

## The Gardener's Son

It was two days after his father got arrested when Elijah's mother finally lost it. He had awoken to her screaming, but it was not directed at him as one would expect at nine on a Sunday morning when he had yet to get dressed for church. Now, he stood behind the sliding-glass door, staring out its smudged pane as he watched his mother strip the cherry trees of their branches, ripping them limb by limb until they were nothing but leaves scattered on the ground and pillars of empty wood. Cherries fell onto the pathway that trailed through the backyard and his mother trampled them; their flesh burst on the cement, staining it a dark crimson.

Elijah's little sister, Esther, lurked next to him with eyes widened to the size of fifty cent pieces and, under them, tired grey circles bloomed on her pale skin. Their mother's hair flailed around in the windless summer air. She continued mutilating the tree, and the small muscles in her thin arms bulged. She was mesmerizing and horrific like an angry goddess.

An uncomfortable feeling, one that made vomit brew in Elijah's stomach and his hands turn cold, settled into his skin. There was a massacre unfolding in front of him. Elijah looked at Esther to see a few tears roll down her cheek.

An ache emerged in his throat and he brought his right hand to cover her eyes, and she should have pushed him away like younger siblings do, but Esther only turned to rest her head on Elijah's shoulder. She sobbed, just identifiable by the slightest of hiccups and droplets that birthed scattered spots of wetness on Elijah's shirt.

At thirteen, his sister was only two years younger than him. Their father had assaulted a girl Esther's age—Julie Byers. They didn't know if it had happened more than once or exactly how much damage was inflicted. Elijah could only imagine him lifting up her light pink training bra, and pulling down her flower printed panties. She had probably left with violet bruises on her

hips, and an ache between her legs, and he, crescent moon cuts along his wrists, and red, swollen lips.

“I was supposed to go to her birthday party next week,” Esther said, burying her head deeper into his skin.

He was glad that Esther didn't say Julie's name. A shaky, anxiety ridden breathe escaped from his lungs. He could feel Esther's tears mixing with the sweat on his neck. Esther turned her head to look out the glass door once again.

“I wish she would just stop it,” she continued, in a voice muffled by cloth and crying.

“I know,” Elijah replied, “Mom's just angry.”

He wanted to mention that he was too, but it didn't feel like the right time nor did it feel truthful. Elijah really only felt sort of sad and sort of nothing. He placed his hands on Esther's back as he embraced her, glancing up to see that his mother had ended her rampage and was now staring at them. She was a wild animal who'd just been caught ransacking the garden: wide eyes bloodshot and glossy, her hair a tangled whirlwind, and bare feet now coated in a layer of red juice and dead grass.

Esther stepped back, and Elijah met her eyes. She had all their mother's features—earth colored hair that fell in waves, thin nose, honey eyes, milky skin—and mirrored her even more so with the tears still dripping like a leaky faucet. Elijah resembled their Dad. He hadn't been able to look at his own orange autumnal hair in the mirror for the past two days.

Their mother was walking towards them with her head jerking from the direction of the sidewalk to either fences on the left and right side of the yard. Esther's right hand crossed over her thin waist to hold her left arm.

“Dad's going to hell,” she said.

Elijah stiffened. The comment pierced him in a way that was sharp and distinct. It was what they'd all been thinking but he hadn't expected to be confronted with the thought so soon and especially not by Esther. He rolled his shoulders back and took a breath that felt unstable in a way, like he was putting more supports on a house that would surely fall.

"Okay," he said just as their mother made it to them.

His mother opened the sliding glass door and both Elijah and Esther stumbled backward so she could step into the house. They were all silent for a moment, and Elijah inspected the muted yellow curtains, noting every stray thread. The room was bloated, stuffed with warm sticky air, and a buzzing fly made circles around the kitchen table. The stare of their mother wore Elijah down like prison shackles. With reluctance, he met her gaze.

"What on earth are you two doing? Go get ready for Sunday school," she said, ignoring their raised eyebrows and parted lips. She hurried past them and started towards her bedroom. The old linoleum floors groaned under her feet, and Elijah started to speak.

"But—"

"And y'all stop looking at me that way. You didn't care nothing of your father's garden no time before. Go get ready."

# # #

On a fall evening, when Elijah was ten, after the trees had turned red and the plants had begun to wither, his mother came down with a flu. And because it was Saturday and, at the time, his best friend was his sister, their father let both Elijah and Esther help work in the garden.

They were tending to the pears, their skin light green and freckled, and curved like a woman's body.

There was a chill in the air, and smell of dust and honeysuckles that occupied most of the town seemed subdued. The grass was yellowed and decayed and Elijah's speckled snakeskin cowboy boots crushed the dryer pieces into dust as Esther chased after him. She was on top of their Dad's shoulders and laughing so he could see her gums where several of her front teeth were missing. His father was shouting and laughing too—it was full and loud, reminiscent of barking.

“We're gonna getcha. We're gonna getcha.”

“You're not never gonna! You're crazy, Daddy.”

His father and Esther caught him eventually, and they all fell into a pile of leaves and grass and limbs. They all laid on the ground. Snorts riddled their laughter and their chests heaved.

“We should probably get to doing some work now, shouldn't we?” Elijah said.

“Well now, look at you, Mr. Farmer. You're ready to tend to the garden all by yourself, aren't you?”

His father looked at him with an easy smile, a smile that made people feel comfortable, with no teeth and his short red beard covering the sharp angles of his jaw. Elijah blushed. He felt inflated like a balloon. His father was an honest man—he didn't give compliments unless he meant it.

They dragged out the gardening tools from the shed: chemicals and shovels and hoses, all in a red wheelbarrow. His father handed Elijah a sprayer with a long tube of a dispenser and asked him to fill it with pesticide. He completed the task, watching as his father broke off the tab

of a beer and brought the can to his lips. Esther was sitting next to Elijah, making crowns out of dying dandelions. Elijah grinned as she placed one on his head.

“How come I never get to do the spraying?” Esther asked.

“Because I’m goin’ be the gardener. I’ll have to harvest it all when I’m grown up.”

“And I can’t help you then either?”

He didn’t want to say no to her but Elijah could sense his father’s stare. There was a way that things ought to be, his Daddy would say, and Esther didn’t understand that yet.

“Of course you can,” he said, “all the fruits need someone to cook them into pies.”

That seemed good enough to appease both of them. Esther smiled at him and jumped on Elijah’s back as he crouched near the dispenser. He sprayed the plants, Ester trailing after him while collecting more dandelions. The pesticide weighed down the weakened leaves of the plants and sent them spiraling down to the soil. Elijah looked up, watching as his father took another swig of his beer. The man gave him a nod and another smile before glancing at his sister and turning to go inside.

# # #

They had gone to the same church since Elijah was born, and before that, his father went to it, and before that, his grandfather, and throughout all those years the building was still just as ugly. Midland Baptist Church was composed of two portables in a bare field that was more sand than grass. One building was for the adult service and the other for children to be taught by some high schooler who probably needed volunteer hours, and in between the two portables, was an

area where everyone parked. A dusty white sign with three crosses drawn on it stood in the middle.

The drive to church had been silent. His mother didn't even turn on the radio, which on any other Sunday before this one would be blasting God's Music, an album that mostly contained twangy country chart toppers that spoke of tractors and women in red dresses. Esther had looked out the window the entire time despite there not being anything to look at besides a few abandoned rodeo ropes and stray dogs.

As they got out of the car, Elijah pulled on the bottom of his dark green polo that was much too short. He had been borrowing his father's Sunday clothes for the past few months but couldn't bear to today. When he had let the shirt touch his skin, he felt poisoned like his father had a disease, and it was lethal and contagious. He vomited in the toilet after.

"You'd best be on your good behavior, you two. They're going to say a few words about your Daddy," his mother said. Elijah and Esther shared a glance, a brief moment of mutual understanding and sadness. In an erratic second of bravery, Elijah spoke.

"Why? It's not like he died."

If his dad were here, he would have been slapped right about now. His mother jerked her head in his direction.

"You'd better hold your tongue right there, Elijah Martin," she said, planting her old black heels into the sand more aggressively with every step.

"These are good people. They're helping us get back on our feet, recover from our loss," his mother finished.

Elijah turned away from her to look out at the field. It wasn't until he could smell her sugary scented perfume that had become part of her clothes that Elijah noticed Ruby Alcott

falling into step with him. She was wearing a knee-length brown skirt with white polka dots. It looked faded and weary like it was gasping for breath and hung low on her hips, exposing a thin strip of tanned skin. It was just scandalous enough for his cheeks to become rosy. Ruby Alcott was somewhat of a legend in the town. She led her first school protest at age eight, she supposedly only came to service because her mother made her, and she had pierced her nose with a sewing needle in junior high. Everyone knew her stories, due to their gossip-worthy nature or her Mama's loud mouth, Elijah didn't know. They were in the same grade, and had had two actual conversations with each other: once when they were lab partners, dissecting a frog on a metal, chemical coated table, and one time when Ruby offered him a cigarette outside the Whataburger on Stallion Street. A deep purple color stained her lips.

He knew she had approached to him for the same reason that everyone else had in the past two days—to discuss his father. He looked at his mother and Esther who were both still silent, trailing behind the other church-goers like corralling horses, and slowed his pace.

“Hey, Ruby,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets, so she couldn't tell if they started shaking.

“That shirt looks dumb on you.”

Elijah's breath got caught in his throat, and he coughed. She glanced at the church portable and then back at him. The wind had arrived, and her blonde curls flew in the sky like stray pieces on a hay bale. His response was stammered.

“Yeah.”

“Then why'd you wear it?” Ruby continued, crossing her arms over her chest and covering the cartoon rose sewn on her white shirt. He could tell she tried to hide her Texan accent but it resonated through some of her words.

The warmth in Elijah's hands traveled to his face, making his cheeks even more fevered than before. His hands were splotchy and cold, and as the wind picked up, he could see Ruby's arms pimpling. It felt like she knew a secret about him, like her pale cerulean eyes had broken through his calm facade and could see what he was really afraid of. If he wore the shirt, if he let his skin touch where his father's had once been, he was one step closer to his transformation. To his unbecoming.

An electronic church bell rang from the speaker mounted above the first portable's door. Elijah hadn't realized that he'd stopped breathing, and he inhaled, coughing on the dust from the sand and hay. Ruby was still looking at him, but her intensity dimmed as she smiled, making the thin line of black makeup rimmed around her eyes crinkle.

"Hey, it's fine. A lot of guys our age like to dress stupid, so you're just blending in."

"Yeah," he replied, and winced as he realized how stupid he sounded.

She giggled as one would giggle at an infant who just did something baby-ish and charming. The door of portable one slammed shut. Despite his embarrassment, a small, apprehensive smile found its way to his mouth.

"We'd better get going. Service is starting without us," Elijah said, tilting his head towards the church.

"Ah, yes. The good Lord waits for no one" she replied. She said it in a tone that made him feel slightly rebellious, powerful, even. Ruby Alcott was from another world—one without Sunday schools, and cherry trees, and fathers who did things that made sisters cry. She turned around, skipping towards portable one. The frilly edges skirt bounced, dancing around her thighs in some holy ritual. He followed.



They walking into the church, and the already quiet crowd turned silent. Everyone sat in brown metal fold out chairs, and a whiteboard with the words “sin” and “forgiveness” scrawled on either side stood at the front of the room. The pastor, an older man with a protruding belly and white wispy beard, halted his speech to look at them standing in the doorway. Elijah felt the muscles in his arms tense. Panic, enhanced by mild agitation, bloomed in his chest when he saw his mother's face. Her lips had disappeared until her mouth was just a thin line pulled taut and her eyebrows, thick furry caterpillars, were raised.

Ruby ignored the stares of the forty-two people who had managed to stuff themselves into portable one and sat next to her mom who sat the in second row, three rows in front and to the left of his mother and Esther. The church smelled of sweat and old vanilla candles, and Elijah surveyed the dull white flooring as he walked to his seat. He could feel his mother's stare burning him. The pastor was the first person to break the silence. After both Ruby and Elijah sat down, he coughed, eyeing the crowd behind his thick wire-framed glasses.

“Okay, let's get back to it then,” he said, and Elijah looked up to face the pastor as he stood at the front, shuffling papers on a podium.

“So as all you folks know, a member of our congregation has recently been detained by the police.” He said “police” like it was two words—*poh lease*—and Elijah repeated it in his head over and over. It was too hot in the church, with too many bodies, and he felt claustrophobic, like he was the smallest fish in a sardine can, and they were about to get eaten.

“Peter Martin was a cherished member of the church, and we know how much of a good man he was.” The pastor paused, and Elijah looked to Ruby who was sitting slouched in the chair with her head resting on the back; her face was towards the ceiling. “And I think it's

important to remember that sometimes, the devil can possess us to do bad things. But that does not mean that the Lord cannot forgive us.”

Elijah's temples hurt because he was grinding his teeth so hard. A drop of sweat escape from his hairline. It all felt fretfully contrived. These people were delusional. This was Peter Martin's doing, and Elijah wasn't sure if he deserved forgiveness—from God or anyone else. It was bullshit. This whole ordeal was. Elijah shifted his gaze to Esther. Her hair was in two braids with light pink ribbons, like a baby girl's blanket, hanging from the ends. He wondered if Julie Byers wore ribbons in her hair. Or did it flail freely in the wind like Ruby's?

The pastor was still talking, but Elijah couldn't distinguish the words from one and other. He stared at his hands. They were freckled on top and calloused on the bottom like his father's. An itch crawled up the inside of his throat, and he was somehow warm and cold at the same time. He scratched at his hands like maybe somehow he could carve the freckles off. He scratched harder. Red, angry lines appeared on his skin but the freckles were still there. He stopped just as three spots of blood welled on his hand. Esther coughed.

He flinched and turned to her. She was staring at his hands as she had looked at their mother that morning: horrified and sad. A plate of crackers with a pool of crimson liquid in the center rested in her hands. Communion. She tilted it in his direction, and as he took it from her, it made his arms feel wrong, or unsure, or nervous like he had been in the same place for eternity, and to needed to stretch had finally consumed him. The liquid in the shallow white shifted as his hands quivered, making the juice spill out onto the crackers. The body and blood of the Father.

Elijah dropped the plate, and it fell to the ground with a resounding crack like a whip, silencing the crowd until the only noise was soft gospel music leaking from the CD player at the

front of the room. The plate and bowl was diminished to tiny shards, and just before the liquid reached his shoes, Elijah stood up.

He could feel everyone's presence—his mother's, Esther's, the pastor's, Ruby's—and how their attention belonged to him. It was a power he didn't want. More blood trailed down his hand. Elijah wondered if blood had fallen into his palms and dripped off his fingers when Julie Byer's nails had pierced his father's wrists.

"I'm sorry," he said, before turning towards the exit. Elijah stumbled out of the church and wiped his bloody hand on his pant leg. The wind was sudden and jarring.

"Wait, Elijah."

He expected to see Esther or his mother, but it was Ruby. Hair whipped across her face and her eyes watered. He didn't reply.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Elijah's head pounded, but he didn't want to touch it because that meant touching his hair, a reminder of how similar he was to his father. He was sick of this town—they were all the same. No one leaves or arrives. It was all boys who became their dads and girls who became their moms.

"Yeah, I'm fine. The room was just hot," he replied.

"I know you're done sick of it, so I'm not going to talk about your dad," Ruby said.

He observed the ground and the layer of white dust that covered her black tennis shoes, not knowing how to talk to her.

"Okay," he said. "Why are you here then?"

Elijah looked up into her eyes the color of jeans faded from summer heat and the morning glories painted on his mother's china. She wore a petite smile that made dimples wane on her cheeks.

"It looks like we got some of the same problems," she said, "and I could've used someone when my dad left, so I figured I'd be that someone for you."

Elijah was suddenly furious, his eyes starting to burn, and the heat from the church possessed him once more like a burning fire.

"I don't need anyone. I just need him to be gone."

He meant to sound angry but his words came out a stream of stammers and heavy breaths. "He's all there is now. He's in the mirror when I comb my hair, he's in my sister's tears, and in that church, and in the goddamn seeds in the garden. At least your father left, mine became another person, and even though he's gone he's still fucking there, screwing everything up."

He tasted something sour like spoiled milk or old fruit on his tongue, and tears ran onto his chapped lips. It was so quiet Elijah thought he could hear the sand sifting through the grass and lifting into the air like uncaged birds. He let his stare detach itself from the dust and plants and shift to Ruby. Elijah expected her to look upset or startled but she was the same.

"Come on," she said. "You could use a drink, right now."

He squinted his eyes, and his nose wrinkled. Ruby pushed past him and started toward the road, lifting her knees to her waist as she walked to step over the grass that got higher farther away from the church. Elijah followed her. They walked along the empty asphalt in silence, Ruby standing on her toes to balance on the white line of paint, and Elijah picked at his nails, watching her. The scratches on his hand had stopped bleeding, red now crusted over his wounds.

He was surprised that he hadn't seen his mother's car yet. It was not like him to disappear like this.

They arrived at a shack about a half a mile from where they went to school. It was made of wood, washed white by rain, surrounded by grass and weeds. As they got closer, Elijah could smell the faint scent of mildew and cologne that could only be worn by high school boys. Ruby stuck out her hand towards him.

"Come on, this'll take your edge right off. You can just forget about him," she said.

When he didn't respond, she continued.

"Lots of us hang here after the football games. It's where we keep the liquor."

"Oh," he said before coughing.

Ruby pulled him into the shack and he ducked to not hit his head on the door frame where the wood was splintered and hacked off. There was a stained pink blanket that covered the entire floor of the small space. Two discolored bean bags and a blue icebox with no lid sat in the far corner.

She threw herself into one of the seats, pulling Elijah with her, so he landed in the other. The wind whistled through a hole in one of the wall panels, and he noticed a pile of miscellaneous items near the door: crumpled cigarette packs and dirty t-shirts, horseshoes and rope. Ruby sat up as straight as she could and pulled the icebox between her knees to search it.

"What'd you want?" She asked, "It looks like we have Fireball, Bud Light, and some Deep Eddy."

He ran his hand through his hair and leaned towards her, looking at the bottles. There was a bull bucking in Elijah's stomach and the nausea from before was returning. He didn't know what he was doing.

"I'll just take whatever you're getting," he said, arching his neck to look at her.

"Okay," she said pulling out two beers and trying to hide her smirk with her hair.

Ruby handed him the bottle. It was room temperature with gold liquid. His hands willed him to release the bottle but they remained; it all felt wrong but titillating. He should stop but he couldn't like there was another, greater force controlling him. She reached over and opened the bottle for him, some of it splashing on his fingers. It was the color of his sister's eyes. He moved his grip to the neck of the bottle.

"Well?" she said.

"Nothing. I'm going."

He felt somehow like he was entering a second stage of his life. This was the moment where he'd become the person to drink beers with girls in shacks, and leave church, and forget fathers. Elijah brought the beer to his lips, sucking the liquid from it like a man dying of thirst, and then flames engulfed him. He sputtered. He was sure that feeling had left his arms. His lips were tingling and tainted.

Ruby giggled, "I knew you'd hadn't drank before."

She took the cap off her own beer and sipped it with no struggle. Elijah wiped his mouth on his arm.

"It'll get better if you go slow," she said.

"You sure? I can't imagine how that'd ever get better."

"Just try it."

"Fine," he said, tilting the bottle to sip it once more. It was still bitter and his face still twisted like a child eating a lemon, but it was tolerable.

“There you are,” Ruby said. “Maybe once you can ride with the training wheels, we can get you the big boy stuff.” She took out the whiskey and drank two large mouthfuls.

# # #

The sky was turning bruised and purple, and Elijah had no idea how long they'd been there. Everything was soaked in warmth and his stomach felt bloated as if a rounded beer belly had already appeared. Ruby was splayed across the two bean bags. Her head laid on Elijah's waist. Sweat had gathered in his underarms and now he had two wet stains.

“I just don't want to end up like him, you know?” he said, gazing at the ceiling, counting the splinters in the wood.

“I know.”

“Because all this town's been here for generations. We don't leave or change. We just copy. We go get the same job as our parents and wear the same clothes on Sunday morning.”

“I know.”

“What if I become like him,” he said under his breath. “I already am like him. Look at me, Ruby. Drinkin' and messing up shit already. My mom's going to have a cow.”

He sat up a little so he could look at Ruby. He could smell the beer that they had probably spilt on their clothes at some point during the day and was now aged.

“What if I'm just destined to be a horrible person? Drink, hurt some little girl, hurt my family.” He laughed, but it was loaded with spite, “I guess it don't matter anyhow, the Lord forgives all.” Elijah shouted the last part.

Ruby tried to lift herself up to get back on her bag but nearly fell so she compromised to just lean on Elijah's shoulder. Her makeup was smudged around her eyes.

“Shhh,” she said. “Just because your daddy’s shitty doesn’t mean you are. My mom is an elementary school teacher, goes to church two times a week, and has a book club on Saturday. Now tell me, do you think I’m going to be like that?”

He pushed his heels against the floor to keep them from sliding off the bean bags. He felt defiant. She had a point but he was not about to admit it.

“I’d be a part of your book club,” he said.

Ruby snorted as she laughed. This time it wasn’t out of pity, Elijah thought. The outer corner of her eyes had a tiny ripple of wrinkles, and the curls in her hair had unraveled, leaving her blonde locks straight but calm and beautiful. Lifting his hand and placing it on her jaw, he turned her face in his direction. Her laughs had quieted to soft giggles, and he kissed her, nearly missing her lips and keeping his eyes open. He wasn’t really sure what to do with his hands but she placed one of hers on his neck. It lasted about five seconds, but it felt longer, and when she pulled away, he could taste her lipstick, like wax and flat grape soda, where it colored his lips.

“What was that for?” she asked. Her lipstick was smudged now too.

Elijah shrugged. He wasn’t really sure why he kissed her. It was something foreign and there. She was still facing him, biting her lip and looking into his eyes as if she were searching for something.

“It’s okay,” she said.

Ruby swung a thin leg with a knobby knee over his waist so she was sitting on him. Her skirt swallowed his thighs. She was holding his neck again, and her mouth covered his, this time for much longer. He felt like he was being drowned in tongue and melted purple crayons, but he kissed her back. She moved to run her fingers in his hair, and as she touched it, he realized how dry his mouth was. Ruby pulled away, sitting up in his lap, and reached for the ends of her shirt.



As she pulled it over her head it, he realized how much smaller she seemed without it, only blemished skin and protruding bones in a polyester bra the color of strawberries just pulled off the vine. Elijah breathed in short pants. Ruby kept her eyes on his as she reached for the end of his polo and lifted it above his arms. It was too small for his shoulders and got stuck around his elbows. He shivered as the wind came in through the doorway and assaulted his bare skin.

She threw his shirt on top of hers and leaned to touch her lips to his neck. Her hands gripping either side of his waist, and he could feel the greasy remains of lotion on her fingertips that she must've put on earlier. Her nails were ridged and uneven like they had been chewed off. The floorboards creaked under them as he retracted further into the bean bag. Ruby left wet kisses on his jawline and licked the sweat from his neck. Her hair engulfed his face and he reached to pull a strand out of his mouth.

"Are you okay?" Elijah heard her say against his skin now moist with saliva and sweat and beer.

He felt like his entire body wasn't there, and the parts that were, buzzed like bees swarming inside him. He stammered something incoherent and looked at his hands, his father's hands: torn and rough and resting on a girl's body. He tried to move them but couldn't. Elijah's vision blurred at the corners.

As Ruby reached both hands behind her back, he counted the freckles on her stomach to distract himself. A toad croaked from outside. Its leathery green body was probably as slimy as his neck felt. Her bra slid off her shoulders and she put it with the rest of her clothes. Her breasts were small, nipples the color of flowering judas. Elijah tried to look away but she held his face in her hands barely touching his hair that wasn't his. He didn't see how small and girlish her nose was until now. It looked like it hadn't yet grown into the rest of her face.

Ruby leaned in to kiss him again, and he thought if his heartbeat quickened anymore he might die. His legs were numb from her sitting on them and the air seemed to be fleeing from the room. It all felt so wrong, so shameful. The frog croak again.

He pushed Ruby onto her bean bag and stood up, hitting his head on the shack's ceiling before crouching. Dark purple lipstick was everywhere: his arms, her chin, his neck, her cheek. She was splayed partially on the cushion with her limbs on the blanket covering the floor, and Elijah wondered if this was how his father left Julie. Naked, alone, drunk, in a shack that reeked of beer and molding wood. Ruby's mouth was opened so there was a thin darkness between her lips, her eyes open so they looked perfectly round.

"I can't do this," Elijah said.

She had a cut on the outer side of her arm. She must've caught herself on a splinter to avoid the fall. Scarlet burst on her skin.

"I'm sorry," he said before turning toward the exit.

"Wait," Ruby said.

She stood up, still naked. Elijah looked up to stare at the ceiling. Everything was tense, and he felt sticky and disgusting, like he needed to take shower after shower. But, even then, he wasn't sure if he'd feel normal. Cloth tickled his stomach, and Elijah looked down to see Ruby handing him his shirt.

"It's okay," she said. "I understand."

She offered a weak smile, and pressure built in his eyes. Elijah's jaw was cemented, and he couldn't move it to speak. He smelled her perfume on his shirt as he took it from her. He nodded, moving his head so little that it could hardly be considered a nod.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, turning back towards the door and walking outside.

He didn't stop to look at his surroundings. He ran, letting the wind steal the freckles from his hands and the red in his hair. He ran, stepping in the muddy puddles to wash the alcohol from his body. He ran, only stopping at the graves of cherry trees and the blue mailbox with "The Martin Family" painted on the side.

He walked up their driveway and towards the garden. And for the first time in the past two days, Elijah sobbed. He cried for Julie Byers, and for Esther, and for himself. He cried until tears ran down his chest and he had burns under his eyes from rubbing them so much.

He fell to his knees. The grass was wet from the sprinklers and he could feel the water soak into his jeans. The only light came from the porch and the stars and the moon. He felt exhausted and detached like maybe the next gust of wind would just turn him into a sea of leaves and carry him away. Elijah lay on the ground amongst the fruit and green, but then he felt it. The moths that had been rioting inside him all day threatened to break free. He barely had enough time to sit up before he vomited onto branches and cherries.

He coughed, covered in snot, and tears, and his insides. Elijah heard someone snap a twig or a branch behind him. It was Esther.

"Hey," she said, coming closer to him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She stood wearing a black nightgown, curling her toes on the grass. He wanted to stand up but he wasn't sure if he could without puking so he started crying again. He heard Esther sigh as she kneeled down, hugging him with one arm from the side.

"It's okay. You're just angry."