ABSTRACT

THE RATTLESNAKE WILLS

By: Kim Rayburn

_The Rattlesnake Wills_ deals with my reaction to my father as he faced learning that his mother had lied to him all his life. She promised him that in her will she would leave him the land he farmed for his parents in southern Ohio. Since a land grant for service in the War of 1812, the Knedlers owned and farmed a tract in Fayette County of more than two hundred acres, bordered on the north by Rattlesnake Creek. This sudden loss, followed by the loss of my father’s other job as a land bank officer, triggered a downward spiral in my father’s health and a change in my view of my strong father. The story takes place from my perspective, beginning at age seven, and in the present, as a mother myself. I examine the events that followed my grandmother’s deception and the pain it caused my family.
THE RATTLESNAKE WILLS

A Thesis

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Acknowledgments

I was halfway finished with this manuscript by the time I asked my dad how he felt about me writing it. He’d seen none of the writing at that point, but he’d graciously sat with me on the deck of my parent’s farmhouse, in the living room, in the sitting room, and on the phone answering question after question. He knew where I was going with this, I think, even before I did. I learned more about my parents, my grandparents, and myself thanks to his willingness to talk to me. Dad showed me that no one in this story is perfect, but everyone is real.

Jennifer Cairns, one of the strongest people I’ve ever met, brought me back to the world of books when I’d fallen off the wagon. I thank her for that. Jennifer Wells was a true friend, a sensitive reader, and an inspiration in all things. Patricia Kambitch, writer, artist, and cheerleader. Without you three, I could not have finished this.

The writers at Miami University, especially Eric Goodman and Constance Pierce, along with my fellow workshoppers, let me put versions of this on the table for two years. They asked me to push harder, and I finally did. What I had intended to avoid was what they asked me to write. Thank you for your energy, your time, and your deadlines.
For my dad

“Land is universal. Every conquerer, every empire. That’s what they wanted,” he told me.

“Because land is power?” I said.

“Because land is security.”
George Knedler settled the land of Fayette County, Green Township. 1810.
   A wild-wood home on the banks of Rattlesnake Creek.
   His father was a continental under George Washington.
       He fathered twelve children.
       Wild game was their main subsistence.
       They ate corn, parched, boiled, and baked.
       The coarse fare was healthful and the children grew up hardy.

--The New Historical Atlas of Fayette County, Ohio, Illustrated. 1875.
Preface

Relation
1. A logical or natural association between two or more things
2. A connection of people by blood or marriage
3. The act of telling or narrating

I was the last child to carry the Knedler name, the youngest of three daughters, born to a man with three sisters, so when I married the name went with me. I’m not sure when I realized I was the last girl with Knedler at the end of my name. My oldest sister, Karmel, was married when she was 18. I was four and her flowergirl. Then, Kindra married when I was 16, and I think that’s when I noticed. A twenty-five minute generic Presbyterian wedding ceremony and a word you’ve carried to identify yourself just disappears.

I’ve hung onto Knedler a little longer by making it my middle name, but it isn’t the same. I miss it sometimes. A few of my closest friends from high school called me by my last name. Knedler (pronounced without the K), but my friend Teresa shortened it even more. To her, I was Ned. When I married a new last name, I was secretly relieved to move that name to the (somewhat) hidden middle where it’s only a K. on my checks and my driver’s license.

Since I was old enough to answer the phone, I remember saying to the callers, “Knedler. With a K. Yes, at the beginning.” In the end, I had to spell it anyway, so I don’t know why I bothered to explain the details of pronunciation. Sometimes I would go even further and say, “It’s German,” as if I was excusing it on those grounds or apologizing for it. But it was my name no matter what and I missed it too much to let it go completely. It felt too much a part of me. And I also knew that if I let it go, it would disappear from our family line forever.

When I was visiting my parents on a summer break from college, a woman phoned from California. It was 1991, but this wasn’t the first time someone had called to ask questions about my family. It went something like this.
“I’m searching for my relatives, genealogy, you know, and I found your last name in the phone book. It’s so distinctive. I wondered if we might be related.”

She talked to me for several minutes, trying to explain something as complicated as our family connection in the shortest time possible. This was long distance. Normally I would have passed the receiver to my mother, the real talker of the family, but she wasn’t home. It turned out that this Californian was some kind of cousin, a distant one, but I lost track of the connection even while she was still explaining it. I could only offer her a few branches for her family tree (mostly I could just confirm that Alonzo sounded familiar to me, but, no, my dad never mentioned a grandmother), and I figured anyone else in the family probably would have known more. This woman seemed grateful for the connection. She told me that there were different spellings of our name all over the country. Knoedler, Kneedler, even a few had dropped the K. They were the Nedlers (those cheaters). She was tracking us down by our consonants. With a name like Knedler, you can pick up the phone book and either find nothing or you can find family.

My Aunt Barbara traced The Knedlers all the way back to the old country. Her daughter, Peggy, has boxes and file folders full of the documents with the German village names and the lists tracing family after family member as they came into New England, making their way to Pennsylvania, then Ohio. I could be a Daughter of the American Revolution if I wanted to be. Maybe someday I will.

The house in Ohio where I lived is old. The stories are old. Most of the people and stories are already forgotten or have died away with the grandparents, the great-uncles, the daughters who once knew them. These are the relatives, the strangers I never knew, who might have had some answers I’ve been looking for. For years, I thought the reason I didn’t know the names of my distant family members was because I was the baby of the family and somewhere along the way, people forgot to tell me. But this isn’t true. My sisters remember more faces than I do. They have some images in the back of their minds, but they don’t really know the stories either. Our dad doesn’t tell them to us. Their names are slowly getting lost. Time is passing and no one is talking. My grandmother once said to me, “I could tell you so many stories,” but she never did.

When I’m feeling nostalgic, or when I see the farm land around Ohio being eaten up by residential houses built on top of each other, that’s when I think about our farm and
the old house. I want to wrap it up, protect it, maybe even live there again. I want to make an open field of soybeans, a patch of scraggly trees into a monument to family. But that’s not how it works. A farm is not a memorial - it’s work. Then I remember the pain that the land and the people who lived there have caused. In the name of the land. That’s when I want to shake it off and forget that place. So, I ride the wave between homesickness and a feeling I can’t name. Disgust seems too strong, so disappointment might be better. It’s that feeling that comes when I want to claim that I came from pioneer stock and that makes me feel strong. Then I remember what those pioneers did to each other once they were here and the history doesn’t feel so romantic anymore.

I’ve tried to recreate some of those stories here. I’ve researched and written and prayed that I’ve captured some of the truth of my family. But I don’t know everything. The family that is gone, the ones who didn’t tell their stories, they took with them the characters who walked these fields and dug into the dark dirt to make a life for the family. They knew the joys and betrayals given in the name of the land, for the sake of love or pride or something else. I still feel the ripples of their affection and the resonance of their anger today.

This land is like a beautiful and tempermental lover, or mother. She has the ability to make you feel strong, nearly invincible, and cherished. But she has another side.
Cutting Back

When I was a little girl, and we visited Grandma’s house, I hated the two trees in her front yard. The branches knotted like arthritic knuckles while shingles of jagged bark covered the body and the stumpy limbs. My grandfather \textit{pruned} the trees each year. He’d taken a chainsaw to them. Every winter they stood sentinel on the house, disfigured and ashamed and helpless. But they would sprout leaves again, stubbornly, in the spring. He made them so ugly. If he hated them, why didn’t he just chop them down completely and stack them for firewood behind the barn?

I think that maybe I don’t hate them now. After Grandpa moved to the rent-controlled retirement community, my father left the trees alone. Like a woman who grows her hair long to hide a scar, tufts of maple leaves conceal most of the damage.

By the time I was twelve, it had been my job to mow the yard and the pasture behind the house. It was mindless work, hours and hours of circling and quartering. I drove a tractor with a mowing blade underneath, a 1950’s style machine, dull red in color and dusty from living in the machinery shed. My mother would yell if I took it higher than second gear. “You miss too much going that fast.” She was right. I left whole chunks of grass uncut, but then scalped the section over by the ditch almost every time.

I made up superstitious games with the house. It passed the time. When I drove under the trees, I would hold my breath. If I didn’t, someone I knew would die. Sometimes when I mowed in the late afternoon, the light would reflect against the warped, upstairs window and it would look like a person was standing there. Since no one was home, I would turn my back on the window. Then, I’d suddenly turn around again in an attempt to catch the window watcher. I never caught anyone.

That’s where I was, fifteen years old and mowing under the trees, when I saw the van. The farms on this road sprawl on long stretches of unlined blacktop. Property lines are separated by sharp curves. Drivers take the straights fast, making up lost time by speeding through the isolated flatness, but everyone knows you have to brake for the curves. Inside my head, I said the words like a child-prophet, “He’s not going to make it.”
Dad was push mowing the perimeter of the barn lot. As he maneuvered around
the fence line, his back was to the arc in the road that designated our cornfields from the
neighbor’s hog lot. The dueling sounds of our mower engines ricocheted off the barn
walls and the metal bins. Dad didn’t turn to see that two hundred feet behind him, the
van’s driver missed the turn. He didn’t even try. His wheels chewed the shoulder,
scattering an angry confetti of dirt and gravel behind him. The magic of speed and the
slope of the ditch had him in the air by the time he reached the fence. The van’s nose
dove forward, snapping the barbed wire like a finish line.

The van flipped in slow motion, a white-noise dream. Adrenaline slowed reality
and senses and I was allowed to memorize it.

Nose over tail, two times. I couldn’t hear the crunch of the impacts, but the front
was smashed. A giant shoebox formed, flying end over end. That’s when I screamed.
My pitch was high enough to be heard over the growling motors and my father looked
up.

I’d screamed before on the tractor. The first time, I’d accidentally mowed over a
toad. The whirling blades sent a small explosion of bright red and tiny pieces of flesh
across the stepping stones. My mother hosed it away, but the stone stained like a
starburst. Like someone had thrown a water balloon of blood at the walkway. The other
time was when a bee was chasing me in the orchard and I ran the tractor into a pear tree.
Dad bent the axle back, but he was too quiet about it.

I hoped he would believe me this time. I hit the kill button on the engine and
stood up. I pointed over his shoulder, jerking my arm forward in exaggerated motions.
He turned in time to see the last of four side rolls. The van tipped once more then swayed
back to rest on its roof. The tires were still spinning, like a beetle kicking its legs, trying
to right itself. The gray underbelly was exposed in the Saturday morning sun. It had
taken out twenty rows of sprouting infant corn.

The mowers were quiet. Even though I knew, I stood under the trees and waited
for Dad to tell me what to do. “Call the sheriff!” he yelled. He was already running.

At the hallway desk I twirled 0 on the rotary. I ended the call with, “This is not a
joke. We need help here.” The dispatcher told me to be patient. “You’re a long way
from town.” She knew we would be alone with the van for at least twenty minutes.
My father had pulled open the wrinkled double doors in the back of the van. The interior was a hollow cave. A man sat facing my father, his legs extended straight forward. It was a child’s pose. Black hair stuck to his head in a few places where the blood was wet. Five small but flowing rivers of red streaked down his face and disappeared into the neck of his shirt. I’d seen this before. At St. Anthony’s, there was a statue of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. The driver’s eyes were colorless, faded gray with tiny pinpoints of pupils. He stared at me.

“He’s drunk,” Dad said. “He was thrown into the back. Tossed around. I think he’s all right.”

The man didn’t speak until the sheriff’s car parked diagonally in the road. I had seen this deputy before. He emerged from the cruiser showing his height and his tight black uniform. Unnaturally pretty for this county. His blonde hair was cut military short and quickly covered by the wide-brimmed hat as he stepped into the field. He wore mirrored sunglasses. Even though I had reported the accident as a rollover, the dispatcher had not sent the medic. Touching the radio mouthpiece at his shoulder, the deputy summoned an ambulance to follow him. A law enforcement god.

“You have to leave,” my father said.

“Why?”

“Because that man says his wife was with him. We’re going to search the ditches now. Or she might be under the roof when we turn the van over.”

“Oh.”

There were cars lining up, both ways, trickling to a stop behind the cruiser. I jogged past them, back to the house. One driver rolled down his window, “What happened?”

“He rolled it,” I said. “He smells like a brewery.”

The driver nodded, understanding for some reason that I would know what a beer factory smelled like.

I sat in the uncut grass, shaded by the trees, watching them search. The sun was higher, hotter than it had been when the van first launched into the field. Dad lifted his John Deere hat and wiped his forehead with a faded, blue handkerchief. He wadded it, stuffing it into his back pocket. He nodded to the deputy. They started the search at the
spot where the dirt of the shoulder was exposed. One walked east along the ditch with polished black boots disappearing into the knee-high grass. My father’s brown lace-ups were heavy, worn and paint-spattered. He worked his way west. They both had the same job. If they came to a thick patch, they would swish the grass back and forth. Some of the men waiting in their cars got out and joined the search. They spent less than a half an hour looking for someone, or a piece of someone, who’d been thrown.

There was no woman’s body in the ditch or the field. The men and the tow truck worked together to tip the van back to its wheels. Only small stalks of corn and soft soil were stuck to the roof. The man was wrong. His wife was home with his two children.

When the tow truck and the beautiful sheriff and the searching men were gone, I sat on the front tractor tire, facing the road. The trees were so bushy now that the sun rarely reached through them at any time of day. The grass was richer in color under the trees. They were hurt trees, but they kept on living. Outside the circle of shade, the white sun washed out the world. That was the way of things here, light and dark, but mostly something in between.

I think that’s the way things were with me, too. I’d become more like my dad by that time. I wanted good things to happen, I really did, but I learned to prepare myself that they won’t. I’d begun to live my world in possible scenarios, constant daydreams, thinking that if I play out every situation before it happened, then I could handle anything. Nothing could surprise me and then nothing could hurt me.

Cars came around the curve toward me, oblivious to what had happened earlier. I psychically willed them to turn safely and sent them on their way. At the same time, I pictured each one ignoring the curve and following a routine of crushing acrobatics into the field.
“People who start that way, usually, they stay that way.”

Ircel Knedler, Jr.

Juanita

In the southern part of Fayette County, a jagged stream cuts through the land. For my family, going back many generations, it’s been a property line. It might have been named for the way it meanders steady and present like a thin crevice in one spot and a wide river a little farther down. Or perhaps the first settlers here weren’t so poetic. There were rattlesnakes around. Not many, but maybe enough to coin the name. Rattlesnake Creek moved around my grandmother all her life. It slithered past her home and spoke to her. I am your border. This is your place. She was born in a log cabin that squatted on its banks as Bessie’s second (and only legitimate) daughter and would end up as the middle child between Olive and Ernest. Her whole life, she would never move more than three miles from the creek.

Her name was Juanita--probably the only Juanita in southern Ohio at the turn of the century. The family must have wondered where Ben and Bessie came up with such a name. Its foreign softness, a whisper of a name, was unlike any they had heard before. According to the handwriting in our family Bible, Eliza and Sarah were popular names for girl babies birthed in their mother’s beds. Juanita Voldaire Melson wasn’t common at all. It started Spanish, went French in the middle (another mystery) and ended familiar and German. The south county was full of Juanita’s cousins, and each one lived on the land their families either bought from the government or earned fighting in the War of 1812. Binegar, Knedler, Carson, Anderson, Melson. A few of their names still mark the roads where they settled.

The truth is that I really didn’t know her. I called her Grandma Knedler and my father called her Mom. I didn’t even know her name was Juanita until years later. The longer I’ve spent writing this, the less I refer to her as my grandmother. The hours of research, the written evidence and the ancedotes from my parents have made her seem all the more removed from me – when I had expected they would do the opposite. I thought that I would feel closer to her. It was conceited on my part to think that I could figure her
out. Grandma was a person I knew a little, but Juanita had a whole life of experience that
didn’t involve me at all.

Though she lived only five miles from my home on Sugar Grove Road, I only
Grandma Knedler when Mom drove me there on Saturday afternoons in the months when
my father was in the fields plowing or planting, depending on the season. She was old by
then.

Juanita promised this land to her only son, my father. When she died, it would all
go to him and he would plant the fields and repair the barn roof, just like all the men in
our family had. For as long as my dad can remember, that’s what she told him. He
thought this land, the place of his family’s roots, was his dream. The new ideas he wanted
to bring to the farm, he calls them, “not so big. Just better maybe.” I was never directly
told that Dad would farm this land and it would be our inheritance some day. It was just
something that was true and we all knew it. It just was.

Grandpa and Grandma Knedler called my dad Junior and most people who met
him never knew his Christian name was actually Ircel Milton Knedler, Jr. It was too
much of a mouthful. When he was very little, his sisters called him Bud, but in the end it
was Junior that stuck. The name worked just fine, except on the days when he wished he
wasn’t a part of Ircel Milton Knedler, Sr., when he wished he had a different name that
was completely different and no one associate him with his father. Sharing a name made
it seem like he would turn out to be his father, take over for him on the farm, and then
become him.

When my dad was old enough to drag the bales of hay into the pasture, cut the
burlap ties, and dump the piles of itchy, dry hay into the cattle feeders, he was moved
from his mother’s world inside the dark farmhouse to his father’s.

Junior meets his father in the barn every morning wearing boots with mud and
manure caked around the edges. No matter how much he stomps, the weight of the
brown and gray lumps hold tight. The tops of the boots are rubber, but the bottom feels
like adobe. Since this is Sunday morning, they need to hurry. They need time to feed and
water the steers before cleaning up for church. If it were a planting or picking season,
there might be other men, mostly older guys that Junior had met once or twice around
town. Unlike some other farmers, Junior’s father wouldn’t skip church, even if the weather was good and they needed time in the fields. The rush then was to beat the rain or the heat or a cold snap that would delay the work.

“You’re late,” his father says.

Junior resists the urge to say, “No, I’m not,” and pulls his hat a little lower over his eyes. He’d learned, that lesson only took once, and it would only make his father angrier than he already was. Angry about everything Junior touched. Instead Junior breathes in deeply. The smell of the hay stacked around the edges of the barn mixes with the warm, sharp smell of cattle. It’s more like home than any kitchen smell, that’s for sure. Junior’s anxious to get started, to be alone. His father stands with his back to the stall door. Inside, Junior sees the steers pushing their big, wet noses through the slats in the fence. Their heads turn sideways so they can see him with their far-set, brown gaze. His father’s voice is forgotten. Junior knows what to do. “Just let me do it. Just go away.” He thinks it, but says nothing.

“You need to grease up those belts today, too.”

“I know, Dad.”

When he is finally in the stall, Junior hears the steers crowding up behind him. Their hoofs squishing down into the places where the straw has soaked into the mud below. They have brown, caked shoes, too. If the biggest one is very brave, Junior knows that he will feel a bump in his back. That granite head pushes him to move faster. “Git!” he yells and they all jumped back two steps. One word controls their half-ton bodies. But he secretly likes to feel their strength, their dumb impatience. He pats the brown steer on the side, three hard thumps, before he climbs the fence and lets them argue for their spots at the hay male.

At the house, he hears his father talking to his sisters. They aren’t dressed yet for church. Junior washes his hands with soap his sisters and mother made in the backyard. It stings a little in the cuts he didn’t even know he had.

I never learned to carry any hay bales by myself and it seemed that no one really expected me to. When it was my turn to learn to feed, I clipped the ties with a pair of garden shears or I hacked at the bales with a rusty machete that hung on the wall of the
barn. My mom showed me how to pull the bales into chunks that I could manage alone. I only had to feed the calves, never the big animals.

My dad worked in the fields for years, alternating crops from soybeans to corn to alfalfa to whatever his father told him to plant. One summer they even tried potatoes, but that was a bust, and the orchard “didn’t go too good” either, so they stuck with the more dependable ventures after that.

In the oldest barn, the only one still standing today, I stare up at the ceiling.

“What are those spikes, Dad?” I don’t remember seeing those pegs before, even though I’ve been in this barn hundreds of times. It’s a strange thing to stand in a place and see something that’s always been around you, but you’ve never noticed it. These are the bits of foundation, the underlying details, quietly waiting to be found. Suddenly, the barn looks more like a ship to me. The joints meet at severe angles and the poles are forty foot masts.

“Not one nail was used in this barn when they put it up. A real peg barn.” The spikes driven between the rafters every foot or so look like something I might use to kill a vampire, round and flat on one end, a honed point on the other.

“How old is this barn?”

“Far as I can tell, 1850. They lived a cabin they built about same time as the barn.” They are the Knedler family, our ancestors, who came before us. Some of them were veterans of war and a few were Quakers. These are their designs, still holding together more than 150 years later.

Beside an old shelf where my grandfather once stored medicines that you could spray on a cow’s hide to seal a wound, I found what I thought was my dad’s boyish handwriting. The ciphering is small, from a child’s hand and perfect the way a little boy learns to line up the numbers vertically and borrow from the number beside it. It is simple addition and subtraction, 18, 32, 20, 41-- pounds of feed.

“Look, Dad,” I say, “You’re writing is on the wall.”

“That’s not mine. That must be Dad’s. See.” He points to the words looping at the top. Go to Macdonald. 4 bags chicken feed. You have to pick them up. “Dad and Mom went on a trip that summer and they took Janet Ann, but not me. I had to stay and
take care of the farm.” He points with his finger at the instructions. “These are the
directions for me. I was in high school by then.”

Fifteen feet away, on the door to the big stall, there is more writing, more
numbers. This one is older, more distinct, but less perfect. These are the hours that the
farm hands worked in a month. My grandfather hired them for harvest season, but
otherwise he didn’t need any help. He had a buggy whip and he had my father. The
sting of that black quirt across his pajama bottoms was usually enough motivation, even
on the coldest mornings, to get the farm chores finished. That and the knowledge that
one day, my dad wouldn’t be told every move to make, that every change he wanted was
a stupid waste of money. His mother promised him.

There were more than two hundred acres here originally and every direction that
Junior looked, there was Knedler land. Two hog farms flanked the east and west borders,
a patch of woods to the south, the creek to the north.

By the time I was born in the 1970’s not much money was made on family farms.
Corporations were leaning on the landowners to sell out; banks were collecting the
outstanding debts. I remember hearing about a man in Indiana who dug a giant hole in
his field and buried his prize tractor so the bank couldn’t foreclose on it. We watched
him on television in our living room. He was caught; television cameras zoomed in on
his red, teary eyes. That’s what desperation does to a farmer, but at the time, I thought it
was weak. My dad would never hide like that.

Dad could still make something on this soil and in the grain market. He didn’t
actually say this. He didn’t tell my mother that there would be enough money to make up
the difference from the previous year or that there would ever be a profit. My dad just
kept going, working the fields, even in the dark, and I believed him. He’d worked his
whole life for this. Inheriting this land, working it into something of his own, it would
complete him. My father never imagined what would happen if it didn’t.
On a Wednesday afternoon, Juanita called her daughter-in-law, Jana, and said,
“Can you take me to Greenfield on Saturday?”
“I can be there by about ten. Do you want to shop?”
“No, I want to see my mother.”
Jana started to say something, then stopped herself. “I’ll be there by nine.”
That evening, Jana and Junior sat in their small dining room. The plates on the
table didn’t match and one of the drinking glasses was a jelly jar. Jana had set the table
though, plates in the middle, knives and forks on the left. Glasses of light colored tea set
just above the plate, slightly to the right. Her grandmother’s crystal sugar bowl between
them. Outside their front door, a few cars and farm trucks headed home on Route 62.
She told him what his mother had asked her to do.
“What do you think she will say to her mother?” Jana said.
“It’s just over fifteen years. I don’t know what they could say at this point.”
“Do you want to come too?”
“No. It’s not my place.” Junior stared out the window.
“She’s your grandmother.”
“I don’t even know her. I haven’t seen her since I was ten years old.” It sounded
a little like an accusation and Junior was sorry he said it. He was almost twenty-five. He
hated to sound like a child.
“That’s your mother’s fault. You can’t keep a child away from a grandparent like
that.”
“Maybe she didn’t want to see me either. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. A child is at
the mercy of his parents.”
When the day came, it took ten minutes for Juanita to find her pocketbook and
make it down the front steps to where Jana parked her car on the lawn. Jana stood to
the side, using her free hand to balance Juanita’s weight, though she was only a little
over five feet tall and a hundred pounds herself. The walk was short, but slow. Juanita
had high blood pressure and heart trouble, but in a year she’d be struggling with the
sugar. In Jana’s other arm she held her first daughter, Karmel, pressing her tightly into
the ridge of her hip for extra support. Her baby’s brown, curled hair tickled against her left cheek as they made their way to the black, four-door Plymouth where Juanita would hold her granddaughter on her lap as they made the nine mile trip to see Bessie Melson. At first, Juanita turned Karmel to face her, but the baby wanted to see out, so Juanita moved her so that she could see the fields and the fence posts skimming by. All three generations of Knedlers were quiet in the car that day.

Bessie was standing at the door of her small, side-street house when they pulled into the gravel driveway. The name of the mailbox by the road wasn’t Melson. In the last fifteen years, Bessie had remarried and this was her new husband’s home. By the time Juanita came to her, she was widowed a second time.

When they stepped through the door Bessie held open for them, Jana thought it had the same sticky mustiness that the farmhouse had always had. The front rooms were dimly lit and the sunny morning light was blocked by heavy drapes. Jana worried a little about putting Karmel on the floor. At fourteen months, she was always determined to find something to put into her mouth. Mom balanced her attention between Karmel’s wriggling body and the quiet forms of Juanita and Bessie. A sofa, an upholstered rocker, a green winged chair. The women took their places and faced each other across the room.

This was the first time Jana had seen her husband’s grandmother and she thought that Juanita and Bessie were nearly identical, just twenty-five years apart. Bessie was slightly smaller than Juanita, and maybe a little wider, but otherwise, they were definitely family. Both of their auburn hairdos fit them like little red, curly caps and they both wore similar shapeless flowered dresses. Jana wasn’t sure what she’d expected them to do. Hug each other maybe. Instead, they sat like strangers, now four generations of quiet.

Because it was her way, Jana said things she thought might help.

“Is that an antique anniversary clock there?” Yes, it was.
“How are you enjoying living in town?” Fine, just fine.

Too much remained Unsaid and it sat in the room with them that morning.

Unsaid: “The reason I’m here is...”
“I’m sorry that...”
“Why did you...”
“I’m so glad that you...”
“I wish we could go back and...”
“I’ve missed...”
“I’m sorry, too.”

When Bessie finally spoke, she said, “That sure is a beautiful baby.”

“Yes.” Juanita answered her, “I think she has Junior’s look.”

Each woman in Bessie’s living room had a part in the baby. Karmel walked with a toddler’s innocence from woman to woman, touching their covered knees with her small hands. Bessie touched her fine curls and Juanita held her small fingers. This was what they had in common.

Later that day, when Juanita was safely home in her rocker watching television, Jana would tell Junior, “It was awkward. But she wants to go again.”

Juanita and Jana and Karmel would see Bessie three more times for nearly silent Saturday morning visits. Before the fourth visit, Bessie would be dead of heart failure and buried at White Oak Cemetery with her first husband, Ben. The date of Bessie’s death would eventually be carved onto their shared stone, 1958.
On Saturday afternoons, Mom brought old cloth diapers and towels from our rag bag and a Kroger grocery sack full of cleaners with her. She did her duty as a daughter-in-law by sweeping the front porch steps, cleaning the dark splotches growing in the bathroom with Comet, and putting a raw casserole in the freezer for Juanita to bake later.

“Do you mind if I take this home, Mom Knedler?” my mother said. She was holding a dark brown pickling jar against her stomach. The side was cracked and the lid wouldn’t hold tight any longer. My mother thought it would look pretty and antique if she turned the bad side toward the wall of the mantle at our house.

“No, don’t take it. I might pickle this summer. I’ll need that.” Juanita watched my mother put the broken pot back into the china cabinet shelf. Mom replaced it just where she’d found it behind the stacks of curling magazines and scattered empty glass jars. Juanita nodded and continued rocking gently in her chair. She rarely left this room. There had been no pickles in that jar for seventeen years.

I played around Juanita and sometimes with her while she rocked in her white, upholstered chair. In some places, the threads on the chair’s arms were so sparse that she could pluck at them like rubberbands, snapping them against her fingernails. By the time I came along, she didn’t leave her rocker very often. She was big by then. Honestly, she’d always been big, but age had made her soft and pain-filled, too.

“May I take your order?” I’d say.

“Vegetable soup and cake please,” she always answered. Restaurant was our game and we had the right plastic dishes for that particular order. She kept an old bushel basket of red and yellow place settings in the dark closet beside the television. The ceiling inside was sharply diagonal since the closet squeezed under the steep back staircase. It was musty and unpainted and unlit. The small metal doorknob fit perfectly in my five-year-old hand. I suppose that should have made it feel comfortable, like a life-size doll’s house might feel, but it only made the door seem all the more unnatural. Each time we played this game, I stopped in the threshold, not wanting to go into the closet. But Grandma wasn’t going to get up to get the dishes, and they were the only toys in the house. I could see the outline of the basket resting in front of empty glass jars and
unmarked boxes. She didn’t coax. She just rocked rhythmically and looked out the window.

I clawed into the darkness, catching the edge of the woven bushel basket and dragging it onto the thin living room carpet. With care, I arranged the teacups and saucers and bowls onto a two-year-old JCPenney Christmas catalog and brought them to her. I ignored the dead spiders and earwigs at the bottom of the basket.

As Juanita enjoyed the smell of her tea and lifted the cup to her lips, I reached out to touch the skin hanging from her arm. It was wrinkled and satiny at the same time, a nearly translucent drapery of living but useless flesh. She didn’t bother to pull away or acknowledge the curious caress of small fingers.

My sisters, years later, both admit to me that they stand in front of their bathroom mirrors, flexing and checking out their triceps. I’ve done this, too, and I still do it. We’re looking for traces of “Grandma Arms.” No other feature seems to worry us. Grandma also had thinning hair and bad teeth and a heart condition. We don’t think about that. We only think about arms.

Sometimes, in those afternoons, my grandfather would come into the living room. He had a green, tweed chair of his own where he sat like an old, tanned troll. The top of his head was pale pink in contrast to his dark face, a perfect line across his forehead where white skin met tan. It had been at least twenty years since he’d left the house without his hat. I don’t remember him wearing anything but dark blue denim overalls and a white t-shirt, his retired farmer uniform. My dad says Grandpa Knedler liked blue button-down shirts with his overalls, but that color doesn’t fit into my memory of him. If Grandpa noticed me, he would look hard at me and say, “Where’s Junior?” I never knew the answer to this. “In the field?” I answered and his eyes, blurry behind wire-rimmed trifocals, just a second longer, decided if I might be backtalking. Grandpa never liked my response and he would push his round body out of the chair and use a mahogany cane to balance his way out of the room. I was glad he didn’t order anything from my restaurant or try to drink my imaginary tea.

When it was time to go, Grandma gave me handfuls of sugar-coated, jelly orange slices or maybe circus peanuts as candy treats. When I started to open my mouth, when, I hate those, was almost out, my mother gave me the eye and I opened my palms into a cup
so Grandma could pour a pile into my hands. The peanuts were faded orange in color, and I thought their flavor was a mix of sherbet and floor cleaner. Neither candy was popular, so Grandma must have made a special trip to the smaller market in town to get them for me. She always had them in the cabinet or lying open, drying on top of the icebox. I wondered then if Grandma might eat them herself when I wasn’t there. Were these her favorite? If I remembered, I would put them in my pockets and my mother would throw them away later. If not, they would stay on the table or the floor after I left.

Juanita didn’t have a chance to tell me anything about herself or what she liked. Even if she had, I don’t know what her words would have meant to me. Her actions are what I remember. They are clear, even when the reasons for them are blurry. That’s all I have to judge her with. It just doesn’t feel like enough.
Domino

I couldn’t stand to be kept inside and I begged, “Just a short walk, just to the barn and back.” I was an expert negotiator for “just one more minute.” Once free of the dark living room and hollow hallway, I let the metal screen slam closed. The sound of Grandma’s “Bob Braun Show” faded behind me. I slid my feet along the smooth, limestone pathway that led to the fence near the road. I’m not sure you could really call it a fence. It was really just a twenty-foot line of mesh and a gate in the center. It didn’t enclose anything. In the spring, four tulips grew from underneath it. Three were standard pink, but one of them was yellow with sharper petals and a black splotch in the middle. I called it tiger’s eye and made myself not pull it even though I really wanted to. “It will just die before we get home,” Mom said.

The only other flower in the yard was a huge peony bush by the storm cellar door – which I was not allowed to stand on because it was rotted and might fall in. It sat in the grass slightly away from the house and all alone as if it had come there volunteer and just grown wild. My mother wanted to mow over it, but my dad never did until years later. I loved the flowers in the early summer because they were fat and smelled like roses. I would say to the bush, “I want flowers before Karmel’s birthday.” That was June 5 and the flowers always came on time. Once I tried to pick a bloom, but the stems were so thick, I couldn’t break them, even when I twisted them around and around. When I let go, there were big, black ants on my arm. I jumped and smacked at them until they fell back into the bush and the grass.

Two weeks later and after a rain, the flowers were gone, but the petals were splattered in ugly pink and white piles, as if the bush had puked them up onto the lawn. On my hand and knees, I sniffed at the piles. Most smelled like nothing and a few smelled like old lady perfume.

My favorite part of the farmhouse was Domino, the barn cat. When she saw our car, she’d sit by the barn door, mewing for me. Most of the cats on the farm were temporary, so my parents didn’t let me name them. They’d either get hit on the road or disappear into the fields, but Domino had been there for a long time. She was small for a
full-grown cat and I named her myself for the white body and black spots on her fur. Every visit I’d ask my mom if we could bring Domino home to our house, but she always said no. “This is Domino’s home. She’s happy here.” How could she be happy? No one ever fed her here.

I’d let myself into the big barn by reaching through a perfectly round hole in the door. Inside the hole, I had to feel around for the metal hook that held the door closed and pull it up. A third of the barn floor was packed dirt, and the other two parts were either wood planks or straw-filled stalls for the cows. It seems like it should have smelled like manure, but I don’t remember that. Domino slept in this barn, usually on the side where the bales of hay had split open. Sometimes I saw an intended valley in the hay and when I felt it, it was still warm from her body. One summer, I watched Domino’s tiny body get fat. Not her whole body, just her belly. She kept her small head and thin legs, but her middle was a tight, perfectly round ball. Then suddenly she was skinny again. My dad searched for her kittens. He climbed into the hayloft and walked the rickety boards over my head. I knew my mom was thinking about letting me have one of the kittens. She had that look about her. Dad walked the perimeter of the barn and came back to stand over me where I sat in the dirt scratching Domino under her chin.

“Don’t go over by the old gate.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t. There’s no kittens. She’s too small for it.”

By the time he was inside the workshop door, I was looking into the grass under the old gate. Eight tiny, deflated bodies were already sinking back into the ground. I stepped away quickly, but the image was stuck in my head for years.

Later that summer, my dad picked up Domino and two other visiting cats and held them like babies in the crook of his arm.

“Want to see something funny?”

We walked across the road to the largest of three empty grain bins. My dad opened the door and threw the cats in. It was empty and echoed as their cat feet hit the metal floor. Only a few small patches of dried corn were left in the corners.

“Hold your ears.” As Dad said this, he flipped on the fan. Even with my hands at the sides of my head, the sound was an immense roar. Field mice, light brown and so
fast, came running out of the small grates around the edges and flew up the sides of the walls. The cats were on them. Within ten seconds, the fan was off and the three cats jumped out the oval door and ran into the shed with their mouths secured around a hanging mouse body and limply moving mouse tail.

Dad wanted me to say something. I could tell because he was looking right at me.

“That was loud.”

He laughed a little and closed the metal door with a ringing slam. When he saw me headed for the tractors, he said, “Better leave Domino alone for a while.”

I thought about her eating the mouse then and I decided to leave her alone for the rest of the day. When I told my mom what had happened, she just nodded. “I bet that was loud,” she said. We didn’t talk about the mice or the cats. I thought about it for a long time. I couldn’t decide if my dad had done a good thing or a bad thing.
Castration

There was always something foreign about it, so I had a hard time picturing my dad as a child, living on this farm. Most of the time I just avoided thinking about it at all. Unless my dad brought it up, by telling the story about the time his leg slid under the old coal stove or how my grandpa had his appendix taken out on the kitchen table, I pretended that I had no connection at all to the house or the people in it.

The house seemed so old and dark and empty. I always wore black and gray boy’s tennis shoes and I remember my flat-footed steps echoing around the rooms. When my mother was busy cleaning the kitchen or stacking up piles of old magazines, and the house smelled like lemons and mildew, she let me walk around outside. “Stay out of the barns. Don’t cross the road. Don’t stand too close to the hogs. That fence is no good.”

I didn’t realize until years later that both of my parents kept me distanced from the farm life. I had chores, plenty of them in my opinion. Outside, my jobs were twice daily feeding the calves or lambs, depending on what we had, but mostly I was a house slave. I set the table with the forks on the left, I folded napkins, I dusted.

I was sixteen when my sister’s boyfriend, a city boy, asked me the difference between a silo and a bin. I was so embarrassed because I couldn’t tell him. How could I not know this? My whole life I’d heard nothing but farm talk. I lived in the country and my dad was a farmer. I made up a lame answer, something about shape and drying time. The first was an obvious observation I’m sure he’d already made himself, and the second drying time issue was a complete lie.

Land was measured in acres, the rain in tenths, but I didn’t know how big or small either of them might be. No one showed me. My parents didn’t let me take prize-winning steers to the local fair, like my dad had. Every summer after I turned eight, the official age of new 4-H members, my mother covered our air hockey table with a cardboard cover. She dug out her special pin holder that looked fit on her wrist like a bracelet and her pattern-cutting scissors that were professionally sharpened. My sewing lessons would begin. It took hours for my small hands to cut around the tan tissue paper of the patterns, being extra careful to remember to make the arrow marks, just like the pattern
showed me. “Don’t miss those arrows, you’ll need them,” she’d say from across the room. Halfway through, I’d threaten to quit. “You’re not quitting,” Mom said, eyeing me with her you’re-an-ungrateful-daughter look. I knew that her mother had never taught her to read a pattern because every summer she told me the story. Her best friend had helped her when she was 25 and she’d been sewing ever since. They’d worked together side by side for hours while their kids were at school. Cutting patterns and interpreting the completely unclear directions until my mom could read them like it was her second language. It was all she wanted as a little girl. Didn’t I know how much money I could save by making my own clothes or alterations? Less than halfway through the zigzagging of the seams, I’d threaten to quit again. Sometimes I’d even cry. It was torture in that basement, ironing seams, fitting the interfacing, pinning down, then sewing again. Then I’d have to rip out the seams that were too wobbly or completely wrong. All this for clothes I’d wear only when Mom forced me to.

In the end, I sewed outfits in material my mother chose for me, each year a new category: Sportswear, Dress Up, School Days. The first outfit I remember was a pale blue, terry cloth number with elastic waist shorts and a top with straps made of white rope. The last one I remember was School Days where I made a pair of striped cropped pants and a red shirt with puffy sleeves. The double layer sleeves were lined in red and made from the same striped material as the pants. It was so hideous that I put my foot down and never worn this ensemble to school. At my project evaluation, the judge examined the seams carefully and asked me questions about how I liked my work. I lied well and later that day I stood on a stage with my small lavender ribbon next to Kendra Redd who won Best of the Day every year. I remember someone took our picture and the non-winners sat in folding chairs and applauded us.

My 4-H group was called Staunton Stitch-and-Stir and for the county fair, we modeled our clothes for an audience of our mothers. Five steps out onto the stage, pivot, pivot, then stage right, stop (put hand on hip), stage left, stop (put hand on other hip), move center (if you’re a showoff, you put both hands on hips here), and then down the steps. Then the clothes were returned to our “booth” where people could look at them on hangers. The best model of the evening won a trophy with a golden girl (one hand on her hip) on top.
My dad has beautiful ribbons that are creased, but still bright blue and as big as my head, for his cattle shows. When we dig them out of the corner chest, he still remembers which award is for which steer. Dad can tell you about the quirks of that steer and how long it took to train it for showing by walking it around the side yard with a halter on its head and a thin, black whip to touch again its back, so it knows to turn or pay attention. Dad had pride that this animal came from his farm. So where was the farm for me? “You had enough to do. You saw enough,” my mother says now.

When I was seven, I followed my dad to the barn. Halfway there, he turned to me.

“Go back to the house.” He was carrying what looked like an enormous pair of black, metal tongs hanging from his right hand.

“I’m coming with you. To the barn.”

“Go.” Two men were standing by the barn door waiting for him. One of them might have been my oldest brother-in-law.

“I want to see,” I said.

Over my head, he yells, “Jana, make her come inside now!” He holds the tongs out to show her what’s in his hand. I’m escorted back into the house by Mom.

“What’s he doing out there?”

“He’s turning the bulls into steers.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I’ll tell you later. Do you want to set up your Barbies?”
“Mom said we’d have to take her out of the house feet first. That’s the only way she’d go. That’s what she said.”

Ircel Knedler, Jr.

Funeral

One oddly warm, Saturday morning in October, Grandma wasn’t in her rocker. I knew she was sick because someone had moved her from her chair to the sofa. The sofa was for guests. The only time I’d seen people on it was my mother and a big red-haired woman called Cousin Beulah. Both had looked foreign and uncomfortable on it. Someone pulled my basket of dishes out of the closet and put them on the front porch, so I played out there alone. Beside the two steps, there were tall pillars that held up a second porch on the upper level of the house. Wood decorations that my mother called “gingerbread” scalloped the tops of each pillar. I looked up. There was always something pretty about them, a soft edge against the harsh corners of the house. Sometimes they held spiders’ webs or a bird tried to tuck a nest of grass and mud into the corner. If someone didn’t knock it down with the handle of a broom, there might be the sound of baby birds. Sitting on the porch, under the gingerbread, was a little like being a doll’s house, a dirty doll’s house.

In my memory, it was the very same day, but I know it wasn’t, when we dressed up, put on our fall coats and went to the White Oak Methodist Church. My dad attended Sunday services here when he was a boy, but this was my first time because we went to the big Presbyterian church in town. My sister, Kindra, ten years older than me, was in high school, and her job was to sit by me and keep me from talking. Karmel, the oldest, was there with her husband and her new baby. I was seven and at the end of the row. I felt like I was a long way from both of my parents. I wanted to be near Mom that day, but I was glad for the distance from my dad.

He cried at Grandma’s funeral, big shoulder-shaking, unnatural movements. He looked so much like his mother when he cried, big and soft and tired. I’d never seen him cry before. I kept my body so still, a statue growing out of the varnished pew. I moved
my eyes only, back and forth between Grandma in her casket, looking younger and smoother than I’d ever seen her, and my father. Dad was stoic one moment, a strongman in a suit I’d never seen before. He kept his summer tan all year. Then, as if something had broken in him, he changed into a crumbling stranger. First his eyes turned red, then his whole face did the same. A few seconds too late he pushed a white handkerchief against his mouth, but I saw anyway. He looked down into his lap, searching for control. When he looked back up, his face was brown again, but his eyes seemed almost scared. Maybe he cried for the loss of her, for the things he would never understand about his mother.

The next day, when the lawyer came to read his mother’s will, my dad learned something new about her. Juanita was a liar.
In my mind, Juanita and the house seem to blur into the same picture. Besides two old casserole dishes my mother saved for me, I have one thing from my grandmother.

The short letter waits for me, folded in three sections, in the front page of my baby book where my mother put it years ago. It is a handwritten note to me from my Grandma. There is no lovely flowered stationary or envelope, just a small section of notebook paper, torn from its rings along the top, and Juanita’s blue ball-point pen at work. Her script is small and harsh in the old-fashioned style, like it took great effort to make each letter, like calligraphy. I try to picture her settling down in the kitchen to write this, but I didn’t ever see her there at the family table. She must have sat in her chair using the Farmer’s Almanac as a hard surface.

The I she makes to start the body of the letter is wide and loopy, but most other letters are pointed and strong. Across the top, where there are no lines at all, she has written, To Kim on her 18th birthday.

Dear Kim,

Although you don’t understand now someday you will. I am starting this account for you and hope by the time you are ready for college it will be at least the same as I gave the other grandchildren. If I’m not here or not capable of it you will at least have a little in that direction for yourself. And will know I love you dearly. Have had a hard time bringing myself to do this letter that accounts for the delay.

Love Grandma Knedler

When she knew me, I was nothing but mismatched pigtails and twisted ankles. I was just a girl growing up in the country and not wishing for much more than the freedom to enjoy bare feet on soles so thick I could run across the jagged gravel driveway and into the soybean field without even flinching.

There is no date on the note, but my mother says that Juanita gave it to me less than a year before she died. She left me one hundred dollars deposited into a savings account at First Federal Bank in Washington Courthouse. My mother has reminded me over the years about the money. Until I read the letter, I had forgotten that my
grandmother loved me. Then again, maybe I didn’t forget. Maybe I just never believed it. When I reach inside myself to recall what it was like to have a grandma, I don’t have much to hold onto. Everything that might be pretty is tainted with a yellow stain. What do I do with a legacy that isn’t as clear as love or hate? Juanita left me with one hundred dollars and the rest feels blurry.

I read her letter again and again. Her first line squats on the page, like half of a prophecy. I wonder what it is that I will understand later. Will I understand how a mother lies to her son? I have sons now, too. And I still have my father. I see what her words are for me and, in her will, I see what her words were for her son.

My mother once told me, “Your mouth is a weapon,” because I was a kid who argued and bickered with her until I got spanked with the flyswatter or she yelled and I accused her of hating me. But she was right about words – they do have that power. The reading of his mother’s words began a spiral for my dad. There are only so many words you can shake off before the sticks and stones proverbs don’t work anymore. I saw what happens when you can’t make any more excuses for someone you love and what they’ve done. The pain has to go somewhere.

Dan, the man who owns the coffee shop in the small suburban city where I live now, recently said to me, “Did you hear about that kid in Logan County? Killed his whole family with a shotgun.”

“Yeah, it made the national news. I saw it on FOX.”

“I guess his family farm was split up by some great-grandmother or something.” He looks down from where he’s washing windows. “It had been in probate, 50,000 dollar tax lien against it. So, all the kid wants to do is farm it, you know. It’s so complicated. All those people inheriting bits and pieces. Then they just move away, move on. So, he kills them – and himself, too. That little sister of his. She might make it, they say.”

I look out the window. The traffic is moving in and out of the grocery parking lot across the street. In the glass, there is the faintest outline of another name that was once painted on this window.

Behind me, he says, “Hard to believe the land could mean that much. He just snapped, I guess.”
“Yeah, sounds like you’re right,” I say.
Mantle

My dad knows that some pictures have fallen behind, stuck in the dark crevice between the mantle and the wall in the room where my mother keeps her piano. That fireplace was sealed more than fifty years ago. It used to house a coal-burning cookstove. A dangerous, black box that heated their bathwater and warmed only part of the bottom floor. Dad tells me how he could hear his mother lighting the stove in the morning and how he would pull his clothes under the blankets with him. He would change from pajamas to work or school clothes and stay warm just a little longer.

Time has pushed the mantle and the wall apart, but not far enough. The crack is only wide enough for a paper or a photograph to slide into. I shined a flashlight into the sliver of space to see if the edges of old pictures can be seen. Maybe I could reach them with some tweezers. I can’t see anything, just a dark line, a boundary. The house has swallowed some of the only things left of Juanita. Are they preserved or lost?

Dad says that a few of the pictures that she chose to lean against the wall were frameless and bowed. The church had taken formal family shots of the members. That one was there. The four children and Ircel Sr. hint at half-smiles, the kind that photographers allowed in the black and white days. Juanita isn’t smiling. When her face is relaxed, her mouth tilts down, pulled so far on the sides that it could be disapproval or pain.

Other colorless, but more candid pictures had spread across the mantle’s jutting wood shelf. Dad remembers his picture being taken by his favorite brown pony.

Junior taught his little pony a real-life cowboy trick. This was one that he’d seen at the movies too many times to count. A cowboy, a good cowboy, didn’t need to climb up the side of a horse. Who needed stirrups? Wimps needed stirrups. So, as a cowboy, Junior taught the pony to stay still until he could run, jump, and mount that thing like a movie star. Right up onto his bareback. Then they’d ride across the barnlot or into the pasture together. Junior would rub his small hand over the pony’s neck and talk softly into his velvety ear. They were making plans, rounding up bad guys today.

Until the day he got kicked.
It was almost four o’clock when the school bus dropped Junior off each day. Juanita watched Junior through the side porch’s screen door. He ran off the bus, full steam, dropping his bundle of books and his lunch pail in the gravel driveway. Junior headed straight for the pony who lowered his brown head to pulled at the patchy barnlot grass. He didn’t hear Junior’s faded cowboy boots drumming across the packed ground. Faster and faster.

The pony wasn’t ready.

The moment Junior’s palms landed flat on the pony’s backside, ready to vault, the animal’s strong back legs kicked out. Junior was thrown back, landing in the hard dirt. The only sound was the brakes of the bus releasing as it pulled away and the yelling, mutated laughter of the kids’ voices.

Junior laid still and stiff for a whole minute. By the time, Juanita reached him, he was starting to gulp in air. She thought for certain that his ribs were broken and she patted him down, feeling his chest for pointed spots. Junior was coughing and smiling. He’d made the kids on the school bus laugh. That was all that mattered to Junior.

In another photograph, Margaret, tall and dark-eyed, so different from her mother, is doing dishes and wearing an apron over her housedress. Juanita had embroidered those aprons, one for each of her three girls. One pink flower, one lavender, and then a series of leaves.

When Juanita tired of looking at the pictures, they went into a topless shoebox in the closet under the back staircase and they never came out. She never saw a reason to revisit the past.

There was no trace of her girlhood. Not a single picture of her posed beside her father or mother, dressed with both her clothes and hair ironed to perfection. Other families have these pictures around. My other grandparents have one in an elaborate frame on the hallway wall. Juanita has no treasured spot for her personal relics, and no treasures. No evidence of what came before when she had a different name and a different house.

If they asked, she would tell strangers she was from near Buena Vista. Most people in the county called it Be-ooney. It was the closest group of houses, a village, just
a mile down the pike from the farmhouse. When Juanita was growing up, that town had such a busy evening stroll that the town voted to put in watering troughs for all the visitors’ horses. By the time Juanita was an old woman, the town wouldn’t even have a stop sign.

It was as if she slid from the womb as a farmer’s wife and she played the role. She took covered casseroles to the Grange on Saturday nights. She talked with her neighbors and a few of the farmer’s wives, but never danced. She encouraged Junior to sing and Barbara to play her accordion along with him. She applauded politely when they were finished.

During the day, if she moved outside to the front swing, Juanita nodded and waved to her neighbors as they drove by, but she was grateful they rarely stopped to talk. Like her name, she was isolated.

From my father and the pictures, I know that Juanita grew up with a wide body and a slightly drooping German face. She was quiet in the way that heavy girls sometimes are. The flappers were in style and she cut her reddish brown hair short and pressed it into waves around her face. She made herself loose cotton dresses with tiny flowers.

The son of a Quaker caught her eye when she was seventeen and she left high school behind. There are no silver-toned photographs of Juanita and Ircel in their wedding lace. They snuck a buggy from Ircel’s parents, and rattled along the hours of a drive to Kentucky, spent the night after visiting a judge in Covington, and drove the hills back. I wish I could tell you more about this, but there’s no one left who knows about it.

Juanita’s father, Ben, was silent on the topic for years. Maybe she knew she was breaking his heart with what she did. Juanita was sure she’d always been his favorite. He might have come home dirty from the fields or dripping with sweat from chopping wood and he might have always had a wink for her. His big girl, he might have said. She might have hoped he’d understand, maybe when his grandchildren were born, he’d forget. Maybe that’s how things worked out for some girls.
Alonzo Knedler, Juanita’s father-in-law, cared nothing for his son’s choice. The day they returned the buggy, Alonzo took the reins of the horse and turned his back on Ircel.

Juanita and Ircel started their new life as outsiders. The newlyweds broke from the Quakers to become Methodists. Not long after, Alonzo’s brother, who was only known as Uncle Charlie, stepped in and he was the one who helped the couple buy some family land at one third of the market value. The house had two young maple trees in the front yard.
Baby

Juanita’s stories come in chunks. Blocks of memories and then nothing. Her life feels like a series of scenes that can’t ever be edited together. There’s no thread to sew with, so I layer them on top of each other and try to create the woman who was my grandmother.

She’d mothered four children. Five, really, if you count the first daughter who was only days old when they buried her in White Oak Church’s cemetery. Over the baby’s grave, they placed a nameless marker of a little lamb lying down with its head curled in toward its feet.

Ben kept watch over the grave. He sat in one of the church’s folding chairs at the edge of the fresh dirt, a double barrel shotgun resting across his lap. There were stories of gypsies, doctors of unknown medicine, bodysnatchers. No one came to dig up little Martha and after that week, no one came to visit her much at all.

My dad didn’t even know about this first sister, until he found a notation Juanita made in the family Bible.

It’s surprising how small the marker is. The lamb could nearly lie on the palm of my hand. I expected it to be as polished and sterile as the modern sand-blasted gravestones, but it’s not. The lamb’s white back is sprinkled with a smattering of black moss. It looks older than any other stone in this front corner plot. I picked at the fungus, my fingernail scraping along the uneven stone wool of the lamb. Underneath, the wool is white and speckled with shiny pieces of clear glass, like it’s been dipped in sugar. She’s my aunt, this baby. More family that I’ll never really know.
Love and Marriage

After Grandma’s funeral, my grandfather moved to the senior citizens apartments in town where he almost immediately married a woman who was a few years older than he was. Her name was Marymae and she raised violets in her front window on a three-tiered plantholder. She bought a small food scale that she used to measure my grandpa’s portions. He began a strict diet and within a year, Marymae had control over his diabetes without medication. The only time I remember seeing him during our visit to their home, he was in their small, windowless kitchen, standing without his cane and wearing a buttoned-up, white dress shirt and gray pants that had been ironed.

Together, the newlyweds bought a cat named Sam, who once attacked Marymae for not filling his bowl with food fast enough. My mom told me that Marymae had blood running down her ankle, but she excused it, saying, “Oh, he’s just so anxious,” and dabbing a tissue against her leg.

“I would have kicked that cat across the house and out the door,” Mom said to me. But Marymae and Grandpa loved Sam no matter what. Somehow Grandpa taught Sam to sit beside the chair and lift his right paw. This made my grandpa laugh at his “little begging trick.” It was the first time I’d ever seen him smile. It was genuine and a little unnatural.

Their apartment smelled mildewy and warm. It reminded me of the farmhouse in that way. “Take off your shoes,” my mom told me when we knocked on their door, number 16. The parking lot was filled with wandering Canadian geese who pooped everywhere. The blacktop was a fine layer of slick and green. The geese were taller than I imagined them being, and meaner.

Marymae and Grandpa Knedler were married seven years, my mom tells me, but I saw them only a few times when my parents insisted that I come along on a trip into town. After Marymae died from a heart attack, my sisters and I went to the pre-funeral. I’ve always had a special hate for viewings and wakes. The funeral, I can cope with that. There’s ceremony there and a list of appropriate manners. The viewings always throw me. I think the presence of a dead body and the fact that I’m supposed to say something about it makes me feel unworthy or grotesque. At Marymae’s viewing, my family was
there, but we were scattered around the edges, looking blankly at each other and then at
the door. How long is a good time to stay for a person you didn’t really know? What do
you say to the grandfather, whose still alive, but you’ve never really known either?

Marymae’s family hovered near my grandpa, who was crying into his palm, and
the casket. Marymae’s family was short, like my grandpa, and genetically, they
resembled him more than any of us. In the casket beyond them, Marymae’s body looked
so small, almost child-like. The fluffy, blue collar of her dress looked too tight around the
throat, her neck completely disappeared, swallowed into the gathers of the fabric. I
wondered if she picked this dress out herself. She had just the tiniest bit of a white
mustache.

A few weeks later, Mom brought me a ring that belonged to Marymae, a pretty,
square, red stone with an 18 carat gold band. It’s kind of old-fashioned looking and I still
wear it today.

“Is this a real ruby?” I asked her.

“No. She didn’t own anything like that. Only costume jewelry.”

I didn’t know what costume jewelry was. Jewelry was jewelry to me. A costume
was something you wore when you were just playing at something, pretending to be
someone. That’s just an imitation and not the real thing. I really do like that ring though.
Sometimes, I think, the imitation is just as good as the genuine, maybe better.

Marymae had no children. She was an aunt or a cousin to everyone at her funeral.
For some reason, I thought that Grandpa was her first husband. “No way,” Mom tells
me. “He was her fourth husband.” She raises her eyebrows to me, sending a message that
I’m supposed to get, but don’t. “They met at the senior citizens center in town on a
Friday morning. By that afternoon, he’d proposed to her and she’d accepted.”

Nine months after Marymae’s funeral, my grandfather married Grace, a woman
he met in the aisles at Ev’s grocery store. Unlike Marymae’s quick acceptance of my
grandfather, Grace waited three days before she said yes. Grace was a big, blocky
woman with gray hair she had set every Saturday morning back into a tight, unmovable
helmet. None of her other features come back to me. I once saw them walking hand in
hand through a local store where I was renting a video. They were almost passed me
when I decided I should probably say something. But then I changed my mind and let
them go without saying a word. I didn’t see her again. “She was a bitter woman,” Mom says, but she won’t give many details. “They fought all the time. They’d come into my office while I was working. Arguing about something and wanting me to settle it between them.”

“What did they fight about?” I ask.

“I don’t remember. Everything.”

After Grace died, my dad started telling people this joke.

A man is talking with another man about his marriages.

I’ve been married three times, the man says.

Three times? What happened to your first wife, the other says.

She ate poison mushrooms.

My goodness! What happened to your second wife?

She ate poison mushrooms, too.

How awful! What about your third wife?

Oh, she fell down a flight of stairs.

How?

She wouldn’t eat the poison mushrooms.

On at least three occasions, I caught him telling this to people at church. Behind the scenes, my dad was scrambling into meetings and signing papers, trying to ensure that my grandpa didn’t change his will to include any of these new wives into the inheritance of the farm. “It was already a disaster. These women and their families could have come after some of the land. I couldn’t let that happen.”

I didn’t know it then, but my grandpa had been prowling around ever since Juanita’s death. My dad says Grandpa used to attend funerals he saw listed in the Record-Herald or talked about at the senior center. That way he could get a good look at the widow, just in case.

One afternoon, after Marymae, but before Grace, my dad answered the phone. It was Elizabeth Knedler, an elderly cousin by marriage to my grandpa.

“Junior? Do you know that your daddy came over here today?” Her voice was loud through the receiver. And getting louder.

“No,” he told her, but he knew what was coming.
“That old son of a bitch was asking me about my money. ‘How much I got in the bank’ he asks. He wants to know how much I got left after the sell of the farm and if I think I’d ever get married again.”

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth.”

“It’s not your fault, Junior. I told him to get out and don’t come sniffing around here again.”

When I was in college, my grandfather moved into a nursing home where he proposed to at least four nurses and who knows how many aides.

“What if one of them says yes?” I remember my mom saying.

“Then we’ll deal with that one, too,” Dad said.
Visiting, 2004

Strangers park in the driveway. Family parks in the grass. I pull off the gravel driveway, bumping slowly across the lawn until I reach the shadow of the trees. I want to roll down the windows and let the wind move through the car, but I can’t risk it. Too many horseflies would get in. This has happened to me before, so I know what to expect. I won’t know the flies are in the car until I’m on my way home. I hear them bouncing over and over against the back window, buzzing and menacing me even before I get to Route 62. At first, I’ll think they’re bumblebees and I’ll stop watching the road and focus all my attention on their black bodies, watching them in the rearview mirror and remembering that my mother once told me that bumblebees can sting multiple times, not once like honeybees. By the time I pass Miami Trace Road, I pray a little prayer that they won’t come up front with me. When I finally reassure myself that their big, dark bodies are fly-bodies, I’ll still be jumpy and eventually I’ll have to pull off the side of the road, at the Mark Road intersection, open all the windows and shoo them out with an unopened umbrella. No, my windows have to stay closed today.

I slam the car door behind me. It is the only sound on the farm today and it strikes me as unnaturally loud. Out of habit, I lock the car behind me, using the key chain remote and watch the orange lights blink twice.

The front path is still a series of three-foot slabs of solid, hand-carved stone as smooth as the weathered grave markers one mile down the road. At one time, when they were first laid here, they may have been level with the ground, but now they are two inches lower. Maybe more. My dad raised them up, bolstering them with new dirt and a little gravel underneath, but they are sinking back to their original places again. When it rains, they are reservoirs. Their edges round, covered with grass and every few years, my mother digs with a hand spade around the edges of each stone, stabbing at the dirt, trying to hold back the erosion and the choking thickness of green.

I feel compelled to follow the stones to the house. That’s where they led. That’s what you are supposed to do, but I really just want to sit down, maybe even lie down on the smooth stones and stare up at the trees and hold my breath.
An old, brick pathway used to lead from these stones in a curve around to the side porch. My dad remembers when his sister, Barbara, dug out all the bricks and exposed the pathway that he didn’t even know existed. My grandfather didn’t care anything for the bricks, so it was only a few years until the red sidewalk disappeared back into the lawn. I’ve never seen it. The side porch is gone, too. After we moved in, my dad used a crowbar to loosen the joints of it and my mom called me outside to see what would happen next. Dad hooked the porch railings to a heavy, gray chain that connected to the tractor, backed up slowly, and pulled the entire porch right off the side of the house and into the yard. It cracked loudly into pieces and crumbled into a pile of white painted wood and green roofing shingles. It was scary and exciting to watch, as if, given the chance, he might accidentally pull the whole house down.

When my dad sealed the door that led from the living room to the porch, he installed an octagon-shaped stained glass window, three shades of red, orange and purple surrounding a small yellow circle. The second time it rained, I stood in the dark living room with the kitchen light on behind me and watched a dark shadow trickle down from the bottom of the window. It was slow and eerie. At first, I thought I was imagining it because it looked so much like the window was crying. I walked across the unlit room and let my hand fall against the paneling. Wet. The seal around the window was leaking and the rain began to pour in more steadily as my mother stuffed our bathroom towels around the window and onto the carpet.

On the front of the house, the main entrance after that, the old screen door was replaced years ago by an efficient, plastic model. When I was a teenager, the door had been a metal frame with molded silver tendrils that formed the letter K in the center.

Across the road, there’s nothing but knee-high soybeans, seventy acres worth that stretch back to the bordering creek. It wasn’t always this open. There used to be a metal-roofed barn for machinery storage, breaking the view with its enormous white and silver body. It housed sleeping tractors with dry mud clinging in their deep treaded tires. At over five feet high, they made wonderful climbers for a young girl. A combine with stale corncobs sticking in its teeth was backed into the barn and its four sloping points faced the door. When I was sixteen, my parents didn’t have a garage, so I had parked my car there at night, pulling into the dark, inching my hatchback Plymouth until the front
bumper was inches away from the combine’s points. I would sit in the dark for only a second, watching the empty machine, David and Goliath. Then I would jump from the car and run like hell up the gravel driveway toward the house. Sometimes the corn was so tall, sealing a border around the barns and the house, it was like running in a tunnel.

My friend, Mindy, once said to me, “This reminds me of *Children of the Corn*. Did you see that movie?” I lied and said no.

My favorite time here is late spring. The sunny days and the nights finally warming up. That’s when the most action happens. Through the winter, there’s a quiet waiting. There’s always the livestock to feed and some piece of equipment to fix, but then the spring comes. The tractors are in the fields until midnight, racing some unknown force, to get the seeds into the ground in time to get hardy enough for the drought or the floods that might come with summer. In the darkness, there is the low groan of engines and the clank of the planters dragged behind them. From the road, there’s nothing but headlights turning in rounded rectangles in the distant field, moving slowly around in the blackness. The farmer out there, with his radio probably turned up to the highest level so he can hear it inside cab of the tractor, relaxed but determined to get finished this week no matter what. Farming is solitary work. I don’t know why I feel nostalgic for something I’ve never done. I only watched it from the steps of my house or from the road driving by. I only lived it through my dad.

On the other side of the machinery shed, my father had a small workshop where he sharpened things and bent metal and banged loudly with hammers of all sizes. He knew how to keep the tractors and their motors alive year after year. My strongest memory of that part of the shed is that there were sometimes sparks coming from the spinning blades and I was not allowed to look at them even though they were beautiful, like yellow fireworks shooting from my father’s hands. “They’ll burn your eyes,” he told me and I had to stand behind the door until he was finished, but sometimes I took quick peeks anyway. That was also the only place on the farm that was padlocked.

The farm truck lived beside the workshop. It was a 1940-something GMC (“Giant Mass of Crap,” my dad called it) and more faded red than any of the tractors. It was the grandfather of the machines and it was used only for picking up bags of feed and hauling things to the dump. When my mom wasn’t around, my dad let me ride down the
road in the back of it. I had to sit with my head directly behind his and promise not to move around in the bed. Because I had a bony butt and the back to the truck was lumpy, I’d bunch up my red windbreaker and sit on it for a small cushion. The corners where the sides met the bed were packed with dirty straw and I would tear small pieces off and let them fly over the edge into the wind. I liked to imagine that I was being kidnapped and leaving a trail of evidence behind was the only way I’d be found.

Before the new owners of the land tore down the machinery shed, an immense oak tree had been removed. In the cleavage between the trunk and a lower branch, the cutters found two broken wings of a windmill. Painted on its wings, you could just make out the words Carson Brothers. My dad remembers his great uncles. Uncle Charlie, he remembers best, was a painter by trade, and a bachelor. His warped, hand-made ladders still run across the rafters in the livestock barn. They aren’t safe to use now, but they aren’t firewood either. You don’t burn relics, but unless you look up through the years of dirty, abandoned cobwebs, you mostly just forget they are there.

If the wind is coming from the south, as it usually does, there’s one place at the farm where the house makes a natural windbreak. My mother put a bench there and my dad built a small water garden where he used an old pump head as a fountain. There are goldfish in the water, but it is too dark to see them. They are barely shadows under the water. No other farmhouses around here have gardens like this. Most of the houses on this road are rentals or empty.

The land here is flat, though not as flat as I would someday discover VanWert, Ohio is or how unnervingly flat some parts of Indiana can be, but our county seemed flat enough to me. I took Ohio History in the eighth grade and Mr. Spears put a question on the first test that I recall. “What best describes the land in Fayette County?” The answer he wanted was “gently rolling.” I got that one right.

Eight miles down the road, toward Hillsboro, on Route 62, there’s a place where the hills begin. Suddenly, it’s Appalachia. My mom drives this way when we visit her mother, Grandma Pauline. The towns there are smaller and harder looking than our small town is, and I feel just a little more sophisticated when we see them. Where we live is called “the country”, where Grandma Pauline lives is called “the sticks.” Sometimes, my dad called it “the boondocks.” It’s never something we say, but I know that in the
hierarchy of land, we are above them. My dad once told me that our land used to be covered by a glacier and that it moved and flattened until it reached the spot where Highland County starts. The richness the glacier dragged along dropped onto our land. I don’t know if this is true, but I love the sound of it. It makes me feel chosen by nature.

Until Route 62 was expanded and straightened when I was a teenager, I spent most car trips to Highland County trying not to vomit. The road was full of the kind of quick and sneaky hills that tossed my stomach up and lifted my kid butt off the seat, letting gravity bring us back down at different speeds. It was just a small movement, over and over, until whatever I’d eaten got tired of that and decided to eject from the flight. This seemed even worse on the way back when I was tired and my mom’s patience was already fried from spending the day with her mother, Aunt Florence and Aunt Mary.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I’d say.

“I know. It’s all right.” She’d rub the back of my neck to help me relax. This is her land and she never gets sick. Mom tells me she was “raised on these roads” and then goes into a story about how she rode beside her father every Saturday when he drove to Cincinnati in his 7-UP truck.

The farther south we went, the sharper the curves cut into the roads. The highway followed the pathways between different farmers’ land. Around some of the curves, I could old gray or white farmhouses and brown droopy barns sitting between the hills. The houses were rustic and tired; their barns were either empty, caving in, or full of tobacco hanging to dry in dark yellow bundles.

Years later, my father will tell that when he was young, kids in Highland County were jealous of kids from Fayette. “They thought we were rich,” he laughs. “That’s just because our farms sometimes made money. But there was no rich around. Then we got the t.v. and people really thought my family had money.”

My grandparents were the first people in the southern county to get a television set. On a shopping trip in Columbus, Juanita and Ircel had seen these large boxes that everyone was curious about, but few people had seen in real life. “They just wanted it, so they got it.” My dad remembers the day the men from the appliance shop loaded it into the living room and arranged all the furniture into a semi-circle around it. He was a
freshman in high school. “Its screen was about as big as this coffee cup.” Dad toasts his mug toward me as he speaks. “It was 1949, I think. Wrestling was on every night.”

The whole family sat together each evening night, never speaking, just watching hour after hour of Milton Berle and Sid Caesar and professional wrestling. They blew several tubes in the set and replaced them every time. It wasn’t long until the Knedlers indulged in an unheard of luxury, an automatic rotar for the antenna. They could move the channels from Columbus, to Dayton, to Cincinnati and never leave the living room. Teachers at school asked my dad if it made their electric bill go up. He told them, “No, we just turn off all the other lights in the house.”

Two years later, the general store that sat at the crossing of the highway and the country road, got a television of their own. My dad remembers that it was robbed three times, the cash register cleaned out, because all the clerks and customers were in the stockroom watching wrestling.

I know when I open the door to the farmhouse the smell will be the first sensation to find me. When my parents first moved into the farmhouse, they lowered the twelve-foot ceilings and paneled over the crumbling plaster. Every room, except the kitchen, is light brown with white pin stripes now. My mother has glass dishes of potpourri in the hallway and a broom doused in cinnamon scent hanging on the living room wall, but she never could get rid of the smell. It only lasts a moment, the musty, sealed-in oldness, then it is gone.

Sometimes when I visit, I pull on the crystal knob and find the door deadbolted. Mom is playing the piano. She practices every week for Sunday’s choir performance, banging away at “What A Friend We Have In Jesus” or maybe she just warms up her fingers with “Through It All.” I rest my spine against the door, locked out and listening. The piano sounds hollow now, but it wasn’t always this way. My mother’s friend, Kathy, used to tune it once a year. Mom doesn’t give piano lessons anymore and the tuning money is saved. After the crescendo and the “Amen” notes sound, I tap a finger against the parlor window. It is always the same, “I didn’t even hear you pull up.”

In the parlor, beside a sealed fireplace, an antique chest against the wall is open as always, like a jaw tilted back, and its mouth full of loose sheet music and piano books.
Some of them, at the bottom, might be mine. My mom put stickers on the songs that I somewhat successfully completed. Mostly she gave me the kind of shiny stars that you had to lick, like a stamp, and stick them to the paper. I know that the early songs will be marked in my small pencil writing, Every Good Boy Does Fine. As my piano teacher, my mom made me stop marking every note. She said, “Some things have to be memorized.” The green couch sits in front of the window that looks out toward the only remaining barn. Mom still keeps the matching velvet pillows in the corners, but they look smaller than they did when I was a kid. I’m not sure why, but I’ve always disliked this room. It’s full of the things I grew up with, the piano, the orange lamp, the Reader’s Digest abridged collection of classic books, but it feels foreign and uncomfortable to me, heavy and empty at the same time. I don’t know where to put myself in this room.

No matter how many coats of paint are applied or how many distractions my mother puts in the farmhouse, I always feel the layers of my family here. On the surface, there are my mother’s decorations, her plastic grapes that were purple when I was a kid, but, she’ll be mad when I tell you that now she’s spray painted them gold and put them in a small basket by the front window.

Under the layer of decorations is my father. The chest he refinished in our old garage by scraping away layers of paint and grease and flour imbedded in the bread drawer. There’s the wallpaper he applied alone on a scaffold that wobbled in the staircase and my mother still scolds him, saying, “You could have been killed. Who would have found you down here in this old house alone?” On the wall, the carved ducks he made from wood he found in the old barn. Their wings in flight, three of them together.

Then there’s another layer. The smell of a closet when you first open it, an old bowl with a lid that was lost years before, a doll with a china head and fabric body that no one is supposed to touch because it is so delicate. This is my grandmother’s layer. There are other levels here, underneath these, and sometimes I can feel them. I just can’t name them.

Today, I’m not just visiting. My dad is coming with me to the courthouse to look up the old records of the Knedlers. What I thought was a short story about a grandmother
or a house has turned into something more. I haven’t told him yet, but the story I’m writing might not be about Juanita. It might just be about him.

I’m not sure if Dad really wants to come with me to see some old papers. I try to ignore this feeling as much as I can. Mom volunteers him to be my helper, but she wants to stay home and babysit my two boys. As we drive, Dad in the passenger seat, I ask him about Juanita again. There are bits of stories and I make him tell me the few details he can, over and over, asking questions he doesn’t know the answers to. The will, her brother, a lawsuit in the 1940s, another will. These are just bits of stories, like papers torn into pieces and only put halfway back together, that he barely remembers. I don’t know what we will find or what is lost forever.

Juanita’s stories are full of broken pieces. What I have is my dad. His story is still being written.
Young

Under my dad’s light and dark gray graduation picture in his yearbook, it tells his name, his title and his nickname.

_Junior Knedler_

_Senior Class President_

_“Cowboy”_

I try to imagine my dad in the hallway at his Leesburg school. He wears jeans and boots and button-up shirts, except on Future Farmer meeting days when he wears his bright blue FFA jacket with the yellow patches. Then he’s like a decorated soldier. He gets to go to far-away places like St. Louis and Louisville to talk about his farm projects and his FFA group wins trophies there. There’s a yellow picture in the old photo album that someone has cut from the newspaper. My dad and his fellow future farmers are holding oversized ribbons. The boys stand in the back, the girls sit with their skirts pulled over their knees and tucked at an angle. They are all smiling, a few laugh, one boy wears sunglasses. The one who will be my dad is taller and skinnier than most of the other boys and his piled up, 50s-style, hair takes up another several inches over his head.

His FFA teacher took this picture and my dad remembers him as “Jim.” He tells me, “If we called his house and asked for Jim, his wife would hang up on us. So we’d have to call back and ask for Mr. Oster. Then she’d get him.”

Around the house, when I am a kid, my dad sang songs that remind him of his high school quartet. They went from churches to Grange Hall meetings in their dark suits and bow ties, singing and being model young men of the county. Dad was second tenor, which is I later found out was like being the lead singer. In the kitchen, before work, he sometimes sang to me while I ate breakfast. It was spontaneous and I never knew when he might do it.

_I load sixteen tons and what do I get._

_Another day older an’ a deeper in debt._

_St. Peter don’t you call me ‘cause I can’t go._

_I owe my soul to the company store._
That one was my favorite. His voice sounded so smooth and even deeper than when he spoke. His face looked right at me. For thirty seconds in our kitchen, he had a performer’s mask and it softened him. In that time, I felt like I knew him better. Dad could just sing to me and I could act embarrassed. We didn’t need to talk. He was lifted from under the weight of the farm and the job and the family. I loved the spirituals he sang, especially *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and he usually sang those more, but they didn’t sound like *his* song, like a man’s song.

The first time my mother saw my father he was standing on the trunk of a car. His farm hat was pushed to the right, and his tongue was hanging out of the left corner of his mouth. He was doing a little dance for his friends as they laughed. His trademark cowboy boots tapped against the metal.

“Who’s that?” she said.

“Junior Knedler,” her date told her. “He goes to Fairfield.”

“He’s drunk.”

“Naw, he doesn’t drink. That’s just how he is.”

A few months later, she saw him again at Serpent Mound and she and her friend walked around the old Indian burial grounds with my father and his friend. I found a yellowed Serpent Mound postcard in an envelope my mother used to keep old pictures of her family. On the right side, it says,

*This is the most noted earthwork left by the ancient Mound Builders who doubtless erected it for worship. The serpent in the act of swallowing an egg is presented by a ridge of earth five feet high and form 18 to 20 feet broad, the egg being an oval enclosure 121 feet long and 60 feet wide.*

*The body of the serpent forms four graceful folds before reaching the tail which is twisted into three close coils.*

*“The Serpent Mound Park” is in a wild and picturesque country and is a favorite place of public resort.*

When I ask Mom if she thought Dad was cute, she says, “Oh my goodness, yes.”

They would be married in the June of 1953, after she graduated from high school. In one of their wedding photos, they stand beside my father’s ’51 Nash. She is seventeen. He is less than one month from turning twenty.
It was only a month into 1962 when my dad did something he never imagined doing. He moved away. He packed up his wife and their two young daughters and left. That makes it sound abrupt, but it wasn’t really. That wasn’t his way. My parents are both planners, detail people, list makers. Whether it’s from nature or nurture, this is a trait I’ve inherited. In the research company where I sometimes edit scientific proposals, I was asked to take the Meyers-Briggs personality test. Now, on the company web site next to my picture, I’m listed as an INFJ. A small * reminds my coworkers that I’m a strong J. I think you can end up as a strong J if you answer “Yes” to questions like “Missing a deadline is very upsetting to me.” Or “Forgetting anything makes me feel like a personal failure.” Knowing this truth about myself and knowing that my parents moved in less than two months from the only state they’d ever lived, I can easily imagine my mom with her many lists written on the backs of old Hallmark cards and bill envelopes. Her purse bulging with anything you could imagine needed, be it tissues or batteries. My dad would have played it cooler. Just thinking to himself, going the details, retracing his steps through the house in case any box had been left behind, and biting people’s heads off for interrupting him.

Eventually, the listing and the thinking were over. Everything was in order by December and they were ready to say goodbye to Ohio.

On their last visit at the farmhouse, Junior pulled their car onto the frozen grass beside the road. Jana and Junior looked at each other, neither moved too quickly to get out of the car. It was cold that week, raining drops of crystals that encased tree limbs into shiny display cases. The roads sealed in a protective layer of ice. On the highway, there were patches of black road exposed and someone had dropped sand and gravel over the ice to give the cars some traction. On the back roads, you just had to drive slowly and avoid the brake pedal. Still, there were a few cars in the ditches that the
drivers had abandoned until the ice melted. The moving truck had come, two days earlier, barreling down the road and taken the turn by their mailbox too quickly. The bald-headed driver nearly drove over the edge of a narrow creek bed that ran the length of the driveway at the house Junior rented. These movers would arrive in Florida three days late, but they didn’t know that yet.

In the farmhouse kitchen, the smell was familiar and stale. Junior told his mother, “Well, we’re ready to go.”

Jana, Junior, and two moving men had packed most of their small house into the truck by then, keeping only the essentials, a few days worth of clothes and some small toys, in the car with Jana and the girls.

Irceil Sr., silent at the head of the table, looked back and forth between the dusty glass of the backdoor and his son.

In an odd way, a foolish way, he thought, Junior wanted his mother to ask him to stay. He wanted her to defend him, for once, to his father. Juanita said little to defend her son, not when he was a child and not when he was grown. The summer before, she’d sat behind Irceil Sr. in the living room and rocked in silence. Junior knew better than to even glance at her for help. She had to know there weren’t enough hours in the day for all the work his father set out. What would it have cost her to see that her son needed her? Junior was a man, but his father treated him like a boy, worse than a boy. Whatever that price was, Junior figured his mother wasn’t willing to pay it. Irceil Sr. and Junior said the words to each other that they’d said a hundred times before. The applause from Juanita’s game show played behind them.

“If you’d update that equipment. Rotate those crops, this would be…”

“When this is your farm, you can do it your way. But now, this is my farm.”

“We don’t have to be busy all the time, Dad. If we got that four-row planter instead of our two-row, we’d make up some time.”

“You just want change for the sake of change. Change isn’t better. It’s just change. And I don’t see you offering up the money for it,” his father said.

Junior thought about leaving, what that would mean, for months. Maybe years. It came to him while he was stacking the hundred-pound bags of hog feed, when he was
lifting and pushing hay bales into stacks in the barn corner, in his hours alone on the tractor. He loved driving through the fields at night. He thought that when the sun hit just below the horizon, the tractor sped up. The darkness made the rows go faster somehow. It might have been an illusion, but he believed it anyway. And the darkness gave him time to think. These were the same jobs he’d done since he was ten, done the same way. By the time he was twenty-eight, the father of two girls, he realized it would be a long time before this land would ever be his.

Not long after that Junior became a tenant farmer for a small dairy operation where he and Jana worked milking and cleaning in exchange for rent on a gray stone house and a half share of the profits. He made extra money by helping his father-in-law farm his own land in Highland County. Junior’s rented house boasted an outhouse, running water in the kitchen, and hand-me-down furniture.

When Junior told his father that he was quitting the Knedler farm for good, Ircel’s mouth worked open and closed for several seconds.

“I’ll go to the draft board. You either work this land or you go to Korea!”

And that way how they left it. Junior thought his father probably did see the draft board the next week. He pictured him writing his son’s name on a sign up sheet and pleading his case to the soldiers there. Every day for weeks Junior expected a letter from them, starting out like, Dear Ircel M. Knedler, Jr., but it never came.

That January day, on the cold front porch steps, Juanita cried into her hands, “I’ll never see my grandchildren again.” Jana hugged her and said they would see each other again. She was sure of it. Kindra was a barely a toddler and stayed balanced on the crook of Junior’s arm until her grandmother leaned in to kiss her. Karmel, five years old, stood beside her mother, but she knew they were doing something bad. They were making Grandma cry.

Junior and his family would be twelve hundred miles away in southern Florida. He would work the sugar cane fields as an assistant chemist and the job was waiting for him. He would learn to check sucrose levels under a microscope and to determine burning days for the cane. He would be in charge of something. He would earn a paycheck once each month, not from selling his own grain, but issued from an office with
taxes already taken out. And there would be a schedule, a timecard, a weekend to spend with his family. In the town of Clewiston, Florida, Junior knew there was a clean, newly built school full of other company family’s children. On parade days and for the Swamp Cabbage Festival, their marching band, The Sugarland Band, would play “Dixie” and “America the Beautiful” for them. The house waiting for the Knedlers was small, but new, and sat on stilts in case the ground flooded and the everglades creatures came back to reclaim their former homes. The rent was cheap since they were part of The Company and they could buy food at a company store. They would meet Charlie who carried a knife inside his boot, and Rosemary who would become Jana’s greatest friend, and they would all go to the Methodist church together.

As they were driving away, Junior decided that no one would call him Junior anymore.

My dad hunted in the ‘glades, instead of the Ohio deep woods, and we have pictures of him in his gear, thigh boots, vest with shotgun shells in the pockets. He is tan and smiling. But there was a hole in my dad. The boots he pulled on in the morning were the same kind he wore in Ohio, but they walked on dirt that was different, silky and black and not his own. In the five years that they were gone, something inside my dad was inching its way back home.

Every time I ask Dad why they moved back to Ohio, he tells me something different. The three main explanations that I remember are, “That job was going nowhere. It wasn’t any kind of career, just something that needed to be done.” Then, “I was poisoned by insecticide. Loading chemicals onto spray planes – in the hospital for three days.” I know this story from when I was very small because my mother told me. They were worried that I might be born with something wrong with me because of my dad’s exposure to herbicide and insecticide in the 1960’s. I’m fine, so I guess he worked it out of his system by the early seventies.

His last answer, “I just missed seeing things grow. I missed the way they look when they come through the ground. I didn’t love the farm. I just loved the growing,” feels the truest to me.
After my Dad was poisoned and tested and finally cleared to go home, he typed a letter addressed to Bob Dillingham at Opekasit, in London, Ohio. It took him only two drafts until he had it just the way he wanted. Dad had heard, through a friend in Ohio, that one of the land managers had died suddenly of a heart attack. The company needed someone to run several farm properties for absentee owners. They were looking for “someone with farm experience, a friendly-type person. And they were in a hurry.” Two weeks later, Mr. Dillingham flew to Clewiston to see my dad. “Either he was really hard up or he just needed a vacation,” he says. Either way, Dad got the job and my parents and sisters moved back to Ohio in 1969. Still, they were more than an hour away from the farm where my dad grew up.

My parents bought a house in the town of London. It was white with yellow shutters and small, but clean. I know this from pictures I’ve seen of my sisters standing in front of it in their swimsuits or on the first day of school. My mother worked as a babysitter at home, a job my sisters hated. Kindra tells me, “I was never alone. Never. Always little kids everywhere.” A few years later, my mom took a job in the records department at Madison County Hospital. That’s where I was born with Dr. Arakawa helping out. He was the only Japanese man my mother had ever met and he kept a cigarette burning in each patient room so that he could smoke and do pelvic exams at the same time, never lighting a new Marlboro until absolutely necessary. “That seemed okay to me at the time,” my mother says. “But I don’t think you could get away with that now.”

At Opekasit, a word I love to say, my dad wore ties and blazers with leather patches on the elbows, slacks my mother ironed with a precision she tried to teach me years later (and which I failed at), and his signature cowboy boots. These boots were his only real indulgence, except for that motorcycle he bought once. The brown leather of his boots was soft at the top with stitched swirls I could trace with my fingers until they met with the hard black heel. They added several inches to his already tall frame. They were his dress shoes and he wore them to church or to meetings.

At his new job, he met with landowners who either inherited farms they didn’t want to work or were too old to work them anymore. Dad was a matchmaker between tenant farmers and owners. Sometimes the farmers came to his office and sat in orange,
tweed chairs. But other times, he would go to them, sitting at their kitchen tables drinking coffee handed to him from a woman who looked like so many women he grew up watching in his neighbors’ houses or at the local stores. My father spread out his calculators and yellow, legal pads of notes for them to read together. Dad worked out farming programs, crop and livestock rotations, and budgets. He told tenants what to fix and what to leave alone because they might not have enough money to cover the new barn doors this year or to finish the fence lines, listing on paper for them what he used to do for himself. Driving the quiet miles to their farms, he saw places just like the one he once farmed, people so much like his own stubborn parents. The profit split was 50/50 between owners and workers and he drew up the papers for each agreement. My dad was farming by proxy, rotating the crops but never touching the dirt.

In the mornings when the girls were still sleeping, he’d walk to the backyard their house and check the rain gauge he’d attacked to the clothesline. “Three tenths of an inch,” he’d tell my mother as she leaned out the backdoor, watching him, and he’d think to himself that this would be a good day for raking or plowing. In the Columbus Dispatch, he couldn’t stop himself from checking hog prices.

In 1972, when Karmel was 14, Kindra,10, and I was six-months old, my dad took a job with Federal Land Bank as a loan office, and later assumed his place, the role he was born to play, back to his parent’s farm. My mom and dad bought a ranch-style house on Sugar Grove Road, five miles from the old farm, but first my dad had to visit his parents.

Ircel Sr. and Juanita met my dad in the kitchen of their house. Yellow linoleum went halfway up the wall, then met with orange wallpaper. Just as he remembered, the countertops were blood red faux marble. Most of the vinyl chair seats were torn or worn down to cracked plastic slices. He’d thought of a hundred ways he could say this, and how they could react. He was older now. He’d learned to deal.

“I’ve been gone awhile now. I think it’s time. I want to come back and work the farm,” he said.

“Junior, I’m not sure…” his mother said.

“No,” his father said. “This is my farm. You left. That’s it.”

“I know that. There were reasons then and we’ve all had time to think.”
“Doesn’t matter.”
“Dad, you’re 65. Mom’s heart and arthritis.” They all glanced at her knuckles, already rounded and tight and bending under.
“We make due,” his father said flatly.
“For how much longer?”
Even when my dad was young, he remembered his mother’s health was poor, or maybe I should say unpredictable.

“It’s her heart this time. She’s sure of it,” Junior said into the receiver.
“Give her some whiskey. A few shots of it. I’m on my way.”

The first time Junior and his sisters made panicked phone calls to old Doc Wade, who lived in Sabina, Junior was fourteen. The phone felt heavy against Junior’s ear and mouth at the same time.

The Knedler house was dry, but they could always count on their neighbor, Herbert Burton, to help them out. Junior rode the quarter mile there on his bike and came back with one hand guiding his handlebars and the other fist wrapped around a sloshing brown bottle, half full. He could see two of his sisters standing at the parlor window, watching him. He heard only the sound of his hurried breath, the slight splashing of the liquor, and his wheels crunching over the blacktop and gravel. An hour later, his parents would send him back to Herbert Burton’s house with what was left of the whiskey. They didn’t want that in the house any longer than necessary.

This scene replayed itself four more times over the next few years, the same shortness of breath, the same chest pains. Mother on the sofa or in her bed, the girls rushing around for cool washcloths and glasses of water. But in the end, it was only Juanita’s gall bladder, which she had removed, and the whiskey remedy was never needed again. Herbert Burton got to keep his alcohol and Juanita began her regiment of pills.

Dad watched his mother lean back from the table, sighing a little to herself, as if she’d known Junior would eventually be back and that they’d play it just like this. Junior had mentioned to her that the house felt smaller to him, but to her, it felt bigger every
day. There were staircases and steps everywhere. The trips out to the mailbox were longer, and some days, she didn’t bother to go at all. She just let Irecel Sr. do it for her.

The bluish light from the open fluorescent bulb over the sink, made Juanita look even paler than my dad had remembered her. Her hair was thinner and he could see her white scalp under the still brown-red strands she brushed straight back away from her face. Dad suspected she used the same “rinse” on it that she had since she was forty. At 64, he thought she looked more than ten years older. Had her mouth always turned down so much? She hadn’t put her teeth in today, he guessed. “That’s what being sick for so long will do to you,” he tells me. His mother kept her fingers tucked under and balled into small fists.

The television was on in the other room, some kind of show with hollow-sounding laughter that she’d been watching before he’d stopped by. She’d been quieter than he expected her to be, but her face was hard. To give in to her son seemed to feel like losing. She weighed it all in her head, but said little.

For an hour they sat there at the table where they’d once eaten as a family. His mother had cooked every kind of beef stew from the steers he’d taken to the butcher himself. Their own beef and their own vegetables from the garden that they planted every spring in the side yard. He’d driven the small tractor across that plot of land and tilled it until it was soft enough for the seeds his older sisters held in their hands, standing to the side and waiting for him to finish. People didn’t live like that much anymore. She’d once fried chickens at this same stove, first catching their squawking bodies, then ringing their necks herself. She’d send Margaret or Barbara out onto the steps to pull feathers out in handfuls. Fried chicken was a meal my dad refused to eat as an adult because it was so frequent at their table when he was a boy. At home, my mom rarely fixed chicken for our family. On those nights, Dad had a special meal of hamburger or maybe baked steak.

“How come you hate chicken, Dad?” I had asked him.

“He doesn’t care for chicken,” my mother corrected me.

“Because you can only take so much of something in your life,” he said.

There were only forks in his mother’s sink now. He’d seen them when he came in, without knocking, though he’d thought about it, through the back door. The mouth of a black, trash bag was open and full of cardboard boxes and aluminum plates from the
Hungry Man T.V. Dinners the two ate together for both lunch and dinner every night. He could easily count thirty silver trays from where he sat.

Their son was asking to come back. He wouldn’t beg them, but he would wait. My dad felt sure that when the soreness had a chance to blow off, the truth would be there. The farm, this house, it was too much for an old man to do alone. There wasn’t enough money to buy help. If Juanita was ever a help to her husband, that time had passed. Already the barn had shingles missing, the house needed painting. The tractor ran when it felt like it, leaving my grandpa stranded out in a field, and it was too hard on a man like Ircel Sr. to walk all the acres it took to get back to the barn and his rusted box of tools. Grandpa must have thought of the hundred pound feed bags he could barely budge in the truck bed, the endless bales of hay and straw piled to the rafters every summer in the old barn. It takes an old farmer to appreciate that land is for the young.

So, they took him back. Papers were drawn up, all legal “so Junior wouldn’t rip them off.” It was a 50/50 profit split of any profits that might be made, just like he’d brokered many times before. Only now, he was the tenant and his father was the owner.

Dad said later, “They were not real receptive. They didn’t want to give up anything to me. But it was necessary or they would have eventually lost the land. All of it. That’s what mattered to them.”

It’s always that way here, pride and land. It’s hard to tell the two apart.

When I was born, I was the ninth and last grandchild Juanita would have. Dad was gone so much that I rarely saw him during the week, maybe at the dinner table, maybe in the mornings, and only part of the day on Sunday. His job at the office and his place on the farm made him vacant from our family, not completely gone, just passing through.

When his parents took him back, my dad slipped quietly from Ircel and back into Junior again. Still, he never introduced himself that way and his new friends called him by his real name. Only his boyhood family, and old men we sometimes met at the Tractor Supply Company, knew him as Junior. I hated it when they called him that. It reminded me that they knew something about him that I didn’t know, as if he’d lived another life and had another name before I knew him. Dad, I knew. Ircel, I knew a little. Junior was a stranger to me.
My dad worked this land again with the clear expectation that he would soon own it. He’d pay his sisters the family price, one-third the market value, just like his parents had. Margaret, Barbara and Janet Ann didn’t want it or expect it. They had married their own farmers, and they would inherit other property. Their land waited for them in Greenfield, Good Hope, Bradenton. But this farm was for him, and for his family.
Closer to Home

The new house on Sugar Grove, which sat in a small valley between two hills, is the first house I can remember. My parents say that it was nicer than any house they’d lived in before. It had two bathrooms, three bedrooms, and a little barn and pasture behind it where my dad brought lambs that were still on the bottle and baby calves that cried for their mothers and hid in the corners of the lot in packs.

The best part of that house was the finished basement. One side was a room for my mother’s sewing machine, an old refrigerator she kept stocked with Diet Faygo, my sister’s easel and paints which were Off Limits to me, and a brand new, full-sized air hockey table. Though my mom taught piano lessons on the side, Dad’s two jobs, farmer and banker, paid for it all. When I was five, the other side of the basement became an official family room. My dad spent weekends that winter building a series of shelves and doors that setup together to form an entertainment center. It was his first major wood working job. Though we didn’t own many books, it had several bookcase shelves, a special feature on the side that held both the stereo and a set of 8-track tapes, but the focal point was a glass-encased gun rack that sat just above the television.

I was my dad’s first remote control. Cross-legged on the floor, I was off to the side of the screen so that my dad could see better, “You make a better door than window,” he’d say.

“Four.” Then I’d flip the channels until the arrow pointed at that number. We alternated between channels 4, 6 and 10. If it was a clear day, we could pick up 7 and 16, too, without moving the antennae. I had to flip slowly, not spinning the dial quickly to the channel in a series of fast clicks. Dad wanted to hear each one ticking off in a thump, thump until we got to our destination. When he wasn’t there, he had to know, the dial flew.

My parents bought Kindra a horse and she named it Susie. Just a few months later, the horse had a colt and Kindra named it Surprise. Kindra was an artistic little girl with pretty brown curls and a quiet way about her. She made friends at Eber Elementary. When I’m older, when I’m 5 and she’s 15, she will have to babysit me and sometimes, if
I don’t bug her too much, she’ll curl my hair with a curling iron—making me count to ten with every curl. She doesn’t burn my head very much.

I always made sure that when Kindra wore her red shirt with the Hang Ten feet on the chest, I would change into my red shirt (Carters with fluffy sleeves), too.

Karmel hated living in the country. In London, she could walk to the city pool from her house and she was on the pep squad. “I had friends there.” But when I see pictures of Karmel in high school, she doesn’t look sad and worried. Karmel, as a teenager, always smiles and has an Honors Society aura around her. She was a majorette with long, heavy seventies hair that reached to the middle of her back. She rolled it in hot rollers every morning with bunches of toilet paper tucked between her scalp and the white rollers. By the time I was four, I remember she and Kindra fighting in the bathroom for mirror space while I sat in the bathtub or on the toilet beside them. If they noticed me at all, one of them would say, “Aren’t you done yet?” They said I sat on the toilet too long, that my feet were going to fall asleep. I stayed out of their fights and their morning routines, except when Kindra used my toothbrush to remove excess mascara from her eyes. Then, I’d yell for Mom. The Karmel I knew wore sequins leotards to perform with the marching band on Friday nights and she is the only one of us to have noticeable breasts in high school. I remember her practicing her fire baton in the backyard, doing kicks over my head until I grew and one day she kicked me directly in the side of the head. My mom had been giving piano lessons and Karmel’s job was to keep me quiet. She got in trouble that day.

Someone asked me once if I was an annoying little sister. I said no, and at the time, that seemed to be the truth, but it doesn’t really explain why I’m standing between my sister and her prom date in several pictures. Me and the dog.

Because of the age difference, people would sometimes say to me, “Were you an accident?” Then they’d laugh a little like they knew something I didn’t.

So, one day, when Mom was hanging shirts on her side of the closet, I said to her back, “Is it true, Mom, was I an accident?”

“Who said that to you?” She turned toward me. I was lying on her blue bedspread fingering the spot where Kindra spilled fingernail polish remover. The spot was twice the size of my hand and completely hardened, petrified.
“People say it all the time.”

“Well, that’s not true. You were really just the last chance for a boy.” She smiled at me and I could tell she thought that it was all settled now. That’s like saying, “See, you were wanted. We just wanted you different.”

To this day, I’m not sure how I feel about this. No one brings it up, except Karmel who once told me that my name was going to be Kent. She hated the idea of a brother named after a pack of cigarettes.

If I had been a boy, I wonder what it would have meant to my dad. He would have had a son to carry on his work, someone he could look at and say, this will be yours and you will know what do to with it. Someone out there, Kent Knedler, would have still had the name. Kent would have shown steers at the fair. People would have found him in the phone book.

It was probably Dad’s dream for a son to pass the farm to, a new generation of planting techniques, better fans on the elevators, the newest pesticides. My dad wouldn’t be like his father. I bet he promised himself that he would listen and not yell all the time about how much things cost and how change was worthless. Dad would have had a young back to rely on, one that could carry those bales without complaining about how heavy they were.

He would have come to watch me play basketball, if I had been his son, and he would have told me how I missed that pick or how my foul shots really need work. He might have told me about the time he took an elbow to the stomach from one of those dirty Greenfield players and how he still hit the winning shot of the game after all. When I asked him to teach me to shoot the rifle, he would have said yes, instead of no, and he would have stood behind me to help absorb the kick of the gun against my shoulder.

My dad wasn’t completely denied to me, though. I don’t want to give that impression. On Sunday afternoons, I did sometimes get my dad to myself. We watched the Cincinnati Bengals play. If it was cold out and he felt like it, we’d watch on the upstairs T.V., which was smaller, but he’d build a fire in the fireplace using wood from the pile we kept next to my mother’s car in the garage, lighting it with ads from the Sunday paper that we’d twisted into tight sticks of kindling. If I begged, Dad would make popcorn in a mesh wire basket that ended up tasting more like wood from a garage, but
we put a lot of salt on it and still ate it. Mom would make sure I stayed in my itchy church clothes, but otherwise, she left us alone. Dad would cup the popcorn in his palm and shove too many pieces into his mouth at once. I could hear him behind me, chewing and sometimes calling plays from the green chair in the corner. By the time I was ten, I could call the penalties before the referees turned on their microphones to announce them and I knew that quarterback Kenny Anderson was the anti-Christ. This was my Dad Time, when I was still genderless.

Today, I still watch the Bengals, but now I’ve become my dad. My husband calls me Little Ircel. I pace and sigh, Come on, you guys. Any other NFL team means almost nothing to me. Even the Bengals don’t hold that much interest for me anymore, but when they play and lose, I feel sick to my stomach. I can’t stop myself from calling the plays and sometimes calling my dad.

Both of my sisters were gone from our house when Dad and I had our time together. They were busy in their own lives by the time things started to go very wrong. Kindra was in the city working a job in advertising and visiting maybe once a month, calling on Saturday mornings. Karmel, already a mother of two, worked nights as a nurse at the local hospital.

When my grandmother lied to my dad, I was outside the loop because I was little enough not to be included in decisions and details. But, her deception was only the beginning.

In the years to come, I would be the insider. “If you let them hurt you, they’ve won,” my dad told me once. He’d let out these pieces of random advice to me, usually without much reason or situation to relate to. He was warning me though to keep these things in my mind. Always there, in case the time came that I might need them. I knew firsthand that his perspective came from experience. I watched him with my own eyes.
Juanita’s Last Words

Last Will and Testament, November 21, 1979

“The watch my father gave me, my wedding ring, and my diamond ring, I give to my daughter, Margaret Belle.

My ruby ring, my locket, and one of my other watches, I give to my daughter, Barbara Lee.

My signet ring and one of my other watches, I give to my daughter Janet Ann.”

He looked for his name. There was no mention of it until the second page of his mother’s will. Junior turned the page that was carefully stapled in the upper left-hand corner. His copy was no different from anyone else’s, but no one looked surprised. He scanned the room to see if anyone was noticing. Weren’t they seeing this? Margaret was – she looked right at him and back at her paper while the attorney’s voice moved forward through the words. The one-third price agreement Junior expected was not mentioned. It never really existed, except in Juanita’s words and in Junior’s mind. They were not on paper, and that meant they didn’t count. Junior exhaled deeply, but kept it silent and the breathing out expelled with it the dream of this place. It wasn’t much to have, was it, but it had been his. In his mind it had been his.

Juanita Voldaire (Melson) Knedler left equal amounts to each of her children and her husband. A five way split of all the land they owned.

Junior’s lips felt white and numb. He stood in his boyhood home. It felt even more hollow. He noticed where the cracks in the plaster reached out from around the door’s ornate molding. He confronted his father when the lawyer left.

“Why, Dad? Why did you do it?”

“I was always hoping I’d die first. So you’d have to face her about this.”

And this had been the plan all along. There was no last minute change to the inheritance, no offense he’d committed to make his parents turn away from their promise. They’d lied together, both secretly conspiring that they would die first, leaving the living parent to face their son’s realization. Maybe Juanita would have been strong in the face of her son’s broken voice. Maybe his hurt wouldn’t have affected her at all. But Junior’s
father wasn’t the hardass he always portrayed. Without Juanita behind him, his words seemed scripted.

Junior, and his sisters, had always assumed that their father was the one making all the decisions for their lives, for the farm. It was easy to blame him. He was abusive and stubborn. A bastard, Junior would think, but never say. Now Ircel Sr. seemed lost, like his bones were gone. Nothing held him up. Ircel Sr. stood in the living room across from Juanita’s rocker, looking glassy-eyed and alone, and smaller than Junior remembered.

The house was emptied not long after that. Each of the children showed up on the appointed day. They walked through the house almost silently at first. Janet Ann and Margaret picked through the closets, taking a few envelopes of pictures, some mixing bowls, and the leftover necklaces and clip-on earrings that their mother had barely worn.

Barbara came with a different perspective. “We don’t want much of this junk,” she told everyone. Then, Barbara and her husband, Pearl, (who had a perfect flat-top haircut and a woman’s name) backed up his pickup truck to the old shed and started loading. He didn’t even look at what he was throwing into the bed of his old Ford. He took broken wagon wheels, boxes of rusted and bent nails that Ircel Sr. pulled from old wood in the barn. He saved them in case “metal was ever scarce again” and he might be able to sell them as a profit.

“You sure you want this? Most of it is garbage,” Junior said.

“You think this is more than my share?” Barbara said. She was ready to fight for her boxes of nails and a plastic bag of old plumbing supplies.

Junior backed away, holding up his hands and laughing a little. It wasn’t worth the energy to tell her that a few of those things he might have wanted. There were tools there, boxes of drill bits and screws for the tractor repairs. Barbara took an old block with the form of a foot sticking out that was used for shoe repair, an old washing machine. He didn’t stop anyone, even Barbara, from taking what she wanted.

“It’s not worth the headache,” he told Jana in the empty farmhouse kitchen where she was loading silverware into shoeboxes and replacing them with mothballs and set mousetraps.
Everyone assumed that Barbara’s dusty things and collapsing boxes would be sorted out later at her house in Good Hope. Barbara’s children might want some of this stuff to remember their grandmother or the farm by it. No one knew that in the end, Barbara kept it all for herself.

Junior once asked his niece, Peggy, if she’d gotten that old coal scoop from her mother. She didn’t know what he was talking about. Barbara had unloaded the whole mess into her garage, lowered the door, and left it untouched until she died of a brain tumor twelve years later.

Junior’s sisters were supposed to get three other properties around the county, plus what he would pay them in the one-third price deal. That was the agreement. That was his mother’s word. She’d held this heritage, this right to the land, over his head while it was useful. My dad received no ring like the girls and no momento of his grandfather passed from his mother’s hands.

Juanita Knedler was rarely at our house when I was a child. In the album, there’s a picture of her sitting on a lawn chair at a family reunion we hosted. I helped my mom set up the garage and the yard for this reunion. We dumped buckets of bleach and soap water onto the garage floor and pushed it around with brooms until Mom was satisfied with the way the floor looked. I remember the smell and the wonderful feeling of cleaning a floor that would never really be clean. But pushing the bubbles and the brown water out still made me feel good. No one was allowed to park in the garage or play in there until after the reunion. She borrowed chairs and tables from our church, setting them up in long lines of food tables. One was turned to the side. That was for desserts. When the women brought their food into our garage, one casserole dish at a time, I disappeared into the house or into the barn. If I stayed, I’d either be in the way or they’d put me to work, bringing them serving spoons they’d forgotten or wiping up the cheesy potatoes that were dropped on the floor accidentally. There were no other kids my age in the family, only teenagers, like my sisters, and if they showed up at all, they didn’t want to play with me. Most of the day, I heard comments like, “You must be Junior’s girl” or “Are you going to be an artist like your sister?” I was a stranger to these old relatives, just a reflection of someone who was born before me.
I have no recollection of Juanita at our house, ever. Did I talk to her? Did I show her my room? I doubt that she would have come into the house. Too many steps. My grandma and I didn’t share anything, except a few moments on the weekends when my mom came to clean her house and I played. I don’t remember anyone saying her name before she died. After the will, her name was part of my parents’ conversation almost every day.

I wonder if she realized that when you start a ripple in the water, it started small and tight, but then it widens, moving out and growing bigger, like an echo, before it eventually fades away. And that takes time.

“That was the way she wanted it.” Dad says nothing now about betrayal, about what a mother does that can reach out from the grave and slap your face. He just shakes his head and stares out his kitchen window into the recently harvested cornfield, the acres of yellowish stubble.

No matter how complicated things are inside the farmhouse, outside there is one season at a time. Drought, frost, tractors stuck in the mud with tired buried three feet deep. Farmers deal with it. What else is there to do? But when I was seven, my dad didn’t shrug it off so casually. Truthfully, I’m not convinced he lets it go so easily even today. But he would say that he does, so I’ll give him credit for showing me a strong face and a story that ends in lessons learned. My mom calls it perserverance. “That’s what a family does,” she says.

My parents only talk about the end of the story, the things that turned out for the best. When I ask about Grandma Knedler and my dad, my parents like to sanitize the stories for me. They clean it up into a neater pile than it ever will be. It’s a little package we call The Past. You can take it out and look at it, but then you put it away. It doesn’t affect you today. That’s how we talk about it.

But I lived it, too, and I watched my father over the few years following Juanita’s death. Things would get worse before they ever got better. That much I remember.

As a girl I wondered if the memories I have of Juanita were even true. Did we have those tea parties? Maybe I made up that part about the cake and the basket of toys. I know there were awkward hugs, orchestrated by my mom, with me reaching up to my
grandmother’s big body in that old chair. I thought she loved me, but maybe this is just a story I tell myself.

My dad was strong and smart and worked all the time. I figured that anyone who hurt someone so good must be bad. That’s what I want. I want to go back to how I felt watching my dad after the will and give my grandma a label. Bad. Liar. I want to look at my father and say Good, Strong. But that’s not how people really are. You don’t get to give them a single word and capture who they are. If you can write them into a single word, you never really knew them.

When I was eight, Dad was trying to figure out how to fix what had happened. It would take years. There had never been “family meetings” in our house before, but there were now. Aunts and uncles and a few cousins who were even older than my sisters were called regularly. Dad wanted everyone to know what he was doing. “They all need to know, every step I take, I want them there. I’ve seen what family can do to each other. I saw what happened with Mom and her brother. I don’t want any of that crap.” It would be a long time before I would know what “Mom and her brother” meant.

My mom managed two checkbooks. One was small, inside her wallet, and used for groceries and school clothes. It was so full of coupons and other mysterious papers that the brown leather was stretched and would no longer snap closed. She used a rubber band to keep it together. The other was a big book, formal and leather bound, full of long yellow papers and receipts. It was the farm money. It paid for seed and pesticide, new belts for the dryers in the bins and it was replenished by the sale of soybeans at the going rate or by taking a load of beef cattle to the stockyards. Out of their personal account, my parents wrote checks to Mr. Brubaker, Attorney At Law, for the analysis of the will. I was too young to know the exact amount, but they fought about it with the bedroom door closed.

I stretched out on the blue shag hallway carpet and peered through the slice of an opening under my parents’ door. My mother’s voice was quieter, but hard. My dad yelled both shit and damn in a booming cascade of words when she finished talking. Those were the worst words I knew.

When the door opened, I said to my mother, “Are you getting a divorce?”
“Of course not.” But her eyes were pink around the edges and she locked the bathroom door a minute later. My dad left for the farm in his work truck. In my room across the hall, I crawled onto my lavender bedspread. My stuffed Chewbaca and I played a game of rescuing helpless Holly Hobby when she fell between the bed and the wall. We dropped a shoestring to her, then pulled her and her baby to safety.

At least once a week after that, we took paperwork to the lawyer’s office. My mom would wait in the car while I ran up to the legal secretary’s desk and dropped manila folders stuffed with papers. Each one a nearly exact copy of the next, long legal white sheets and black signatures. Sometimes the secretary wasn’t at her desk and I’d stand in the middle of the reception area, outside the lawyer’s closed office door, waiting for someone to take these papers from me. There was no use to go back to the car. I’d tried that before. Mom would only send me back, saying, “Just knock on her desk or on the door. Someone will come out.”

We stopped going to the farmhouse regularly on Saturdays. It was completely empty inside, only a shell of a house. But from the outside, it looked strangely the same. The lacy curtains were closed, but if I cupped my hands around my eyes, I could make out the outlines of the walls, the bare floors, one closet door left open. Even the old chicken house and barn were mostly empty. My mom picked through the leftovers in the house after Aunt Barbara had her loads of junk taken away. Mom kept a few photo albums, a quilt, a collection of lace doilies that Juanita made herself (which I have trouble picturing since her fingers were both fat and gnarled with arthritis), two casserole dishes, and an axe. Everything else, the broken crates, the old stalls from the barn, the empty feed sacks, the boxes of magazines, the old tires, Dad says, “I sacrificed them,” and then he laughs a little. “There was even old cancelled checks and checkbooks. Old, empty lard cans full of them. Dad was sure we would want to look at these after he was gone.” Piece by piece, he carried them in the bed of this truck or tied them behind to drag them if they were too big, into the field south of the house. He shows me with his hand, “It was a pile eight foot high.” He lit the pile in three places with a new book of matches. It burned for hours.

If my dad needed lunch on the weekends, we’d park on the grass along the ditches before the farmhouse and walk the fields to find him. We’d wave like crazy and
jump around until the tractor’s engine changed gears and we knew that he’d seen us. Mom would unpack Dad’s food on the hood of the car. The sandwiches were in small plastic bags just like the ones she packed for my school lunches. His iced tea was poured into the lid of a thermos. It was blue and the bottom edge was rusted.

Kindra came home from her art school in Cincinnati on the weekends. My parents paid her twenty dollars every time she drove her Plymouth to the farmhouse and spent two hours on the old mowing tractor. I knew that I’d inherit this job from her and I couldn’t wait. Twenty dollars. I was lucky if Kindra paid me a dollar to vacuum out her car. Once, I sucked up her graduation tassel, which hung from the rearview mirror. Mom helped me take the sweeper apart, dig out the tassel, and hang it back up before Kindra saw me.

Kindra has eyes that look just like mine, only sharper somehow. In the fields, she was always the first one to pick up an arrowhead, like it was just waiting two hundred years for her to come and get it. In the yard, she could look into a clump of weeds and pulls out a four-leafed clover. “I just saw it,” she’d say and hand it to me. Each summer I pressed them into the Bible until the clover leaves were stiff and put them into my room where they disappeared. I lost them all. Kindra told me once how lonely it was there, at the farmhouse on mowing day, how she was afraid to look into the windows of the house. They were long, skinny glass rectangles and each one was warped, reflecting the light and making it look like there was movement inside. I was afraid of those windows, too, but I couldn’t stop myself from looking. I had to.
The Job

In 1983, I didn’t know the word downsizing. I was only twelve. I sat at the dinner table and I heard my dad talking. I watched my mother listening. We had beef, maybe cube steak or hamburgers, on the table with a few dishes of lima beans and the beets my mom canned in the summer. We butchered our own and the deep freeze in the garage was full of white paper wrapped packages taped closed, representing of any part of the cow my mom chose. Every day I looked into the sink to see what was defrosting in the sink. On liver or tongue nights I put up such a dramatic gagging scene that I usually got peanut butter.

My dad liked to gripe about his job, about the rain, the car, whatever. We sat like this, listening to him, so many times my mind blurs trying to pick out individual moments. He was a farmer and a banker at the same time. Dinner was the time in between the office and the farm. In the mornings, he got up early to feed the cattle, hogs and sheep at my grandparents’ farm. No one lived at the farmhouse since my grandma died, so my dad changed into his pants, pressed shirt and tie in the barn. He took off his brown work boots and put on the cowboy boots that he wore at the office. I remember the work boots the most since he kept them behind the door of the front bathroom. My mother put a square of *The Record-Herald* on the tile there so that the mud wouldn’t dry and flake onto her floor. She made him carry them outside or to the garage before he put them back on. When I sat on the toilet in that yellow bathroom, I would sometimes pull the boots over and slip them on my feet. Depending on the season, they smelled of paint, grease, manure, or mud. Year after year, I stared down into the darkness inside them. Size 10.

I didn’t notice that my dad was rarely home. Dad worked. That’s what dads do. My mom made all the decisions for our family—and she probably would have even if he were there all the time. When I was in the fifth grade, I asked my friend Mindy if she could come for a sleep over. Her mom was home, but she told me that she would have to ask her dad.

Later in the car, I asked my mom, “What for?”
She just shrugged. Moms make decisions, dads work.

Years later my dad would tell me, “I think your mother got tired of it. You know, me working on the farm all the time.”

“So why did you do it? Was it for the money?”

“No. There was almost no money in the farm. I just wanted to.”

He worked the farm everyday, but only owned one-fifth of it. The details are fuzzy to me, but I know that he was trying to get enough money to buy his sisters out completely. He just wanted to have the farm, like his mother had promised him, like he’d always dreamed. But I was starting junior high school and the boring details of this had been going on for years now. Most days were fine, but sometimes he and my mom would argue about it. My mother called this “discussing it.”

The conversation at the dinner table was different that summer. There was less talk about the farm. The weather and Dad’s boss were still there, but my dad looked angry. Looking back, I think he might have looked helpless, but that wasn’t something I could understand then. One night, when he finished telling Mom about the office and the company merger, she said, “It will be all right.”

“You don’t know that,” he said in a voice too loud for our small dining room. Then he would take his plate to the basement and eat it while he watched television alone. Before he left for work the next morning, I asked him why Production Credit wanted to be part of his company.

“Won’t you be as big as two banks then? With jobs for everybody?” I said.

He said, “No, it’s all political” which I didn’t understand.

At the Federal Land Bank, my dad helped farmers fill out duplicate sheets of loan applications in his office, then he would drive to their farms and assess whether they would get the money for land or equipment to make it through one more season. He mostly worked in Ross County, a rough and hilly area to the south and east of us. On his traveling days, he would drive down the gravel roads to the craggy farms they stuck into the hillsides. Cemeteries were bunched on the top of the higher lands and fenced off. All around Ross, families planted fields of corn, beans, and tobacco into any space of tillable land. These people stretched a living out of the giant rolling fields and flooded valleys of
the Scioto River that washed away their top soil twice a year. Right after they’d planted their fields, they were featured on the television news, replanting over their drowned seeds. The Ross farmers looked rougher, a little more worn away than the farmers in my county. If I mentioned this to my dad, he would laugh a little and say, “They’re just closer to Kentucky.”

For a few years, my dad drove the company K-Car (which I loved since our family was Knedler and I had two grown sisters both with K names), but Dad didn’t park it in our garage. We were a proud three-car family. And we had a camper, too.

When my dad came from of the office, my mother would say, “Get your dad some tea.” He would move away from the refrigerator so that I could fill his glass with ice from our new ice-maker and pour his tea from the stained Tupperware pitcher. After I handed it to him, he would sweeten it with two saccharine tablets from a crystal sugar bowl on the counter. They melted slowly, half-dissolving like aspirin on the bottom of his glass.

I retreated to my room on most days until it was time to eat. Later, my mom would report things to me about Dad. “Your father thinks we should bring food down to the fields this weekend when they are plowing…your father thinks that boy is probably no good…” I don’t remember when I stopped talking directly to my dad and allowed my mother to become our interpreter.

After supper, he would go into the bathroom and reemerge in jeans and a stained t-shirt, sometimes carrying his overalls. He became the farmer again and if I saw him again, it was always after dark.

On the weekends, he did longer and bigger jobs at the farm. He’d come home so covered in mud or dust, depending on the rain gauge, and my mother would make him strip to his underwear in the garage. Then he’d walk to the shower like Frankenstein’s monster, arms out to the front, legs stiff. My mother followed behind, fussing and picking up debris that fell as he stepped. I could judge the way his day had gone with the words under his breath. Damn tractor. Damn combine. Damn rain.

Then it was a Diet Faygo and the television. This was my childhood dad. Big and busy and mostly gone.
When I was twelve, my dad was almost fifty and his office work was never good. And the farm was worse. If he didn’t have his office job, he couldn’t keep up the farm. I didn’t know it at the time, but after splitting the profits with my grandfather, Dad was bringing home only five thousand dollars a year from those hours at the farm. When I think about how much my dad was gone, I have a hard time not being angry about this. At work, his secretary was mean to him and she had something called seniority. I wasn’t sure what that was, but it meant he couldn’t fire her. He told my mother that Margie had “no sense of humor” and more than one time I heard the word “bitch.” Dad’s supervisor, Mr. Boyle, was a crook. Since I remembered him from an office picnic as a greasy-haired, thickly jawed man, I believed it.

I learned these things at the table. It was just the three of us. My father sat in the only chair with arms, the captain’s chair. My mother and I flanked his sides, facing each other. Karmel was already married (since I was four – I was her flowergirl), and Kindra was in Cincinnati, permanently, it seemed. It was Kindra’s chair I had taken to sit closer to Dad.

In the month of September, it was hard for my dad to stop himself from yelling. The new words he had for us were corporate merger. Later, my mother would tell me that this meant Federal Land Bank was becoming Farm Credit. There weren’t enough jobs for all the people in both companies.

“I’m too old now. No college degree,” Dad had said to her. “There’s too many younger than me. With more school.”

I pictured hungry, angry men in suits trying to sabotage my dad. He was a man who had worked his way up in a company. He was easy-pickings.

“Not with more experience than you,” my mother said.

“It won’t matter. I’ve got one delinquent loan. The other office has twenty-two. It still won’t matter. You’ll see.”

“You have to stay positive, now,” she said, but the whole time she stared at my mouth. From her view across the laminate table, she could see my teeth. The gap in front was so wide, I could hold a sucker stick between them. The eye-teeth were coming in forward, over other teeth and the lower ones, hidden by my lip, were crowded and
mostly sideways. I was scheduled to get my braces one week later. They would cost one thousand dollars.
Snake

I sat on the smooth patio, my feet touching the first step, with our dog, Tiff. Mom was raking gravel back into the driveway and pulling at dandelions along the edges.

“Stay on the porch. Hold the dog,” she said as she hurried into the garage.

“Why?” I couldn’t help moving to the lowest step, not disobeying her yet, but just thinking about it.

“Just wait there.” I heard her voice coming from inside the hollow doorway.

She reemerged then with the garden hoe and walked carefully into the grass. She bent slightly at the waist and searched. She swished the patches of clover with only the very end of her toe. A few more feet, more searching. I held Tiff’s collar, but she started to pull even more at my hand. Something was up and she wanted to get in there. Just past the brick, charcoal grill, Mom stopped. With a sudden swing, she hacked into the ground with all the strength her five foot-two inches could give her. She chopped over and over, great wrenching blows into the dirt.

When it was over, she used the flat end of the hoe to lift up the leftover pieces of a two-foot snake. She balanced them on the sharp edge as she walked to the back of our property and tossed them over the fence into Merritt’s cornfield behind our house. She returned the hoe to its proper place on the garage wall, entered the house, and locked herself in the bathroom.

When I was six, I saw an animated goat dancing and singing on Sesame Street. His song was called “It’s Okay To Get Mad.” I loved this song and the way the goat’s hair stood up on his head when he yelled.

My mother was in the room with her piano. She was reading from Guidepost when I came in and told her I what I’d seen.

“It’s okay to be mad, Mom.”

“Who told you that?”

“I saw it on t.v.”

“Well, it’s not true.”
“Things are always changing. You never know what’s going to happen by the end of the day.”

Ircel Knedler, Jr.

**Political**

When we lived on Sugar Grove, I was the last one to be picked up for school. The bus came at 8:15 and I had a half hour ride to the junior high after that. There used to be a K-8 school just ten minutes from here called Olive Elementary, but it was boarded up and covered with overgrown bushes and unmowed grass. My dad went there. He walked from his farmhouse. I was bussed to an ugly village called Bloomingburg on the northern end of the county.

On a Friday morning, my bus was making the wide turn onto Route 62 when I saw my Dad coming home. His white pickup truck with a matching pop top slowed down slightly and I felt like I hovered over him for a moment as he passed the bus. I couldn’t see inside his window from my angle.

I knew he had lost his job. My dad never came home during the day. Since I had the seat to myself, I pulled my legs up to my chest and laid down my head against the vinyl. All the talk at the table didn’t seem real. That was just stuff that he complains about, not anything that ever really happens or touches us. Then I pictured him sitting in front of some man’s desk, telling him how he needed his job, but he can’t get the words out right and he can’t tell the man about his single loan. He’ll say, “What about my record?” and the man, some faceless boss, will say, “That doesn’t matter now.” In my mind, he looked too desperate, too needy. My stomach is clenching and I’m mad at him. I wanted him to look strong, to tell them that he knew what he was doing and the man will shake his hand and tell him to unpack that box he has in his office. They still need him. My books spilled under the seat in front of me, but I don’t reach down to gather them up. I knew I was a selfish girl because I can’t think of how my mother will greet him at the door and how she will cry. I only think of my white and black cheerleading uniform that still isn’t paid for. I run my tongue over the new brackets of my braces.
I picture Dr. Palmer, the only orthodontist in this county, plucking the silver squares off each of my teeth, unlacing the wires that run between them. I imagine that his mean receptionist smiles at me, a poor kid with fangs who only paid ten dollars at a time to start with. They take away my wax and my small bag of rubberbands. I don’t want to lose these things, but how can I fight this. For a second, I think that when I get to school, I’ll call my mom and ask what’s happening at home. I picture myself using the office phone, asking Mom to pick me up, so I can come home to see my dad’s face and hear them talking about what will happen to the three of us. Then I picture something more realistic. Mom crying. Dad silent.

When I get to school, I can’t picture them anymore and I feel left out of their grief. It’s easier for them when I’m gone. My friends are waiting by the lockers when I get to school and they call my name. I don’t tell anyone what has happened and I don’t call home.

My dad was less than a year from being fully vested. I didn’t know what this meant, but I knew it was about money. He was too expensive to keep on the job, no matter how good he was, no matter if he had a family to support. For my dad, there was one foot in the corporate world and one foot in the field. After my grandmother’s betrayal and the loss of his land bank job, it was like there were no feet at all. The two things he stood on were gone. He packed a single box of picture and papers and came home. Years later, Dad would tell me the story of a man, a friend of his, named Eaton who worked for Federal Land Bank in Louisville. He had the same job as my dad. When the bosses came for him, he was sitting at his desk filling out paperwork for a new loan. They came together, three of them, asking first for his keys to the office. He opened up his wallet and slipped the company credit card into one man’s opened hand. “Your personal belongings will be shipped to you. There’s a cab waiting outside,” and that was the downsizing of Eaton. At least my dad walked out with his own box.

“You know what the ironic thing about it is? That supervisor who came for me - they fired him six months later.”
“I once thought I might be a veterinarian. But when I got older, I was a farmer. I never thought of anything else.”

Ircele Knedler, Jr.

Sick

He’d worked in the constantly blowing wind of Fayette County since his boyhood, but when my dad lost his job, he found a cough. He came in from the fields, pulling off his dirty clothes and clearing his throat. Something was there and he couldn’t get rid of it. It started as a small, annoying tickle and he cleared it with short, loud grunts. In a few months, this developed into full-blown barks. At night, if he slept, his snores were like loud moans and he would wake up choking on something. This would send him to the kitchen for hot coffee, muffling his sounds all the way down hallway. He’d stop in the bathroom closest to my room and not quite close the door all the way, not wanting the door to click and wake me up. I’d hear him though. Night after night, peeing or spitting into the toilet, whatever he needed to do.

At first, my mother would come out to check on him night after night. She was the one who usually made the coffee while he wheezed and hocked things into the sink in the kitchen or front bathroom. Sometimes, it would be so bad that he would throw up. His eyes turned red-rimmed and teary against his blotchy, but still tanned, face. I thought my dad might have a heart attack. And sometimes I pictured what we would do if he did. How would we save him? We didn’t know CPR. We didn’t know anything.

On the days when Dad was searching for a job, something that would fill the time between the farm and our home and pay our insurance, he coughed. At the dinner table, I couldn’t hear my mom talking because Dad’s cough was so loud. She ignored it and just kept on talking. It was like talking to someone on a phone that is breaking up. Every two words disappeared into the noise.

“I can’t hear you,” I said.

“I know,” she told me, nodded a few times and continued talking.

Mom bought two more packs of white, starched hankies to add to his collection. Next to his underwear in the top dresser drawer, she piled them into four stacks. When Dad covered his nose to blow, sometimes the sound was full and wet.
Other times, it was empty and he would push back from the table, blowing and blowing until the smallest sound of moisture came out of his nose. Our loads of laundry were full of white squares that had to be folded into smaller, pocket-sized squares that would fit into my dad’s jeans. I hated this job and it was almost always mine to do. Within weeks, the squares of white turned calico with yellow, green, and even some red spots. The tedious folding and folding wore on me like the sound of sickness.

In restaurants, waiters would bring us extra glasses of water when they heard him. Once the manager at Friday’s came over to ask my dad if he was all right, could he bring us anything. I searched my mother’s face, pleading silently with her. I wanted to leave, but I kept my mouth shut for once. Her eyes told me not to say a word.

At the First Presbyterian Church, my dad leaves our pew every Sunday. He excuses himself quietly, waiting until he hits the hallway, holding it back until his neck begins to turn a red that inches its way toward his face. This cough, it pushes at his throat. He’s private with it. Dad doesn’t let anyone, except Mom and me, how bad it really is.

He saw doctors. I don’t remember my dad ever seeing a doctor before this – except for the time he hurt his back. He started with the family doctor, but that was no help at all, so then he progressed quickly to an allergist in Columbus. My parents drove together to the appointments, an hour and a half one way, where they wait for two hours as my dad is pricked along his back with tiny barbs of common allergens. If his back swelled up, and it did, then he would have medications for each little welt that appeared. He laid the report on the table and I read the chart. Suddenly, he was allergic to everything. And he had proof. Dander, pollen, ragweed, grass, mold and so many more, listed alphabetically for us. I realized then, he was allergic to the farm. To our life.

He started with bottles of small, white pills that my mom laid out for him every day on the countertop beside his multi-vitamin and a constant companion he carried that we called “the puffer.” It was an inhaler of asthma medication that he nursed three or four times a day, depending on the severity of the coughing. That winter, it feels like a competition. If I get a cold, he gets a worse one. If I sneeze, he sneezes louder. My mother starts carrying a crinkling bag of cough drops in her purse and he pops them like candy. At first, the coughing felt like a hobby. A year later, it felt like an addiction.
When my dad isn’t home, my mom and I fight about it.
“Why can’t he stop it? It’s embarrassing.”
“Because he has asthma. You can’t stop that. You think he wants this?”
“I don’t know. I know he could stop if he wanted to.”
“It’s a disease. Didn’t you see the papers I brought home from the doctor?”

For that comment, and for being a hateful, self-centered daughter, I got grounded.

My sisters, who were both long-gone from living at home, would talk about it together. About how bad it seemed, about how the stress was behind it and how mom was enabling him. But they didn’t live there. They didn’t really know. When they asked me, and I don’t know why I did this, but I would exaggerate and make things worse on the times when they were okay. But when things were bad, I usually said, “It’s all right. Same as usual.” What could I say? My dad before had been gone, always working, but more there than the dad I had now.

I know that we were still living on Sugar Grove when the shots came. The syringes sat on our kitchen countertop while my parents wait for the medicine to reach room temperature. They’ll be less painful that way. The small, glass bottles are full of clear liquid, like water, and they have rubber tops where you can stick a needle in to pull out the medicine without spilling or wasting it. My mother keeps them in the refrigerator on the shelf next to the margarine.

Mom and Dad practiced the shots sitting down, but standing up seemed to work better. He can’t give them to himself and driving into town every day is too much of a hassle. So, my mother, always practical, decides that she will give them. My mother is as tall as my father’s shoulder and this gives her the perfect view of his upper arm. He rolls his t-shirt in fat bunches up to his shoulder, exposing the spot where his white shoulder meets his dark arms. When I was really small, I could hang on his biceps while he lifted me up. “Look,” my mom would say. “Daddy’s a gorilla,” and she would pet his arms. On Saturdays, when he was home, he would chase me down the hallway, to the fireplace, where I’d be trapped and he would come at me like a wild animal, all stooped and grunting. When I screamed or threatened to cry, he’d stop and both of my parents would laugh. He was the strongest man I knew. His arms are hairy, covered with too
much dark curly hair, but at the shoulder, most of the hair has been worn away by years of shirts and coveralls rubbing against them. When he lifts his sleeve for the shots, the spot where dark meets like looks like a target.

Mom has everything laid out when he comes into the dining room. Three skinny syringes, topped with gray protectors, in the order that she wants to give them. One cotton ball and a half-full bottle of Kroger brand rubbing alcohol. Dad’s glass of iced tea, cubes mostly melted already. All the lights in the kitchen, dining room and living room are on. The show of shows.

I wait around the corner of the kitchen where I can hear, but not see. I can’t stand the sight of any kind of needles. Before anyone was in the room, I looked at Dad’s thin and waiting needles, imagining how they would feel going under my skin. The thoughts make me feel sick in my stomach and left arm feels heavy and useless at my side. Years from now, I’ll become nearly phobic with this fear. It will grow until even the mention of needles will send me to tears and my lips will turn white. It’s not the pain that I fear, it’s something about impalement. The feeling of inserting something metal into my skin, the violation of it. It’s unnatural.

“Hold still,” Mom says. She wipes his arm with the cotton ball until a small oval of wetness appears and she is satisfied that it’s sterile and she can hit the mark.

“You don’t have to go into the muscle this time, you know,” my dad’s tight voice. “Just hold still.”

I feel like I hear her jab him three times then, but they are both silent. Dad takes his tea to the basement, walking past me in the hallway. He taps me on the head with his fist.

“How does it feel?” I ask him.

“Stings,” he says.

I’ve seen my mother give shots before. We bring small calves from the farm to our pasture at the Sugar Grove house when they are sick or when their mother’s won’t feed them. Most of the babies drink from bottles that we mix in the garage with cream-colored, powder formula and then fill with water from the backyard hose. We do this a few times a day, for months, until they are old enough to eat the feed and hay I toss into
the feeders. We know already that a few of them won’t make it, but we try to save them. On the sick ones, the bumps of their bones show along their backs and if they let me touch them, I can feel the slopes of their spines and the ripple of ribs. The smallest ones have stomachs that are sunken in. They have what my dad calls “the scours,” which is a spray of light brown diaharrea they leave everywhere in the straw. If we don’t treat them with antibiotics, the scours will make them skinner and skinner until they don’t have the strength to walk anymore. When I’m young I think that we do this because they need our help. When I’m older I realize that they are beef cattle and at their size they might not be worth much unless they get healthy and gain weight.

In the corner of our garage, we have a small veterinarian pharmacy. Bottles of pills in big, black bottles, medicine in viles with pink rubber tops and huge syringes with four-inch needles.

When my mother tells me to, I follow her to our small barn. We chase out the healthier calves to isolate the sickest, one at a time. My job is to get the head. Even as babies, they are strong and scared. I wear thick shoes because their hooves can smash toes. I know this by experience. Once cornered, I move toward the front and as fast as I can, I pull the calf in a headlock, leaning into the side of the barn with my hip against his neck. His back legs scramble around and sometimes kick at my mom. But I am strong enough to hold him for a short time in this position. I read the ear tag number outloud to make sure we have the right one and the calf rolls his eyes back at me. The look is half crazy, half pitiful. My mother pins his backside with her hip and one free hand. “Hurry up, Mom,” I say, grinding my body into the calf and the wall behind him. With her free hand, always her right hand, she brings down, in a single hard stroke, the needle and syringe that disappear into the calf’s thick thigh. He lunges when he feels it, but I am ready for him. I don’t look at what’s happening behind me. I just hold tighter.

When she says, “Okay. Got ‘im.” I open my arms and jump away. He runs to mix himself back in with the small herd waiting by the far fence row. Their spotted faces blend together again. He might live or he might not. “We’ve done what we can,” mom says. “He’s weak.”
Whiner

“I don’t want to move to Florida,” I told my mother.

She nodded to me, but I couldn’t tell if she agreed with me or if she was just doing that to make me stop talking. I knew she didn’t want my dad to overhear me. Karmel was here tonight and she cried to my mom in the kitchen. Her little boy and baby girl were with her; my nephew is closer in age to me than my own sisters. Karmel will live in Fayette County forever, even I can tell that. This is her place now. Mom and Dad might leave her here with no grandparents for her kids. So she cried. I didn’t know where Dad was during Karmel’s visit.

“Can’t he find a job here?” I hated the way I sounded. Like a whiner, like the baby my sisters accused me of being. I knew Dad sent out letters that he typed himself on the typewriter in the basement. He had lists of names on a yellow legal pad and small cut out squares from the Columbus Dispatch Sunday edition, they said Help Wanted, Now Hiring, or New Position. He had a new, blue suit, too. He took a test that might help him get a job at the post office. I tried to picture him behind the counter, weighing boxes, or walking the streets in a blue uniform, delivering mail to the people who live in the city limits and get the mail put into small boxes beside their doors.

No one was calling him. We ate our dinner on t.v. trays in the basement family room and watched the news together.

“Things are bad everywhere,” Mom said. “But they might be better there. They were before.”

“No, Mom.”

I was thirteen, but I sounded so much younger as I pushed my face into my pillow. When I was two or three, and when I was mad, I would race across the living room to cry into my mother’s favorite green velvet pillows on the couch. She would lightly sponge them with a warm, soapy washrag when I stopped.

Mom moved around my room in the dark. She closed the closet door the way I like it. She placed the chair of my vanity into perfect alignment.

What I really wanted to say was, Mom, don’t take me to Florida. I’m no one there. I was finally becoming somebody in Fayette County. I knew I was too tall, but I
was at least the kind of natural skinny that girls admire. I got to wear my uniform on
game days and I had a jacket with Miami Trace written on the back and my name
embroidered on the pocket. In Florida, I’d just be another girl with a bad home perm that
her mom gave her in her kitchen, and lonely. Kids in Florida will see right through me.
Dad seems to give up on Ohio too quickly. My parents preached Florida to me like the
promised land. The place where jobs were there for the taking. I thought that my dad
wished he’d never come back to Ohio. I thought that maybe he was trying to recapture a
life down there that he ended too quickly.

Between the two losses, the farm and his job, Ohio had been nothing but grief for
him. If he’d stayed in Florida, maybe everything would still be all right. If he hadn’t been
so attached to this land, we would have been all right. He blamed himself. And God and
Juanita. But mostly himself.

If we stayed in Ohio, I would probably be the main reason. My selfishness, my
need for things to stay the same. We’d stay here and run out of money. Dad would be
lonely and lost, without a job, and sick.

I’m killing my dad’s dream. I’m making him sicker. I knew this in my heart, but
I couldn’t stop myself.

Mom and Dad tried their best to keep it away from me, but the truth is that I
didn’t need to see the bills stuffed into desk drawers, waiting for their checks to be
written and mailed. The heaviness sat at our table, stood beside me in the kitchen, and
followed us to the door. Unemployment was our shadow. My parents fights got louder
and my dad’s Datsun spit gravel into the lawn when he pulled out to head back down to
the farm.

During the day, Mom made calls and thought she might have a job. She wore her
best church dress and brown pumps that she polished with Vasoline to the interview.
Mostly, she seemed the same in all this as she quietly cleaned the house and made her
lists. We didn’t talk about the tension; we just walked on it.

I once told my mom, “I’ll never marry a farmer.”

“Why not?” she asked, but she didn’t really look all that surprised.

“I don’t want to live like this. The rain, the bank, grain prices. It’s all we talk
about. I want to marry someone who has a real job.”
“Yes, that’s true sometimes. But you never know who you’ll fall in love with. Some things can’t be controlled.”

“Yes, they can.” I said and walked out of the room before she could convince me of something else.
New Jobs

Gale Helms and Associates hired my mother. I could ask her if she had a resume, but I don’t really want to know. I like to picture her job application for myself, listing church choir director, Sunday School teacher, 4-H leader, baker of classroom cookies, checkbook keeper, babysitter. All the ways I knew her. She hadn’t held a job outside our house since before I was born.

There was a Jana before though. She’d worked in the office of a brick company, and in the medical records department of a hospital, and at a hardware store. I didn’t know that Mom. And yes, I know she worked at home. I’m sure I exhausted her every day. In fact, I now know I did, but sometimes I would catch her lying down on her bed, facing the wall, and I would wonder why she was so tired. To me, she did almost nothing. Moms are invisible that way when you’re a kid. But Mom in an office, in a square room with plastic waiting room chairs and that funny stale cleanliness of a business, was a different Mom.

Mom became the new receptionist and bookkeeper. After a while, when they knew they could trust her, the draftsman and the surveyor taught her how to run copies of blueprints and surveys on a huge, foul-smelling machine. She wore skirts and blouses, colored bead necklaces, and short pumps. She bought a small space heater to keep under her desk, directed at her feet. Her boss was an engineer named Loren Puckett and I remember him only a little as a gangly, older boy who lived in a white house just over the hill from our house on Sugar Grove. He was around the same age as Karmel. My mom told me that Loren used to hold me on the way home from band practice. I screamed the whole way because I hated having strangers in our car. I would have been two years old. I’m sure it was a carpool that everyone dreaded. Some of my greatest moments as a little sister have been in the car. I was one of those kids who was habitually, but unpredictably, car sick or hungry or tired, but refusing to nap. At the age of five, I learned all the words to “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover,” but my favorite line was “Get on the bus, Gus.” So, I sang that over and over, a hundred times at least. It was the best line, next to “Don’t need to be coy, Roy.”
“Make her shut up,” Kindra said to Mom. But no one did (because my mom secretly thought it was cute) and Loren held me every other day on the twenty-minute drive home. When he hired my mom, Loren was still as tall and shy as he was in high school.

Dad found a job at an oil company in Hillsboro. That one lasted for less than a month and then he is home again. I was not allowed to ask about it. (And I’m still afraid to). The shock of losing one job churned into anger somewhere in the next month. Dad sat in his green, tweed rocking chair and watched cartoons in the afternoon with me when I came home from school. The arms of his chair and the pillow-like stuffing at the head had started to fade. My mother made matching covers for the two areas, which are just big squares, like placemats, and they constantly fell off onto the carpet. My dad ate peanut butter straight from the jar with a large tablespoon. Sometimes he put peanut butter and cereal on top of ice cream mounding it up over the edges of my mom’s white glass bowls with the green trim. The rooms where he sat smelled like crunchy-style Jif and I alternated between liking the lunch-time smell of peanuts and thinking that it smelled like sweat.

If I couldn’t stand the quiet, I would say, “How’s the search coming?” In answer, I would either get a quiet, “Nothing yet,” or I would get a half hour lecture on the job market for men in their fifties with no education to speak of. “That’s all these people care about. Just a piece of paper with your name on it. Not how hard you work.”

I stopped asking questions about jobs. The less I knew about the world, the better I felt.

There were empty bottles of his Diet Faygo sitting by his chair. My parents rarely argued anymore. Behind their bedroom door, there was silence.
The Sale

When he tried to push open the farmhouse’s door, it stuck. Dad put his shoulder into it. The door came open with a combination sucking and popping sound, like the breaking of a seal. Or like a small piece of wood splintering. My father moved inside with a familiar step, but I hung behind, walking more slowly. I felt like we were trespassing, breaking into someone’s house when they weren’t home. This was the house he’d been born in. It should have felt like a circle coming around, nearly complete. But it didn’t. It felt a lot like limbo, like hanging in mid-air and waiting to see if you could fly or if you’d fall.

The decision had been made. If we didn’t move here, we were moving to Florida. That’s where the real hope was; my father was convinced. He’d escaped this county once by heading to the sugar cane fields, he could do it again. I was young, but I knew things wouldn’t be better there. They’d just be farther away. I would be a nobody and my dad would still be ragged with anger and asthma. This desperate, old farmhouse was a middle ground, a happy medium that didn’t make anyone happy.

Sell the house on Sugar Grove, move here. I knew it was final, no more discussion, because my parents took all the storm windows out of our house and washed them with the garden hose and then Windex and newspaper. People want to buy clean houses, Mom said. Mom made me crawl on all fours with her pulling a Tupperware bowl of soapy warm water along behind us as we scrubbed my pink, bedroom carpet with hand brushes. Only people on T.V. had their carpets cleaned by men in trucks.

In the entryway of the farmhouse, my mother stood with a blank, yellow legal pad and a ball-point pen. We walked forward, through the hallway, into the kitchen. My dad pulled a tape measure from his back pocket and he stretched it to meet the ceiling.

“Twenty-four and a quarter,” he said.

“Don’t you think we should leave a little room for the…”

“Just write it down, Jana. I’ll think about that later.”

He moved around the room like that, issuing measurements while I stood behind him with empty hands. When he pushed the tape’s edge into the wall or ceiling, bits of plaster sprinkled onto his hat. He didn’t bother to shake it off.
I wandered back to the open front door and laid my hand on the wide bannister of the main stairway. It looked black and sticky, but when I touched it, it was shiny and hard. The dark cherry finish was decades old. The staircase seemed too fancy for this house. Each bannister stood like a small pillar, carved square and then round, then square again. At the bottom, my hands traced the circles carved into the final turn. The steps were solid, but each one cracked loudly as I moved up, the wood getting used to bearing weight again. I was disturbing dust that had rested well for more years than I’d been alive.

At the top of the stairs, between the two bedrooms, was a door. It opened onto the roof of the front porch. I looked through the glass to see that the porch roof sloped toward the ground and there was no railing. There was a regular lock on the doorknob and a deadbolt that was harder to turn. But I did as my dad had and I put my shoulder against it to loosen the humid wood. Finally, a glass storm door separated me from the outside and I moved the small silver handle down.

“That’s an upper porch.” My mother words were behind me. I’d heard her small feet on the steps, impossible to miss in this hollow house. If we lived on the water, this might have been called a widow’s walk, a place where women watched for the return of their men from the sea. But this house was surrounded by grain fields on all four sides and the platform of the porch juts out five feet and ends abruptly. No railing, just a drop off to the ground below.

“Why is it here?”

“I don’t know. A lot of these old houses have them.”

Holding onto the edges of the door, I leaned out and looked down. Fifteen feet down to the limestone steps in front or the sticker bushes on the sides. One bad step and I could…

“Maybe people stood out here to admire their fields,” I said.

“I’ve never seen anybody do that. It’s too dangerous.”

The toe of my shoe was already outside the threshold. I moved forward so that my whole foot was out the door, casually but carefully testing the floor.

“Don’t let her go out there,” Dad hollered from downstairs. “She’ll fall through the roof. It’s not safe.” His voice was amplified by the curling staircase.
“I’m just looking, Dad.” I heard his boots moving toward the kitchen, away from us. I was sure he was right. The whole roof looked unstable, but I still moved forward until both my feet were outside. Mom held the door so it didn’t smack closed behind me. I felt the pull of gravity or temptation asking me to step closer to the edge. The shingles were sandy, the grit eroding and loosening. It crunched under my soles. Instead of stepping forward, I edged onto the roof and kept my heels close to the ridge between the house and the roof. When I was three feet from the door, I couldn’t make myself go any further. I slid to sit, my back pushing slowly down the painted wood siding, my knees coming up to my chin. I examined my position for stability. This was the best I could do. I thought I could probably survive a fall from here. I could grab onto the rotten eaves on my way down to slow the fall. You should roll when you come out of a fall, right? The wind didn’t reach me here on the north face of the house, so it was quiet. My dad moved around inside, below me, and that’s the only sound I heard. I wondered if Florida had such lonely houses.

“Come back,” Mom said, sticking her head out the door. I listened to her and edged my way along the wall and back inside. “How was it?” she asked. I told her it was neat, but not that it was scary or that the gritty shingles of the upper porch lean just slightly toward the ground, luring you a little toward the edge as you walk.

There were three bedrooms on the top floor. The one across the landing will be used for storage. There was no closet for me, so Dad said he’d build racks in the spare room for my clothes. The front bedroom that faced the road was claimed by my parents, the back will be mine and we will have a door separating us. The entire upstairs floor was tile, the green squares of an institution. Our footsteps tapped against it.

When we came to the room that my parents said would be mine, I practiced in my head, “my new room.” I tried to picture myself here and place my things. I couldn’t do it. The only aspect that broke up the perfect squareness of the room was the six-foot dropoff to a second staircase that was small and steep. Mom and I walked over and looked into the dark. The small steps went straight down and then turned, disappearing into the living room below. The most obvious problem was that there was no railing on the top of the staircase, just like the porch. I could literally walk across the room and fall into it.
“It’s like an elevator shaft.”

“It’s a servants’ stairs,” Mom said. But I knew no one in our family ever had enough money for servants. They had children instead.

“Your dad will make something. He’ll fix it. Maybe some kind of cabinet can block this area. Wouldn’t you like something to hold your radio and your records?”

I didn’t remind her that I only have cassette tapes. The only albums left were her vinyl copies of “Alley Cat” and the Best of Anne Murray. I claimed not to, but sometimes when no one was around, I still played them. I pictured my radio, my tapes, and her records falling over the edge and I imagine the sound they would make as they hit the place where the steps turn. Mom told me that Dad planned to mount speakers on the wall for me and I admit to her that this does sound a little cool. It was enough of a distraction.

“You’ll have your own bathroom, too.”

Dad made scraping noises and banged something against the walls below us. Mom was selling me the house. She doesn’t know that I heard her raise her voice to Dad more than a month ago. Behind their closed bedroom door she said, “I’ll never live there.”

Dad told me later that when he told her that they couldn’t maintain two properties anymore, she told him to take the farmhouse and “burn it down, tear it down. I don’t care.”

We made our way down the back staircase, holding on the walls on either side for balance. I knew that I would have to sleep facing the stairway. I was afraid of someone coming up them while I slept. If there was anything I can’t stand, it’s something sneaking up on me.

At the turn in the servant’s stairs, three small steep steps dropped us into the living room. This is where the T.V. will go, Mom told me. When we move here, my dad said we’ll get one of those new VCRs.

These were the things, the objects, they used to entice me into thinking that this place will be okay. Maybe they were convincing themselves, too. The Sugar Grove house would disappear to us, taken over by some other family. The Ramseys. They will
tear out the hedges we trimmed all the time to keep in a straight line. They will hate the pink carpet we cleaned and tear it out first thing. We will be happy on the farm.

“Everything will turn out fine. You’ll see.” This is Mom’s favorite ending to a story. The stories were fixed for me.
Cook

In the summer before I start high school, my job is to cook. Both of my parents work during the day, Mom until five, then a twenty minute drive home from town. Dad does maintenance at the Carnegie Public Library until three in the afternoon. It’s “steady work” and there’s insurance for us now. We never say words like janitor or custodian. Dad talks to me only a little about it, but the farmhouse is his new project. He thinks about it. He is making decisions again.

I know how to fry hamburgers, make meatloaf, and mix up boxes of macaroni and cheese, so that’s what they get for the next six months. Everyday, Dad puts on a t-shirt that has been washed so many times it is thin, like cotton tissue and I can see his skin and his hairy chest underneath the spatters of dirt and paint. My dad’s hands are stained, permanently around the fingernails and cuticles with oil-based beige. That is the new color of the woodwork at the farmhouse. It is supposed to lighten up the dark wood, to accent the new paneling. Everything but the staircase gets painted. It stays dark. When my mother comes home, she eats my meals and then puts on her old pink polyester pants and an old shirt that Karmel used to wear when she was a teenager. Mom drives her car to the farmhouse, parks on the grass beside Dad’s truck, and follows my dad around with a shop-vac, sucking up the crumbs of whatever falls behind him.

“How is it?” I ask her. I’m doing my homework at the table when she comes home. She looks tired.

“How’s it?”

My parents go through bottles of Clorox and concentrated Spic N Span. Once every few weeks, they take me there to see the progress. Inside, the farmhouse looked new, but still smelled old.

Of all the rooms, the kitchen seemed the most different when they were done with it. My grandmother’s tile floor, the part by the deep sink and by the mudroom door, had worn through to the wooden planks underneath. Carpet came in. My mother loves carpet in the kitchen and she keeps the remnants to cut into small rectangles that sit on the shelves. “Now everything matches,” she tells me.
Next, the cabinets came out. They were metal and fat and banged with a dull thud when the doors were pushed closed. They were replaced with warm, maple-colored stock cabinets from Home Depot. Mostly, I hated to see my grandmother’s countertops go last. There was nothing else like them and they were still in perfect shape. Blood red with a faux marble swirl designed into the heartiest Formica. My parents tried to modernize the house, and they did. But the oldness of the place, the isolation of it couldn’t be scrubbed away. It’s in the walls, in the air.

We have some of the antiques that belonged to my grandmother. They are displayed on shelves my dad made. There are four mantles in this house, but no fireplaces anymore. Each one has been walled up, sealed completely. Some things here you just have to seal in – messing with them is more trouble than they are worth.

My mom told me once that Juanita loved to read the local newspaper to see how much the newest dead person’s estate was worth. They used to publish those kinds of things when she was younger.

“I can’t wait for the day when my own estate will be published there,” Juanita told Mom.

“You can’t mean that. You’d be gone anyway. That’s only for obituaries.”

“I do mean it. I think a lot of people will be surprised how much we’ve got here.”
First Night

There is something in my shoe. I realize this pretty quickly after I slip it on. Last night was my first night in the farmhouse that is now my home. It didn’t feel as bad as I thought it would really, but I slept facing the stairway just in case. The pale green carpeting matches better with my rainbow bedspread than I hoped, but on the walls, the beige paneling is distracting. I didn’t notice this so much until my white vanity and dresser were moved in. I thought the wall color would kind of disappear, but instead it seems to clash with everything. I try hard not to miss the feel of paint on drywall. It’s something you don’t think about until it’s gone. There is no drywall in this house. Only dropped ceiling panels that are rectangular and the same off white in every room. The plaster of the hallway is wallpapered with ducks and cattail designs, and the rest of the house is paneling. Every room.

I’m looking at the carpeting as I slip on my left brown loafer. At first, I feel as if there is a quarter in the toe of the shoe, something just kind of blocking a little space. Then, it’s moving, that’s all I can think. It’s touching my toe and it’s moving. I don’t give myself time to think about what it might be before I pull the shoe off and throw it onto the carpet. A brown cockroach bounces out, landing six inches from the heel of my shoe, and begins to crawl toward the corner. I try to tell myself that it’s just a water bug – I’ve only seen a few roaches in my life and maybe I’m wrong about this bug. There’s no time to call anyone, so I do what I have to. Climbing onto my knees beside the roach, I grab my shoe by the toe and pound the bug hard into the carpet until it breaks into three or four pieces. It sounds like I’m cracking open a small peanut. I pull a foot of toilet paper from my bathroom’s new mounted paper holder and I form it into a ball in my hand. I pinch up the pieces of the roach and flush his leftovers down the toilet.

Down the back staircase, I go to find my mom in the kitchen; my orange juice glass already poured and waiting for me on the table. Just like home.
Living There

In the spring after we are “settled” into the house, my dad makes green painted window boxes for each of our windows. My mother spends hours hauling boxes and dirt and three-packs of annuals up and down the staircases until they look just the way she wants them to. A big spike plant in the middle, two marigolds, and then two impatiens on the outside. On the upstairs windows, she shoves a little trailing ivy into the extra spaces so it will fall down the side of the house and look softer than the edges of the house. I know that all summer, we’ll be hauling watering cans into the house.

I’m responsible for my own window boxes, two of them for my windows that face the back pasture, and I have to follow the “spike, marigold, impatien” formula. When my parents are at work today, I’m supposed to fill my box with dirt, plant the flowers, and then haul each of them up the back staircase. Then I’m to open the screen, lean out the window and screw the box into the holders my dad has already built on the outside.

I’m standing on the front porch, scooping potting soil when I first hear them. It sounds like steps. Like walking. The new screen door is open and I hear the television I’ve left on in the living room, but I hear something else, too. It’s warm out, but my skin gets bumpy and I tell myself, stop it. But I can’t because there’s that sound again.

I decide that I can’t stay outside all afternoon. I’ve waited all day to do this and my parents will be home soon. I can’t tell them that I heard sounds. My mother hates it when I say anything about the house like that. Thinking about ghosts is like thinking about being weak. There’s no time for either of those things.

So, I stand at the screen and I say into the house, “I’m coming in now. Okay? I’m coming in.” My voice is louder than I expect it to be. I run up the stairs with my heavy dirt box and spindly flowers. The whole time I’m rationalizing in my head, if there’s ghosts here, they’re family. If there’s ghosts here, they might love me somehow.

It’s not a haunted house or an evil place. But, and this will make Mom mad, I heard things sometimes. And others have, too. It’s just a house that’s old and full of energy and memory. Whatever that energy might be, we know that we’re connected to it.
My parents didn’t warn me that the farmhouse lost power when it stormed, but I learned this on my own. If I sat on the new kitchen countertops and put my feet into the dry sink, I could see the passing cars and a few headlights on Route 62. I could see the hump of the abandoned stone quarry and the large barnlot light that glowed, dusk to dawn, except during storms. If there was any lightning, we lost our electricity every time.

I had my electricity job. I would gather the oil lamp, the candle that dripped colored wax onto a wine bottle that my parents didn’t drink, and the fat, orange candles that sat on bronze plates that looked like leaves. If I heard thunder I’d pull them from their storage places and sit with them at the kitchen table and wait. Usually, I’d light them ahead of time with a long, barbeque starter. My father sat with his huge flashlight he called the lantern beside him, and read the *Record-Herald* to himself.

When the storms came across the fields, we could see the clouds growing for miles. Once, when they were black and tall and rolling, my mom told me about how to open the cellar door. Just in case.

I had a dream after that storm. I saw a tornado coming across the highway and working its way toward our house. It wasn’t one of those amorphous, messy storms. It was a clearly defined funnel and the farmhouse was like a magnet attracting it, like a target waiting. I ran outside in the whipping wind and pried open the cellar doors. Inside, I listened as the house was destroyed and its debris blocked the cellar door. I was trapped there with the furnace, the sump pump and 200-year-old carved, limestone walls. In the dark, they felt moist and green to my fingers.
Auction

In the farmhouse kitchen, my dad put himself at the head of the table. I hadn’t seen this many aunts and cousins since the family reunions we used to host when Grandma was still mobile enough to move around. We’d lived in this house for almost a year by now, a family understanding, that *he who farms it, lives it*. Tonight, things were going to be official and the table full of papers was proof that this was not just a family gathering. There was a pen on the table for each person present. It was my job to keep the iced tea glasses full.

“You all know why we are here,” Dad said, calling the meeting to order in a way that sounded brotherly, but prepared. He was using his banker voice. “We aren’t going to have any of that family stuff that happened before. Mom never talked to her sister or brother after all that. We aren’t going to do that. I’m reading everything out loud to you, so that if you have questions, we can answer them together.”

There were no secrets with him, but he still kept a verbal distance from them while he talked and moved the papers around into piles he’d arranged before they arrived. “I want to make sure everyone is clear on all this. Every time I go to the attorney’s office or to court, you are all invited. I think this is the best way to split this remaining land. No one gets left out. Dad has already signed a deed of his share over to me. Here are the papers for you.”

He passed out long sheets of cream-colored documents, like sacred scrolls, to my aunts and their husbands. Margaret would get the land in Greenfield and a small amount of cash, Barbara would take the property that their parents had owned in New Martinsburg and cash. For Janet Ann, an out-of-state property plus cash. They flipped the sheets with scraping slowness and I climbed the servant’s staircase to my room to listen to my sister’s old BeeGees records. In exchange for this money and this other land, the sisters would deed their interest in the Knedler farm to my father.

Dad outlined the deal. The word that no one expected was *auction*. All but nine acres and the house would be sold. Dad would take the money, pay out his sisters’ interests, and he would take the house and the left over acreage. The surrounding land that had been Juanita and Ircel’s, and Uncle Charlie’s, and George Knedler’s, would be
gone. The farm my father had tilled and planted and plowed would be reduced to one field, one barn, and the farmhouse.

Within a month, strangers would own the land around us. My father would stop farming permanently. He called it “semi-retired” even though he worked every weekday at the public library. The equipment was driven out of the sheds and laid on the lawn or in the field. People in Carhardt’s coats and cowboy boots milled around and old farmers talked. For some, it was a reunion of sorts. They rarely saw each other except at these auctions when their fellow farmers folded. My mother put me on the high school bus that morning and when I came home at 4 p.m. that day, it was all gone. The borders around us tightened. For the first time in 150 years, the land was not Knedler. It was broken into chunks. We looked over someone else’s land to see Rattlesnake Creek now.

My mother wishes she had kept me home from school that day so that I could have seen the auction. I didn’t get to hear the auctioneer’s fast, impossible voice as he split apart the farm. And I didn’t get to see my dad’s face or know if he felt sorrow or maybe just relief.

But before all this would happen, my family members had to read the agreement and sip at their tall glasses.

“There’s something not fair about all this.” Aunt Barbara’s husband grumbled to the group, breaking the silent reading. Everyone looked up.

Janet Ann, the youngest was already signing since she had skipped four pages. Margaret was not there. She had died two years earlier. But her sons were there to sign over their inherited interest, to collect the money my dad now owed them. Margaret’s quiet, ever-smiling husband Kenny, took the dissenting uncle outside where they talked on the front porch my mother had covered in bright artificial grass. When they came back in, everyone signed on the line that my Dad designated for them with the black pens embossed with the words Farm Bureau on the side. I came down from my room to have my mother reach up four inches taller than she was to push my hair out of my eyes. I was tall at fifteen, like my dad.
Throwing Up

At the farmhouse, my dad is throwing up. It could have been the flu or an asthma attack that brings this on. Mom is scurrying. That’s the only word I can think of to describe it. Her feet swish against the carpet between the bathroom and the washing machine in the kitchen. She carries bundles of towels and clothes and stuffs them into the washer and the water pours in on top of them. Her voice is drowned out by the sound of the motor and the water together, sucking my father’s throw-up clothes under the surface.

She shouts a little over the gushing. “Go help your father.”

Around the corner, at the far end of the living room, I hear him in the narrow bathroom. I approach slowly but keep a distance from the door, which is open. His vomiting is violent, like he’s yelling into the toilet. He sounds hurt by it. Normally the sound of someone puking would send me to do the same. My stomach rolls at less than that. But my father’s sound is so unnatural that I don’t relate it to anything I would do. It doesn’t inspire me to sickness.

He is leaning, one hand against the wall. The other is on the edge of the sink. Behind me, the washer is chugging into spin cycle. My mother is quiet in the kitchen. Her movement masked by the other sounds. I know what she wants—for me to do what she did when I was sick. Rub my back in small, perfect circles. Put a cool cloth on my forehead. Whisper, “It’s okay. You’re going to be okay.”

Dad turns his head only. He still leans. He is a big man in the small room, but I can only see his outline in the dark bathroom. No one has bothered to turn on the light yet. A small, green nightlight glows from the outlet behind the sink. Dad knows what I’ve been sent for and we are both considering it. He shakes his head at me and I walk away. He’s released me. I climb the back staircase and sit on the floor beside the stereo cabinet he’s made for me and listen to QFM 96 on the radio. It’s almost loud enough to block the downstairs noise, but every few minutes I hear small and familiar echoes of my father coughing.
On Being Country

The house on Sugar Grove didn’t feel like it was in the country even though it was. We had neighbors on either side. We could clearly see them as they mowed their grass or spanked their kids. I suppose a realtor could have listed our house and barn as a gentleman’s farm. That means you could own just enough acreage and pasture to be quaint without relying completely on the all-consuming life of the land. We had painted our barn to match the house, white with red shutters. Even the fence row, white planks with red posts. Every other year, we painted it. White on the even years, red on the odd. The whole time we roller-painted planks, the dog would run through them and stripe her black hair with white. The calves would chew on my shirt and when I shooed them away, they’d run across the pasture kicking up their legs in triumph, happy about something.

The kids who lived within the city limits went to Washington. They thought of themselves as city slickers. They ignored the grain elevator and farm equipment stores and considered themselves urban dwellers. The rest of us, outside the city limits, went to Trace and we were the shitkickers. It struck me as strange that slickers wasn’t an insult at all, but shitkickers was. I think we meant it to sound tough, but it didn’t. The city wasn’t even slick at all and barely qualified as a city in the first place. The houses were just a little closer together and most of the parents worked at the pork processing plant or the trailer manufacturer. We were all just small town kids, but somehow we squeaked out alternate identities.

When we moved to the farmhouse, I felt like a farmer. The Gentleman part of the equation disappeared. If we weren’t gentle any more, what were we? Peasants? I was no longer playing at this land thing, but we were surviving on it. It was only five more miles down Route 62, then right on Greenfield-Sabina and a half-mile to my grandparents empty farmhouse. The shared stake my father here had was our income and the softness of gentility had worn away to a hard finish.

We couldn’t afford our life anymore. My father had expected to own most of the family land one day, but that didn’t happen. His mother’s will had assured that. It was
an issue of heritage and pride to him. But what kept us going was my father’s *other* job. It didn’t drag my father completely down when his mother took the land away because he still had something else.

When he had the land bank job, he was a man. There was no question of his position in our family. My mother had always been in charge at home. She made the decisions on whether we could go to sleepovers or ride our bikes. Once I asked my friend, Mindy, to stay all night with me and her mother said she’d have to wait until her father got home to ask him. “What for?” I asked my mom. She shrugged. Mom put ten dollars of gas in the car every week on our way to Krogers where she bought everything, except meat since we had a freezer full of beef we’d slaughtered ourselves. She babysat our neighbor, Brad, while his mother worked her shift at MacTools. She wrote out the checks at the old, gray basement desk and balanced the numbers every month. She stopped directing the children’s choir at church, but she still sat three times a week in the living room, next to the piano, and read from a blue, hardback book, *The Good News*.

Dad hovered around her. When the job was gone, he seemed lost. To him it was the job, always the job. Land Bank gave him a severance package, but he lost his retirement and his insurance. Sometimes he called the money “nothing” or “pitiful.” Other times he called it, “bullshit.” And my mother would stir her batter faster and wish me out of the room. The farm was only a small piece to him. He owned nothing whole. The land bank had taken away more. And how they’d wronged him and how there was nowhere to go. He was in charge of nothing. To me, it was how he seemed to fade slightly. I tried to comfort like my mother. Out of the blue, I’d say, “It will be okay, Dad.” Sometimes he would nod, an unconvincing acceptance of my help. Other times, he would teach me, “The world is full of jerks. You have to watch your back. Always watch your back. You never know who’s out there just waiting for you.” I thought that he was talking about strangers, faceless mean people, but now I wonder if he was picturing his own mother.


Library

Susan used to play the piano for our children’s choir at church. She was a small woman with short, sandy hair and exceptionally large glasses. Other than that, I remember very little about her. Mostly, she was just a head and a pair of shoulders moving behind a black grand piano while I sang. When I am fourteen, I learn that she has another job, the director The Carnegie Library in our town, and my dad’s boss. For several years, my dad is the only man working at the library. Just before he retires, a young, out-of-towner is hired to take Susan’s place. My dad leaves our house, Monday through Saturday, before six in the morning. He sweeps the thin carpets between the book shelves and sprays down the tables with a sharp smelling foam that wipes away in streaks that crinkle as the bubbles pop. He moves on to the shelves and the check-out counter. Before the women get there, he’s on his knees, using razor blades to scrape mostly dried gum off the tiles and the stone steps. In the evening, at our dinner table, he will tell us about what someone did in the men’s room. Our town is full of sick and dirty people.

I know my dad talks about me to the librarians. When I come in to find him, they know that I am running stairs four days a week for conditioning and that I need an algebra tutor. A few of the women show me pictures of their children or grandchildren who go to the city school. I’ve seen them around town, but I don’t know their names.

“Come see the reading box I made for the preschoolers.” He leads me down the stairs to a room I remember being much bigger at one time. The shelves have shrunk, the walls seem tighter. My dad has build a cubby hole for little ones to climb into while they read their board books or hide from their parents. My mom used to bring me here, and sometimes our neighbor came too, for Story Hour on Wednesday mornings. A blonde librarian read to us, and one time there was a puppet show in the room with blue carpet. It might have been The Three Little Pigs. The woman with black hair runs the children’s department. She smiles at me, and “How are you, Kim?” I tell her I’m fine, but I don’t tell her that I remember her from when I was little. She sat at the same desk in the same spot even then. She would glare at any children who came into her realm, especially me. I had the look of a page-tearer about me. She had looked at my card and then popped
open the front covers of my books, sticking little blue cards into her machine and then into the pockets. “Don’t forget.” Stamp. “To check your due dates.” Stamp. “And take care of these books. They are for everyone to enjoy, you know.” Stamp.

Dad leads me back the hallway for library staff only. I feel like I’m behind the scenes, secret library things happen here. Susan is standing in her office door, talking to another woman with a small, cluttered desk. I wave a little when I see her. She nods, but she is not friendly. She watches my dad like he is stealing books – like the preschool librarian used to look at me.

I used to think that she looked almost pretty when she was behind the piano, playing our notes for “Domineeky, neeky, neeky over land he plots along and sings a little song. Never asking for reward he just talks about the Lord, he just talks about the Lord.”

Now, she closes her door and the bronze name plate is all we see of her. When she was playing the piano for me, and I was ten years old, my dad was a deacon of the church.

By the time I can drive, Kindra is ready to hand down her hatchback Plymouth. She’s working now and at 26, finally married. She has a new Honda. I’ve lost my job as a cashier at the local auto parts store, so after school I have nothing to do. I park behind the library, in the extra lot, to surprise my dad.

He is not at the front desk. Someone checks the bathrooms and then the office.

“Oh, I know where he is.”

I smile.

“He’s in his room.”

She walks to the hallway between the children’s department and an open conference room. An old gray door hangs along the wall, attached by rollers along the top. She knocks on it.

“Ircel, are you in there?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m here.”

“You have a visitor.”
She pulls the door open to the side. It sounds like a drawbridge lowering, just
pulleys and squeaks. He is there, working under someone’s discarded lamp, which he’s
rigged up on a hinge above his head. Dark shelves, cleaning supplies, hooks with rags,
three kinds of brooms, a shovel, a bag of sidewalk salt – half full, and my dad.

“Hi there.”

“Hi.” He stands and moves toward me. I don’t come into his room. “We
couldn’t find you.”

“I was here.” He pushes the roller door closed behind us.

“I didn’t even know this room was here.”

“Do you want to go upstairs to the desk?”

“I guess so. I don’t really want anything. I just wanted to see you.”

“Well, you found me.”

That might have been the first time since we moved to the farmhouse, that I saw
my dad, really saw him. It wasn’t sudden or profound. I just found him. I wasn’t twelve
years old anymore and my parents would be sending me to college in a year, away from
this town and our farm. I pushed the feeling away most of the time, but I felt guilty about
it. I’d chosen a private school and a higher tuition for them to pay. I would only be back
to visit after this fall. They were working for me now, to get me through the next few
years and hold everything together just a little longer. We were stable and we had a home
on what was left of the land of our family. Dad coughed less now. There were still bad
days when the wind was too cold and he started again, but I had to acknowledge that
things were better.
We lean onto the Probate Court Office countertop. It’s so tall that it hits me nearly in the chest. I am small and powerless for a moment, feeling so much like a little girl with my father beside me as I rest my elbows against the dented, wooden surface. For my dad, the counter is just above his waist.

He’s sixty-eight years old now. He doesn’t think about how hard Juanita made it on him. I guess that’s what you do when your mother breaks your heart. He’s a grudge-holder and tempermental, just like she was. But he doesn’t hold this against her. Juanita was his mother.

The woman typing into a computer doesn’t get up when we come in. She leans back in her adjustable office chair while we tell her what we want.

“1944? We don’t have anything like that here. You’ll have to search the county archival records.”

I drive us the four blocks between the court house and the brick storage building. Whenever my dad sits in the passenger seat, I forget that I’ve had my driver’s license for fifteen years. And he looks a little tense, too. He wouldn’t ride with me when I was a student-driver of sixteen. Mom says his nerves couldn’t take it.

I used to know this street; it’s just one block down from the library, but I can’t remember its name anymore. Inside, institutional green walls and two flights of stairs that greet us. My dad had a hip replacement last year, but he only hesitates a second before starting his climb to the archive room.

He charms the old woman who wears an oversized sweater and perfectly ironed white apron as she works archive desk alone. He tilts his hat back just a little, smiles and speaks softly. He leans against one elbow on the table. His boot tilts to the side, like this is a saloon and he’s just a cowboy. She moves a little faster to pile the heavy, bound volumes of court records on the countertop in front of us. He’s still tall and tanned like he was when he worked the fields every day. I’ve always thought of him as John Wayne, or maybe John Wayne’s brother.

The Fayette County Archive Building echoes against its own high ceiling as books are moved and searched and I watch my dad’s profile. This used to be the armory.
for our town. Now the only thing dangerous here is the keeper of the books who stands ramrod straight even at her age and guards the copy machine that costs a dollar per page.

Whole bound volumes in here list Junior’s relatives, their lands, their births and deaths, and one time he left here. He thought he would never come back. I wonder if he thinks of it now. It was years before my birth, but I feel like I remember it.

His plane left Cincinnati in the dark, the last flight of the night. When he landed at Miami International, the terminal was a cavern of stillness. No passengers waited in the rows of empty chairs that faced the black windows. At three o’clock in the morning he took a cab to the deserted bus station. He says he waited under the brightest light they had, sitting in the protective circle of it, until daybreak and the arrival of the bus that would take him to Clewiston.

My father wore casual clothes to the job interview with U.S. Sugar, a buttoned up shirt and a pair of his better pants. But that’s not really how I like to think of him. I picture him in a light linen suit with a matching vest underneath, a fat silk tie and one of those flat hats with a small bill.

I’ve seen pictures of him when he was in his twenties. In black and white photos, he looks like he stepped right out of “The Quiet Man.” He grins in every picture, not a full smile though. He struggles to avoid showing his teeth. His face is smooth and he wears his wavy hair in the late 1950’s style, pushed up piles of barely controlled dark swirls. In every picture there is something beside him. A pitchfork, an award-winning 4-H steer, or my mother.

He looks lean with wiry strength earned by growing from childhood to manhood in the brown, Ohio dirt. Juanita wanted to named him Benjamin, after her father, but her husband wanted a son to have his name. For days, their baby went nameless. Finally, Juanita gave in. Ircel Jr. was named after his neglectful and moody father, but no one ever called him by that name. In the few childhood pictures and school portraits he has left, face is smooth and round and carefree. But that’s not anything like what his life was really like.

At the time of his move away Fayette County, he would have been right on the edge of thirty.
It still takes a long time to gather all the papers in front of us. Each one is enveloped and handwritten with the court case number. We begin to pull each one out of its pocket. “Don’t mix those up,” Archive Lady warns us. My dad smiles and knows somehow that her name is Sandy and that she goes to the Methodist Church on Route 41. Sometimes she does private genealogy searches for people who think they might have family around here. She charges them by the hour. On her desk, a bulging, yellow envelope is ready to be mailed to Denver, Colorado. The searchers are everywhere.

We can’t seem to pull the papers out fast enough. Archive Lady only give us a few at a time, so that we don’t get carried away and put them out of order. I want to bang on the doors and the windows of this musty, hollow place, so that I can have the answers. These are just old, folded sheets, but I’m convinced that the answers are here. Which Juanita is mine? Is she the one who deceived her own son, or is she Grandma? I want Juanita’s will and her papers. I want to see her handwriting and read into it.

An hour and a half later, with seven dollars of copies in hand, I found more than I expected of Juanita. I found her father.

On the way back to the farmhouse, my dad tells me to stop and he pays for my gas. I’m more jumpy than usual because we found papers that he didn’t know existed. There’s a story here that he doesn’t know. His mother didn’t tell him about her own father’s will and the codicil that changes it.

If deceiving your child about your will is genetic, I found out that my family is a second-generation carrier.
Ben’s Will

Ernest and her mother were already seated when Juanita opened the attorney’s office door. The room smelt of must and polishing oil. Mr. Brubaker handed her a large, unsealed envelope and she knew this was her copy of her father’s will.

“This seat is for you, Mrs. Knedler,” he said, pulling an unpadded, stiff-backed chair toward the left corner of his desk. She heard her husband dragging another chair across the room. Its legs made a low screech on the hardwood floor. Then he sat slightly behind her, just beyond her peripheral vision. She noticed how close Ernest and her mother sat to each other and how far she seemed to be from them.

She felt no hurry to open the envelope. This was the will she’d seen ten years before, so she simply laid it on top of the purse on her lap. Her presence here was just a formality, a closing of her father’s last chapter. The lawyer sat in his chair and gathered several stacks of paper in front of him. He picked up each pile and tapped it on the table, perfecting the collection. Other than his movements, the room was quiet. A moment later, when they were instructed to, Bessie, Ernest, and Juanita slid the two pages out, unfolded them, and silently read Benjamin’s unnaturally formal words.

“Why are there two pages? What is this here?” Juanita said.

The lawyer answered for the group. “That is the codicil. It’s an amendment to the original will.” Juanita read and reread the words. I hereby revoke and annul Item Three of said will and in lieu thereof, I hereby substitute the following... Item Three. She flipped the paper to the first page. Item Three left the remaining farm land to both Juanita and Ernest. In equal proportions, they shall take the same absolutely.

Her mother started to speak first. “Juanita, your father wanted Ernest to...”

“What is this? Dad didn’t want this.” Her words felt hollow and misty coming from her mouth. Her eyes jerked from the paper and its cold, typewritten print to Ernest, but he was looking at the lawyer’s desk, the neat masses of paper, the mahogany pencil box.

Mr. Brubaker was reading aloud suddenly from the second page. He thought she didn’t understand. But she did. Ernest was now the sole owner of the farm and the land. All these years, Benjamin kept the same will. No changes had been made. Seven months
before his death, he’d come here to this very office. He’d sat in one of these chair and he’d erased his own daughter. He’d signed it with his own hand and dated it, October, 1944. Why had he done this?

Juanita found her name. It was mentioned in the final sections of the codicil. The devise is subject to my said son paying to my daughter, Juanita Knedler the sum of Five Hundred Dollars ($500.00). Said payment shall not become due until the death of my wife.

Her father had taken the land from her. This was the land she loved because she was born on it, the land she wanted to join with the farm she owned with her husband. They would stretch the two farms to reach each other, acre after acre touching one another.

“This is not what my father wanted.” She faced the lawyer. She didn’t trust herself to look at her mother or her brother.

“Juanita, as your mother, I...”

“No.”

She stood and out of habit smoothed the front of her dress. She reached up to feel the position of her small hat. The eyes of the room watched her refold the papers and press them firmly into the front pocket of her purse. Her cold fingers clutched the leather straps and the purse fell to her side, resting against her leg. As she walked out, she heard her husband just a few steps behind her. She knew that by the time she reached the car, the tears would come. That didn’t matter--as long as they were far enough away that they couldn’t see her.

The heavy black telephone in the hallway had a short cord and Juanita was forced to sit close to the desk. Around her the house was silent, but she sensed its movement. This was her home. She had lived here with her husband and her children for nearly twenty years, but she could look out her front window and see the land that she deserved. Part of that land across the creek should have been hers. It was hers.

When Laura answered the rings, Juanita was balancing the receiver between her chin and her shoulder while she smoothed out the will and codicil on the desk’s glass
surface. Her sweating hands had already wilted the edges and the folds were threatening to tear.

Laura had been her best friend for so many years now, fifteen maybe. Her hands delivered Junior in the front bedroom of this very house. Juanita thought Laura might have been the first woman that she ever really cared for. They were cousins by marriage, but Juanita liked to think that they might have been sisters in a better life.

“I’m so sorry, Juanita,” Laura said over and over while Juanita repeated the story. They were both habitually listening for extra clicks, in case someone picked up their two-party line.

“But you’re not surprised.”

“No, I am. Truly. I don’t know what he was thinking by this.” They were both quiet a moment, thinking.

“I’m getting a lawyer of my own,” Juanita said.

“Why?”

“It’s the only way.”

“To what?”

“To get what I deserve. Daddy wanted me to have that land. The will stood unchanged for ten years. What has changed in the last few months? Nothing. I don’t know what Ernest and Mother have done, but I’ll find out.”

“You want to sue your mother and brother?”

“I want that second page, that codicil, broken.”

Laura said, “I don’t think anyone has ever broken a will in this county.”

Juanita mulled this over in silence. It was probably true, but she’d have to let a lawyer worry about that. Her father loved her. He wanted her to have this. His will, there was no reason for this. A judge would see that.

“I’ll have witnesses,” Juanita said.

“Who?”

“You. And Olive.” The line was so quiet that Juanita began to wonder if Laura had hung up the phone. There was only the tiniest crackle on the other end.

“No, I can’t.”
“Yes, you can. You can tell them about my father and me. You can tell them about how he really wanted things to be.”

“No, this is family. I can’t help you sue family.” Laura paused to let that settle. Quieter now, she said, “Why can’t you just be happy with the land you have now? With your children and Ircel?”

There was silence then. It continued for another minute, while they both realized their positions. They made their decisions. Like the fences around the land, the two women stood in their respective places and roped off what was theirs.

Juanita rested the receiver in its cradle and stared at the small cracks that formed where the plaster walls met the ceiling. She would not think about this right now. She wouldn’t consider how Laura could turn against her, how she would have done anything for Laura if she’d asked. There would be time for that later. Today she had to take care of herself.

She picked up the receiver again. Her half-sister Olive lived in town. She and her husband owned a cottage-like home near Eastside Elementary School. Juanita had been inside once. She knew how Olive felt about her, but she called anyway.

“I’m not even mentioned in the will,” Olive told her.

“I know.”

“For sixteen years, he was the only father I had.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Juanita, I’m not part of this anymore.” Olive sounded relieved as she hung up the phone.

The children, who’d been sent to do their outside chores, returned to feel the heaviness in the house. No one told them what had happened that day. All they knew was that their mother drove herself to town the next day for an appointment and Laura didn’t come by for coffee anymore.

My parents still keep the phone in that same hallway. Their new phone plugs into the same jack Juanita used to connect to Laura. The new desk has a set of cubbyholes installed above it to hold their checkbooks and envelopes. Just two years ago, they
finally traded in their rotary phone for a push-button version. My mother has covered a jar and a small box with the same wallpaper that she used for the walls. The jar is full of pens and the box has square sheets that she has torn for notepaper. Everything matches, all is in order.

When I was sixteen, I sat at the desk to call my friends. I put my feet on the top and leaned back in the chair. From that angle, I could see the upper landing at the top of the stairs. It is a carpeted area only six or seven feet wide. A no man’s land of space floating over me. I could never stop myself from looking up. Sometimes I would try to look only at the papers on the desk. I’d pick up a black pen and start drawing concentric circles, like a target, on the paper. If I felt tempted to look, I’d turn my body toward the kitchen, directly away from the stairs.

I’m always sure, even now when I’ve been away for more than fifteen years, that someone is standing there. Just before I look up, I can feel it. It’s a strange hovering pressure and it draws my eyes up involuntarily. In reality, the spot is empty. There’s only a curving row of dark cherry spindles that wrap along the drop off, and nothing else. I’m not scared really, just uncomfortable. My cousin, Peg, has a recurring dream that she is standing on the staircase, just where the first landing turns. There are only three more steps to the upper landing, but something is blocking her way. She pushes against it, but it holds her there and she never reaches the top.

When my sons come to visit my mom and dad in this house, they are not afraid. The darkness of the rooms, the tall, thin windows don’t bother them. They are little and this house is full of adventures so different from our suburban home. They run from room to room and up the staircases. Their small steps muffled against the carpet of a floor that my parents fixed so that it rarely creaks anymore. This house is full of love for them. They feel safe here. That’s what they will remember about this place.

Juanita was my grandmother in this house. She said she loved me, too; I have proof. I have it in her letter. My dad used to tell me, “Actions speak louder than words.” Since I don’t remember her voice, I have to think about her letter. But her actions were against her own son and trickled down to my sisters and me. I am confronted with her written letter of love and her written will of lies.
I sometimes imagine her at the top of the staircase. She is not old and heavy with her burdensome body. She’s younger and she leans slightly over the edge of the railing and wishes me to be comfortable here. She wants me to claim this place, this land, as my own and save what is left. She wants me to bring back the land that reaches to Rattlesnake and rebuild what feels so weak. Other times, I think she just wants me to go away. Both of these options feel all right to me.
Codicil

I end up alone in the farmhouse with my two-year-old son. My parents have gone to get their flu shots today. Since I’m visiting, they ask me to come along. My sister is a nurse at the health department and I can picture her laughing just a little as she pokes me with a needle, so I say no.

A stack of papers from the archives hangs out the edges of the manila folder I brought for them. Bradley plays in the closet where my mom has collected my old toys that were worth saving. I lay Juanita’s will, Benjamin’s will, and the court papers out on my mother’s table.

I read Ben’s words again. I study his signature and wait for some knowledge to come to me, like a medium I concentrate and want this to reveal a truth to me. But there is nothing here except old typewritten words on copied paper, an ordinary signature at the bottom of a page. In the original part of the Ben’s will, dated 1937, he leaves “in equal proportions” all of the real estate he owns in Fayette County to Ernest, his son, and Juanita, his daughter. The last lines is, “They take the same absolutely.”

This is where my family thought the story ended. This is where I thought my grandmother became a dark character, the beginning of my mistrust. I thought Juanita took her mother and brother to court because she wanted more than her half. I thought she was greedy. No one knew that a second page had been added, a codicil.

She had isolated herself even more after the will was read. Aunt Laura, who wasn’t an aunt at all, but Juanita’s best friend, who had delivered my dad in the front bedroom of this house, didn’t come around anymore. Aunt Olive, who wasn’t even mentioned in the will at all, communicated with Juanita in letters even though she only lived eight miles away. The story was that Juanita turned against them when they wouldn’t testify against Ernest and Bessie. I branded her selfish and callous. No one knew.

I look at Juanita’s signature and the names of the jurors. This is the case she filed against her brother. It seems so sterile. The summons for her mother to court cost four dollars and I have a copy of that, too. The Highland County Sheriff delivered it to Bessie’s house and put it in her hand at Juanita’s request. I had always pictured my
grandma as the bad one. Over the years, she become more and more the one who hurts others, the one who lies. These archives held some answers for me. Juanita’s father had amended his will just seven months before his death, cutting Juanita out.

If she was the one who deceived her child, it was a talent she passed down from her own father.

My little boy silently climbs the stairs while I’m reading the judgment against Juanita. By the time I hear him shuffling around in the upstairs bedrooms, I jump the steps, two at a time. The front staircase with its ornate pillars and a very steep incline is one of two dangerous stairways in the house.

I pick up my son and balance him on my hip as I step down and hold the railing with my free hand. At the turn in the landing, I notice that the hanging light, a stained glass flowered lamp, is on. I know I rushed up those steps in near darkness just two minutes before.

I put Bradley’s windbreaker on and play with him outside in gazebo my dad built. It sits in the middle of a sunken part of the yard where Juanita and Ircel used to have a large vegetable garden. I feel jittery and alone, but I keep an eye on the house, just in case I am missing something. I watch the windows, half expecting and half afraid that I am being watched back.

I can stand on my parent’s front porch, and if the corn isn’t too tall, I can see where Juanita’s childhood home once stood. The land around me rolls gentle, but it’s unnaturally flat in that place now. Agrico bought the land for storage and the area is full of white bins huddled together, large silver locks and numbered codes on the sides. The chemical company keeps this land graveled and clean. They don’t use the names of what’s inside each tank, but everyone knows. Tons of concentrated fertilizers and pesticides sit silently on the banks of Rattlesnake. The farmer’s order it; the sprayers spread it. If kids are near the fields, they stand in the mist of it, inhaling its tangy spice. There are none of the trees Benjamin Melson used to build his log home or cut for firewood. Only tiny gray rocks and one white trailer used as an office and the unmarked tanks.
I can only imagine what her cabin looked like. It’s gone now, all of it. No one remembers if it was torn down quickly or if it was one of those abandoned shells that bends at the waist, white paint peeling into gray decay, then soundlessly caves in on itself.

Between her birth in that house on Rattlesnake and her young mothering years, Juanita must have done things, but they remain a mystery. She didn’t talk about her family, her sister or brother or the home they made together on the creek. She didn’t tell them how the water sounded to her young ears or how she took off her shoes and stockings on the first warm day of spring and put her round, white feet into the icy stream. When she spoke, she was a manager. Her orders to her son were issued in a firm, low voice. “Be kind to your sisters. Girls need protection, Junior.” Other than that, Juanita didn’t let anyone in.

The same aunt who traced the Knedler family back to Germany, tried to do the same for Juanita. But on Juanita’s side, the genealogy abruptly ends outside of Fayette County. Several other women in my family have tried, but Juanita’s family seems untraceable and frustrating, so they gave up.
“There are no pat answers. You want pat answers – you’re not going to find them.”

Ircel M. Knedler, Jr.

The Money

Until that day in the Archives with me, my dad didn’t know that Juanita lost her court case against Ernest and Bessie. “She had money. I remember there was money and I thought it was from that suit.” We found the jurors’ names, eight women and four men, all signed on the bottom of the decision and Juanita’s under them all, agreeing never to appeal this case. She came home that day from court and they all thought she’d won. She didn’t have the land, but her children were certain she had something. In reality, she’d been ordered to pay four dollars and twenty cents in court costs and left with the same as her father had wished. Nothing.

“Daddy’s in the car, Mama.”

“I know. Just let him sit.”

Janet Ann picked up her doll and was careful to place its china head in the crook of her arm. Juanita watched her youngest daughter leave the kitchen cradling her favorite toy and bending her head to whisper in its ear.

She leaned forward, her waist against the wide lip of the sink, to look through the double pane of the window.

Sure enough, he was still there. Well, he could just sit there all day for all she cared. “Stubborn bastard,” she whispered. Ircel was looking at her through the windshield of his car. She hoped he could read her lips.

This car sitting, this afternoon pouting, was in protest of the new rug. Juanita turned away from the window and took two steps to the stove. The beef and vegetables were still cold and white fat congealed on the surface. As she watched the edges of the pot, the broth began to move, an undercurrent barely swirling as Juanita’s supper heated.
slightly and the lard began to liquefy. It was melting into the stew and disappearing.
Her ankles hurt again today. And her knees, too, really. Thank goodness for the new rug. It softened the linoleum and wood floor just enough to make this cooking time tolerable.

Ircel hated this rug from the second he saw it.

“Don’t step in here with those muddy boots,” she’d said to him. “You’ll ruin my new rug.” They both knew it wasn’t really mud caked around the edges of his boots. It was manure.

“What’s this?” he said.

“I said, it’s my new rug.”

“How?”

“I had it delivered this afternoon. Kirk’s brought it.”

“How?” he repeated.

“With the money from Ernest. The money he owed me from Dad’s estate.” When Ircel only looked at her, she said, “Not all of it.”

“I thought we were saving that for the farm.”

“Well, we’re not. Besides, this house is part of the farm.”

He dropped his boots by the back step and stomped, as best as he could, in his stocking feet up the curving staircase. Juanita continued to stir the pot, pushing the ladle’s warped handle in wide ovals, the spoon scraping around the edges. The beef simmered now and a few bloated, brown bubbles inflated and popped in the center.

When Ircel appeared again, he had changed into fresh overalls and a clean, white T-shirt. He let the screen door slam behind him. She heard him beating his boots against the edge of the steps and pictured manure splattering across them and onto the white, painted wood of their house. She would wait until it dried and then sweep it away as she’d done a hundred times before. A minute later, the car started.

Juanita watched him pull slowly off the gravel driveway and onto the grass. He eased the Buick forward and angled it until it faced the kitchen window. And there he sat. She took turns stirring the stew and staring out the window at him. The other children came into the kitchen for drinks of iced tea from the icebox and cold water from spigot. They peeked out the window at their father in the car.
Juanita took off her house shoes. She stretched her naked toes, curling them around the braided edge of the rug. Her money bought this. It was hers. Let him rest his feet in the car. His money bought that.

The mysterious money for the rug, and what was left over, equaled maybe five hundred dollars. For a while, she kept it in a separate savings account just so she could look at it. After a few months, she moved it in the farm’s checking account and it muted into the figures of the farm and it disappeared into the daily expenses of the Knedlers.

How she came into this money is still unknown. Since we discovered she lost her case, my father believes that Ernest settled with Juanita out of court. A peace offering or guilt money, possibly. My parents bicker about it now that they know she lost in court.

“There probably never was any money,” my mother says.

“I know there was. I saw her buy things with it,” Dad says.

“She probably lied about that.”

My father raises his voice, insisting that she believe. “I know there was.” He is almost yelling.

The farm and the land, its personal goods and chattels, would have been worth thousands of dollars. Out of that, my Dad believes her brother gave her something, a token. She fought him and lost on the legal front, but my dad speculates that his uncle offered her a settlement later. In secret, she tucked it away and her four children saw her as a winner.
Ben

There are no pictures of Benjamin Melson left in the farmhouse. I sit on the carpet, legs crossed, as I search through the oldest photo albums in the antique corner hutch. The pages are soft black, faded to gray in spots, and brittle. Above me, on the hutch’s open, top shelf, my parents display three pictures in frames attached at the sides by gold piano hinges.

The church photographer took the picture of Karmel for the yearly directory. She might be thirty in this shot. Her face is bright, but pale against the unnatural blue of the generic backdrop. Kindra’s picture is a glamour shot where they put her in heavy make up and surround her with gold and red satin. She never looks like this. My picture is a high school senior portrait. My hair is very curly after another Toni home permanent and I’m wearing a red velvet dress. It would seem at first that we are the only pictures in this room. Hidden and mostly forgotten, the old albums are stacked underneath us, behind 150-year-old cabinet doors. And every page of those books is filled with squares pasted or taped to the paper. In the backs of each album are loose pictures that have no home. There is no room left for them, but someone couldn’t bear to get rid of them or buy another book for them.

The black and whites with slightly scalloped edges, the oldest ones, have candid shots of unknown relatives in different places outside our house. Mostly the people are squinting into the sun or looking away, out into the fields. The children’s clothes are a little wrinkled, but mended and mostly clean. Their parents look tanned and tired and just a little in shock to find themselves here. A few portraits have survived in the albums. The men have greased-back hair and blank faces. Behind each one, a woman always stands in a forbidding black dress and a severe, pulled hairstyle. Someone has written the names in blue ink across the sides or the backs of the pictures. The ink is strange on the silver pictures, like graffiti. The names are there so that we will remember who these people are, but it still looks like vandalism. None of the words say Benjamin or Bessie. I wonder if Juanita took Ben’s pictures away after he died, after the will was read, or if there never were any pictures of him at all.
The best picture I find is one of my dad. *Junior age 3*, it says. He looks like the prettiest little girl. His curly, sand-colored hair, a little frizzy on a humid summer day, rests just above his shoulders. He’s wearing bib overalls, but one strap is broken and hangs behind him. If he ran fast across the barnlot, the metal hook would have smacked him in the back of his legs and made a quiet, metallic jingle. One side of his bare, toddler chest is exposed. He is thin, but still padded and without edges, like a baby. Junior’s fist is closed, hiding a treasure from the camera. His bare feet, dirty.

Since he is standing at the corner of the house, where the ivy grows now, the photographer would have been on the front walk, or maybe the first step of the porch. Junior has been preserved in the time before they cut his hair, before they worked him in the fields, before he knew the unique chores that each season brings. He looks loved. I don’t know who took this picture, but it was probably Juanita.

“Who do you think that is?” Dad says.

“Aunt Janet,” I tell him even though I already know.

“No, that’s me,” he says. “When I was four, someone told my parents that they had a beautiful daughter. I got mad and made them cut my hair.” The dad I know has been bald since he was thirty. Only a ring of jet black edging encircles his head.

When my father remembers Benjamin, he looks at his hands. He’s comparing them, two generations of a farmer’s tools. He knows that Ben was tall for our family, over six feet, with quietly hollow cheekbones and the capable and scarred fingers of a lifelong worker. Margaret and Junior were the only grandchildren who inherited their height from him. The other children were like Juanita and her mother, short and round. Ben and Bessie together were Jack Sprat and his wife.

Everyone who remembers Ben, except my dad (who was only ten when Ben died), is dead. But one thing seems clear from Dad’s stories. Ben Melson was not meant to cut trees.

*When Ben closed the cabin’s only door behind him, he put a few extra cords of wood by the step for Bessie to heat up the cookstove. Three of his neighbors were*
already waiting in Carson's flatbed wagon. With three more hired workers and one man's teenage son, they would have plenty of hands for chopping today.

The air was cool under the trees in the morning. They wanted to take advantage of the reprieve from the heat and get this work done early. Without words, they walked through the thick woods. Some men running their hands along the dark trunks of the trees, others looking up into the branches. Each one gauging the effort he'd use and the volume of wood he'd get from that particular tree.

Ben was taller and broader than the other men. He chose a tree to match him. This one was an old beauty, healthy and thick. He chopped at the trunk for what seemed like hours. His shoulders felt loose and quivery from the repeated impact of the axe. When he couldn't go one, he rested the blade on top of his foot and stood back.

“Need a hand?” Carson asked from behind him.

“Sure. If your up to it.” Ben laughed lightly and moved away.

Around him, the sound of axes was loud like rifle fire and the men’s grunts echoed off the standing trees. Patches of light and dark puddled at his boots and danced on the forest floor.

“My turn!” he shouted back to Carson who gladly waved his hand at Ben.

Ben could see the trunk was nearly ready to go and he wanted to be the one who felled this one.

A few more swings and the tell-tale cracking was heard. The other men stopped their work to watch the tree come down and to help if they were needed. The angle was unexpected and the farmers watched the trunk split, splintering so loudly their shouts could not be heard.

“Ben!” Someone yelled, but he had started his run too late. The booted feet around him scattered to the sides as they watched Ben disappear, like he was sucked into the mass of two-tone leaves and one angry, black trunk.

There was a second a pure silence before Ben’s neighbors began to tear and break the branches around him. They found their voices all at once.

“I see his arm.”

“Ben, can you hear me?”

“Someone bring the wagon around.”
Then Carson said, “His head. Oh, God, his head.”

Their frantic movements deflated when they saw him. Each man leaned lightly over the trunk to see the side of Ben’s head beneath. The blood was smeared onto his face and running so quickly into the dirt that they couldn’t tell the location of the wound. A creek of red was forming between the leaves and heading for their feet.

Ben opened his eyes suddenly. Carson froze and the other men stepped back a little. When they would tell this story later, not one of them could explain how it happened. When they would tell it to each other, they didn’t correct each other’s missing details. Mostly they agreed that Ben’s brown eyes turned light like amber and his lips were pure white as he reached his arms around the trunk of the tree, hugging it in a strong embrace. Then, in shock and delirious, he threw the trunk off his body and it rolled to the side. The men ran at him as he pushed himself up on all fours, like he might stand, but instead, he collapsed at their feet in the sunken divot left by the tree.

“Get him into the wagon. Billy, you drive.”

Carson’s orders woke them and they each put hands under his body and lifted him onto the dusty bed. Since he was so tall, his boots hung off the end of the wagon as they left the woods behind them. As they entered the glaring sunlight, Ben yelled, “Stop it!” and everyone jumped. Then he was silent and still. They wound hankerchiefs against the bloodiest patch of his hair and Carson took off his shirt and tied it tightly around Ben’s skull. When he started kicking, one of the workers sat on his feet to control him.

They whispered to him and to each other. “It’s going to be fine. You’re going to make it.” Across Ben’s body, they looked at each other straight in the eye. You were allowed to lie to a dying man. It was all right.

Ben didn’t die that day in the woods. The local doctor inserted a metal plate into his head and somehow he survived it. His hair grew back and he slowly plowed the fields again next season. He lived old enough to see his children married and all of his grandchildren born.

At sixty-two, he was the oldest man chopping at the tree trunks and clearing scrub in the woods. Out with his neighbors and the hired hands one final time, Ben collapsed on the crunchy forest floor. The men didn’t rush him to the new county hospital this time.
or hold him still to prevent him from hurting himself more. They loaded his body into
the half-full wagon and drove him to his farmhouse. This time, Ben was dead.

Junior was ten when he saw his Grandma Bessie sitting with Ben’s body and
crying so loudly, with such force into her open palms, that it scared him and his sisters.
The doctor told Juanita that her father’s heart gave out. She wasn’t wailing like her
mother; she was staring and vacant. Her hands were on her stomach, moving slightly
around as if feeling for a hole. Her father was the only one she really ever loved in this
family. She was his girl.

Olive was the oldest and Ben seemed to care for her, too, but it wasn’t the same.
Olive wasn’t really his. Bessie had her from before. No one talked about it, but Juanita
knew. She knew she was Ben’s first child. Olive was tiny, barely five feet tall, and petite
in that girlish kind of way. She kept herself separated by the years of her age and by
being the half-sister. Ernest was the boy and the expected worker though that rarely
seemed true. Juanita was the worshipper of her father, his restless and round girl. It was
unspoken, but she always knew she was his favorite.

Without her father, without Dad, she wouldn’t look across her own land to see the
place where she was born. There was no fondess for the house on the creek’s bank. Her
mother could live here for years and Juanita might visit her sometimes if they were on the
way to town and passing by. Earnest could farm their father’s land and maybe some of
his own. His family could live nearby in a farmhouse of their own in Bueny or New
Martinsburg. That wasn’t too far, really. She would wave to him as they drove by or she
might even stop sometimes to see how the beans were growing or how much Earnest had
paid for seed this year. And she would remember her father and how he would come
home from the fields so dirty and sweaty and he would wink at her on his way to the
pump. When she got her half of the land that she would share with her brother, just like
the will said, and she would make her own land and house better. Ben would have
wanted that for her.

*His grandfather’s body was displayed in the living room. He was tall enough to
look into the casket without needing a stool. Junior wished he was tiny like Janet Ann*
who was only big enough to see the silver decoration on the casket sides and to trace her fingers along the heavy molding. Grandpa laid for three days between the wood stove and the stairway.

The man in the box was not his grandfather, he thought. His grandpa was a living man who drove the three miles to visit them on Saturdays and pretended to drink tea with Junior’s sisters and he always told the story of how he turned green when he realized that little Margaret had been dipping the “tea” from the leftover dishwater. His grandpa played fetch with Junior’s white spitz puppies. He rested his hand on Junior’s curly hair. He had a quiet laugh.

Mourners came, neighbors and church people. They brought covered casseroles and wreathed bouquets. Mother was distracted and Junior was able to leave her side to sit on the bank of the creek and set oak leaf boats into the water. He would launch them on the smooth side of the bridge and then run to see what happened when they entered the whitewater that sprang from the other side. He stayed there until everyone lined up their cars and snaked a procession to the church.

The service was Methodist and short. A stone reading Melson in large, block lettering was waiting for them. Benjamin’s name would be added later. He was the first to be interred under it.

Juanita took four roses with full, open faces from a bouquet. One for herself and one for each of her children, except Junior because he was a boy. She stood by the grave while they threw the dirt in clods on the casket lid.

She didn’t know then that she would never stand beside her sister and brother again. She didn’t know what her father’s will revealed, what had been added and what had been taken away. The next time she would see her mother, they would be in court.

On the drive home, Margaret and Janet Ann let Junior smell their roses.

There are still patches of trees around the southern county. A quarter mile behind our house, one small woods stands like a preserved area. No one tears out the old trees to farm it and no one cuts wood there either. This chunk of tall pines and maples sits, an oasis, on the flat landscape. Once this land must have been covered with masses of deeply rooted, silent inhabitants. Then came the people, my family, and cleared the land
and claimed it. The leftover clumps of trees stand like proud refugees and their presence is dark and a little mystical. My dad wouldn’t let me go there when I was young. “It’s dangerous.” For some reason, I accepted that it was.
I call home and say, “Can I see your wills?”

“Our what?”

“You and Dad have wills made already, right?”

“Yes, of course we do. What do you want to see in them?”

“My name.”

“You’re in there.”

“And Karmel and Kindra, too?”

“Yes.”

“Just the three of us. Equal, right? A three-way split?”

“Yes.” She says this louder, but she laughs a little to play it less seriously. I hear my dad in the background, from his chair in the t.v. room.

“Jana, who is it?”

“It’s Kim. She wants to see your will?”

“So, let her.”

Back to me now, Mom says, “Maybe we’ll think of it next time you’re over here.”

Benjamin Melson, Juanita Knedler. These are the parents and the children who were liars and became liars. I want to know that this legacy has stopped. If my parents were sneaky people, they could show me a version of the will and then change it. That was Ben’s trick to his daughter. If they were like Juanita, they could tell me everything was mine because I’d earned it, then sideswipe me at the reading of the will. But they aren’t like either of these people. I’ve heard people say that you are the sum of your parts. These are the same people who think about the sins of the father, type stuff. My dad isn’t the sum of his parents. He’s the exception. That’s a choice he made.

I just want to see our names together, in black ink and typed so carefully together. There’s no money or antiques I want from my parents. My house is already overflowing with toys from my children and my sisters have their own places and things. I just want to know, the quiet reassurance of our respective places in this family.

My parents aren’t sneaky, but they are secretive about money. When I was eight, I asked my mom how much money Dad made.
“Enough to get us through.”
“How much in dollars?”
“I’m not sure, why?”
“I think Tara’s dad makes more money. She said he does.”
“Don’t talk about money with your friends on the bus. It’s rude.”
That meant we either had a lot of it and talking about it would be bragging. Or else Tara was right about her dad.

When I ask my mom to show me the wills, I feel eight again. I’m asking about money and property and private things. Money is like sex in this house. Probably around, but deliberately unacknowledged. “You can come to me with questions about it. But these things are personal.” That was my mother’s answer for both.

She hesitates when she talks to me about the wills. She comforts me that I have a place on those papers that are in envelopes and hidden in the lock box she keeps in the empty, upstairs bedroom. This is the same room where my mother keeps all her winter sweaters and my dad’s old suits. There is an ironing board always set up in the corner by the window. I once hung my wedding dress from the ceiling and its white satin train stretched to the floor. In a round, red box that once held a hat, there’s a deadly-looking .38. I know where the lock box and the key and the wills are, but I want my mom or dad to show them to me.
Choosing Sides

It’s beautiful here. In the late July wind, everything is beginning to dry. I don’t remember it being this windy when I lived here. My parents planted a series of evergreens along the southern fencerow, close to the house. Their branches touch now; they hold hands and work together as a windbreak. Gusts fly across the flatness and crash into the trees that try to stop it. The wind here is unstoppable. It cuts around the thick, but skinny needles and finds me.

By August, the lawn will tan, the grass nearly dead from drought. It will feel crispy under my feet. I used to walk to the barn with bare feet, but I can’t stand that anymore. Something poke me; the nests of crabgrass are sharp. I need my shoes. Somehow the crops stay green and cool under the heat.

*Knee-high by the Fourth of July.* That’s the old saying, but my dad tells me that it’s not true anymore. “The seeds today are so much better than the old seed. Such a high quality now. They grow stronger and can be planted earlier.” The corn is to my shoulder this year by the Fourth of July. If we hadn’t had such a wet spring, they might be over my head. All around their stalks, the dirt cracks, splitting gaps in the oil between the rows. The corn gets taller, the soybeans wider, and soon you can’t see the ground at all. Just a sea of leaves.

That’s the way this place is. Always riding a line between living and dying, fresh and old. I think that’s what I’ll miss about it one day. There are two sides, alternating realities, pushing at each other.

My country sister lives on a farm to the east and my city sister lives in urban sprawl to the south. I’m suburbs now – west. Together we form a triangle around what’s left of Juanita’s land. We are away, but tied to it with leashes that have reached their limit. It’s in our blood somehow. We can’t shake it out, even if we want to. That’s what roots are.
We come back when my parents call for us on Mother’s Day or a birthday or just to visit. Karmel, who hated the country at first, looks sorry about the land. Some part of her wants this place.

“We can’t just let it go,” she says, but it sounds like a question to me.

“What would you do? Move here?”

“No. I don’t think I would. It just seems wrong to sell it. To strangers, you know. It’s been in the family forever. I can’t imagine it not being here.”

“And if we keep it and it’s a rental house, you know what will happen.”

All the houses within two miles of the farm are rented. One after another, the deeds falls to children who don’t want the farm life. And they rent the houses of their ancestors to people who don’t mind living this far from town. It’s not long until the paint begins to peel along the outside boards flaking like molting skin onto the grass. Instead of insulating, the boarders pile bails of straw around the perimeter of the houses to keep the drafts at bay. They park their rusted trucks and their children’s broken toys in the front yard and then they stop mowing. Twice a year, someone brings in bush-hog to take down the grass. That’s what will happen to our farmhouse. Karmel can’t stand to think of selling it. I can’t stand to think of what will happen if we don’t.

Karmel has a look about her. She is like my mother, a glue for family. When my mother is gone, Karmel is the one who will call for us, organize our holidays. For now, her wistful voice is nearly convincing. I hear family history and pride and justice in those words. But I think that’s what caused the trouble of the past. Those grand ideas, those sacrifices to keep the family together, are what really tore it apart. Our family isn’t this land. We have to be more than that. We have to.

I stopped going upstairs in the farmhouse a few years ago. The ceilings feel too low and even though I slept here for almost six years before I left for college, it doesn’t feel like this was my place. I remind myself of the things I liked. By the bed, that’s where I read *Lord Jim* for Mrs. Black’s English class and wrote a whole notebook full of secret poetry one summer for myself. I think about how quietly I could come up the stairway and how I used to slam down the phone in the corner when I was mad. I have memories here, good ones. But when I stand in the room, I’m an outsider somehow. The
world of this room, even this house, feels distant from me, somehow formal. Like I have to be polite, like I’m a guest. I don’t know when I became an outsider here. Maybe when I decided this would never be my home.

My old room looks very much the same, but I’ve stopped checking to see its status. The bed and the vanity are unmoved and I could sit down at the mirror and start my life over at the age of fifteen if I wanted to. Just slide onto the seat and time would follow me. In that room, the future feels stagnant, frozen. In the mirror, I seem taller somehow, even though I’ve been this height since I was fifteen. It’s just a room to pass through now.

My old window, where I planted those annual flowers in boxes my dad made, faces the back seven acres. I should feel nostalgic standing here, I tell myself. I try to think of how many generations of my family have walked this land, how many have looked out this same window. Not much has changed in this view. The workshop, the fields and fence lines are all there. My eyes go the spot where I dragged trash into a cage in the barnlot and started it burning with a box of matches called Ohio Matches. I should want to preserve these histories, the little memories and the big landmarks, to keep them alive by saving this house and tying us to it a little longer. But I don’t want it.

When my parents are too old to ride the mowing tractor, when they are too delicate to stand the wind that beats the walls, I want this place to go away. It will be time for Juanita’s land to go. I want to stand beside my dad on the day the auctioneer comes and people I don’t know will walk through the places where my mother’s flowers once were. I will watch as he signs the deed to the new owners and I know that he will drive past this house regularly, if he can, reporting back to us all the terrible things they have done to it.

For the last decade, this house has been a neutral meeting ground. I don’t want to give the impression that my sisters and I are fighting. We’re usually not. It’s just that we are all so different that every time we get together, it’s like we have to spend time getting to know each other again. We have to get reacquainted. This is the place where we are all daughters again, our other lives on hold. Here, we are far enough from our new homes to feel a little foreign. The last nine acres and a two-story white farmhouse, bright green shutters and displayed on every window, remain in the Knedler legacy. I
will miss it, but not enough. When it is time to bury my parents in the White Oak Cemetery, I hope this land is gone. I want to look at my sisters and be glad that no surveyed boundaries or lawyers will steal a part of our grief. Those grandparents who came before, those who lied to keep it in the right hands, their words will not hold us anymore. We will have to realize, it’s the blood that makes us, not the land.
Older

It was the first time I thought he might be old. Two years ago, I saw my dad in Bethesda North Hospital. I visited his small, private room one and a half days after his new hip was installed. Even though they’d lowered his medication, he barely moved. The day before he’d been hallucinating that disembodied hands were floating around his room. When Mom described them, it gave me the chills on my arms.

My mother held a white, foam cup with a long straw to his mouth. He forced his neck up and his chin down to drink his melted ice chips. I watched him wrap his lips deliberately around the plastic.

He was old. I had to look away and finger the cord from the mini blinds. I straightened the two chairs along the wall. He was helpless.

His dark tan was ash under the fluorescent lights. I leaned down to kiss his forehead and I was careful not to tangle the tubes and plastic tag hanging from under his sheets. Everyone was unnaturally serious today.

I once met a man who knew my father. He recognized my last name.

“You’re Ircel Knedler’s daughter?”

“That’s right.”

“He’s a funny guy.”

“Yes, I know.”

“He once told me the best joke about an old woman who sucks all the chocolate off peanuts and then serves them to her preacher.”

“Yeah. I know that one.”

I’ve heard that joke in too many different forms over the last decade. My dad has timing, build up, and delivery. People like him because of that. They don’t realize how little they know about him. They only think he’s funny.

But at Bethesda, no one laughs. He talked only a little, letting my mother fill in the blanks. His skin moved under my lips, loose and soft like a warm tissue paper. I remembered that I’d kissed skin like this before when I was so little that my stomach leaned against the arm of a padded rocking chair as I reached up to her cheek. This was Juanita’s skin.
Music Man

My dad used to play the banjo. I don’t even know where that instrument is now. He just seemed to pull it out, play a little in our basement on quiet nights, then it went away again. It was a surprise every time.

The first time I remember that black and white instrument being pulled from its old graying case, I must have been five years old. The sound of it was sharp and so much louder than I expected. It echoed against the walls and ceiling of our little room. I laughed and crawled under a blanket to get away from the sight and the sound of it. He didn’t know any songs completely, just pieces of old songs from when he was a kid, a few broken church songs. He picked away at the strings and then stopped. Sometimes he’d sing a little and I’d laugh and hide even more. I was almost scared of it. Once, he held me on his lap and put my fingers over the strings, pushing them into the neck. “We’ll make a chord together.” The metal felt sharper than I thought it would and I hardly had the strength to hold them in place while he strummed.

Then, when he was finished, “That’s enough of that.” The banjo was zipped back into its case and gone.

There was music in him. It came and went, but it was there.

When I was in graduate school, a woman told me that one of her best memories was staying up late on Sunday evenings to watch Masterpiece Theater with her parents. I laughed and said, “Do you know what I watched on Sunday nights with my parents? HeeHaw.”

Ten years ago I wouldn’t have even told anyone where I grew up. I knew what these people would think of me if I revealed my secret. Either the person would idealize farm life, thinking it a pure life so free from the pressures of the real world. Or worse for me, they’d find it quaint that I’d actually finished college. Ohio farm girl makes good.

If they asked me, I would say that I lived south of Columbus. Most people just let that go, thinking that I meant a suburb. But south of Columbus is essentially half the
state. Somewhere down there. That’s where I’m from. There’s no real town to call my own, no place that stands for what I associate with home. I have tracts of land and barns as my home places.

In graduate school, I told a professor about what the landscape has come to mean to me. She said, “I would have never guessed you grew up in the country.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you are so sophisticated.”

I’m not sure she meant it, but someone was being insulted here. Could have been my family or it might have been me. Was I so removed from it now that there was no trace of the farm in me anymore? Wasn’t that how I wanted it? I’d always thought so.

Something happened in the last few years and I can’t explain it. I’m not lucky enough to have epiphanies in my life. I just plod along and things happen. I persevere and I learn things. And somewhere along the way, I started looking at the land again. I found out I was proud of it.

My distance from the land wasn’t all my fault. Mom and Dad really did hold me away from many of the realities of farm life. I find myself alternating between gratitude and frustration. There was never any talk that I would be a farmer, or that I would learn a farmer’s ways for my own life. I could mix bottles of formula for baby lambs, I mowed and painted my summers away, I held open gates, but never pulled the animal by its ropes into a waiting trailer. On the periphery of the real work, I was allocated to support staff for Dad. Farming was just a temp job for me.

I have few memories before the words, “When you go to college…” It was the preface of how my parents talked about my future.

Just a few months ago, I finally asked my dad why he and Mom always talked that way. Dad looked at me, then leaned his head back against the chair’s overstuffed headrest. He laughed silently one time, and talking to the ceiling, he said, “Don’t you think I learned anything from all this?”
Now

Last Saturday, I called my parents at home, long distance. My dad answered, which surprised me, so I told him about how sick the baby had been that day, how we’d been over to the Urgent Care that morning and how I was worried about dehydration and all that. Just as Dad was starting into a story about how I’d gotten so sick on every vacation, even ending up in the emergency room in West Palm Beach, I had to interrupt him.

“Bradley’s throwing up, Dad. I’ll call you back.” I had the phone in one hand and in the hand under my son’s chin, a wet mass of jelly-like vomit. I yelled for my older son to bring a towel before I shut the phone off using my elbow.

By the time I called back, Mom answered.

“Everything okay now?”

“Yes, back under control.”

“You’re Dad’s in the back. Having an asthma attack.”

“Why?”

“He’s upset about Bradley.”

“It’s just a stomach virus, Mom. I told him that.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter anymore. He’s sensitive now.”

She said now, but I wonder if he always was. I just never noticed. When I was little, the last word I would have used for him was sensitive. Busy, strong, hot-tempered, funny, gone. All those, but I never saw any underbelly hidden below that. I simply wasn’t looking. He used to give away little details about his childhood, mostly about his father, that were too isolated. Little images, but no context, no details. He was a hider of feelings. Dad stuffed them all inside and kept them away from us. That’s how he handled things, until I was a young teenager, and there was so much awfulness that he couldn’t keep it inside anymore. Some pain builds, at the hands of his mother or God or fate, whatever you want to call it.

Even though it’s not my fault for calling at a bad time, I don’t want to be responsible for him getting sick again. I can hear him cough in my memory, I can hear the whistling of his breath even now, like I’m standing in the bathroom beside him. It wasn’t my fault that my dad lost his job or that we had to stay in Ohio when he really
wanted to go. That’s what I tell myself. But if my parents hadn’t had me, maybe things would be been easier for them. If I’d been a boy, it might have happened another way.

This is the part where I wish I could tell you that everything is perfect. I wish this was a piece of fiction with an epilogue that clears up all the blank spots and makes both me and you feel like all the strings of this story are safely tied. What I can say is that I sometimes still wonder about my grandmother and I still feel like I might have handled this better than I did. Sometimes Dad still coughs. And there’s nothing I can do, all over again.
In Leesburg, before my dad was born, there was a constable by the name of Knedler. The man was known around town for his quiet demeanor and quick-tempered ways. One night, at the local pub, a fight broke out between two working men who were passing through the area and doing odd jobs on farms. When Constable Knedler came in, the two were throwing fists and knocking over chairs. Men were shouting. Some cursing because they were “sick of this shit,” and when they heard glass breaking, they picked up their drinks and moved to the other side of the room. The voices of other men were mixing in and by the looks on their faces, they were fixing to get into this fight themselves.

When he saw the atmosphere, the constable yelled at two men sitting at the bar, “I’m deputizing you in duty to Highland County.”

The two men laughed at him and then lunged for his billy club.

In the end, it was the constable against four younger, drunk men. By the time it was over, two had given up and the other two were knocked out. The constable laughed a little, but accepted a towel wrapped around chipped ice for his knuckles from the bartender.

When my dad was a teenager, he hurt his back playing basketball, so his parents took him to a chiropractor in Hillsboro. When the man saw his patient’s name was Ircel Knedler, Jr., this was the story he told him. Years later, my dad told me.

I thought he was telling me a funny story about a distant cousin, and maybe he thought that, too, but he told it with too much pride. Underneath it all, he was showing me that there is strength in our blood. We get back up.
When my dad found a job, he stopped watching cartoons in the evenings. Instead, he went out back, to the old chicken house and tore the last of the dirty pieces of wood and stacks of trash out into the pasture. He swept the layers of dust out the front door and the back door that had to be held open with a cement block. One hundred years of dirt floated into the wind and he looked all right with that. It had been my dad’s job to get eggs from the hens when he was a kid. He’d gather them, sliding his hand under the feathers and moving his fingers around. “You get a feel for it. It was usually pretty easy, except sometimes one of our old gray barn cats would go to sleep in the nests. You’d reach in under the hen and there would be a big furry cat. I pulled my hand out every time. Scared me. Not what I expected to feel in there.” When my dad was a teenager, the building was converted inside and full of sows, but they still called it the chicken house.

My mother brought buckets of bleach and water to him and he swept away at the floor, mixing his bleach water into swirls of dirt and pushing them all out the back door of the chicken house. Over and over, he worked until the cement floor was dark gray, not brown anymore. He took his tools from the barn and put them into shelves he fashioned himself out of old dresser drawers. In an antique apothecary, he placed bunches of screws and nails and drill bits. After that, we stopped calling it the old chicken house and started calling it The Workshop.

This is where I learned something about my dad. “I wanted to take Industrial Arts in high school. We called it Shop.” He’s rocking on the front porch where my parents have removed the old hanging swing and put in two chairs that sort of bounce a little when you lean back. My sons have found the newest kittens. We laugh because they call the fluffiest one of the group Junior. They have never heard their Poppy called by that name. “You couldn’t take both agriculture and shop class. You had to choose one. But I always missed being able to make things.”

Dad bought himself a table saw, a drill press, and a band saw. “I still had all my tools from the barn, too. I moved them in.” In the evenings, he read magazines with patterns you could print out on a copy machine to make your own woodworking projects.
He drew some patterns himself. He started small with shelves and little wooden cutout shapes, hearts and dolphins especially, and stained them a dark brown. Next came the toilet paper holders and then a desk for the hallway.

I wish I could inventory my house for you right now. I could show you all the things my dad has made for me. Every summer, my sisters and I, and now my niece, come to Dad with our lists. The things we’ve been thinking of all winter, drawn out and measured. And he makes them for us. He could make money at this. Really, he’s good. One year he made three nativity scenes from 150-year-old wood he took from the barn. One for each of his daughters. A woman at his church asked to buy one. “These are just for family. Not for sale,” my parents told her.

Every room of my house has been touched by my dad’s hand. Even the desk I’m using right now as my computer/pile desk is a custom corner piece that we designed together and he made for me in The Workshop. My prize possession though is one of the first pieces he made me. Before I married, I bought some old chairs with black backs and maple-colored seats. As a gift, Dad designed a table with black, curvy legs and a blonde top to match my garage sale chairs. As the table’s middle, he took an old window from an condemned house that was being demolished near the library where he worked. He told me, “I just went to the construction workers and said, ‘Can I take that window?’ and they said yes. They even helped me load it into the truck.” He mounted it in the center of my table. It’s his own design, without any pattern to follow or instructions. Just his tools and his imagination.
Harvesting

It is extremely sunny on Memorial Day, 2003. My dad hasn’t been to this cemetery in years, not since the day his father was buried eight years ago. It’s less than two miles from the farmhouse. My dad comes because I say I want to go. I want to see the graves of my family.

My older son has never been to a cemetery before. We tell him the names of the people and how they are blood to us. My younger son stays at the farmhouse with my mom. She hates cemeteries and refuses to come.

“This was Poppy’s grandpa. This was Poppy’s Uncle Ernest,” I point to the stones as we walk. He likes the stones that are tall pillars or the ones that are shaped like hearts. Those are not our family. Everyone I’m related to has a thick, practical rectangle with block lettering.

Most of the newer stones are taller than his six-year-old height. He loves the arrangement of the graves and how they are lined up in perfect runways. He races along the burial grounds and across the open lawn.

It’s well kept here, better than I thought it would be. The grass is bright, short and attended with precise weed whacking around the stones. The White Oak Church sits near the road and in front of the oldest graves. It isn’t Methodist anymore. It sat empty for years and was recently bought by newcomers. “Holy rollers” is the answer you’ll hear if you ask around. No one knows anyone who attends services there.

I tell my son to stop jumping the smaller gravestones. I want him to be respectful of something, but I’m not sure what.

Dad is talking like a tour guide. He points out the family graves and those that rest in between. He throws out the names, an interesting fact he remembers about them and walks slowly on. Near the front, he says, “Benjamin Melson. 1878-1945.” That same stone lists Bessie M, His Wife 1884-1964, Clearance E. 1919-1919.

“I didn’t remember that third name was on there,” Dad says and he looks at the names another few seconds before moving down the row.

He stops often in front of stranger’s plots. He seems to have more to say about them.
“This is old Theobald. He owned the general store that used to sit where the hog farm is now.”

“I didn’t know there was a store there,” I say.

“Oh, yes. I used to ride there on my bike and buy flour sometimes for Mom. Old Theobald was the meanest. If a sweat bee landed on your arm, he would reach over and crush it into skin. It hurt like crazy.” He says this from a far-away place.

“That sounds awful.”

“It was,” he says, but he’s smiling a little as he turns away from that list of old neighbors’ names.

Before we leave, Dad wants to search for Uncle Charlie’s grave. He was an old bachelor, always alone, and like a grandfather to my father. He was a painter and his hand-made ladders are still in the rafters of the big barn. Dad was sure his grave was over by the oldest stones in the cemetery, shadowed by the church and staggered at different angles through the grass. They are all white with gray-black etched names carved deeply into them. One strangely white tablet per person and the date of their whole lives. Twenty-one years, four months, two days. Each one is weirdly precise and personal.

Most are unreadable. If I had a piece of paper, I might get the impression of the name if I rubbed over it. But the pressure of my hand against the stone would probably topple it. Many lie like this. Flat and forgotten in the grass. The keepers mow around them. No one moves them or tries to right them. They stay where they fall.

In the newer sections, the rows are planned, the grave markers shiny, the names blasted onto the faces of the stones with machine-made perfection. But this section is scattered and random. No order was given. Find a spot where no one was buried and dig there. Only a few have two names on a stone, husband and wife. Too many have women’s names and the words Infant Child below. The death date is the same for both. Those are the stones I hate, but I stand and stare anyway. I’m supposed to be looking around for Uncle Charlie, but these women distract me. I want to touch their crumbling stones and say, “I’m sorry for you, I’m so sorry.” And through one hundred and fifty years of space, we are together, friends and sisters for only a moment.
I wonder how many of my friends would have died if we’d lived in 1846 like this woman I stand before now. Jenne, for sure, with her ectopic pregnancy. They pumped her full of morphine and rushed her to surgery. Laurel and Marian had long labors and eventual c-sections. They probably would be gone, too.

This mother’s body was a sinking ship and she took her baby down with her. She’s in all our minds when we deliver our babies. But we have the padding of a century-worth of medicine. We reassure ourselves and thank our God that her fate, her time, is not ours.

I turn away from these women and their decaying memorials. Uncle Charlie is not here with them. Dad doesn’t remember where he’s buried. Or maybe his stone has fallen face down and we’ve stepped right over him.

Near the back, we find my grandmother’s gravestone, Juanita V. Knedler, July 26, 1906- October 28, 1979. The stone itself is reddish marble that is so shiny and unmarred that it might have been set in this ground a week ago. Etched on the top is a curling vine with three leaves and a flower with five petals. Her grave is close to the rear fence.

To the front is the church and Greenfield-Sabina Road, to the side is a bean field already planted. Beyond Juanita’s grave, the fence line is heavy with trees and bushes. It looks shadowy and cool through there. If I were alone, I’d find an opening and climb through.

“What’s behind those trees, Dad?”

“Don’t you know?”

I shake my head and squint into the sun. He says, “It’s Rattlesnake Creek.”

The End