents had passed and he had no brothers or sisters, Gus didn’t bring his new wife to his family home. The old house was set back from the main road, almost in the country, and Gus was idealistic.

“A preacher ought to live amongst his flock,” and so they’d moved instead into the Methodist parish and left the old house to sit empty.

Besides, Gus had said:
“It has a history that’s not fitting.”

Birdie hadn’t asked, but over the years she’d put together that Gus’s family home was one of the “sweet houses” that made Sugartown famous. Gus used it as hideaway for himself when he was blocked on a sermon, and as a place for confirmation trips and spiritual retreats. He kept the key in his office; she’d seen him retrieve it a thousand times from the top drawer of his desk.

The parish was small, too small for secrets, and they’d been happy there.

They’d been so happy. It had been so good. Even when they discovered, after a short time, that Birdie would never bear children of her own, though she saw pain in Gus’s eyes, he never said a blaming word to her about it.

“And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me,” he’d quoted instead and not two weeks later that fire in Kinston had left three little girls without parents or a place to go. The girls had stayed with them the better part of month until a distant cousin was located to take them permanently. And so it had gone ever since. Fostering was Birdie’s calling, her ministry.

Ren had looked enough like her that sometimes Birdie had pretended that she was her own. Birdie had been small and slight too—underfed more like—with hair that stayed light long after it was supposed to darken and blue eyes.

“Eyes like cornflowers,” Gus had said.

“I’ll show you,” he’d told her. “Seas of corn and the sun setting over ‘em. Nothing prettier in this world.” He’d tucked her hair behind her ear. “Well, except for one thing.”

How did she remember that so clearly, but couldn’t recall her own sister? Birdie put the pain away; she only remembered the good.
Ren had blue eyes too. Wild blue eyes, Birdie had always thought, like those of an animal caught in a trap.

Ren had been through so much before she’d come to them. And Birdie had saved her. She’d brought that injured lamb into her home, brought her someplace safe. Ren had been twelve when the Lord delivered her to them. She was defiant from the first moment.

“My name is Lauren,” she’d told them. “But don’t ever call me that.”

They’d been getting on in years, she and Gus. Since her sixtieth birthday, Birdie had been unable to ignore how much more quickly she tired, how she didn’t bend like she once did.

But Gus had said, “Just one more.”

“It’s the Lord’s will,” he said and she’d agreed. Of course it was. Another little girl. Another lamb to join the flock they’d built together. God had given them a challenge and they’d made something beautiful from it.

And how could she ever say no to Gus when she hadn’t even been able to give him a child, no son of his own.

They’d had Ren the longest of any of their foster children. There had been nowhere else for her to go and by the time she and Gus understood that, Birdie had already begun to feel like this one was hers. This was the one, sent by God to be her daughter.

“People don’t just vanish,” the police officer who didn’t look much older than Ren herself had told Birdie and Gus. “Something always gets left behind.”

But Birdie’s daughter had vanished. And everything left behind was a tangled mess of nonsense. Nonsense, in that it made no sense. They’d found her car in the woods which was a bad sign, Sheriff Adams had told them, because it suggested the car had been dumped.
But they hadn’t found any money in her room. Ren was a waitress and kept her cash tips in a jar until they overflowed, then she bought a new jar. That, Sheriff Adams said, was a good sign. She probably just ran off. Kids do that, Adams had said sagely, close enough to Birdie’s face that she could smell the too sweet tobacco on his breath. You just wait until she gets tired or hungry or cold and she’ll come on back, he’d said, adjusting the dip in his mouth.

Except Mr. Adams didn’t know Ren the way Birdie did. When Ren wanted something she didn’t get tired, or hungry, or cold. Ren didn’t quit. Birdie hadn’t taught her that, but she had always greatly admired it. If Ren wanted to leave, Birdie knew, she would never see her daughter again.

In the end, it was a mystery.

When the crisis was first getting underway, time hadn’t seemed to move the usual way. Days were marked by sleeping, by mealtimes, by dressing and brushing teeth, by the rituals of daily life. But for Birdie and August, that baseline had disappeared overtaken by something base that felt like survival. Hundreds of volunteers descended to make frantic searches of the woods where the car was found. They had to be fed. For those who had traveled long distances, it didn’t seem right not to arrange lodging. The candlelight vigil was put on by the Carlisle family, but of course Birdie had to attend, had to comfort Kennedy, had to tell her nothing was her fault. Equipment had even been brought in to drag the lake where Ren had spent so many afternoons tanning on the banks wearing a bathing suit Birdie didn’t approve of. It was a difficult contest, but if Birdie had to choose, she thought that had probably been the worst day. Worse still was when Gus invited one of the rescuers to stay in their home. Birdie had fed him breakfast and then he had gone to work where he operated a machine to search for her daughter’s bloated corpse.

It was hard work to coordinate a tragedy, Birdie now knew.
But gradually all of those things had given way to waiting. And now Birdie knew that the waiting was so much worse because at least before she’d had something to do.

Of course, Gus had rediscovered his baseline first. Just three weeks had gone by when he began to shift his minute to minute existence back into something that looked almost normal, preparing sermons, and sending the interim preacher home.

“I need to feel useful,” Gus had told her and hadn’t Birdie understood? It was a terrible thing to feel useless, a terrible thing to feel helpless, rudderless, and hopeless.

The morning after Sam’s party, Birdie woke up to find herself alone in bed—which wasn’t unusual because she slept much later than Gus who rose with the sun to pray—with a note on her bedside table.

Gus, who ordinarily took Saturdays off to pour over his notes for Sunday, had taken an emergency counseling appointment with Kennedy Carlisle.

This wasn’t entirely unusual either. Gus thought of himself as a doctor always on call. He was never one to turn down a person in need.

But something made Birdie turn the note over in her hands again and again until she’d torn it to ribbons.

She knew how darkly ironic it was to admit now, but Birdie had always credited herself with a sixth sense, like—she could only imagine—that of a mother. Sometimes, she just knew things. And she just knew that if she went to the church right at that moment, she would find
Kennedy Carlisle, Ren’s best friend, in her husband’s office. And he would be doing to her exactly what Dewey had described.

Birdie was dressed and behind the wheel of her car before she even knew what she was doing. She peeled out of her own driveway on two wheels feeling like she might still be asleep. Was this rage, she wondered looking down at her hands and feeling like they might not be her hands at all, or was it righteousness like that which prompted Jesus to overturn the tables of the moneychangers and free the doves. She felt like she was someplace else, floating above to watch herself. Up Center Street then left, another left, slam on brakes for the child on the bike crossing slowly, so, so slowly.

And then she was turning once more, then she was there in the parking lot of the church, and there in her body once again. Feeling a little silly, silly enough, at least, not to want to have to make an excuse for why she was there or what she was doing. Even so, that possessed version of her had already come up with a good enough reason—an alibi, was it called?—on the drive over.

She opened the unlocked side door that housed Gus’s office and the Sunday school classrooms feeling more and more ridiculous as she walked—no, crept—into the hallway.

The closer she came to her husband’s office the slower she walked. She was sure, sure enough to vomit, of what she would see when she arrived.

But when Birdie finally stood on her toes to peer through the little window at the top of his door, she saw— with more relief than she would ever be willing to admit— that it wasn’t Kennedy Carlisle who sat on the olive green couch across from August.

It was Sam Dupont.

Birdie exhaled so loudly she was sure both Sam and Gus would hear, guilt replacing fear.
But the fear, Birdie was annoyed to realize, wasn’t completely gone. Feeling like stupid, she stepped to the side of the window and, childishly, pressed her ear against the door.

“She’s just everywhere,” Sam said. “And I know you’re the last person I should be saying this to—”

Gus cut him off. “Don’t trouble yourself with that for another minute,” he said, his own voice heavy, almost choked. “If anything it’s a comfort. She touched so many lives.”

“Something was wrong,” Sam said so quietly that Birdie wasn’t entirely sure that was what he said. But then he said it again, much louder. “Something was wrong with her those last few weeks and I didn’t— I didn’t—”

“Ren was a troubled girl,” Gus said. “We did the best we could with her, but she was a troubled girl. There’s only so much you can do for a person who does not want help.”

But that wasn’t true. It was so untrue that it made Birdie press a fist to her lips to keep from screaming.

Sam’s sobs were muffled. Gus spoke over them. “This next stage of your life will be the making of you, my boy. I want you to put Ren behind you. You loved her. We loved her too. But, she would want you to move on. I want you to move on.”

Sam’s sobs continued and Birdie heard her husband get up and sit next to the boy.

After a while Sam’s breathing calmed and so did Birdie’s. She moved back to the window. Her husband’s back was to her but she saw that the boy’s face was clearing as though from him Gus had expelled some demon.

Birdie stepped away from the door. She composed herself in the tiny room off the sanctuary amongst the choir robes. Birdie was good at composing herself. She was good at carrying on. She was good at masks. After all, no one in a town that was good at uncovering
secrets had any idea about her humble beginnings. And so by the time Sam left Gus’s office, she looked like she always did.

She could almost convince herself that nothing was off about the conversation she’d overheard. Kennedy Carlisle hadn’t been in the office. She’d witnessed nothing inappropriate. All she’d gotten for her spying was a moment between her husband and a heartbroken boy, a normal moment, even a kind one. He’d helped Sam, hadn’t he? Sam had looked lighter, had he not, as he’d made his way across the empty parking lot to his truck, less angry, more free?

Gus was closing the door to his office when Birdie met him in the hallway. His handsome, still so handsome, face was drawn as it so often was these days. Still, his mouth pulled up in a smile when he saw her and he chucked her chin.

“What brings you here?” he asked, looking, as he always looked, genuinely happy to see her. So many husbands sighed when they saw their wives, looked for reasons to stay longer at the office, played golf for hours to get away. Birdie had always felt a sort of pride that her husband wanted her around no matter what.

“Ruby,” she said, just like she planned, “Needs the names of the hymns for the program.” Birdie was filling in, as she often did, for the hypochondriac organist.

Gus grinned. “How many times have you given them to her?”

Ruby was their ancient church secretary who never remembered anything. Birdie waved a piece of paper. “I finally just wrote them out.”

Gus almost laughed. They were both always doing that. Nearly laughing, then remembering. The impulse to laugh was still there. But then the memory caught up. Birdie thought it was crueler and more exhausting than it would be if they just couldn’t find anything funny anymore.
Birdie looked away so Gus could pretend she hadn’t noticed and by the time she looked up again he was at the door.

“See you at home,” he said without turning around and Birdie couldn’t stop herself.

“What was Sam doing here?” she asked and waited, blood pounding in her ears like she’d just jumped from a great height.

Gus’s hand paused on the knob. “He’s worried about his mother.” The lie was perfectly timed. Not too quick. “About leaving her alone.”

Gus turned around. “And so am I,” he said. “It can’t be easy. That Dewey, she’s had a hard road. You’re looking after her?”

Compassion had softened the lines of his face. Gus looked decades younger.

The blood in Birdie’s ears stopped rushing. It seemed to leave her altogether. Her head felt clear and cold.

“Of course,” she said and her husband’s face softened again so beautifully. The door clicked closed behind him.

Birdie didn’t faint. She didn’t wail or tear her clothes. She was Methodist, after all.

But she did let herself slide down the wall onto the floor and she did sit there for a long time.

She was still there when the late summer sun set, still there long after the cicadas started up. She sat until she couldn’t sit anymore and that was when she stood. Gus had left the door to his office open, as was his custom.

Gus kept a neat desk on the surface. A clean pad of paper and a blue ink pen sat in the top corner. His tattered King James on the left. The drawers though were full to bursting, packed
with old sermon notes, programs, brochures, and anything else he couldn’t bring himself to throw away.

The key was just where she’d thought it would be in the top drawer towards the back. Birdie tried to remember when he might have last used the house and couldn’t, but there it sat on top of the papers, as though it had been recently used.
CHAPTER V

MEL

Mel wasn’t sure what she was expecting when she voluntarily drove to see her mother the day Sam left for bootcamp. All she knew was that she couldn’t let her mother go home to an empty house, not after what she’d told them at the party. She’d tried following her mother home then too, hoped to get some answers, some clarification, something out of her, but Dewey had insisted on pretending the whole thing never happened.

“It’s the past, Melodee,” she’d finally snapped right before Mel had given up and gone home. “Just leave it there, why don’t you?”

But it wasn’t the past. Not really. It could be Ren’s present.

The driveway was gravel and Mel knew the sound a car’s wheels made on it, displacing the rock, was as good as any alarm system. But still, Dewey made her knock. Mel knew it was on purpose, just like Paw had made Dewey knock all those years ago when she’d turned up on the same porch with two children and a bruise on her jaw.

She’d been surprised the other night and she was surprised again by the state of the house. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting. Chipped paint. Maybe a front yard overgrown with weeds and bamboo, porch beams caving in on themselves, Dewey herself sticking out from a hole in the floor, a lit cigarette dangling from her mouth.

But the place looked better than Mel ever remembered it looking. Someone had fixed the porch; there were no rotten patches of wood left to avoid. The paint wasn’t fresh or a shade Mel would have chosen, but it looked tidy. A handprinted sign hung over the door that read “Live. Love. Leap.” The stair you had to jump or else fall through into the foundation had been
repaired. There was a straw mat that said, or maybe shouted, WELCOME, and the light fixtures on either side of the of the door were flickering, but functional.

Through the window, Mel could see blue light early evening light playing off the hanging metal pans in the kitchen. Dewey stood at the counter pouring a glass of tea from a pitcher, a shockingly domestic picture that Mel could no more easily comprehend than the dog. Mel jabbed at the doorbell to get her attention. Nothing happened. Of course, that was the one thing Dewey hadn’t bothered to have fixed.

“Dewey,” she called.

A dog was barking. Dewey hated dogs, or any animal really. Mel registered the sound coming from the backyard, but didn’t have time to process her surprise, before not Dewey, but Birdie answered the door.

Birdie looked at her appraisingly. A moment passed, then another.

“Well, you might as well come in,” Birdie said finally. Mel, who felt both that she’d passed some test and that she wasn’t entirely sure that she was glad of it, followed her.

Mel met Dewey and Birdie back on the first floor of huge house. Now that she knew better, Mel was feeling a little sorry that she hadn’t failed Birdie’s test.

The house they were in was, Birdie had informed them, August Baggarly’s family home. And the three women were now, what, searching for clues?

Yes, that was exactly what they were doing. Searching for clues incriminating Gus. And, unsuccessfully, at that. Mel could tell by her mother’s face that she hadn’t found anything either. Mel fought the urge to stomp her foot the way Bonnie did when she didn’t get her way. It had been a ridiculous thing to do coming all the way out here. But it was like some collective
madness had gripped all three of them starting with Birdie who’d knocked on Dewey’s door on Monday morning brandishing a key. Somehow they’d all been so sure…

“Not even in the basement?” Mel couldn’t help asking asking Birdie. The lady who’d run the vacation Bible School Mel had been forced to attend every summer, run it with boundless enthusiasm, shook her head.

Well, what had they expected, really? Ren, bound and gagged in a hidden cellar?

To trip over her body when they opened the door, her bones? To at least find overturned furniture, signs of a struggle, or some proof that a girl had been there, that she’d been alive or was alive or—

Yes, said a sullen voice in Mel’s head. Yes to all of the above. That was exactly what she had been expecting.

But maybe he was too smooth for that, another slyer voice chimed in. He’d been doing this for years, for decades, for half a century, and he’d never been caught. Not even a whisper of suspicion. Not even from his wife.

“I told you I wasn’t sure, not about any of it—“ Dewey said and she sounded so childlike. But before Mel could speak, to maybe even say something comforting to her mother, Birdie let out a little cry that made Mel’s insides leap and the skin on the back of her neck erupt in chills. She hadn’t realized that she was frightened.

“Don’t do that,” Dewey snapped sounding more like herself, sounding like she was scared too and annoyed about it. “I just about jumped clean out of my skin—“

But her words died away when Birdie took a step back to show them what she’d found.
The door—because it was a door, perfectly concealed as a row of cabinets, the trick handle on one of which Birdie had pulled by lucky mistake—had slid open easily and at once, gliding over hinges that barely creaked.

It opened into what their flashlights revealed to be a small room hardly larger than an office cubicle.

“Where they hid what they didn’t want the revenuers to find, I expect,” Birdie said. “I did research when we first moved out here. These old brothels were full of hidey-holes.”

Birdie’s voice was as matter of fact as ever, but when Mel looked over at her, she noticed the old woman’s face had taken on a strange gray cast.

In the center of the room, Mel’s flashlight beam caught a string. She pulled it and the lightbulb at the center of the ceiling clicked on, white light streaming into all four corners of the tiny room.

The walls, from floor to ceiling, were covered in photographs. There were dozens, maybe hundreds, but they could have been the same photo. Dewey pulled one off the wall. It showed a young—youngyoungyoungyoung—girl with long, near black hair. Her eyes were huge and dark in her small face and she couldn’t have been more than thirteen. She looked like she should be riding a bicycle or dancing in a recital. But she was naked from the waist up and lying on an olive couch.

“Mom,” Mel said. The crack in her voice seemed to surprise them both and Dewey, startled, looked up from the photo of herself. Her face was very white.

“Mom,” Mel said again, more desperately. She was reminded, strangely and all at once, of an incident that had taken place just weeks before Dewey had left her and Sammy with Paw. A truck had cut Dewey off in traffic and pissed her off. She’d gunned her own engine and
hugged the tailpipe of the tan pickup for several blocks until she’d finally followed it down an empty street into a deserted industrial park. Ignoring Mel who was laughing a little but mostly just pleading with her to turn around, Dewey had pulled up next to the driver and rolled down her window, probably intending to put the fear of god into him.

If Mel had ever possessed any artistic talent, she could’ve drawn the redneck driving the tan pickup truck perfectly so clearly etched in her memory was the moment Dewey rolled down the window. But even if she’d been a master, Mel doubted she could’ve captured the look in the man’s eyes. Dewey’s cursing had died in her throat and the man had revved his engine and floored it, spinning to faced them in a one-eighty he could’ve probably performed at a monster truck rally.

“What’s he doing?” Mel had asked. “Mom, what’s he doing?”

Dewey hadn’t answered because by then, it had become very clear what he was doing. Though something in her probably knew that the man would never have let the truck really hit them—he would’ve died too; no one was that crazy—that was the first and only time in Mel’s life she ever felt real terror. She’d tucked into a ball, sure that the last thing she’d ever hear would be her mother’s screaming, her arm thrown in front in Mel as though that could’ve saved her skull from being crushed against the metal dashboard.

Of course he’d swerved at the last moment. Dewey and Mel (and in the backseat, Sam, who never woke up) had sat in the middle of the empty park. Mel still remembered the bone deep shakes that had wracked her body.

But Dewey had recovered almost at once. She’d gathered Mel, who by that point hadn’t sat on her mother’s lap for nearly a decade, across the console and rocked her until those chills had subsided.
She’d hardly been older than Mel was now. Mel knew she must have been traumatized. But she’d been so calm.

And standing in that little room, holding the horrible picture, she was calm again.

“Mom,” Mel said a third time, though she had no coherent idea of what she wanted from her mother.

Dewey dropped the picture and gathered Mel to her once more.

Mel wasn’t sure how long Dewey held her like that, rocking her back and forth like a restless infant until finally, many minutes later, Mel pulled away, tremors calmed if not entirely subdued.

“We should call the police,” Mel said dragging the heel of her hand across her eyes.

She was met with silence. Dewey and Birdie were looking at each other. Then Birdie nodded once, but not at Mel.

“No,” Dewey said.

“Why the fuck not?” Mel said. She pulled a picture off the wall of a girl she thought she vaguely recognized, a girl with a vacant smile and braces on her teeth, and dropped it at once like it burned her.

“We can’t,” Birdie said flatly. Almost absently, Mel realized that this was the first time since they’d turned on the light that Birdie had moved or spoken. She’d almost forgotten the old woman was there.

“Look around,” Dewey said. “These are children.”

“Exactly,” Mel said. “Children who deserve justice.”

“But what kind?” Dewey said. She wasn’t looking at Mel or at the pictures or at anything that was in the little room.
“Their parents,” Mel parried, fury rising in her. Did Dewey just want to leave? To put the pictures back, to close the sliding door, to leave the nightmare to the night? “If Bonnie—“

Birdie cut her off. Her mouth had turned up in what might have passed for a twisted smile, but the longer Mel looked at it, the more she concluded that Birdie’s expression was half mad. Mel had seen a rabid raccoon once, outside the trailer where they’d lived in Tulsa. It had had the same manic something in its eyes, the same grimace peeling back its frothy lips.

“You’d want her to have to talk in a courtroom? Show on a doll where the bad man touched her?”

“That’s not justice, Melodee,” Dewey said almost gently, like she pitied Mel for reasons Mel couldn’t understand.

“What are you saying?” Mel said, looking wildly from Birdie’s animalistic snarl to Dewey’s preternatural calm. “We just do nothing? I know he’s your husband, Mrs. Baggarly, but—“

“You know what my Gus always says?” Birdie said. She’d turned away from them to face the sliding door where across the room, on the window sill, a bible leaned against the frame. “He says, ‘the things we do make up the people we are’.”

Birdie laughed. It seemed to come from a place that hurt. “Have you ever heard him say that?”

Mel was starting to feel desperate. “Mrs. Baggarly—“ she started again.

But Birdie still hadn’t turned around. She didn’t seem to be listening to Mel at all. “I must’ve heard him say it a thousand times,” she said quietly.

And then Birdie turned around, looked at Dewey, who met the other woman’s gaze without blinking.
“What are you talking about?” Mel asked, but Birdie had already begun rummaging through
the handbag she still wore at the crook of her elbow.

When she looked up, she was lifting an already dialed phone to her ear. Mel could hear the
faint rings echoing off the walls of the little cellar, the empty house silent as only deep country
could be. Her face looked entirely human again.

A man’s voice answered, but Mel couldn’t make out his words.

“Is she calling the police?” Mel asked, in a voice that sounded manic even to her own ears.

Dewey made a soundless shush shape with her lips as Birdie began to speak.

“That officer called,” Birdie said without preambles and her voice sounded just as she
might’ve sounded if she’d been sitting in the chair in Dewey’s salon. “The very young one, you
know?”

She was silent again as the man made some reply. Her mouth began to curl again. This time,
the expression was triumphant.

“Yes, yes, Gibson. Officer Gibson called to let me know they’ll be at the Baggarly house in
the country in the morning. They’ve had a tip that Ren might’ve stayed there a few days on her
way out of town.”

“I know, dear, I’m emotional myself,” Birdie said, gaze now fierce and fixed on the cellar
walls. When she spoke, however, her voice was as pleasant as ever. “He said he shouldn’t be
telling me, but he knows how desperate we are for any news and—we are you all right, Gus?”

Birdie paused again, the most careful, measured pause Mel had ever heard, a predator
backing her prey into a corner.

“Of course. Will I see you for dinner?”

“Of course,” she said again, this time more quietly. “I’ll keep a plate warm.”
Birdie hung up. “We’ll have to be fast,” she said to Dewey. “He’s on his way.”

“He said that?” Mel nearly moaned. She felt like her arms and legs had been emptied of blood and filled with something heavy, like sand. “He said he was coming here?”

“Of course not,” Birdie said, tone almost snippy, like a schoolteacher addressing a particularly slow pupil. “But if I were Gus and I thought the police would be searching this house tomorrow morning, I’d get out here to move all this,” she gestured to the hidden room, “tonight.”

“I’ve got a gas can in my car,” Dewey said. She touched the walls, her face speculative. “I don’t think it will take much.

In the end, both Birdie and Dewey were right.

August arrived not even fifteen minutes after Birdie hung up the phone. He immediately made for his secret room, suspecting nothing as Dewey had by then moved her car around to the back of the lot.

Mel sat in the car and waited, trying not to imagine what was happening inside. And then Dewey and Birdie were running from the building, followed shortly after by the flames that erupted from the windows and crawled the side of the house. Like Dewey had predicted, the walls and floors, soaked again and again over the decades in potent homemade liquor had ignited at once.

Mel didn’t know which woman had held the sliding cellar door shut, nor which had shoved the bookshelf from across the room against it, to hold it in place. She only knew that it was a two person job and that August Baggarly did not emerge from the burning house.
APPENDIX

Historical: Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte


Jane’s story is told through a close, first person narrative and the novels actions and events are underlaid by the characters’ histories, a literal intrusion by the past into the present by the physical presence of Mrs. Rochester in a hidden room, haunting the page as well as the space around Jane. Charlotte Bronte has been called the “first historian of the private consciousness,” evidenced by the closeness of the narration to Jane and her thoughts by her self-consciousness, introspection, and depth of awareness.

Historical: Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte

Bronte, Emily. Wuthering Heights. Thomas Cautley Newby, 1847.

The only novel of the younger Brontë, Wuthering Heights, contains elements of Gothic fiction. Through its setting, the intrusive past undercuts the present action of the narrative. The moors’ undulating presence within Bronte’s narrative, their melancholy wildness, mimic the simmering inner lives of the characters who inhabit them. However, the reflective setting avoids the imitative fallacy as it is an element of the novel’s form and cannot be separated from its meaning. Wuthering Heights is a frame narrative from a witness narrator who is placed in Catherine’s room. He is told of the histories around him, and ultimately observes the implications of those histories through encounters with Cathy’s spirit, effectively heightening the sense of urgency that might not ordinarily arise around a witness narrator and within a spoken narrative.
**Historical: My Antonia by Willa Cather**


I have included My Antonia on this list for its POV. Cather uses a first person narrator (Jim). Her view was that novels depicting deep emotion could only be narrated by a character present in that story. The story is told by Jim whose twisted and conditional acceptance of Ántonia can be understood as a microcosm of America’s conditional acceptance of immigrants. Even the name he’d shortened to an “Americanized” Tony, a nickname he conditionally bestows following her grasp of English. Jim is both entranced and fundamentally disturbed by the cultural differences between himself and the Shimerda’s from their first meeting. He responds by sorting and categorizing the actions of the individual family members into good and bad, normal and atypical, right and wrong. Ántonia and her father are “good” immigrants and they are juxtaposed against Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch who are, therefore, “bad.” However, on the occasions in which Ántonia deviates from Jim’s standards, he expresses a range of negative emotions from annoyance to outright rejection. Ultimately, he rescinds that rejection and adopts her story as his own. Jim’s proprietary nature over Antonia (as evidenced by the title) is most effectively conveyed through this first person narration.

**Historical: Middlemarch by George Eliot**


My primary area of interest in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is its POV and its narration. A large complaint against the narrator in George Eliot’s Middlemarch is that it is intrusive, a device inextricable from, and representative of, the machinations of George Eliot, continuing to work on the page, threading her own text with didacticism, and championing her moral lessons with an
omniscient voice. However, criticisms of this voice hinge upon: one, a conflation of novelist with narrator; and two, an assumption that the narrator is actually claiming omniscience. The narrator of Middlemarch is not omniscient, nor is it the voice of Eliot. Rather, it is a formal device, in possession of stylistic access into the inner lives of the characters, and cognizant of their histories and motivations; and furthermore, as it moves within the text as a character— that is, as a transparently subjective and human observer— the narrator utilizes its unique access into the characters’ consciousness’ in order to empathize with their individual circumstances through the lens of its own shifting belief system, lending its form in order to make meaning of events and strive toward Eliot’s interpretation of realism.

**Historical: Collected Stories of William Faulkner by William Faulkner**


Though Faulkner was not the first to invent a setting, his Yoknapatawpha County—and its county seat of Jefferson—had a peculiar pervasiveness throughout his work, becoming the setting for all but four of his novels, as well as fifty of his short stories. Inspired by his own home county and town, through his “apocryphal county, Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner was able to combine and interpret specific geographic quirks and symbols. Specificity lending itself to the fictional town’s authenticity, Jefferson can therefore contain the largeness and the strangeness of the whole of the American South, its grotesque histories, provincial mythologies, and the remnants of its grandeur past. Jefferson’s influences can be seen in Faulkner’s literary successors, such as Marquez’s Marcondo, another fictional town containing all the multitudes of Marquez’s own hometown. In the short story, “A Rose for Emily,” Jefferson is given a particular resonance as it is narrated collectively—in the first person plural of the town itself—to describe
the death of one of its oldest inhabitants. Faulkner edited the majority of the short stories he had written throughout his career and organized them into a single volume, sorting them thematically. The categories he chose— the Country, the Village, the Wilderness, the Wasteland, the Middleground, and Beyond— are indicative of the heavy importance of setting and place in his work. “A Rose for Emily,”—originally published in 1930— was placed beneath the Village heading; in it every element of plot, character, and point of view are mobilized to reinforce setting; the effect is that the story cannot be divorced from its place. Place affects plot— both naturally and materially— and functions symbiotically with the town inhabitants, informing both individual character motivations and collective histories. As the last townsperson with memories of the Civil War and the shape of the American South before it, Emily is an Antebellum relic, a frozen depiction of the past; and, within her, the ugly truth of that past is inescapable. Her position to the town’s collective narrator is that of a “tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation.” She does not leave her house or interact with her community, nor does she pay taxes. Her existence is a literal burden upon those around her, and when she dies she is buried with her contemporaries, the soldiers of the Confederacy. By joining “the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers,” she becomes of the land itself, one with the physical place she embodies which no longer exists outside of a graveyard. Both the physical shape and the narrative function of Emily’s house—a former plantation home in the American South, once grand, now dilapidated—are classically Gothic. Her house is the curdled remnants of the disgraced Antebellum. The close, dank smell of the body rotting in Emily’s bedroom is also the smell of those memories to which she— and through her, the town— cling. In the house and in Emily, there’s a sense of the past as it actively haunts the present, a fixation upon the
grotesque. The setting described here is a perfect example of place, not as a function of plot but as a component, a function of story-telling rather than the result of story-telling.

**Historical: The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald**


Arriving on the literary scene to generally poor reviews—the New York World ran with the headline: “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Latest a Dud”—The Great Gatsby experienced comparably mediocre sales; and, when Fitzgerald died in 1940, the book was mostly forgotten, no longer in print, and difficult to find. Of the bad press, Fitzgerald is quoted as saying: “of all the reviews, even the most enthusiastic, not one had the slightest idea what the book was about.” Published in 1925 and arriving on the heels of World War One and all that it revealed about the human capacity for atrocity and agony, Fitzgerald’s contemporaries were perhaps not ready to grapple with his undressing of America’s foundational myth. Gatsby’s final passage, ostensibly Nick Carraway’s attempts to make sense out of the murder of his friend, reveal a greater tension, an inner turmoil of a much grander scope. Nick muses on the fresh green breast of a new world beheld by the Dutch sailors upon their arrival to New York. That natural green that flowered and prospered was henceforth commodified, repurposed. And that green was ultimately destroyed in favor of a different green, that of the currency of America’s capitalist economy, the fruits and promises of “the American dream.” Jay Gatsby too traded in his own natural green—that of his youth, his history and people—in favor of vanished trees, a light that could never be reached, a love that was never to be realized, and a persona that—in addition to being spiritually inauthentic—was never really fooling anyone. In pursuit of Daisy and all that she represented, he sold his soul to an insubstantial notion, to a dream so deeply entrenched in American culture that
it is all at once inextricably entwined with notions of American identity. This symbolism is
unapologetic, even overwhelming. That heavy handedness, however, is softened by an economy
of language, by trading in poetic, rhythmic sentences that subvert their own meanings, that twist
and surprise. As in the oft-quoted passage which sees the lake and its distant green light through
a variety of lenses, place in the novel—the settings of West and East Egg, the city of New York
itself, and so on—is active, functioning dramatically, emotionally, and symbolically; and
indeed, like an intricate clock, every piece of the novel is doing some sort of work. The plot itself
is simple—if classically tragic—concise and easy to describe. When reading, for the first or the
fiftieth time, I am always possessed by its spirit of inevitability, as though Gatsby—and the story
itself—is careening, once again, toward its only possible conclusion. For all its thematic
meandering, this is a novel of structural restraint, its concision creating a narrative so tightly
woven that at many moments the author even seems clear on the page, at work tying loose ends
into macrame knots.

**Historical: Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert**


Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary* has generated strong reactions since its publication (when it, or
rather Flaubert, was promptly put on trial for obscenity). Flaubert taps into the human inclination
to judge his or her other humans. Madame Bovary inspires passionate judgements for, or against,
his characters, the kinds of fervent disavowals or defenses usually reserved for other people, not
fictional creations. Flaubert said: “I do not want my book to contain a single subjective reaction,
not a single reflection by the author.” Rather, Flaubert uses third person revolving POV and
varying degrees of psychic distance to create a sense of closeness and psychological objectivity
in the reader, managing the reader’s personal impressions and sense of sympathy or revulsion toward the characters.

**Historical: Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston**


The structure of the frame narrative in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, works to characterize its narrator. Janie has the agency to tell her own story, in her own words, with her own voice. Janie recounts the story of her own life to an old friend, and this story-telling nature of the narration leads to in text revelations that would not be possible otherwise. Her voice, that is, spoken nature of the dialogue as written vernacular, is primarily effective because it is a “spoken” story.

**Historical: Passing by Nella Larsen**


The compactness of narrative is what drew me to this novel, its sense of economy and concision. Clare and Irene, its two central characters, function as foils for one another within the text; however, this formal move does not diminish their characterization, which retains deep and true humanity. *Passing* is primarily the story of Clare Kendry, a woman of mixed race ancestry, whose physical appearance is one that may “pass” for a white woman. The novel explores themes of self-invention, social mobility, and the arbitrary hypocrisy of white supremacy and the American Dream, challenging the “genetic” conditions predicating its existence. Clare’s personal mythologies are precarious and her mask is a shroud of anxiety, as her “white life” is underscored and legitimized by her marriage to a dangerous white supremacist. Their daughter
together, whose appearance fits with Clare’s narrative, must be their only child; Clare cannot risk having more children given the gamble they would present, therefore her role as a mother in the text is complex, crucial for her survival and wrapped in her mythologies and desires.

**Historical: The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde**


The Victorian period in Great Britain witnessed a revolution in the rise of industrialization: its transformative effects upon the country’s economy, its devastating effects upon those who worked in factories, and its overall broadening and strengthening of the inequalities—particularly those in health, education, overall quality of life—between the upper and lower classes. Springing up alongside the factories were the dissenters from the church, questioning its societal pervasiveness, and it was perhaps in a bid to fill those social gaps left by an increasingly secular society, that a worshipful devotion to the mercuries and trends of art, fashion, and culture emerged. Fashions and trends became major sources of identity and overwhelming emphasis was placed placed upon cultural, literary, and artistic criticism. Within this context of unstable identities, anxiety, and social change, Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a satirical Gothic with its roots in the Aesthetics Movement (a movement defined by a French phrase he did not coin, and with which his name is forever intwined). The prose of *Gray* is pure Wildean indulgence; however, its indulgence is its appeal and the reason it has been massively influential in the way I think of writing. As with Gatsby, often the writer’s hand is visible to the reader of Dorian Gray. Unlike the former, in which a reader may sense Fitzgerald at work, meticulously crafting the near perfection of his plot, *Dorian Gray* generates for the reader the impression that Wilde is playing on the page. Wilde’s playfulness, his elegant silliness
sits pleasantly alongside his grisly, gothic tropes of sexual repression, murder, and spirits
corrupted. And ultimately Wilde’s contradictory style creates around Dorian, an undeniably
morally bankrupt creature, the general atmosphere of a hero. In his introduction to the novel,
Wilde makes the aesthete’s claim that “all art is quite useless.” It is not, he postulates, the
responsibility of art to moralize, nor is it art’s place to mold the social identities of the society in
which it is created. Wilde’s preface goes on to say, “There is no such thing as a moral or an
immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.” In many ways, my personal
interest in Dorian Gray, and its placement on my list of influential texts, stems from this freeing
concept. Moralizing judgements, reactions of aversion or pleasure: these are reflective of the
reader only, never the story being told. In all Wildean prose, it can be difficult to gauge the
depths of his sincerity. Indeed the plot of Dorian Gray seems to suggest the dangers of adhering
to a solely hedonistic—or purely aesthetic —lifestyle. Dorian is corrupted by the creed that his
preface exalts, and his preface literally subverts the underlying moral of his novel. In a similar
fashion, in its language Dorian Gray often makes use of—if one can make use of a fallacy—the
imitative fallacy; its themes of satiation and excess, of duality and double-talk, are mirrored
exactly by Wilde’s characteristically indulgent, sly, and contradictory prose. It leaves the reader
mostly sure and somehow not sure at all what Wilde or his characters meant. However perhaps
that is Wilde’s point: perhaps Dorian Gray is neither a celebration of Dorian’s hedonism or a
cautionary tale about his moral decay; perhaps, is just a story, bereft of moral, fundamentally
entertaining.

**Contemporary: Giovanni’s Room by James Baldwin**

I have returned to *Giovanni’s Room* again and again for many reasons, most particularly his mastery of characterization and place. Baldwin plays with the ways home can be a physical space, but it can also be a state of mind, the ways in which home can suffocate and exclude. He uses place as metaphor as well as a function of plot, another instance where form cannot be separated from meaning. The central character is guilty of terrible emotional violence, guilty of creating the circumstances of Giovanni’s ruin, and guilty of ensuring not only his own misery, but the misery of those who loved him: Hella and Giovanni. He should be—and in many ways is—wholly unlikable, however as a reader I can never hate him. I think this is accomplished in part by Baldwin’s time handling: the conclusion is there on the first page as is David’s devastation. By front-loading David’s pain at Giovanni’s fate, there is a benevolence towards him that accompanies the reader through the novel even when confronted by David’s fatal failings.

**Contemporary: Kindred by Octavia Butler**


I think the common thread in most of the books I return to is this: a conciseness of plot that generates a fast pace and leads to an inevitable conclusion. That is, entertainment. Butler’s *Kindred* is an excellent example. Another reason to justify its placement on this list is its use of time handling. The narrative conceit of time travel is used in the plot and this leads to a unique time handling; effectively, two stories are playing out at once.

**Contemporary: The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky**

Writing a full novel in letters, like diary entries, is an exposition-heavy conceit that requires a strong emotional payout in order to earn its keep. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is also a young adult novel—a distinction that perhaps shouldn’t matter as much as it does—however, it is the successful managing of its central conceit that compelled me to include it on this list. The book’s title character, its “Wallflower,” is Charlie who writes his letters to an unnamed acquaintance because he cannot fathom opening up and expressing vulnerability to anyone he knows personally—an intersection of form and meaning.

**Contemporary: Room by Emma Donoghue**


*Room* is a novel about a young woman kept in a one room shed for over a decade. I have included it on this list as is told from the point of view of her five year old son. This POV decision, as in The Perks of Being a Wallflower, carried the enormous risk of not earning its keep and boring the reader: who wants to spend two hundred pages in the mind of a five year old? I do not even want to spend five minutes in the same room as a five year old. However, that is the point— the claustrophobic way the reader feels in the mind of Jack echoes his mother’s claustrophobia. His panic, her panic, the readers panic, all intertwine. In her mind or through any other delivery or POV choice, this panic could only be similarly generated through the imitative fallacy; however, through Jack’s narration it is a viable method of storytelling.

**Contemporary: Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides**

Narrated in first person plural by the boys of the neighborhood, the story ostensibly belongs to the five Lisbon girls who each commit suicide—one by one—over the course of the year. The boys, and later men, become “we,” a collective consciousness solely concerned with uncovering and understanding the girls they “loved.” Singular voices emerge when it is necessary for the story; their role played, they retreat back into the faceless. The more desperately the narrators attempt to understand and unlock the secrets of the Lisbon sisters, the more ephemeral and incorporeal the girls themselves become. The girls ultimately fade, their voices warped, altered, distorted, and forgotten, and it becomes clear that the novel was never about the Lisbon girls at all, but rather a meditation on gender and the male gaze from the point of view of that gaze itself: those who watched the girls, the ideas projected upon them, and the attempts to possess, tame, and control things which should never be possessed, tamed, or controlled. The narrators “exhibit” from their scopophilic collection of Lisbon girl artifacts, meticulously catalogued and stored in their childhood tree house. Each item, they claim, provides some crucial insight into the sisters’ character and inner life, and they pick apart diary entries and study yearbook photos like students dissecting frogs. Parentheticals are used to relay numeric facts the narrators feel are relevant, such as suicide statistics and Lux’s bodily dimensions taken when she escaped to the hospital. The Lisbon girls are ultimately only further obscured, rather than illuminated, buried beneath the mountains of information provided by the narrators on their behalf. I was intrigued by the deeply unreliable nature of the collective narrator as well as the point of view, which, although it is first person, allows for observation of the unsaid. That is, what the narrators do not notice or do not feel important enough to comment on is also used effectively as a characterizing force. For example, following the death of the first sister, the youngest, Cecilia, the narrators note that they possessed vivid memories of her, that some had
“played in the sandbox fighting over a shovel, or had exposed ourselves to her behind the mulberry tree that grew like deformed flesh through the chain length fence.” Another recalls looking up her skirt as she rode her bicycle. The casual way in which the narrators sexualize and desexualize Cecilia at will does not indicate reflection or remorse. As the story is told upwards of twenty years after its events—the boys are now middle aged men with “thinning hair and soft bellies”—but the casual manner in which the narrators sexualize and desexualize a young girl at will indicates no reflection or remove; thus, temporal distance is a characterizing detail, revealing more of the narrators’ collective character than they are willing, or perhaps capable of, revealing themselves. Though years have passed, the narrators display little development in their ability to see nuance and humanity in the Lisbon girls, instead cobbling together a narrative that is insistently reductive and mythologizing. The narrative of the Virgin Suicides is propelled by the “data” and “facts” the boys compile— an anatomy of the girls themselves. This form is a function of its meaning: the narrators are attempting to to overlay logic and meaning upon what they perceive to be unacceptable chaos that the girls created; furthermore, they are also attempting to force them from death, reiterating their lack of agency in life, freezing them forever in a form through which the narrators might re-experience their aliveness again and again.

**Contemporary: White Oleander by Janet Fitch**


Originally composed as a short story, *White Oleander* is a novel that tracks the declining bond of a errant mother, Ingrid, and her teenage daughter, Astrid. Ingrid, a poet, poisons her cheating boyfriend with oleander sap and is subsequently incarcerated. Astrid is then placed in a
series of foster homes generating a patchwork, almost fractured structure. Astrid, so long defined by the enormous presence of her mother, is unmoored without her. She craves Ingrid’s love even as she attempts to shuck her control and search for both a new mother figure and an identity of her own. It explores themes of transience and tenuous identity. Astrid is a patchwork of her influences. It also explores the codependent bond between a narcissistic mother and her daughter, and the ghostly, almost mythic, intrusion of Ingrid in Astrid’s life even when she isn’t physically present.

**Contemporary: Exit West by Mohsin Homid**


Set at a time that could be now or a moment away, in a country that is never named, Exit West, is both allegorical and realist—a fairy tale punctured by shrapnel. In few pages and with concise prose, Exit West compresses and expands to span great lengths of time and travel large distances, a story that is fable-like in its universality and aching in its specificity. About that unnamed place—which becomes uninhabitable by political upheaval and violent revolution—Mohsin Homid said in an interview that he had in his own hometown, Lahore, in mind as a template, while “intentionally [keeping] the place-specific details a little bit sparse, so there is a color of this place but then it’s also slightly blurry, and you can imagine it being other places as well.” Exit West serves as both a personal meditation on home, and a wider dissection of the politics of space. Serving functions of plot and theme are the “doors.” Conceptually, these doors are never explained, but their lack of explanation is less frustrating and more reminiscent of a writer leaving out the workings of a computer when writing about a Google search, or listing the make and model of a blender when a character makes a smoothie. The doors are magic; they
work like magic, and for the purpose of the story, that is all that is needed. The doors serve to transport their migrators from within war-zones to “safety.” Bifurcating the real and the imagined lines that demarcate one place from another, Exit West then puts them together again, but differently than before, minute changes that serve to highlight the arbitrary nature of boundary lines and borders: “Location, location, location, the realtors say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians.” Geography is destiny, Exit West seems to be saying, but borders are drawn, and accidents of birth continue to divide, maintain, trap, shelter, prevent, and exclude.

**Contemporary: American Gods by Neal Gaiman**


Neal Gaiman is a British expat; he has adopted America, but it is not his home. In many ways, Gaiman has said, he considers himself to be an outside observer, and American Gods can be seen as a deep dive into both general mythology and the specifically Americana myth-making of a new and strange country mired in uncountable transplanted histories. I have no small interest in myth and archetype. The earliest known translation of mythos is “things spoken;” that is, stories. A literal interpretation would be a narrative account without logos that does not simply tell something true, but that actually uncovers the truth. Gaiman uses the literal mythologies violently imposed by the creators of “American culture” to generate a whimsical and dark modern fantasy novel that is both in and of America.

**Contemporary: Beloved by Toni Morrison**

Published in 1987, *Beloved* is Toni Morrison’s response to an article from an 1856 newspaper, entitled “A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed Her Child.” In Morrison’s expansion upon that premise, a young woman, Sethe, lives with her daughter and mother in a house in Cincinnati. The house itself—124—becomes a container for the traumas Sethe and her family experienced under slavery, those traumas manifesting as a living, poltergeist-like haunting of their physical space; and, then, through the corporeal form of the revenant, Beloved. Driven to near madness from the abuses she had suffered and facing recapture and re-enslavement, Sethe attempted to “put her babies where they would be safe,” and tried to kill her three children. As she was successful only with her infant daughter, Sethe comes to believe that the spirit haunting 124—Beloved—is the ghost of her child. The novel uses these supernatural themes to convey notions of repressed memory and the fragmentation of identity under the conditions of slavery. Morrison's *Beloved* represents a new American gothic. In the Gothic tradition, in which supernatural elements were utilized to indicate a past that is palpable in the present and in the minds of the characters; however, in *Beloved*, the memories of that past have been suppressed. Still, the immediacy of the physical presence of the ghost serves as both a function of plot and a metaphorical invasion of past into the present space, regardless of how it has been remembered. In an interview with *Time* Magazine, Morrison said: “I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people won’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia.” Repression of traumatic memories at 124 leads to Sethe’s isolation and a “spiteful” haunting, to an infection of an already near-fatal wound. Morrison points out this “national amnesia”—the repression of memories of slavery in the American consciousness—as another infected wound.
Contemporary: *The Beggar Maid: stories of Flo and Rose* by Alice Munro


Neither a short story collection or a novel, the unique structure of Munro’s collection of interconnected stories spans decades of family drama and centers itself upon a woman (Rose) and her stepmother (Flo). The relationship between stepmother and stepdaughter is thematically central and their interwoven lives reflect the interwoven nature of the Munro’s storytelling structure. These are two female characters who alternate between displays of agency and reaction.

Craft: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell


I ran into this book and concept last year while working on a project about myth. It has since evolved into my central source of understanding inspiration, my “muse” and “duende.” The best ideas, in my opinion, don’t seem to be created at all; rather, they arrive like they’re returning, seeming familiar, recalled, rather than conjured. Campbell describes the archetypes that underly that recollecting sensation, the communications from the ancients that underscore storytelling. Although myth is commonly associated with its fantastical elements, with the unreal and the incredible, something inherently not to believed, as opposed to science/reality/fact, Unlike the discoveries of science, whose truths are continually in a state of evolution, changing, expanding and compounding, myth—like art— is eternal. Myth then, in a sense is the highest reality, serving to interpret the whole of human experience.
Craft: *Women Who Run with Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés


The preoccupation with travel, with conveyance and transience, in my work is related to another archetype of my primary interest: the wild woman; specifically, the wild woman repressed. Estés *Women Who Run with Wolves* is an extended study of this archetype; she calls this woman “feral.” She presents the tragedy of the feral woman through an analysis of fairytale, which she called “brutal episodes,” designed to communicate “an imperative psychic truth.” Re-experiencing the potent moralizations of fairytales after childhood is like bearing witness to a first intervention, an attempt on the behalf of a deep voice, an underlying—somehow parental—force that tells its story in order to frighten us, its children, away from a dangerous space, idea, or state. In “The Red Shoes,” Estés equates the girl in the story with the feral woman. Robbed of the product of her creation—the shoes she made herself—the girl is deprived of their vibrancy by her grandmother, who seems to thrive on the subjugation of her innate hungers and desires; and, “when she is starved, a woman will take any substitutes offered, including those that, like dead placebos, do absolutely nothing for her, as well as destructive and life-threatening ones that hideously waste her time and talents or expose her life to physical danger. It is a famine of the soul that makes a woman choose things that will cause her to dance madly out of control—then too, too near the executioner’s door.

Craft: *Man and his Symbols* by Carl Jung


On a similar note to the above, Jung helped me isolate the archetypes and symbols specifically present in my thesis. The shadow self is represented through a central character’s
relationship with her estranged mother. Their estrangement stems from the daughter who blames her mother for her uprooted childhood, for what she perceives to be her mother’s failure as both a woman and mother; and, when I began this story, I was primarily thinking of self-knowledge in terms of genetics; that is, negative traits passed down through generations by nature or nurture. Though the idea of birthright is still present in my current conceptualization of this story, from a structural standpoint, considering their positions as foils for one another, their difficult relationship is more compelling when viewed as a depiction of the shadow self. The traits the daughter carries that she despises, those she cannot recognize as being part of her, she sees only as belonging to her mother. The arch of the shadow self coincides with the rejection and recognition of the “dark aspects of the personality as present and real.” In a narrative structured to mimic that arch, the character grappling with the shadow self then, must recognize in its foil those traits she despises, acknowledge them as nonthreatening, and ultimately assimilate them into her own self-identification. With that act of assimilation in mind, this particular story will find the root of the daughter’s hatred for her mother, their shared traits, disgust undercutting the daughter’s desire for the same types of transgressions she despises her mother for committing. Whether she repairs her relationship with her mother or not, it is her assimilation of her shadow into her psyche that resolves her internal conflict.

**Craft: On Imagination by Mary Ruefle**


Ruefle opens her gloss with a prayer-like unification of increasingly unrelated things that feels like an invocation. “A man and a woman are one,” she begins and then a woman is one with a blackbird, and then a man and a woman are one with “a jug of maple syrup and an old
tennis shoe and a Roman statue.” She concludes with “a woman and her imagination are one,” as though these two concepts are both as random and as obvious as the oneness of a man and a woman.” Although she invokes it in the way of a muse, Ruefle’s conceptualization of imagination brings to mind the duende—something dangerous, even frightening, that possesses. She calls it her daimon, and it is within her control and without it, of her and over her, a source of fear and comfort, and as such perhaps it is the marriage of muse and duende, paradoxically divine and of the earth. Unlike either the muse or the duende, her imagination/daimon is with her always, “a kind of twin that prowls alongside.” Imagination is often thought of as belonging to the children. A playful, ephemeral sort of game, imagination is held in opposition to the adult’s “real world.” Ruefle concerned her essay with a broader conceptualization of imagination. Imagination is the mind’s practice of making and remaking its own context. It is the things we tell ourselves that are real, and the things we tell ourselves that aren’t; and, imagination is the very mercurial nature of real and not real, the line between and the union of (because if all language was first imagined, it can only be as real as the minds that conceived it). Imagination is the mind’s capacity for articulating infinite possibility. As such, Ruefle also meditates on its paradoxes and dangers, the fears it generates, acknowledges, and soothes. It is the worries that come with the dark, and the gentle untruths we chant to bid them away. It is Shakespeare’s imagining of Othello and Othello’s imagining of Desdemona’s betrayal. When I was small, I sometimes stopped playing all at once and ran to my mother in tears. When asked why I was upset, I would say that my imaginary friends had been mean to me. Imagination is a source of comfort and danger, because ultimately, like the minds that house it, imagination is possibility.
Craft: *The Faraway Nearby* by Rebecca Solnit


“For the mothers,” Solnit dedicates, “and the wolves.” “To be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads out in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice...we tell ourselves stories in order to live, or to justify taking lives, even our own, by violence or numbness and the failure to live; tell ourselves stories that save us and stories that are the quicksand in which we thrash and the well in which we drown, stories of justification, of accursedness, of luck and star-crossed love, or versions clad in the cynicism that is at times a very elegant garment.” Thematically, this idea— that is, the stories we create around ourselves, the stories we need to tell for some fundamental reason related to our self-conceptualization— is my primary focus. Why and how do we generate the stories that provide for us our foundational myths? These personal mythologies we collect like sticks. We weave them into a cradle; inside our own creations, we rock ourselves to sleep. How much of what humans tell ourselves is the truth, and can a person go on in the event that his or her mythologies have been stripped away? Solnit meditates on self awareness, postulating that “not to yourself is dangerous, to that self and to others. Those who destroy, who cause great suffering, kill off some portion of themselves first, or hide from the knowledge of their acts and from their own emotion, and their internal landscape fills with partitions, caves, minefields, blank spots, pit traps, and more, a landscape turned against itself, a landscape that does not know itself, a landscape through which they may not travel.” I knew that I was concerned with self-understanding, but Solnit made me understand that I am really concerned with specifically that landscape, that is, the false landscape that is overlaid upon true one, the reality beneath the unreliable narrator, “the means to hide from yourself, the disassociations, projections, deceptions, forgettings, justifications and other tools to
detour around the obstruction of unbearable reality, the labyrinths in which we hide the minotaurs who have our faces.”
VITA

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