

Suddenly a Bright Cloud Overshadowed Them

After the burial, June and Daniel, my two older siblings, have planes to catch.

"I need to be on set in five days, and there's so much to do even before that," says June.

"And I could only get the four days off, it's back to the desk tomorrow morning," says Daniel.

I nod. I know what they're saying. Of course, June knows I know, but she says it anyway.

"Could you handle the house? There's a real estate agent I went and saw yesterday." The week she buries our father, she's already selling his home.

"Yes," Daniel agrees, "we must move as fast as possible. Just a few days here, Mick, we'll reimburse you."

Because I live only three hundred miles from home, and not three thousand, like June, the answer is yes. Because I may be between jobs and subsisting on food stamps and teaching watercolor lessons in assisted-living common rooms, the answer is yes.

"Of course," I say. "I'll put everything in place."

At the airport, I hug June, but I'm not sure if I should hug Daniel. He's so much older, I really never knew him all that well. Especially now, when this whole stage play of grief is supposed to form some common bond between us.

"OK," I say.

"Yep," he responds, and so we shake hands.

"Hey, we can maybe do something for Christmas, right?" June says brightly. "You two can come to California, it'll be nice, away from the cold."

"Right," Daniel says, "like I want to be on the beach on Christmas Day."

"Maybe," I smile. Then, one by one, they're off the ground, and I'm still here. I walk to the temporary parking lot, and choke Dad's truck to life in its way: turning it once, then waiting five minutes before trying it again. Don't ask me why, but that's how it works. On the ride back, the sky burns out like a Van Gogh daydream. Dad was probably happy to die in the Fall, in these

sorts of colors. Although, to be honest, the same could be said for every season. Dad just liked the looks of the world, wherever and whenever he was.

It's one of the first cool nights, when the cold can't be avoided by simply pulling a sweater on. So I go about trying to start a fire in the woodstove in the living room. I was never very good at this, as a kid. Once I get the kindling burning, I check the mudroom for wood. There's about half a cord stacked inside, and through the window, I can see the other cord-and-a-half neatly arranged on the raised bed by the barn, covered with a blue tarp. What a waste. Dad split enough fuel for a winter he'd never see. No doubt June will figure a way to tack it on to the cost of the house. She's a bloodhound for money; I half-wish I had her sense. After the fire's lit, I settle on the couch with a blanket and pillow. The room is empty, and the fire's furnace roar dulls to the occasional crack and whisper, so I read aloud from a book of Dylan Thomas poems I find on the coffee table. *Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark on the horizon walking like the trees the wordy shapes of women.* I fall asleep on the couch, though upstairs there are now three empty bedrooms.

In the morning, the house smells like woodsmoke, and my neck is cricked from laying up against the arm of the couch. There's the thought of Dad, comes second after my neck, then the scramble to push him out. How long will I have to push him out until he stays out for good? I cycle my arms in front of me until they propel me off the couch and into the kitchen. I head for the fridge, open it, and remember June emptying everything into a trash bag. This is her one contribution. Because Dad was dead five days before he was found, food spoiled and rotted in the kitchen. She went through without prejudice, knocking whole bunches of rotten grapes and sealed tins of mushroom soup into her yawning bag. The kitchen smelled a little better, though the scent of rot still drifted around the rest of the house, exuding from some other location. June spent the funeral weekend in a hotel by the river, while Daniel slept at an old high school buddy's home. Only I stayed in the house, sitting awake all night reading the rites of *Shiva* online. Dad would hate such a blasphemy, an introduction of the occult into the careful Christian order of his home. The Jesuses--crucifixes, paintings, statues, busts, amulets, badges, blankets, books--all watched me with Dad's silent eyes, waiting for me to slip up.

The real estate agent is expected in two days, a local woman who runs estate sales, and brings a municipal trash bin along for the 'excess,' as June called the contents of the house. I have the job of sorting through everything and determining what to save and what to leave behind.

Do you want anything? I asked June when she first suggested clearing out. She looked up from her tea, and glanced through the doorway into the dim living room, where stacks of CDs and books wrestled with the furniture. She shook her head. Most of her stuff she had already taken, when Mom died. The woman's touch was gone.

At least Daniel walked through the house, filling his backpack with odds'n'ends. *Look at this Mick*, Daniel said, holding up a handful of empty shotgun cartridges, "Dad and I used to pick these up in the quarry." I smiled and nodded, only I had never gone on any of these excursions, being too young.

I start in the kitchen. Most of the dishes are junk: chipped plates, some burnt wooden spoons, some melted plastic tupperware containers with the stain of tomato sauce still smeared in the crevices. A favorite mug from when I was a kid, with a picture of Elmer Fudd and his shotgun on the side. Some nice, still sharp, steak knives. The salad spinner makes me stop. Who remembers the salad spinners in their life? And yet, there's Dad, shouting from the sink to June and Daniel upstairs that it's time to eat, yanking the line of the spinner like the starter on a lawn mower. The spinner's got a heavy duty crack running from about halfway up the side to the center of the bottom. I pour some water in it, and the crack leaks a slow, but steady, dribble. Discard.

I'm about to make my way into the dining room when I see a horse. It's outside, in the backyard, I can see it through the window above the kitchen sink. I pause, and consider grabbing my shoes sitting next to the couch, but there's not enough time. There's a sense of urgency about the sighting of the horse, a knowing that if the horse is not investigated immediately, there's a chance it will leave, or perhaps never have been there at all. I cross the room to the glass doors to the porch. Gently, so as not to frighten the animal, I pull the door open.

The horse is gone. I can hear something, but I don't pursue it, writing it off as a ghost of my imagination. This is not the first time this week I've made this mistake. That first night,

didn't Dad come walking down the stairs, asking if I wanted a cup of tea, asking if I needed to be woken up in the morning? Didn't Mom tell me to make sure I left the porch lights on for Daniel when he came home? And now there's a horse. I laugh at myself, standing in the doorway looking out into the dewy morning, but stop quickly. My laughter doesn't sound right in this place, not anymore.

In place of the horse, I see a man, in a baseball cap and holding a drink in one hand, riding a mower in neat lines across the back lawn. I watch long enough to confirm that he isn't also a mirage, but actually the neighbor, the one who Dad once told me comes with his rum and coke and does yard work. Remembering my own work, I step inside. But I can't get the image of the horse out of me, and listen close for the faint possibility of clopping hooves.

"Michael?"

The voice startles me out of the kitchen stool, where I had been sitting in a stupor for the better part of an hour. The neighbor, empty glass in hand, is standing in the open doorway of the kitchen, one thumb hooked in his jeans, leaning from one foot to the other. "Are you Michael, or Daniel?"

"Michael." I stand. "Listen, thanks for the mowing. I remember Mom saying something about that years ago, but I didn't know you kept on after she died."

He nods, and clicks the glass against the doorjamb.

"Yes, well, your dad started doing it for a few months, but I knew he wouldn't last too long what with his age, so I just started in one morning. Don't worry about it. I'm Rich, by the way."

There seems to be a line drawn between the inside of the house and the outside, two galaxies brushing up against each other at a black hole, unable to touch, an infinitely thin pane of glass between them. And I am in mine, and he in his.

"Nice to meet you. Anyway, thanks for that. It makes a big difference."

"Well, I was sorry to hear about Ken. He was a good neighbor." The man coughs, in the way men do when they speak together of such intimate things. I feel myself floundering.

"Were you the one who found him?"

The man's face wrinkles. "No. No, sorry, it wasn't me."

We both allow a moment of silence for the man to contemplate the emptiness of his glass and for me to contemplate the redness of my face. Finally, he looks up, speaks suddenly.

"Sure. Listen, you going to sell?"

I nod, but can't unwrap the dark muscles of the house that hold me in place enough to move any closer to the door.

"Well," he says, "it's just, I've got an uncle, he's made all sorts of money down in Virginia. Real estate and that. So, he's looking for a Summer getaway, you know."

I see the house for a moment from this man's eyes. The kitchen a wreck, dirt and woodsmoke inches thick on the walls, a buckling roof over a mudroom, and other than that, simple, square rooms with simple, rectangle windows. I shrug.

"Of course. I mean, I didn't think people bought one hundred year old farmhouses for Summer homes."

"Oh, sure. But, me being next door and all, I can do the labor on it cheap. Knock a few walls out, put some new sheetrock up. This place could really turn into something."

Did it need to turn into something? Could it be something else? It had been my mother's project, the house, for the decade she had gotten to enjoy it. Dad hung on for the ride, agreeing to renovations, running back and forth to the hardware store, while Mom chose paint colors, hung drywall, sanded and shaved stair railings to perfect cylinders, all with a calm fortitude, a confidence that, eventually, the job would be finished and the house would be better for it. It's still junk, sure, most of it. The house has always sat on a slant, the basement has always been just a hole with some rocks sticking out of dirt walls, the top step will always be slightly taller than the rest. Could it ever be anything than what it was when we first moved in, and us three kids slept on the floor in the hall next to the master bedroom, because none of the beds were set up yet? Of course, it could never be what it had been, because now they're both gone, and soon I'll be gone, too, and the house will be someone else's and something else.

He's not in the doorway anymore, the neighbor. Did I say goodbye to him? Did I finish the conversation, or did I just turn away, and lose track of him? I honestly can't remember. It's grief. It does strange things to you. That's the excuse I'll use this time. You can get away with anything when you've just shoveled dirt over your father's coffin. Hey, your pop's dead, what's

expected of you? If I allowed myself to feel the grief in the movie-hero way, maybe, I'd do something real crazy.

The second morning, I wake up to my phone buzzing next to my ear, flat on my stomach on the couch, one leg bristling with pins and needles where it hangs to the floor. I grab for the phone, drop it, then balance it on my ear.

"Mick, you there? How's the house look?" It's June. The house looks much as it did before, except the contents of the kitchen cabinets are now on the linoleum floor and there's a pile of dead plants creeping in through the doorway of the mudroom, where I was tossing the indoor pots.

"It looks fine."

"Just make sure it's ready this afternoon, ok? They're going to arrive around two, and I don't want them to have to wait while you shovel a bunch of his shit into your car."

Right. Because Dad's lifetime collecting books and old maps and images of the Madonna and odd musical instruments and notebooks from when we were all kids and he tried homeschooling us those few years, that's the shit June's talking about.

"I'll deal with the actual selling and all," she continues. "I just need you on point now. Can you do that for me?"

"I'm not a child, June." I don't usually speak back, but laying in the grave darkness of my dead father's home instills me with an unexpected frankness. There's a pause on the other side of the line.

"Don't be this way, Mick. Not now."

"Of course, June. Don't worry. Don't worry about anything." I think I say goodbye, but I'm not exactly sure. Suddenly, the phone's on the floor, I'm up, half expecting my mother to walk out somewhere, give me a neatly written list of chores to get done. like she used to on Saturday mornings. And if I got done, I was allowed to go biking down the street to Cam's farm, where we climbed around in rusted out trucks and antagonized the chickens, or snuck into the garage where Daniel and Cam's older brother had "band practice," which usually consisted of getting baked and then occasionally strumming some sonic atmosphere music into the concrete nexus.. But that was fifteen years ago, and my mother's been dead five years now.

Upstairs, two of the bedrooms are pretty much empty of furniture, leaving only the traces of us saturated in the walls. Mom kept the rooms neat for when us kids came to visit, filled with all the childhood paraphernalia that kept me nostalgic, but when she died, Dad tossed most of the stuff we didn't claim ourselves, and shoved the leftovers into the closet. Still, as I peer in, I catch glimpses of what it used to be: the hump of the dresser that the lego samurai had to climb to reach the gangster's lair; the place where the wall corners, and I would sometimes read through the night while Daniel slept; the stains pocking the carpet where I dropped paint or clay. No more movie posters, no more Halloween masks, no more little metal soldiers brought back by Daniel as a souvenir from Scotland. The second bedroom is pretty much the same, although a few of June's high school photos still remain, taped into the alcove where a window used to be. And stars. Stars that glitter at night from the ceiling. I don't like being in that room at all; I always feel like I'll be in trouble with June. It's her room.

The same for Mom and Dad's room. Well, Dad's room. Well, the master bedroom. This is where they found Dad, propped in a sitting position on the floor, back against the mattress, from what the police report had told us. Apparently he spent most of the last week of his life in this room, judging by the food remnants scattered around on the bed, the books with pages ripped from them, the dresser drawers leaking underwear. There's a pile of jeans and button down shirts next to the mirror, and socks everywhere. The police report guesses Dad didn't leave the house for close to seven days straight. "Because of the pain in his throat," Daniel supplied as a reason. But he still got dressed each morning.

Why didn't he let anyone help? June had asked the air between us at the burial.

Mom was the only one he let help, I replied quietly, from behind her, unsure if she even wanted an answer. Mom was the only one Dad ever let in really at all. Always kept each of us at a distance, kept us from seeing inside the mysterious pains he carried. Waved June off when she suggested a nurse come visit the house. Burnt in the woodstove the pamphlets for the retirement home Daniel gave him. I think I might have been the only one who got it, this seclusion, this hiding.

The ripped books are mostly religious texts. St. Augustine, Mother Theresa, Pope John Paul II. The Bible.

So now, deal with me as you please, and command my life breath to be taken from me, that I may go from the face of the earth into dust.

This is from the book of Tobit. Who the fuck is Tobit? I flip through the shredded pages. I guess there must be a bunch of unimportant prophets, right? Ones that no one really likes reading from. That no one cares for? But, of course, Dad knew them all, made a point of it to memorize just about every name in his New International Version. This is perfect for him. I gather the torn pages into a neat pile, and carefully slide the books back on the shelf, next to the untouched photo albums my mother had meticulously cared for. The ripped pages I will keep, and perhaps make something out of, a papier mache icon of my father, or a collage in memoriam.

There's still a rancid smell to the room. How long will it stay? Should I spray something before the real estate agent arrives? Should I take the sheets out? I pull the covers back, and find a few urine stains. They blotch the white sheets like some old projected map of the Americas. This was where he lay, I think suddenly. This is evidence, DNA assurance that my father existed in those last days, and that this was, indeed, where he had been. I gather the sheets and blankets, and toss them into the hallway. The smell doesn't wither. It'll take some time, I guess, and rub my hands against my slacks, the same ones I wore to Dad's funeral. I work at the window; it opens with a few hard shoves, and a blast of fresh air swoops in, temporary relief. I place my face as close to the mosquito screen, and breathe fully. Straightening up, the fresh air battles with the rotting inside. The smell doesn't even seem to come from the bed, but from the closet. Mom's closet, where Dad left all her clothes and shoes and private binders and papers untouched for the ten years since her death. I remember hiding here, the afternoon of her wake, not wanting to face the performance of mourning we were all supposed to give for the neighbors. I climbed in until her dresses were hanging around my shoulders, and closed myself in. Now, I pull open the door.

The cat is inside. The cat is dead. The cat is the source of the smell. It lies on its side, legs stretched out, one paw almost comically stuck by an exposed claw reaching into one of Mom's shoes. What's the cat's name? I don't even remember. I remember it being alive the last time I visited, about six months ago. Of course it was.

What do you do with a dead cat? A cat this dead, so dead that fur seems to be blowing off of its body and into the dark corners of the closet. I think about calling Animal Control, think about calling Cam, asking him if he wants to dissect it, the way we used to do with roadkill, think about calling June. *June, it's Mick. I've been having weird dreams lately. A horse. I dunno, it's just strange, isn't it? I don't usually dream this much. And now, only two days here. Maybe it's something in the water. Of course it could be. Maybe it's why Dad went, huh? A horse, yeah, a horse. And there's a dead cat, too.* I don't make this phone call.

Instead, I take one of Mom's dresses (I guess it doesn't matter if it gets dirty or not), and wrap the cat in it. Then, using one of the wide, thin photo albums, I gently slide the cat onto it, like a shovel, or a bread paddle, and carry the carcass into the hallway, where I leave it on the pile of soiled sheets. Maybe I'll bury it later, maybe not. When we put Dad in the ground, it was the 2nd funeral for all of us, and we were under no delusions. Didn't invite anyone, not even a priest. *Are you sure this is how we should do it?* I asked June beforehand.

No need to make it more difficult than it needs to be, Daniel replied for her, and we left it at that. Without the priest, without the crying and the sympathetic stares and the flowers tossed into the pit, I realized it was just a box in the ground. The cat doesn't inspire a change of heart in me.

At last, the smell in Dad's room recedes, ever so slightly. I sit on the bed, and start going through the ripped pages, one by one.

I am the potter, and you are the clay.

Was it not enough for you to graze on the best pasture, that you had to trample the rest of your pastures with your feet?

Give yourself fully to God. He will use you to accomplish great things on the condition that you believe much more in His love than in your own weakness.

To live well is to work well, to show a good activity

Cutting through my reading, I hear the voice of a woman, speaking from outside the window. I pull my body off the empty bed, and spy out the window. There's a woman standing in the backyard, close to the porch, next to the nonchalant mass of a horse. So, it wasn't a dream. I look down on woman and horse, glowing like health in the afternoon haze. She's probably in

her thirties, and has a pretty, organized face. The horse is a silty white, like the underside of a wave.

"Hello!" I call down, surprising myself with the strength of my voice. She looks up, guarding her eyes with a bent hand.

"Oh hi! I didn't know anyone was here! Sorry about this. The neighbor called and told me Bridgette was out again, so I came as fast as I could. Such a pain!"

"Just a second, I'll come down."

"Gotchya."

I nearly step right on the wrapped cat on the landing, but wiggle around it and thunder down the stairwell. I pause long enough to pull a different pair of pants from my duffel bag, and yank off the wretchedly wrinkled slacks. I wade through my own chaos in the kitchen, and step out through the open door, into the light. The woman waits for me by the stairs, one leg cocked on the bottom step. The sunlight is warm, and the hair on my arms prick appreciatively where it soaks in. I remember this sensation, from growing up, stepping out on a warm afternoon and drinking the sun, an almost ticklish, oddly orgasmic experience. I smile at the woman, and she smiles back.

"You're Mick, then."

"Yes, mam."

"Well," she speaks with the drawl of the place, an accent that digs into each simple word, like the drop of a fly fishing weight into the water. "My name's Ellie, and this is Bridgette, the troublemaker of my crew."

The horse is there, really there. She's chewing on the riot of weeds falling out over the stone wall of my mother's herb garden. She looks up when I step onto the porch, but only shakes her head to dislodge a few flies, and continues eating. The sun glances off her auburn back, and white breath rolls from the wide nostrils. Her jaw moves circularly, gnashing the weeds into pulp before swallowing.

"You're real," I murmur to Bridgette, letting her wet nose explore the back of my hand and wrist.

"What's that?" Ellie asks.

The surrealist painter Salvador Dali was notorious for including images in the background of his paintings whose purpose was not immediately evident. There, in "The Birth Of Man," sits the cracking egg of the earth, and the man clawing from it, blood oozing out, another figure and a child observing. But there, too, the tiny image of two men in pointed caps, discussing some important matters in the distance. As if to remind the viewer that more occurs than that which we care to pay attention to. That we cannot encapsulate all that is happening on our own meager terms. This, perhaps, is what Bridgette is trying to tell me when she snorts, turns, and sets off across my father's long back yard towards the woods at a quick trot. As Ellie and I stand in stark relief in the foreground, Bridgette asserts herself as background, begging for the eye to see first what the mind ignores.

Ellie is quicker to recover from surprise than I am.

"Shit, Bridgette, don't!" she cries, and follows as fast she can, hair streaming out behind her, sturdy boots pounding the earth. I follow, stretching my legs to overtake her. At this point, Bridgette is already at the edge of the woods and, like some last mist disappearing under the sun's heat, disintegrates into the foliage. Ellie doesn't slow.

"I have a hunch we'll be able to find her in there, the ground's still soft. Bridgette! Bridgette, would you slow down, please?"

I don't have enough breath to reply. We both slow, by some unknown premonition, before the edge of the trees, then dash in.

In the woods, everything is familiar and nothing is known. The trees are all wood and bark and leaf, exactly as I expect them to be. But as the sun-bathed lawn disappears from view behind us, I immediately become disoriented, lost. I haven't explored these woods since I was a child. Ellie keeps her eyes down, following the deep gouges of Bridgette's hooves, Small branches snap against her outstretched palms, and the bending boughs of the fir trees leave snaking scratch marks along her legs. I fall in behind her, and almost forget what it is we came in for. Am I chasing this woman? Am I following her? What are we looking for?

"Hold," she says, stopping in front of me suddenly, so that I almost barrel into her and have to grasp her shoulders to stop myself. We stop, and the subtle sounds of the forest whoosh in on us, suddenly. The stretching of the tree limbs, the rustle of unknown civilizations beneath

the leaf cover. And then, what Ellie stopped for, the unmistakable assertion of a horse clearing her nostrils. We stalk forward, and there, head down in a puddle as if it had been her destination all along, stands Bridgette.

Ellie waves at me to pause, and goes forward alone, cooing softly to the horse. Bridgette steps forward like an innocent daughter, laying her long chin into the palm of Ellie's hand, which travels slowly up it, tickling the throat, then up the massive stretch of neck to Bridgette's mopy mane. She wraps her fingers into the hair, all the while keeping herself nose to nose with the horse, and slips from her back pocket a tightly coiled lead. Bridgette almost bows in deference as Ellie slips the lead into a loose loop around her neck, then shakes once, and returns to the pleasure of her puddle.

"Well," Ellie laughs, turning to me. "You must remind her of Kenny." She beckons me towards her, and I approach slowly, afraid Bridgette will try to dash off again.

"Why do you think that?" I ask.

Ellie gestures to the ground. The puddle Bridgette is slurping from, I notice now, is the rut of a four-wheeler track. "Bridgette and I would take your father out along this trail, when he was able. Get him a good ways into the woods, away from the house."

It hurts, suddenly, that little stretch of skin in my abdomen beneath which lay, not the heart, but perhaps some older, more primitive organ that deals more directly with the loss of flesh and blood. Something that has little to do with the emotional centers of the brain, but rather the nerves realizing they've lost a bit of themselves somewhere, and can't locate it. I remember the same place aching all through my mother's last few months. And now, I notice again. Maybe it's just a cramp from the running. But the pain feels too familiar.

"My father went riding?"

"Yep," she responds, wiping a drip of sweat from the bridge of her nose. She nods her head to the summit of Bridgette's back. "Come on, I'll give you a lift back to the house."

My eyes involuntarily must've gone wide, because Ellie laughs.

"It's no problem," she says, placing a hand on my shoulder and drawing me up alongside the horse's flank. "Here, just grab the mane here, and throw your right leg over. I'll shove you the rest of the way."

I don't have enough time to protest before Ellie's knotting a fistful of Bridgette's mane around my fingers, and I'm suddenly flying into the air, Ellie's flexed palms wrapping my waist and propelling me over Bridgette's back. For a moment, I think I'm going to go clear over to the other side. For a moment, I don't think I've left the ground at all. For a moment, I think I might cry, or vomit. But suddenly, I'm sitting on Bridgette's back, shifting to find some flatness, some part of her that isn't moving in such a terrifyingly alive way beneath me. Ellie swings up behind, wrapping her arms forward around my ribs and squeezing slightly to brace herself. There is a slight shift of Ellie's left hand, a tug on the lead, and suddenly Bridgette is turning in the track, and we're moving.

"You used to do this with my father?" I ask.

"Yep," she says. It sounds like she may want to say more, but she sighs instead, and the three of us step slowly down the path in silence.

I wonder what my father might've thought, with this young woman's arms clutching him in a way more intimate than my parents had ever been. Was it disconcerting for him? Or comforting? Did it remind him of my mother, or satisfy a desire my mother might not have ever been able to? Was it a sexual thrill, this woman and, yes, the aliveness of the animal beneath him? I shudder, involuntarily, when I realize that this is the first time in memory I ever tried to guess the hidden interiors of my father's mind. It is a good thing my back is turned to Ellie. I let the tears drown my vision of the path before us.

Perhaps by the shaking in my shoulders, Ellie senses my grief.

"We used to come out here once or twice a week," she says quietly, words almost rhythmically timed with Bridgette's steady step. "Kenny and Bridgette took a liking to each other the first time they met, when she first cut loose about a year ago. Like I said, she's a bit of a troublemaker, but when I finally found them, she was eating crabapples from his hand."

She tells me stories, slowly and carefully, as we walk. The trail ahead of us breaks and forks, and I suspect Ellie is leading me on a long route back home, but I don't mind. She tells me mysteries about my father: that he kept a careful bird-watching journal; that for a short time he took up drinking, only to abandon it; that on occasion he cooked a large roast meal, the kind his Irish mother used to cook when he was a child, and invited her, her husband, and the neighbor

over for the evening. These things had never been told to me, and I don't imagine to my siblings either, on our rare visits. I realize guiltily that most of the time I spent with my father, I spoke only about myself, imagining that the only means of living left to him was vicariously, through my own life. Ellie tells me a joke that Dad told her three or four times, and I laugh through my tears.

Bridgette pulls up, and I lift my hands to my face, rubbing the tears away and stretching my eyelids, as if from a dream. Ellie's hand reaches up from the horse's lead, and she points into the woods a ways to our left. Three pine trees stand leaning towards each other, sheltering a small indent in the ground where the needles collected.

"It's there he said he wanted to be buried. Used to ask me to leave him here, and he'd nap, on the days the 'squitoes weren't too bad, lying right there on the ground. Said the trees reminded him of his kids."

We pause, Bridgette shifting impatiently from foot to foot, and then Ellie ushers us forward again.

"We buried him two days ago," I say softly. Ellie's arms seem to stiffen.

"I didn't hear about it, or read an obit in the paper," she says, voice close to my ear. My face burns up.

"No one was invited. We just... We just stuck him in the ground."

She doesn't reply.

The path finally emerges from the woods onto the edge of a dirt road I recognize vaguely as the one I learned to bike on. Bridgette quickens her pace in the newfound freedom, and soon, we reach tar, and then the peak of my roof comes into view. Ellie leads Bridgette toward the driveway, but pulls up at the end, turning Bridgette once in the road. An unfamiliar, painfully clean Honda sits in my driveway.

"Expecting company?" Ellie asks, and I shake my head.

As I slip from Ellie's arms and awkwardly drop off Bridgette's back, the driver's side door opens, and a woman steps out. She wears a pressed gray skirt, and a pastel blue button down shirt. She's smiling, and holding a heavy duty clipboard in front of her like a wrapped present.

"Mr. Bennett? You're Michael Bennett, aren't you?"

"Yes, mam." I say. I hear Ellie drop to the driveway behind me. The woman nods primly.

"Yes, well, I'm Karen Tripp. I'm here to discuss the sale of your father's home? Your sister told you about me?" Each sentence ends like a question. I squint my eyes in her direction, and the clipboard slowly rises to her breast like a shield. My eyes drift up, over her shoulder, to the front steps of the house, the bright green frame of the door, the dim glimpse of sunlight leaking over the photographs hung in the front room. I shake my head. Ellie puts a hand on my shoulder, and squeezes firmly. I shake my head again.

"Mr. Bennett?" The woman asks.

"No, Ms. Tripp. I'm sorry. I don't think we'll sell, anyhow."

The woman leans forward, as if she can't hear.

"Excuse me?"

Behind me, Bridgette clicks her hooves against the stones of the driveway. The crab apple tree in the front yard catches the wind, and makes itself known. Somewhere from the backyard, by some trick of my mind, I hear my mother's steady hammering as she fixes a clapboard, or drives frames into the wet earth of her vegetable garden. And, there it is, the murmur that always accompanied her, by her side, and by mine, though I used to never register it: my father, telling her about his day, or singing under his breath a tune I never bothered to learn. My eyes drop back to Ms. Tripp's concerned face, ear turned in my direction, waiting for me to speak. Above us, the sun slips behind the cover of a cloud. But the light doesn't dim or disappear. This is not a moment when the chill picks up and a gray threat of rain picks up in the air. No, this is a gentle whisper of a cloud, an interlude, and in the moment before I speak, the sun appears above us again, bathing the yard in a satisfied light.