

In Our Father's House

A Novel

By Caroline Roper

## Author's Note

For my senior thesis, my goal was to draft a novel. My creative writing experience thus far had mostly been in the personal essay and short story genres, but I always had an interest in novel-writing. I wanted to understand the process for writing a novel, and I thought I would benefit from guidance, support, and structure of a senior thesis project.

When I started writing my thesis, it had been a year since I'd taken a creative writing class, and thought I'd had a long-term interest, in writing, I had not become habituated to writing daily, on my own time, without short-term deadlines. In the summer, I began making an effort to wake up early and write for a short time before work. At first, I wrote anything that came to mind, and when I didn't have any new inspiration, I revised my previous work.

In July, I found inspiration in a piece of folk art I saw in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It was James Hampton's *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*. The piece was a liturgical assembly made of scraps and tin foil. An unmarried janitor created it over the course of 14 years in a rented storage unit in Washington, DC. He believed that God had commanded him to create his masterpiece. I wrote several scenes about James Hampton, but I gradually departed from his biography. I changed his name to Jim, placed him in a rural setting, and gave him a wife and two daughters. I wrote pieces as they came to me from whichever point of view seemed convenient. My main goal was to get in the habit of writing. I wrote about 70 pages in this unstructured manner.

During the fall semester, I tried to shape the work I'd written into a more cohesive form. I revised many of the individual scenes I'd written and tried to impose on them a clear timeline and fluid transitions. However, the piece remained chaotic, in large part because of the many points of view. During my pre-writing phase, I wrote from many points of view without regard for telling chronologically close parts of the story from the same point of view. In addition, I had trouble understanding Jim's motivations. In my first iteration of the story, I wrote that Jim was building a chariot. The chariot connoted God's judgment, but it never became clear to me why Jim wanted to convey a message about God's judgment.

I thought I'd found the solution when I decided to start the story with the death of Jim's younger daughter Nathalie. Over winter break, I wrote and revised 70 pages from Maribel's perspective using this premise, but the death of the daughter overshadowed the other themes and storylines that I wanted to bring out. The protagonist was rendered passive by grief, and the plot

progressed sluggishly.

Finally, in February, I got a strong foothold on the story when I began telling it from the perspectives of Maribel, Jim, and Julia. In the draft I finished, Jim is building a church as a refuge from sin and a place of communion with God. Jim's religious obsession is motivated by depression, his failure as a father and husband, and his distrust of female sexuality.

The draft that I present now is a good starting point, but I'm aware that some shortcomings persist, and I intend to continue revising. As I was writing, Julia increasingly became the protagonist in the story. When I further revise the novel, I may focus more on her to increase the book's cohesion. Maribel is a somewhat passive in the story, and if she remains one of the narrators, I must develop her character further. Furthermore, the storytelling is very straightforward. There are few instances where characters speak elliptically or with rich subtext. The tone of the writing seldom departs from the mood of the characters. When I revise further with specific attention to stylistic choices, I will be able create a much more sophisticated work.

Over the course of writing my thesis, I read the following works in addition to my personal reading. I read these books because the genre, characterization, style, or themes related closely to my goals for my novel. Many of these books were recommended by my senior thesis adviser.

*Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner

*Cold Sassy Tree* by Olive Ann Burns

*The Cottagers* by Marshall N. Klimasewiski

Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, and Job from the Bible

*The Little Friend* by Donna Tart

*The Secret History* by Donna Tart

*Selected Stories* by Alice Monroe

## Chapter 1

Jim awoke from a dream when, turning in his sleep, he kicked the footboard of the bed. In his dream, his younger daughter Nathalie was still an infant. She was crying and hungry, but she'd been sick for days and she was too weak to draw milk from her mother's breast. Jim had watched his wife Maribel struggle with Nathalie in her arms. Nathalie's face was wrinkled and red from crying. Her mouth stretched open and Jim saw her small throat, swollen and red. Jim knew he couldn't help, but he couldn't look away. He had brought her into this world where there was pain and suffering and not enough milk. He reached out to take Nathalie, curled in her mother's arms, and his wife Maribel pulled the child closer as if she were guarding her from a stranger or intruder. Jim recoiled, kicked the footboard, and woke up.

Now he was pacing in his kitchen and shaking himself fully awake. The light above the oven was on, but the rest of the room was in shadows. It was only a dream, not of the past, but of something that had never happened. Seven years ago, when Nathalie was an infant, they were all well-fed and contented. To crowd out the other thoughts, Jim focused on the image of Nathalie as a baby smiling in her sleep. He was lost in thought when he heard a sound. He didn't recognize that the sound was the front door, because he'd never heard it open so quietly. Jim turned on the brighter lights. His older daughter Julia was creeping up the stairs. When she saw him, she froze like an animal trying to camouflage with its surroundings.

Julia's eyes were wide when she said, "Dad. I'm sorry I startled you." Then she exhaled shortly a few times, trying to laugh.

Jim frowned at the laugh, at her disheveled clothes and hair, at the faint smell of sweat and wine that she had brought with her. "What are you doing coming home so late?" Jim asked. He walked towards her and Julia took a step up the stairs, backwards.

“I was at Susanna’s house,” she said. “She was upset, because of what's happening with her mama, and...”

“You wore perfume and rouge to comfort a friend?” Jim asked to his daughter. She was the picture of sin itself. Her lips were stained red and her cheeks were flushed.

“What do you mean?” Julia asked. “I always wear makeup. That’s nothing.” She took more steps up the stairs as if she'd simply go to bed now.

“Don’t make excuses, and don’t lie to me,” said Jim. “I don’t know who you think you’re fooling.” Jim grabbed Julia's arm.

Maribel came to the top of the stairs. “What’s going on?” she asked. “Both of you, what is this?”

Once Maribel spoke, Julia's face relaxed. Jim saw this. Maribel spoiled Julia. Worse, Julia knew that Maribel spoiled her, and she smiled smugly at him, knowing she’d come to no harm with Maribel around. “She has sinned and we must discipline her, Maribel,” said Jim. He repeated the old verse to himself, *Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from her.* “I won’t have my daughter allowing lusts and desires of this world to grow in her heart unchecked. She is to be a Godly woman, in control of her own tempers.”

“Let’s listen to what happened first,” said Maribel. She turned on the light above the stairs. Cross-stitched hens grinned at them from the yellow walls. A framed Bible verse hung above Maribel’s head reading, *As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

“I was at Suzanna’s house,” Julia said. “He doesn’t believe me, but I was. She was upset and I went over to comfort her.”

Still gripping both of Julia’s arms, Jim turned Julia around to face Maribel and said, “Do

you see this? Don't you smell the wine?"

Julia whined, "I mean it. I haven't been up to any trouble."

Speaking over Julia, Jim continued. "Can you look at her and tell me she's telling the truth?" Maribel opened her mouth as if to speak, but she hesitated. The words caught in her throat. "Of course you can't," said Jim. "She's sinned and she's lied to us both."

Jim looked Julia in the eyes for a few moments, and he felt her muscles tighten. He struck Julia with an open palm three times. More would not befit a man of God.

Julia barely flinched, but Maribel did. "Oh Jim," she said.

Julia pulled away from Jim.

"Jim, please," said Maribel. She said it quietly, but Julia still heard, and her face lit up in a self-satisfied smirk. Jim noticed that Nathalie was sitting at the top of the stairs, watching with impatient indifference. Jim looked at Nathalie and then at Maribel.

Maribel scooped Nathalie up as Nathalie whined, her eyes covered under Maribel's hand. Once Maribel was gone, Julia's face dropped again, with the fear she owed Jim.

"Apologize for the shame you've brought us," he said. Jim thought he saw the semblance of respect in the way she dropped her head while she backed away.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"Why, Julia? Tell me why you're sorry. Do you even know the difference between right and wrong?"

Julia shrugged. "I'm sorry," she mumbled again, no more sincerely.

"You have abandoned yourself to your desires. You have acted like an animal." Jim spat, nearly choking on the words. He pointed a finger at her chest. But what displeases me most is your deception, your disrespect for me."

Maribel returned. “That’s enough,” she said. Jim saw it again—that flicker of relief in Julia’s face when Maribel was there to protect her. Maribel came down the stairs and pulled the two apart from each other, held them at arm’s length. Then she let her arms drop and took a step back. “Julia, I know that you understand this is wrong. We want you to treat everyone you know and your own body with respect,” she said stiffly and indifferently, like it was something she’d memorized.

Julia nodded. It was almost as if they were winking at each other, glib insincerity in both of their voices. “And you won’t do it again,” Maribel said.

Julia shook her head no.

“So that’s all,” Maribel said. Julia went upstairs to go to bed, and Maribel looked at Jim with a begging look. Maribel brought Jim into the room, and said, “I heard what you told her. You said that her deception is what offends you.”

“She lies easily, like one who is practiced at it. It will only become easier to her if we allow her to continue growing wayward.”

“Jim,” Maribel said, and touched Jim’s arm gently. Jim jerked away from touch of Maribel’s calloused fingertips. “I know why you say these things to her. I know why you get so angry.”

“It is only because I am doing the will of the Father,” said Jim.

Maribel took a deep breath and shook her head slightly. They fell silent and pretended to sleep. Jim seethed. Maribel and Julia were wicked women, like the women of Zion in Isaiah: *haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, tripping along with mincing steps, with ornaments jingling on their ankles.*

Julia hadn't always been wicked. It began about four years ago when a couple from the church had come to Jim's house with their son, a young man named Peter with a lean frame and bad breath. Peter sat in Jim's easy chair.

Peter's mother began, "We brought Peter here to apologize. I'm afraid he's done wrong to your family, and we felt it necessary that we come and tell you in person." She paused and took a deep breath. Maribel and Jim waited with their eyebrows raised. "Peter, this is your responsibility," she said, nodding at him.

Peter stared at the carpet and he spoke mechanically, like a sewing machine whirring. He said, "Julia and I have engaged in conduct that is only appropriate in the context of marriage. I'm so sorry for what I did. I know that purity is very important to you and to God, and that God's plan is for us to remain pure until marriage. What we did was wrong and I hope that you forgive me."

Julia stared at the floor, her face crimson. She was holding very still. She didn't even move with her breath. It was the summer and the fan's whirring was the only thing easing the silence.

"We appreciate the apology," Maribel said. Her eyes were too wide and her voice was stiff and came in an unnatural pitch. "Of course, we agree that we as Christians ought to take these matters seriously," she said. She looked at Jim. "We believe that we must do our best to ensure that husbands and wives are unburdened by past loves. Jim, do you have anything to add?" she asked.

"There is no use for an apology in such matters," said Jim. He looked at Maribel as he spoke. "There is no excuse for someone giving in to the desires of the flesh at the expense of others and in violation of their faith. Such behavior reveals something about a person's true



nature that one can never forget.”

Peter’s parents widened their eyes. “We don’t wish to trivialize the matter,” said Peter’s mother. We understand it’s a grave situation.”

“Yes,” said Maribel. “We know you have done your best to be honest with us in trying circumstances. Thank you.” Julia and Maribel nodded in synchronicity. Their features were nothing alike but their expressions were, and there was something unsettlingly similar about the way they spoke and the way their moods fluctuated together.

When they had left, Jim turned to Julia. “You are not to become this type of woman,” he said. His arm was stretched out in the direction of Maribel. “You are to control yourself and respect those around you.”

Maribel’s eyes were full of tears. “Jim, it’s just one mistake,” she said.

“It’s depravity,” said Jim. “It’s nothing less.”

Julia fled to her room and cried while Jim and Maribel screamed at each other. “I told you I was sorry, there’s nothing else I can do,” Maribel cried.

“You didn’t even think you owed it to me to tell me yourself. And your apologies mean nothing.”

“Please, Jim, don’t take it out on Julia,” Maribel whispered. “She isn’t the one who hurt you.”

“You have set an example for her, and you have turned her against me.”

She had wanted him to find out, he was sure. She just didn’t have the courage to say it. The man didn’t live in their town anymore. He’d run like a coward once Jim had found out. He was gone the day after Jim had knocked on his door, grabbed him by his coat and told him God would punish him.

He would have found out sooner if he'd known women could be so depraved and simple. Maribel would say that she was going to deliver something to a customer and be gone for the greater part of the afternoon. She'd come back with the furniture still in the back of Jim's truck, saying, "It was a long drive. Such a pity to go all that way and find they didn't like it after all." How unnecessarily cruel it was, to blame all those unsold things on Jim and his handiwork. They had even been in Jim's house. Maribel had been confused when he asked her why. "Why?" she repeated to him, incredulously. "The same reasons anybody does it, for excitement, for pleasure. It meant nothing."

Despite everything, four years later Jim still shared with Maribel a bed, a home, and the furniture store that supported them both. The store was Maribel's idea. Before Maribel had come along, Jim had worked in construction. But it wasn't enough for her; she'd wanted something they could call their own. She wanted to build something. "It'll be something we can be proud of," she said. "Think of inviting our folks to see the place. They won't believe their eyes, our own store." This was in the days when Maribel was effusive and whispered her words with a feminine and airy cadence, before motherhood had made her embrace her practical side. Maribel lauded Jim's work, the pieces he carved for friends and his own folks on holidays and birthdays. She said that Jim ought to start his own store, and all her friends nodded their heads and agreed. The idea had meant so much to people—it meant they were rising above and doing something different from other folks in town.

So when they married, they built a store. They bought an old building where the heat didn't work and they fixed everything on their own. Maribel sold what she could to the people she knew until their friends had more furniture than they wanted. Then the loans they took to get

the place running dried up and they only made sales when Maribel called up old friends and recent acquaintances and begged. She managed to sound professional when she begged, but there was no mistaking it. She'd swear she had the perfect thing for them—she'd pretend she was giving them all kinds of discounts, she'd offer to drive up and show the piece to them, and if they didn't get back to her in time, she'd just show up. Jim would listen to her, working away while she talked on the phone. It seemed to him that the way they did things hardly made for a respectable job.

Even with Maribel calling every name in the phone book and doing her best to sweet talk everyone, they hadn't sold much the past year. Jim wondered what people were putting in their houses these days, since nobody seemed to need his furniture anymore. Maybe modern folks lived in houses without furniture. Sometimes, on days when not a single customer came in, it felt as if the furniture store was just a house, a dusty overcrowded one where nobody came to call. Who had ever heard of people as poor as they were having two houses? "It's just a waste," Jim would say. "We ought to just put all this in a warehouse somewhere. We never sell anything straight out of the store anyway."

"But we built this together," Maribel would answer. This was always her response.

They got calls all the time from the people they owed money to. They pawned off the TV to make ends meet. Maribel had even given up her jewelry. She'd begged Jim to take care of it. "I can't stand to go there," she said. "It smells like smoke and I'm scared I won't be able to hand it over to him, when I get down to it." Maribel didn't have much to start with anyhow, a gold necklace and pearl earrings. The earrings were her graduation gift and the necklace was an heirloom from her mother.

“Maribel, we can't do this. What good is it going to do anyhow? We'll get \$50 for it, no more than that.”

“They'll cut off the heat if we don't send them something this month. I'm not going to freeze on account of some jewelry.”

So Jim took it into the store. The man at the counter did a decent job of pretending not to recognize Jim. How humiliating it would be, to realize that he was one of the shop's most regular borrowers. The man didn't change his expression at all when he saw what Jim was holding. All the same, Jim felt that he must be surprised, that they'd be giving up something so personal and precious. Jim pulled his hat further down over his eyes. He looked out the window at the cars driving by. Some of the cars cost enough to keep his family going on for two years, pay back all their debts and maybe have enough left over for a steak dinner to celebrate. Jim turned away from the cars and looked at the man bending over to inspect the jewelry carefully. “\$40,” he said.

“We were hoping for \$50,” said Jim. “It's all genuine,” he said.

The man shrugged, and looked at Maribel's jewelry as if they were loose change, or just a crack on the sidewalk. “It can't be more than 14k, that necklace,” he said.

Jim followed the man's eyes and looked at the things. For a moment, he felt less pain at leaving these things here, because they were meaningless and they'd never really been worth much anyway. “Well, I suppose that'll have to do,” he said. He walked out of the store with \$40 in his pocket. He kept his hand on it the whole time. It felt heavy in his pocket. He imagined that others would want to steal it.

When he went to his car, he prayed. He thought of the Bible story where Abraham went to sacrifice his son. He was just about to kill the boy when a lamb appeared for the sacrifice. Thinking about that story always brought Jim to tears. When he put himself in Abraham's shoes,

he thought of Nathalie as Isaac, the one he had to sacrifice. He thought of walking up a mountain to sacrifice Nathalie at the top. He thought of this, because letting Nathalie hurt would be the worst thing in the world, and he knew God would never let things get so bad.

Jim tucked Nathalie in every night. She always spoke to him with wide eyes and she spoke quickly, as if she'd been thinking all day about what she'd say to him. Jim imagined that she must narrate her thoughts in her head during the day as if they were addressed to him. Jim was the same way. When he narrated his thoughts in his head, they were addressed to God or to Nathalie or both.

"I placed second in the practice spelling bee today," she'd say. "I got the word occupy wrong. It has two c's. Isn't that weird?" She talked about school, and things any girl would care about, but she also asked strange grown-up questions. "Dad?" she'd ask. "What happens when babies die? Where do they go? Do they go to heaven?" she'd want to know. Or she'd ask something like, "When does somebody become a grown-up? Do people ever finish growing up and stop changing?" She wrinkled her brow when she said this, and it made her look older and a bit masculine.

Jim would do his best to answer, but he never knew the answer.

Nathalie would shrug and smile and fall asleep not much later and Jim would pray and try not to think of the story where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac. He thought of God and his strange demands. He thought about what glory meant and why God was allowed to want it when people couldn't.

Jim had a friend with whom he could talk about these kinds of things. His name was Paul, and he had a boyish face and spoke with a gruff voice. Maribel invited him over all the

time, complaining that Jim never let them have enough company. Paul was the only person who could come over while Jim was around. After dinner, they'd sit on the porch and talk about things. Jim did most of the talking and Paul nodded and did his best to keep up.

There was one night when Jim had just realized something important and wanted to tell it to Paul. He was lying back in a rocking chair and whittling a piece of wood. He was always fiddling with something like that. "I figured something out today. Something about God," he said.

Paul's eyes were closed, feeling sleepy after a big meal. He didn't open them when he asked, "And what was that you figured out?"

"I've been wondering lately: why is allowing Christ to die for us the right thing to do?"

Paul sighed and opened his eyes. He sat up. "What do you mean?" he asked. He plucked a frond off of a fern and began rolling it around his finger, mirroring Jim's fretful whittling.

"I mean it. Making a good man hang on a tree, because you didn't live your life right. How's that make any sense? Isn't it better to bear your own load?" Jim looked at the piece he was making and cut it very precisely.

"Well we can't, Jim. We'd go to hell," said Paul, shrugging his shoulders. He noticed Maribel standing around with the water jug as if there were more plants to water. He nodded towards an empty chair on the porch. She sat down in it. She kept watching Paul, even once Jim was talking.

"Well, what if that were the right thing to do?" he asked. "Bear your own, and go to hell?" Jim said.

"Jim, that sounds crazy. You'd rather go to hell than let Jesus suffer?"

"Just because it'd be hard doesn't prove it isn't right. We should be willing to do

anything if it's the right thing. If it's the right thing to do, we don't have a choice." The piece of wood Jim was whittling was very thin. He looked like he was getting close to cutting his own finger.

"Well, if God expected us to do the right thing every time no matter what, he sure didn't make us the right way for that. He knows we're human, Jim. He made us that way."

"I can't tell you the answer I came to, if you keep disagreeing with the question."

Paul sighed. "Tell me, Jim, I'm listening." He closed his eyes as if he'd return to napping.

"I think what God really wants, is folks to be so determined to be in his presence, alone with him, that they'll do the wrong thing to be with His holiness."

Paul furrowed his brow. He wrapped a leaf around his finger. "Well I think that's the idea, sort of. But something doesn't sit right about calling it the 'wrong thing' to accept Jesus' blood." It was quiet again. "Why don't you ever ask the pastor these kinds of things?" Paul flung down the leaf.

"You think the pastor thinks about these things?" Jim asked. He stopped looking at his carving, briefly. He looked up at Paul with one eyebrow raised.

"I doubt people ask all that often. But he's a smart man and he knows the Book well."

Jim finished carving and held up the piece of wood, rotating it. He'd carved perfectly symmetrical curves in it, and whittled it so thin light could have passed through it.

Jim had a place in the woods where he meditated and prayed. Mr. Reid owned the land, but he let anybody use it any time they needed to be somewhere wild. Even though their town was tiny, it still had about two-hundred families too many for Jim. He wanted a farm. He wanted to be in a place where the only sounds were the sounds nature made. Some days, Jim didn't want

to see another human face or hear another voice but his own.

There was a place in Mr. Reid's woods with a tiny round clearing. Grass grew there that was comfortable to sit on. Jim brought his Bible and he talked to God. He talked to God aloud because there was nobody there, no humans to hear him. "God," he'd say. "I need to know what you want from me. I'll be patient. I'll be like the other men in the Bible and wait for a sign. I'll wait a long time God, but I'm mortal and I've only got so many years in my body." Jim cried here too, loudly, because he could. He couldn't cry in his own home because Julia and Maribel would hear him and scorn him, and Nathalie would worry for him and grow upset. Some men governed nations and lead armies, but Jim had been given just a family to care for, and he couldn't. In the years since Julia was born, he hadn't gotten any better at it.

He thought of the Bible passage, *Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave?*

Jim wondered, sometimes, why suicide was a sin. If somebody truly deeply believed in a heaven where they would be in the presence of God, in the center of his presence where they would know him better each passing moment, and if that somebody loved God more than anything, if he hated his own life in comparison to the life to come, could that person be blamed for wanting to kill himself? It didn't have to mean you were giving up on life. It could mean you were embracing eternal life. The Bible even commanded people to long for heaven. How cruel it was to command someone to want something and to get to choose when you give it to them.

But at least there was this place in Mr. Reid's woods, and it was the closest Jim knew to heaven. Perhaps most folks would find it a rather disappointing paradise, but Jim wouldn't want to go to heaven if he could just stay here, retreat and be at peace. *Because thou hast made the*



*Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.*

The clearing was warmer than the rest of the woods and there was a tremendous tree that had been struck by lightning some years back. The split dead wood cast interesting shadows on the grass. The trees surrounding may have burned, too, because they had few leaves and there were jagged breaks in the branches. There was some symmetry to the way the trees were arranged. Something about the place felt so purposeful.

Jim stood up. He picked up a stick and drew a large square in the dirt, centering it in the cluster of trees. Somehow creating a boundary made him feel safer. It made the place feel more well-defined and sheltered. Jim took branches that were lying on the ground and he lined them up along the line he had drawn in the dirt.

Jim thought that this was what a church should feel like—secluded and hallowed, and calling to mind heaven. He wanted a place that looked like a ruin, broken like something God had touched. *He fills his hands with lightning and commands it to strike its mark.* And among the things that God had touched would be a church house, humble and human and pathetic. That was what God looked like, and what he would truly want as a worship place. Jim imagined a place that would say everything he knew to be true about God. It would tell everyone who found it who Jim's God was, and the devout would recognize it as the presence of God.

## Chapter 2

Maribel lay awake listening to Jim pacing up and down in the house. After church, Jim had gone off into Mr. Reid's woods. He said he had some thinking to do, and he stayed out there thinking for an awfully long time. He came back as it was getting dark. Jim mystified her by how could stay up so late and sleep so little. He usually woke before she did to do his daily devotionals in the woods. This past week it seemed that he'd been getting up even earlier, while it was still dark, before Maribel had even begun dreaming.

Maribel stood up and went downstairs to where Jim was pacing. His pacing didn't bother her. She'd gotten so used to the creaking of the floor at night that it seemed too quiet on nights when he slept soundly. But it seemed like he was more aggravated than usual, the footsteps pounding the floor a little too hard. She made herself some tea. Jim paid her no mind. "Do you want any?" she asked quietly, but he was lost in his thoughts, so she only poured enough for herself. She sat down at the table and watched him pace. He always looked like he was frantically searching for something when he did this. "What are you thinking about?" she asked. He didn't even pause or look up. "Jim," she said. "What are you thinking about?"

He took a few more steps and then stopped. "Maribel," he said. "I've thought long and hard and I've prayed it over, and I've decided I can't be the person I want to be if I keep living the way we do."

Maribel's eyebrows drew together. She feared the worst. "What's wrong with the way we live?"

"I toil daily at work that means little to me. And I'm always surrounded by others and buried in responsibilities."

Maribel exhaled. "Oh Jim, that's so ordinary. Everybody feels that way," she said.

“Perhaps so,” Jim said. “But I won’t content myself with less than what God has called me to.”

“How, Jim? You want to retire? We don’t have any money,” she reminded him gently.

“There are needs that are greater than the material. I need to rest in God,” he said. “And I need rest from distractions, from seeing others’ sins.” He didn’t blink or turn his face from her when he said this.

“Whose sins Jim?” Maribel whispered.

Jim sat down at the table, but he seemed even more restless than when he was pacing. “It is best to say no more. But I need to spend time alone with God,” he said. “I’ve been bound to my duties to this family in the absence of a higher calling from God. But I believe now that my higher calling is at hand.”

“Jim, what does this mean for us? Are you going somewhere? Are you leaving?” Maribel was breathing hard. She felt like she couldn’t get enough air, as though there were a thin cloth over her mouth.

“No, I’m not going far away. I don’t need to go far away to experience God’s presence.”

Maribel sighed. “I wasn’t sure what you were saying. I thought you might be leaving us. Please don’t do that to me.” She looked down at the table with a confused expression.

“I’m just giving some thought to what it is I’ve been called to do, Maribel. There’s something more important about my life than what I’ve done so far.”

Everything he did was important to her. The sweat on his palms was important to her, the blink of his eye was important to her. So was every detail of his face and his body. She’d never stopped being attentive to the details of him. “What, Jim?” she asked. “What’s more important than your family and the life we built together?” She saw Jim’s face change, and something about

what she'd said seemed to clear his head. "Do whatever you need to do," she told him, hand on his wrist. "I'll follow you anywhere," she said. "I want you to be happy. I've wanted it so badly you can't imagine." She kissed him and he let her kiss him. She slept soundly that night, thinking she'd settled everything.

A part of Maribel found it exciting when Jim behaved like this, strange as it was. Jim was different from other men, from everybody in this town. He was solemn, and moody, and most folks didn't find him too likable. But his strangeness was part of what made him hers. Most other folks didn't understand him, so Maribel only had to share him with the few who did. They weren't a church couple that paraded with each other on their arms. Their house didn't have family photos of all of them smiling together, making a display of themselves. They weren't even in the phone book. Their marriage still felt as secretive and irrelevant to everyone else's life as a teenager's love affair and this was what Maribel loved most. And the furniture store was wrapped up in this, something that was theirs, that kept them working side-by-side all day.

But Jim was unpredictable and often shut off from her. Sometimes when she tried to embrace him, whisper something romantic to him, he curled his lip and tugged away from her. She knew why. She knew she'd done wrong. People did such things every day and people forgave them. It wasn't her right to say he ought to forgive, but most people would. And Maribel loved him. Her love had turned to infatuation, the way unrequited love can. The more sinful she seemed to herself the holier Jim seemed by comparison, like someone set apart.

Maribel loved the furniture store, because she loved the things that Jim made. When she was still young and they had been dating only a year, he'd made her a jewelry box, the most perfect thing she'd ever owned. His work had the most perfect proportions, with interesting

details that would have seemed strange if they hadn't been executed so perfectly. She was enamored of his work and with the idea of being with an artist. All the men in town had jobs that used their muscles—construction, manufacturing. The women who worked were teachers, but most were homemakers. The town was impossibly generic and its people seemed like copies of each other. But when Maribel held something Jim had made, she believed he was the only man like him.

She begged him to quit his job and create furniture. She only had one skill, one that she sometimes felt ashamed of—persuasiveness. She told him how what he made awed her. “You have to, Jim. Maybe it isn't practical, but it's your calling,” she said. This was back when she wore her hair long and to her waist. This was before she had daughters and reasons to be practical. Jim had believed her, basking in her admiration for him. After they had bought an old building and had it fixed up, scarcely after they'd stocked it with Jim's creations, Maribel was pregnant with Julia. She felt she already had a baby, the store. She and Jim had made the store together and now they were watching it grow. And Jim would never leave her as long as they had to raise this furniture store together.

Before the affair, Jim used to leave the door to his workshop in the furniture store open. Maribel used to admire his work and rub his shoulders when he said they were getting tired. She used to say things like, “Make it as if you're making it for me. Make it lovely and passionate,” and kiss him on the neck. But now he closed the door to his workshop, and it only opened for Nathalie.

Nathalie came to the furniture store with them when school was out. There was a used bookstore down the street where they sold beaten up books for a dime. Nathalie was

indiscriminate. She'd read anything. Maribel paid her in change for helping out with little things—dusting in the morning, or saying hello to customers when Maribel had to take a quick break. Then Nathalie would run to the used bookstore and get a crummy book. She'd run back and forth to Jim's workshop and tell him what happened in each chapter of the book. Jim asked questions and exaggerated his interest, "Don't leave anything out, Nathalie, you've got to go read the next part and tell me what happens," he'd say.

When Maribel asked why she wasn't allowed to go into Jim's workshop, he said he didn't like folks seeing what he was making before he'd finished. "I just hate folks looking over my shoulder while I'm working. It rattles my nerves," Jim would say. He didn't explain why Nathalie could freely come and go and even talk about what he was making. He didn't even try to hide the difference from Nathalie.

It became clear that Nathalie had rights that Maribel didn't have. One day, Maribel was trying to get an ad in the classifieds of the nice neighborhood's newspaper. "I don't want it next to the ads about garage sales and used junk," she was telling the man on the phone. "It ought to be in the business section." The man was saying that she'd have to pay more. "I don't see why it should be more expensive. It's the same piece of paper isn't it? It doesn't cost you more to print it." The man on the other end was insistent about the price difference, so Maribel went back to Jim's workshop just to ask him if they ought to pay more. She came and said, "Jim, the man at the Cliffs Review says it's \$15 more to have it printed in the right section..." she didn't have a chance to finish.

"Maribel, for the last time. I hate it when you come in here. I need a little quiet to think and work clearly."

Maribel turned to Nathalie, who was sitting on an almost-finished stool with a book in

her hands. She had looked up from her book at Maribel. Nathalie stood up, looked like she was starting to leave, and then sat back down on her perch. She saw how things were—kids learn to see where they have power pretty early, since it's something they crave.

Maribel put the phone back to her ear. “I suppose the personal sales section will do,” she said. She intentionally didn't leave while she did this, but glared at Jim. The man on the other end was silent. “That's all,” Maribel said. “Put in my order. I'll send you the text in a minute.”

There was a long pause before he stammered, “Yes Ma'am.”

Maribel never went back into Jim's workshop and Jim never apologized. He didn't even treat her with that kind of care and distance he usually applied when she was angry. Somehow, in all of that, he must not have known that anything important had happened. But Nathalie had figured it out. She had always had a bit of an attitude. She did what she was told, but she decided when she'd do it. After that day, Nathalie seemed even more impatient and bored by Maribel's scolding. She stayed by Jim's side all the time, except for during Jim's morning devotions.

One morning, not long after he'd confided in Maribel about his restlessness, Jim didn't come back after his morning devotions when he usually did. Maribel sat at the breakfast table while Nathalie dressed herself, packed her own lunch and started walking to school. Julia wouldn't wake up until just before noon when her first community college class would begin. Maribel waited until half an hour past the time when the store would normally open. She assumed he was doing his devotionals and lost track somehow of the time. Maribel walked into the woods. She felt as if she were invading somebody's home, not Mr. Reid's, but Jim's. She wondered if she ought to find some way to navigate. It was easy to forget, because of how Jim treated this place like his own, that it would be easy to get lost here in a great big wood with no

trails. Maribel took out a pocketknife and decided she'd just have to do this the old-fashioned way, scraping the bark off of trees now and then so that she'd find her way back. She'd go in straight paths so that she could see where she had been, not end up wandering in circles or retracing her steps needlessly. She began diagonally into the woods.

She turned back now and then to see if the marking she'd made were easy to see. Easy enough, but of course, you'd have to be facing the right way. It wasn't foolproof, this idea of hers. It was just a little better than nothing.

Something caught Maribel's eye in the distance. Something seemed irregular up ahead, but she had to move closer to see what had gotten her attention. There was something straighter and lighter-colored than the trees. A wooden beam stood upright in the woods. She followed it, nearly forgetting to mark the trees as she went. She saw a square area that had been cleared out where the ground had been leveled. The beginnings of a frame were erected, but it was just a few planks nailed together. She stepped into the square. She looked around her at the trees struck by lightning and the striking symmetry of the clearing. The surface of the trees was smooth, because their bark didn't grow anymore. Maribel sat down in the cleared out ground. Her legs felt weak. Her mind raced, but she couldn't think of any reason for this to be here. She looked left and right, waiting for someone to approach. She called Jim's name. Things sounded so clear out here in the woods, but quiet in all this open space. There was something peaceful about this place. Maribel couldn't put her finger on why. Perhaps it was simply because she was tired, and here this very human and orderly place. She looked upwards. It was a beautiful winter day, the sky clear and crisp. She called Jim's name again, hollering up at the birds.

"Who's there?" someone called.

"Jim?" she called back.



She saw him in the distance, a glimpse of red flannel. He was hauling a small wheelbarrow with a few logs in it.

“Jim,” she called, seeing him, and ran towards him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, and Maribel felt that she should have expected this. He never wanted someone to see his furniture before he’d finished it. Perhaps this place was the same way.

“You didn’t come back when you usually do,” Maribel said. “I didn’t know where you were. You didn’t leave a note or anything.”

Jim kept pushing his little wheelbarrow up the hill. “Maribel, you know I don’t like to be interrupted,” he said.

“Jim, I won’t bother you much. You can do as you please, but you can’t blame me for being worried. We’ve gone to the store at the same time every morning for years. What is this Jim? What are you building? How long have you been working on this?”

Jim didn’t reply. His tools were scattered in the area where the frame was.

“Can you tell me what this is?” she asked again.

“I tried to warn you that things were going to change soon,” said Jim. “I have resolved to do as God commands, and to live a life set apart for him.”

Maribel’s face fell. “Is this what you meant? But what is does God have to do with it? Be clear with me,” she said. Jim could say strange things when he got like this, distracted and lonesome.

“It is a place set apart. And God has ordered that I build it. It is not my place to reveal his plans. You must wait upon the Lord if you wish to understand the power of this place.”

“God told you to build it? But how, Jim? You spoke to him? You read it in the Bible?”

Maribel asked, her face serious, steady, and she hoped, calming. “This isn’t so hard, Jim,” she said when he didn’t answer right away.

“I know His heart,” said Jim, simply.

Maribel watched her husband begin cutting the logs lengthwise. He set them on a bench he must have brought from the store and began sawing. “I think, Jim, all this time alone isn’t good for you,” she spoke softly, felt herself beginning to cry, but she didn’t give in. She’d gotten a hold of her crying. She would cry, but only when she decided to. “It would be best to spend a bit of time at home, Jim, resting.”

“Working is rest for me, now, Maribel,” Jim said. “And my home is wherever God leads me to stay, wherever his presence resides.”

Maribel sat on the ground inside the wooden frame. He sounded like himself, just that last sentence. That was something her Jim would say. “Jim, please,” she begged. “Help me understand. Did something happen? Are you upset about anything?”

Jim paused for a moment. “This is my calling,” he said. He put his wrist against his brow. “God has finally spoken. I’ve been waiting for his word for a long time, in misery waiting for his word. He brought before me only trials—your treachery, Julia’s defiance, our poverty. But now he has come to comfort me and he will draw near to me in this place.”

“This is for God, Jim? What is it? Why does he want you to make this?” She couldn’t contain her confusion, her fear.

“You aren’t meant to know,” said Jim. “Please leave.”

“I’m not leaving, Jim,” Maribel said.

“Go,” said Jim, and his eyes looked fierce and wild when he said it. She’d never been able to make him do anything. If she did it now, it’d be the first time.

Maribel stood up. She found herself praying, quickly, telling God that if she left now, the rest was up to him. This wasn't her way of thinking. It was Jim's. *Please let this blow over*, she prayed. "Will you come home tonight if I leave now?" asked Maribel. A bargain, it was all she could manage.

"I will, Maribel," he promised.

Maribel left frenzied. She climbed back in Jim's truck and started driving. She was driving too fast. It was like she couldn't control her foot on the pedal. She drove past her own house to Paul's. He was the only one who might understand what was going on, who might be able to help. Maribel didn't even think to call ahead, because Paul was always available, too available, really. People don't respect a man who has too much time on his hands. Maribel rang his doorbell. His shrubs needed trimming. The paint on the door was peeling.

Paul answered. He smiled as if it were a cordial little neighborhood call. "Something's wrong with Jim. He's acting so strange," said Maribel. "I don't know who else to talk to." Paul was wearing what looked like a pajama shirt.

"What happened?" said Paul, his face sobering up properly. He invited her in to the kitchen. Surely there was a room somewhere in this house more fit for company. Maribel marveled at the mess and the emptiness. There was a half-eaten bowl of macaroni and cheese with cut-up pieces of hot dog in it. Paul sat down and resumed eating it. Maribel had known Paul when he didn't live like such a slob. He was divorced. That's why he lived alone and made too much time for other people, not bothering to cook much of anything real, his old house hardly maintained and half of the furniture and knick-knacks gone.

"It started just a couple days ago. There was one night where he started telling me some strange things. He said he needed time away from distractions and from the sins of others, and he

needed to find his higher calling. It was all so strange, but you know, he isn't often as open with me. I guess I thought it was good he was saying what was on his mind. You know that he goes into Mr. Reid's woods every morning to pray?"

"Of course," said Paul.

"He's been spending more and more time out there, I think. This morning he didn't come back in time to get to work and open the store when we normally do. So I went out there to find him. And he's building something in the woods," said Maribel. Paul's face showed no surprise. "He must have started it a while ago. He's gotten a lot done, cleared off the land and leveled it, chopped up a heap of wood."

Paul sat back in his chair. "Did he say what it was he's building out there? What did he tell you?"

"Hardly anything," said Maribel. "He says there's something sacred about the place, I don't know." Maribel started to say the last part, that about how Jim believed she wasn't a part of God's plan for the place. But she was ashamed of it. "You know something about this already. I can tell. What is it? What do you know?"

"I don't know much," said Paul. "I've had this conversation with him, too, the one you were describing earlier, about how he needs an escape. I've been having that conversation with him for months."

Maribel's heart sank at this. "What did he say to you? Do you remember exactly?"

Paul paused and scratched the side of his face. "Well, Maribel, it's probably nothing you haven't noticed. You're living with the man. He's restless, and he's making himself lonely by shutting you and Julia off. And he's sensitive. Some things that ought to be ordinary in a man's life grate on him."

Maribel nodded. She wondered what Paul knew about her, probably everything, probably as much as her husband did. “Things have been hard. The furniture store hasn’t turned a profit in years. And Julia disobeys him, as any teenage girl disobeys her father, but he is hurt by it, deeply.”

Paul finished eating, and he put his bowl in the sink. “I’ve told him before that the way he sees Julia isn’t right. He has everything mixed up in his head.” Maribel stared at the table again. “Maribel, I don’t want to scare you or anything. He’s a strong man and he can get through anything. But he hasn’t been feeling well for a long time now. He doesn’t show it really, but he talks around it. He talks about death.”

Maribel’s stomach turned. “What does he say?”

“Well, more than once now, he’s asked me why suicide is wrong. I’m sorry, Maribel, I should have told you when he said this. I didn’t think much of it at the time. He said he didn’t understand how somebody who loved God as much as he did could be blamed for wanting to be with him, right now. And with God forgiving him for the deed, what’s one more sin on a bunch of others? That’s what he said.”

“He’s that miserable,” said Maribel. “Does he say why?” she gulped. She didn’t want Paul to answer, but she’d asked. She braced herself.

“No, he doesn’t,” Paul said quietly. “And even if he did, Maribel, people never know, really, why they run to thoughts like that. Blame doesn’t rest on anyone.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Maribel, whispering. She wasn’t sure if he heard. It was painfully quiet in the room. She stood up and brushed the front of her dress, though there wasn’t anything dirty on it. Then she sat back down. “So you didn’t say anything else to him? You didn’t try to ask him what was wrong or tell him to do anything about it?” she asked. Her anger at

him had come on suddenly, before she'd even realized she was angry.

"I didn't know what I could say, Maribel. Honestly, I thought treating it like a real threat would only convince him further he was miserable enough to do it. It seemed better to act as if it was idle talk, to convince him that's all it was," he said.

Maribel wrung her hands. Really, though, that's what she would have thought too, if she had been in Paul's shoes. "I suppose that all makes sense," she said. "I'm sorry for being rude," she told him. "Thanks for telling me what he said," she said.

"Would it help if I talked to him?" said Paul. "I'd give it a try. I don't know that it'd do any good, but I'd give it a try."

"I'll think about that," said Maribel. "I've got to get home. Julia won't know what I've been up to. She won't know what's gone on."

"Of course, of course," said Paul, standing up and walking her to the door. Good manners like that didn't fit this sort of visit.

In the morning, Jim was beside Maribel. She had begun to understand, because sleep brings clarity to things, why he was doing this. What Paul said had helped, and seeing Jim's face sleeping restlessly beside her, somehow brought it together, made the ideas alive to her. It wasn't actually so different from what people often did when they weren't feeling their best. They spent a week out in their beach house or they went to some summer camp or retreat. They left somehow. Sometimes they got so attached to the places where they went. The fact that he thought this was God's command to him worried her, but then that was Jim. He saw divine import into everything. The furniture store, raising children were both divine mandates according to Jim—things God had commanded him to do. Maribel breathed deeply, thought slowly, and

consciously controlled the way her ideas meandered and raced and bounced in her head. She was going to be okay. The things that were happening to her were things she could survive. *Thank you God*, she whispered, and praying made her feel closer to Jim.

She began to make breakfast. Jim wasn't eating too well lately—she'd have to work on that a little bit. His collarbone and sternum looked more prominent than she'd remembered them. She cooked eggs. He used to eat them every morning, but it had been years since he'd had breakfast. Still, she tried sometimes.

Jim came downstairs, and Maribel told him, "I made breakfast. Please eat something." Seeing him awake refreshed her doubts. She worried he'd start that crazy talk again, about how she wasn't meant to know God's plans or some nonsense like that. Even knowing that he was going through a rough patch, wasn't quite himself, those words stung a little, but briefly, like a speck of hot cooking grease on your wrist.

"Maribel, I know I frightened you," he said.

Maribel breathed a sigh of relief. "I understand Jim," she said. "I understand why you need this," she said.

"I have to finish this, that part I'm not changing," he said.

"I know," said Maribel, although it wasn't too uncommon for Jim to start projects with a lot of zeal and then leave them half-finished, or broken from frustration, out behind the furniture store. "You'll finish," she said.

"Yes," he said. "It is God's decision not mine that I finish."

Maribel put a biscuit and some eggs on a plate and slid them on the table towards Jim. "All I ask," she said, "Is that you don't take me out of the picture." She served herself a plate. "And please, Jim, you've got to keep eating and sleeping regular," she said. "It isn't doing you

any favors to stop all your routines. We've all go to keep our routines in place," she said.

Jim took a few obliging bites of eggs.

"I don't mind that you finish what you're working on out there," she said. "But please don't shut me out. I promise I won't ask again, although I think I deserve to know: what is it? I mean in the simplest way possible, is it a house or a shed?"

Jim nodded. "It's a sacred church, just for those whom God has chosen to invite, something to tell everyone all I know of him."

"I see," said Maribel, squirming a bit. She wondered what this meant, what it was that Jim knew about God, that other people didn't know. She felt, for some reason, that this wasn't a question she could ask. "Jim, I meant what I said about eating, and coming home reasonably early and living life as normally as you can. Will you promise me that?"

"Lord willing," he said, which was a pious way of ignoring a person's question. He threw part of his breakfast out and put the dishes in the sink. "I'm going now," he said.

"Will you come to the store" Maribel asked, but he was closing the door. He didn't hear, or at least, he could believably pretend he didn't. She convinced herself, by telling herself over and over all day, that this was normal and that it would come to an end soon enough.



### Chapter 3

Julia used to have everything she knew she wanted. She didn't realize it then, but now she knew. It was when Peter Samuels was hers. She wasn't sure how she must have picked him out of a crowd, back before she really knew him. It probably had nothing to do with him when at the age of thirteen she first developed what she would have proudly called a crush. He was a boy, and she knew he was categorized as one of the cute ones. And she thought, from the way he looked at her, that she could make him his. This was when Julia had just discovered that walking in heels made her hips swing nicely and that the color she looked best in was bright, not light, blue. It was when older men began guessing her age wrong and shaming themselves, talking to her like she was a grown up. There had to be something useful to do with all this.

So she chose a target. He had a good strong jaw and there was nothing going against him. She practiced talking about him in a high-pitched squeal with her friends. And when she got too good at this, she set out to get him.

It was easy to make him unsettled. All she had to do was look at him just a moment too long and he'd flip his head her way, make eye contact for an instant, then look down or away, sometimes at nothing, or something that couldn't possibly be holding his interest.

Julia got it into her head to just walk up and tell him that she wanted him—wanted to be a couple that is (she had no idea what else there was to liking a boy). She knew this wasn't the approach her friends were using, but then, none of them had boyfriends. She was going to be the first. It was after a Sunday potluck, back when her father still went to church, holding Nathalie in his lap during the sermon and when her mother was still friends with all the other ladies who quoted parts of Bible verses when they spoke. She chose that moment to tell it like it was. She marched straight up to him and then realized: she had no idea what she could offer him in return

or what he wanted. But she was there, standing in front of him, and he was wearing a ridiculous tie with ducks on it that made him seem less intimidating. So she told him, "Let's be a couple."

She could tell by the look on his face that this wasn't going to work out as well as she'd hoped. *Live and learn*, she thought, and she searched for a way to spin this to make everything turn out. Peter looked back at her surprised. "Your name is Julia, isn't it?" he asked.

Julia felt a little pinch in her chest when he asked her that. But she was unflappable. She remembered seeing something in a movie that she could try just now. "Yes, that's me. And what I meant was," Julia whispered. "There's a boy out there that's making eyes at me. And I just want him to think I'm taken so he'll leave me alone." The girl in the movie had looked one way, blinked hard, and then looked the other way. So this is what Julia did.

Friends of Peter's were craning their necks and straining to listen, just a few yards off. Julia glanced at them and saw that, whatever else came of this, she hadn't embarrassed herself. They looked jealous of Peter and they didn't seem to mind her blue dress (her Mom wouldn't let her buy one any tighter, but it was alright when she put her hands on her hips and tugged the fabric a little). "Who is it making eyes at you?"

"Better not to know," said Julia. "You'll act extra funny around him, and it'll make us seem suspicious."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Peter. Of course he hadn't. It was a relief, Julia thought, that boys didn't watch the same movies as girls. Peter wasn't too good at pretending to be a couple though. She'd hoped he'd let her hold his hand just while she was walking by her friends, but it must not have crossed his mind. Proud as she was that she was parading around with him, he wasn't really looking at her the right way. She'd learned to recognize when a boy liked her looks. He'd look at her mouth and put his hands in his pockets. He wasn't doing that. And he

hadn't known her name. And he'd looked horrified when she'd suggested being a real couple. She'd have to get better at this, if she wanted him. And she did now even more than she did before.

Julia was clever, and she didn't believe everything she heard—about how playing hard to get was the thing for a girl to do, or about how men preferred women who were soft-spoken and sweet. Something told her deep down that that was a bunch of baloney, and even if it wasn't, it was just too darn boring. It seemed that most people thought that flirting meant never saying what you thought, but Julia wasn't sure if that was right. What she really wanted, was to be appealing deep down, to take all those qualities that make a girl attractive and bury them so far down that she couldn't help but dazzle everyone she met. She learned to be coy and charming and polite and beguiling—qualities people think have only to do with how you talk to folks you just met, but they could be buried deeper than that, Julia was sure. She practiced asking boys questions by thinking to herself what she wanted to know about them. She practiced giving complements by thinking flirty things about them in her head. She turned her inner dialogue into one long flirting practice. If you ever caught Julia sleep-talking, she was probably saying something subtly flattering and cheeky.

Maribel invited Peter to dinner after church one evening. Julia didn't care for this much. She wondered if it meant that Maribel knew something. But even if Maribel knew that she was set on this boy, that wasn't the half of it. That wasn't the half of everything that ran through Julia's mind about men. Nobody knew that she would stop at almost nothing. She was going to make him hers whether or not he ever loved her.

So after dinner, Julia talked to Peter. She tried not to use any of the exact words and sentences she'd practiced in her head for this moment—they would sound mechanical and

contrived. She asked him, “Do you play any instruments?”

She knew, by chance, that he played piano. He shrugged and answered piano, but he looked down at his lap and blushed. It was something that seemed feminine to him, something his mom made him do.

“That’s wonderful,” said Julia. She spoke in an airy and emphatic way. Her parents had a very old home video of them finishing up the furniture store. In it, Maribel talked exactly like this. Julia never would have admitted that this affectation had probably come from that video—from watching her mother talk like that to her father and seeing the way it made him beam. “It’s such a beautiful instrument. What’s your favorite piece?” She tucked her hair behind her ear. Her ears were freckled on the back and stuck out a bit, impishly.

He insisted that he didn’t have one.

“But of course you do,” she said. “I really want to know what it is, your favorite piece to play, or to hear.”

She was delighted when he insisted again he didn’t have one. She was going to teach him something new about himself. He would think of her every time he thought of it. She was going to win a place in his mind. “Isn’t there anything...” she giggled. “That you play when you don’t have to? When you’re not going to perform it in front of anyone?”

He paused and thought. “I guess so. Sometimes I play Mozart. Sonata 11.”

“And it’s the only one you play when you don’t have to?” asked Julia. This would only work if her prediction about him came true.

“Yea, pretty much.”

“Then I guess it must be your favorite,” she said. She laughed and he laughed with her.

It wasn’t very much longer before he bought her a cross necklace. He would have gotten

something in the shape of a heart, but he was only allowed to go to the Bible store by himself. “I like you Julia,” he said, and he seemed to be nearly choking on the words from nervousness. And like that, He was hers. She had won. She said thank you, and kissed him on the cheek so lightly he wasn’t sure just what had happened.

After that, she forgot she ever had girl friends—the power she could hold over a boy was so alluring that women paled in comparison. If a few days went by without hearing from Peter, she became restless and agitated. She found herself having imagined conversations with him in her head. She loathed it when he was the first to hang up after a phone call. She wanted that always to be her, with him sighing on the other end and wanting more of her. She discovered that she was more sensitive to things he said to her than anyone else. She’d find herself confronting him, after mulling and agonizing about what to say for hours, about things he didn’t remember saying.

But the moments of vulnerability were worth it for the many times when she felt tremendously important because of him. It happened sometimes that he would cup her face under his hand and look at one feature at a time, and Julia felt like she was perfect. To be an admired person, to be cared for, these were important things. When Jim was in Nathalie’s room late at night and they were pouring their hearts out to each other, Julia waited for Peter to call and when he did, she’d tell him everything and beg him, sometimes prying the answers to the daily questions from him, to tell her about his day. He often just fell asleep as they were talking, but sometimes she got what she wanted, and he listened to everything she said and wished her well, sympathized with what she thought, told her she was right about everything, that she’d conquer all her problems tomorrow.

Peter was the only one Julia could turn to after her parents found out that they’d slept

together. It happened in the summer, and Julia endured a month without seeing him, without seeing anyone but her parents. She didn't dare defy them after her father had yelled at her like that. She waited until school started again, so that she could talk to Peter. After class, she came to him. They stood in the turnaround where the kids who were picked up in cars waited, even though they both walked home. "I just don't understand," she'd said tearfully. "Why couldn't you have warned me that you were coming? That your parents were going to make you do that?" Julia looked around. There were people all around her, chatting and hugging each other and saying how much they'd missed each other over the summer, but as long as she and Peter spoke vaguely, nobody needed to know what had happened.

He had told her that it wasn't his fault. He swore that they wouldn't let him make a call. He'd tried to find a way to sneak out and see her, but he was afraid of getting her into more trouble. "Honest," he said. "I was thinking about you the whole time. I wanted to warn you and I wanted to see if you were alright when it was over, but I couldn't. I couldn't find a way to do it."

Julia nodded and sniffed. "I trust you," she said. "I knew you didn't mean to leave me wondering."

"Was it okay?" he asked. "How are you?"

"I was so scared. My dad wouldn't stop yelling. He called me names. She leaned close and whispered. He called me a slut."

Peter hugged her and said he was so sorry. "My parents are upset, too," he said. "I didn't want them to find out. There was nothing I could do."

"They aren't upset like mine," said Julia. "They can't be. If they were you'd be panicking just like I am."

"But they're not going to do anything to you, are they? My friend got caught and he had

to go to a Christian school the next year where they had Bible lessons every morning for two hours and they weren't allowed to listen to any music except hymns."

"I think I'd like that better. Was it a boarding school? Did he get to go away from his parents?"

Peter saw she wasn't smiling at the story he'd told, not even a little. "I'm so sorry," he whispered and put his finger under her chin. "This was the last thing I wanted. I didn't want to cause you any trouble."

"I just knew we'd get caught," said Julia. "I just knew it. I knew it wouldn't end well."

Peter looked around them. It was too obvious what they were talking about. "Shhh," he said. "It'll be okay. We'll work something out. Please tell me I'll still see you," Peter said.

"I don't know," Julia whispered. "I don't think you understand. I still hear my parents screaming to each other about it all the time."

"I love you," Peter said, and this was the first time he'd said it. Julia smiled despite herself.

She said that she loved him too. "But I don't know how we'll get away being together anymore. My dad asks me where I'm going every time I leave the house, even when I don't have shoes on, so he should know I'm only going to the yard."

"We'll be more careful now," said Peter. "Tell your parents you're getting a job, so you can have an excuse to see me. Tell them you're babysitting or tutoring or something."

"I'm so scared," said Julia. "I don't think you understand. I'm scared of them. I want to leave."

"It'll be better now that school has started," Peter said. "You won't see them as much, and they'll come around. I'm so sorry about what happened," he said again. So Julia kept seeing

him. She did as he said, finding excuses to see him. But she also became tougher about enduring her father's anger. She learned to breathe deeply and think about being somewhere else whenever he started.

Somehow, word got out at school, too, and Julia was the first girl in her class to have lost hers so certainly. The girls were suspicious of her, and though they didn't treat her cruelly, they didn't speak to her naturally. They regarded her as an adult, and she intimidated them. So Peter became her only friend.

When he said that he was going far away to college, it was just the opposite of everything she hoped. He was supposed to wait for her. He was supposed to have a smaller life than she did. And here he was, with grades in his hand that would get him into any school up North and Julia had barely opened a textbook all year. She only hoped his parents didn't let him, though it wouldn't diminish the pain of him going. But they did, and she cried loudly, without shame.

On the day that Peter left for school, Julia hit him. It happened quickly, before she knew what she was doing. "Thanks for coming by," he said. "I think everything's already packed up, but it was nice of you to try and help." He seemed more nervous than when they'd first met at the church potluck. "Gosh, I can't imagine what it's all going to be like, everybody new, not a familiar face anywhere."

"Oh don't brag," said Julia. "I bet it really isn't so different from where we live now."

Peter shrugged. He was holding a big box in front of his stomach like he didn't know that Julia would want to be closer to him than this. "It seems like it'll be different. I don't know much about it, that's sure, but I've thought about it plenty. I've been thinking about this for three years now."

Julia swatted at the box, and he dropped it on his foot. He was yelling and when he



started to bend over, Julia hit him in the nose. If she'd hit him harder, it would have broken. "Go to hell," she said. "Thinking about this for years. I ain't been thinking about it for years, Peter. You didn't think it'd be worth it to tell me this is what you were going to do!"

Peter was holding his nose, and he wasn't even listening to what she was saying. He was making pained noises and sniffing.

"Go to hell," Julia said again, and her voice cracked this time. She ran out before she really started to cry.

She could have a million boys like him, she knew. A million, if she wanted them. It would be easy.

She came home and picked a fight with her dad about how the house was too cold and he ought to turn the heat up. He replied that they were pinching pennies now, and they'd all like to be warmer if they could.

"How hard is it to make enough money to get the house warm? What are we? A bunch of eskimos?"

Maribel had tried to quiet her down but she wouldn't obey her. She yelled and carried on until Jim insisted that he discipline her. He struck her harder than usual that time. There was no mistaking it. Julia took the blows and went quietly to her room. She cried and scolded herself for crying until morning came.

It was around then Julia started sneaking out of the house to be with boys. She left after she heard Jim tucking in Nathalie. At first, she seduced them, the way she had with Peter, but after a while she realized it wasn't such a challenge. All that work she'd put in to win Peter probably hadn't been necessary in the first place. She looked at herself and saw all the different

pieces boys liked. Her body was something she had, a possession, a thing. She realized she was beautiful—more accurately, that she looked the way beautiful girls are supposed to look. And so she didn't need to do anything else. She didn't need to be anyone for people to care for her. She slept with all the boys she knew, and some she barely knew, and some she wasn't sure if she knew, because it was so dark. And Jim got angrier and angrier, but not angry enough to stop her. If he'd wanted to, he could have. He could have kept track of where she came and went and he could have grown worried when she was gone and called everyone in town to find out where she was. He could have put locks on the doors that wouldn't open from the inside without a key. But he didn't. Sometimes she slipped in right behind him while he was awake, and he pretended not to see her, because he didn't want to deal with it all. And Maribel cried whenever Julia got caught, harder than Julia did. She pled with Jim to stop, and once she told Julia, "I'm so sorry," as if it were her fault.

## Chapter 4

Maribel realized that Jim was breaking the law. He was a squatter. And if Mr. Reid noticed and asked Jim what he was doing, Jim would explain it all, in his own words. God knows what people would think of it. So Maribel picked up the phone. Julia was in her room, listening to loud sad folk songs. “Love’s not a Savior, when you’re messed up,” the singer was wailing.

Maribel called and Mr. Reid picked up. “Mr. Reid,” she said. “It’s Maribel.” She inhaled deeply. She should have decided, before she made this phone call, how much she was going to tell him. It would be best to tell the truth and make it sound as ordinary as she could. “It’s about Jim,” she said.

“Oh?” said Mr. Reid.

“I don’t know if you’ve seen it or seen him coming and going, but Jim’s building something on your land,” she said. It was quiet on the other end of the line. Maribel spoke quickly and nervously. “It’s crazy of course, that he didn’t bother to tell you, but you know how he is. He’s not so practical”

“He’s building? Something big? What is it?” Mr. Reid asked.

Maribel heard feet on the stairs. Julia was coming down. Maribel put her finger on her lips to warn her not to talk. If it weren’t for Julia, she might have decided to tell Mr. Reid the truth. But Julia was pacing around in the kitchen snacking on pretzels. She couldn’t tell Julia yet. She wasn’t going to understand. Maribel pursed her lips and released them. “He’s making a shelter out there, a cabin, sort of,” she said. “I don’t know that it’s necessary, or why he didn’t ask you first, but he enjoys it. Building is sort of a hobby for him, and I don’t see the harm.

“A cabin?” asked Mr. Reid. “For what? It’s not like a house is it?”

“No, I’m sure it won’t be quite that comfortable. It could be somewhere to have a picnic

or rest a bit in bad weather, for the people who hike in those woods. I would have told you sooner, of course, but I only found out about this a few days ago.”

It was silent on the other end of the line. Everything considered, this sounded more reasonable than she thought it would. Still, she was crazy for telling him all of this. What reason did he have for permitting Jim out there? “Is that alright by you? It’s pretty deep in the woods out there. It won’t spoil anyone’s view. Some folks might think it’s an improvement on the land, really, if you ever decide to sell it.”

“Well, that might be true,” said Mr. Reid. “It all depends.” Maribel could hear him sigh into the phone. She heard a soft noise like he was scratching his face.

Julia was hardly paying attention. She could have the decency to listen, since Maribel was lying because of her.

“Well, I suppose I don’t see anything too wrong with that. I’ve got no plans for the place anyhow. But I don’t know how much longer that’ll be the case,” he said. “I guess I’ve just held onto it being sentimental, since my grandparents were so proud of it. Does seem like a waste in times like these. But I’m glad somebody’s enjoying it for now.”

Maribel breathed deep and her breathing made a crackling sound in the phone. “I don’t know how long it’ll hold his interest and I don’t even know that he’ll even finish it,” she said. “Still, it’s quite generous of you to let him be. You let me know if your plans ever change,” she said. Maribel said goodbye and hung up abruptly. Julia left right as Maribel hung up, so maybe she was listening after all.

It was Saturday. Usually, Maribel spent Saturdays driving furniture around to folks, making calls, doing her best to keep their heads above water. The only reason she wasn’t running around making sales today was because there was no point. There was no reason to think things

would be different this time. Jim was gone, working out there in Mr. Reid's land. Maribel hadn't tried to go back since the first day she discovered all of this—she thought showing too much interest would convince him of the wrong thing—that he needed to try harder to keep her out, or that she was jealous of the place and greedy for his attention. Maribel went to her room. Jim's Bible was on the bed like it often was. Maribel opened it, and she saw that there were notes filling the pages, and pieces of paper stuffed in between pages. She felt that she had intruded on something very personal, and this, in fact, was the only reason she carried on and began to read. He could send her away from his workshop in the furniture store, but he was defenseless against this. She hesitated after the first few words. Though she hadn't realized that she felt nervous, her heart was racing like she was. How had they been married so long and yet she still remained afraid of his innermost thoughts?

The Bible passage that Maribel had turned to was the book of Exodus. The Bible opened there, because the binding was bent in that place. A page had been torn out and taped back in, more than once, it seemed. A part of it was underlined. It said, "And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen."

The words moved Maribel. She reread them several times. Then she read them aloud. *There is a place by me* it said. It could be the words to a song.

Maribel took the Bible with her and resolved to find Jim. She'd just ask him—flat out—if this, the place described in the Bible, was what he wanted. Of course, he might not be able to

answer. He might not know why he was doing this. But Maribel had to know. She used to be the one who understood Jim best.

She circled around Mr. Reid's place a few times to try and find the beginning of the trail she'd started the last time she'd been there. It was a good thing she'd explained something to Mr. Reid. This kind of thing would have caught his attention before long. She followed the trees and also carved a few new marks to show this trail better. She wondered how Jim found his way in and out of here. He was there, working like she'd expected, but by God, she didn't realize how fast he was getting things done. What had been just a flat spot of ground and some tools and wood lying around a few days ago was now shaped like a building. Where had he learned how to do all this?

"Jim," she said. "Look at all this."

"The Lord has blessed me with strength to do so much in so short a time," he said.

"Well, I suppose so. It's really coming together there." She looked at it and a part of her wanted to laugh. All this small talk and acting like what he was doing was just as simple as you please. Jim hadn't stopped working since she'd approached. He'd hardly looked at her as she was drawing near.

"Why have you come here?" asked Jim. "Have I not made it clear that it is private?"

"I just wanted to talk to you and try to understand this place." She put her hand on the Bible inside of her bag, but suddenly it didn't make sense anymore to show this to him. He'd think it was intrusive, he wouldn't answer her questions. And what reason did she have, truly, to think that the passage she'd read explained it all? "Could you please just take a break and talk to me?" she asked.

"My mind is sharpest when I'm at God's work," said Jim. "There's nothing I can tell you

right now. You don't respect the sacredness of this place." Jim was working away as they talked.

"What do you mean?" asked Maribel. "I'm trying to understand it, Jim. That's why I'm here."

"Paul came here," Jim said. "You told him about everything."

"Oh. And what did he say?"

"Maribel, I don't like how you're dragging other people into this. It tells me that you don't understand what this is to me. This is where I feel the presence of God, and one day it will be where the devout worship. Paul doesn't belong here."

"He's a friend," Maribel reminded him. "I talked to him, because I was worried about you. Jim, please stop what you're doing and listen to me." Jim did finally take a break from his labor. Jim stopped working for a moment, looked up and met eyes with Maribel. It gave Maribel a kind of comfort that hurt, like putting lotion on hands that are so dry, oil stings them. "I told Paul, because I didn't know who else to tell, who might understand what it is that you're thinking about. I was only trying to understand what you were up to out here."

"He asked me to stop," said Jim. "He had no cause to ask me to stop the work that God has ordered me to do. He has set his face against the Lord."

"I didn't ask him to tell you to stop," Maribel said.

"He shouldn't have been here."

"Tell me what happened."

"You told him about this place, though you knew it was sacred. You are a conspirator with him and a person of the world."

Maribel's eyes stung. She was silent for a long time. She felt hot and dizzy, overwhelmed. "I was reading the Bible this morning," she said. She knew better than to tell him

it was his Bible, and she'd found the places he loved best and read all his notes about them. "I read the passage about Moses, where God shows himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock." Her stomach ached. Somehow it felt cruel to use this against Jim. It would force him to reveal himself—he had no choice.

"I communicate with God through more than the scriptures that he has given to all men," said Jim. "Reading the words proves nothing. You do not know his heart as I do."

Maribel was silent for a while. She was seething. She didn't believe him. Though he'd done a good job of making his faith seem believable, sincere, and healthy. It was an escape, a cheap escape, like men who buy boats and spend their days motoring around the lake. He was no different from them. "You're just running away, and you're hiding behind God." The cold was whipping at her face and she held her hand over her mouth to warm it even as she spoke.

Jim didn't respond. For a moment, he seemed to care that Maribel was furious. He stood up, took a few steps toward her. But the look on his face held fear, too, not just acknowledgement.

"Don't you dare say another word about God's will and God's desires unless you can show me," said Maribel. "Show me that it's something he said, and not something you made up to keep us away from you," said Maribel. Maribel sniffed and wrapped her coat tighter. "And don't speak to me again until you're ready to explain this." She pulled the Bible out of her bag and dropped it on the ground.

Later that night, Maribel woke up with the clock on the table saying it was 2:00 am. Before sleeping, she had replayed her conversation with Jim that afternoon in her head over and over again until she felt sick of thinking of those same words. She heard sounds in the living



room, somebody coming into the house. She stretched out her arm over Jim's side of the bed, but it was empty. Jim owned a gun, but Maribel had never even held it. She'd only ever seen him take it out once, when a bear was sniffing around near the house and Nathalie was too scared to sleep. Jim kept it in a locked box in the wardrobe. The key was slipped underneath that same wardrobe. Maribel felt like she was still dreaming. She was trembling and felt clumsy and out of control, but she swung open the wardrobe and took the key from underneath, opened the box and picked up the gun. Holding the gun made her feel more out of control, not more powerful and not better able to defend herself. She had always pictured guns being heavier. "Who's there?" she asked, and realized, from the sound of her own voice, that she must have been more afraid than she had realized. Her voice sounded hoarse and masculine. "I've got a gun," she said, and hearing herself say this in the hoarse masculine voice scared her more than the person downstairs did.

"It's me, Maribel," whispered somebody, but his voice didn't sound like Jim's.

"I mean it. I'm standing up here with a gun. Don't you dare try anything. Just turn around and walk back out. If you come up these stairs I'll shoot."

"It's Jim," said the person, who sounded a little more like Jim this time. Maribel didn't take her finger off the trigger, though. "Maribel, put that thing down. You're scaring me to death." The light went on downstairs.

The light startled Maribel, and she shot a blank at the floor before she knew what she was doing. The feeling of firing the gun hadn't been like she'd expected, and she screamed. Julia screamed from her bedroom. "Everyone is safe!" Maribel called out.

"Maribel, what in the devil? Give me that thing," said Jim, sounding like himself now. He took the gun from her hands. His face was red, and he smelled sweaty and outdoorsy, like

he's been in the woods all day. His voice was a little strained.

Julia and Nathalie appeared, Nathalie's eyes were wide and frightened and Julia was ranting, "What on earth happened? Holy shit. That scared me so bad. Oh my God, you're holding a gun."

"It was an accident," said Maribel. "I thought I heard something."

"You thought you heard something, and so you fired a gun into the dark?" Julia asked.

"I was startled, it was an accident," said Maribel.

Nathalie hugged Jim looking up at his wind-burned face and his chapped lips. He crouched and told her something: "It's okay. Your mom fired the gun on accident. Everyone is okay."

"Why were you out so late?" asked Julia.

"Please," Maribel interrupted. "Go back to bed, both of you. He was out late working on something, and he startled me when he came in." They shuffled off obediently, though it was easy to hear through walls in their house, and they'd surely listen intently in their rooms.

"Maribel, I needed a moment of peace. I'm sorry to do this to you, but I needed to. I need to find a place of peace," Jim said. He went into their bedroom and started taking off his shoes as if he'd go to bed now, as if nothing was unusual.

Maribel breathed a sigh of relief. What he's just said was nearing an explanation for his behavior. It was just a snippet, but it was something. Maribel looked at the gun. She needed to put it back in the wardrobe, but she didn't want to have to touch it again. "There was somebody coming into my house in the middle of the Goddamn night and you weren't here to protect us," she said. "That's all I knew, and maybe you should have thought about that before you decided to disappear for the whole day and come back to sneak around in the dark without saying a

word.”

Jim didn't answer. He looked weary. Jim got back up, went to the dresser, picked the gun off the dresser and went into the bedroom to put it back in the wardrobe. Maribel still stood in the hallway. Jim sat on the bed, facing her.

“Are you coming to bed?” he asked.

“No,” said Maribel. She was crying. She had come close to crying every hour for most of the days, and now she was giving in. She watched herself cry and despised herself a little bit, because she was showing weakness, because she was begging Jim to prove he still wanted to protect her. Jim stood up again, walked toward her and held her.

## Chapter 5

Paul came by the church while it was still just a frame. Jim was trying to find out the mechanics of it all, how he could build it so that it'd stand forever, through all the storms and the hail that came through. He was still learning how to cut the wood so that it's be the strongest, how his saw should line up with the grain of the tree. And he was learning which beams would have to bear the most weight and which should be the strongest and which way to nail them so that the walls would flex under pressure, instead of breaking.

Jim saw Paul from far off, but he pretended not to. After all, Paul might not be coming for him. Folks came through the woods from time to time, hikers and lovers and people who needed to be alone. So Jim kept his head down and worked, watching Paul walk towards him out of the corner of his eye. Paul didn't walk in a straight line right up to him. It was as if he couldn't make up his mind where he was going. But after a time, Paul was too close for Jim to pretend not to see him.

"What is it, Paul?" Jim asked, startling Paul before he'd gotten up the courage to speak.

"I heard you were out here working on something, a new church building is what I heard. I was curious, so I thought I'd stop by and see the place, hoping you don't mind."

"Maribel has spoken to you."

"She has. She stopped by."

Jim didn't say anything—if Paul wanted to talk he'd have to open his scared mouth and say something. Even the birds and insects grew quieter at that moment. Paul fidgeted from one foot to the other. He never had been one for the outdoors. He jumped a bit when a crow took off from a tree nearby. "It's just that, Maribel will never own up to it. She has a kind of control

about her feelings. But you know, she's mighty worried about you and I can't say that I blame her."

Jim glared at Paul.

"Look, Jim, we don't have to talk about all of that right now. I really just want to know what's going on with you. I know how things haven't been the best for your family lately. And I just want to know how all this is helping."

Jim stopped working for a minute and sat on a log. "I can't talk to you out here," he said. "And you can't come back. But I'll tell you what I know about this place. I'll tell you how this place is healing me and bringing glory to God."

"I'll step away, Jim. I never meant to intrude."

The two stepped away and they started walking out of the woods—they could talk without looking at each other this way. Jim hadn't felt as comforted by the church today as he usually did. He didn't mind leaving it so much. "Tell me, Jim. How does this place help anything?" Paul asked.

"It's the work, I think. I miss working myself to exhaustion, the way I used to. Makes me sleep easy. It was God's plan for me all along, to work like this."

"And you're keeping it a secret."

Jim nodded. "There aren't too many people who deserve to know," he said. "It's for the devout, Paul. It's a refuge from sin in the world. It can't be what it's meant to be if everybody knows about it."

"As long as there are people there, there will be sin there, you know," Paul said. "And Christ came for the sinners, not the righteous."

Jim made a scoffing sound. “For the repentant sinners, those who detest sin. This place speaks to God’s greatness. It cannot be trespassed by those who do not recognize the magnitude of their sins. It is only for the devout.”

They walked in silence for a while. Paul furrowing his brow and looking at the ground as if he were examining each leaf. “Your family, Jim, are they the devout?”

“Maribel and Julia are lustful, wicked. They have each given into the desires of the flesh, which are not from God.”

Paul shook his head. “It’s hard to hear you talk about them that way,” he said. “Jim, Julia’s just a girl. She doesn’t even understand where your anger comes from.”

“She defies me. And she loves not the Lord.”

“She’s young and impulsive, but I don’t understand why you grow so angry with her and neither does Maribel.”

“I wasn’t wicked like she is, even in my young days,” said Jim. “I sinned, but I hated sin. Julia relishes it.” Julia was just like Maribel, the same gift for deception and the same sinful desires. When she lied, she had the same easy nonchalance about it, the lack of shame. And she loved controlling people for its own sake. Jim had seen the way she talked to men, standing taller than they did, measuring her words with them the way Maribel did when she spoke to anyone. And like Maribel, she wanted to be caught. She made little effort to hide her sin, because she felt so little shame. Why else would she come into the house late at night with Jim standing right before the door? He’d tried everything with her. He was, at one point, level and calm with her, but she scoffed at him. He tried showing her his anger and he tried ignoring her behavior, and she still defied him.

“You’re giving up too soon,” said Paul. “There isn’t a problem in your life that you and the good Lord can’t work out together. And here you are out in the woods building your own personal heaven with everyone around you aching.”

“God has commanded me to do this,” said Jim.

“I doubt he’s commanded all of it, Jim, the part of it that’s really just running away from the folks who love you.”

“They do not, for if they did they would obey me. But God is my solace. This is all I have now, and it is enough for me. I can stop grasping at happiness, here. I won’t let the others interfere.”

Paul was silent. The men had reached the edge of the forest now and there was nothing for Paul to do but leave. “I can’t make you see what you don’t want to see, but I don’t think you’re doing this for God. It doesn’t square up with anything God teaches. Now, I’ve said my piece,” he said, before he went.

Jim’s church began to take shape. On days when Jim was completely absorbed in his work, it seemed as though the church were growing upwards from the ground. At the end of the day, he would survey the work he had done and he would barely remember doing it. The exhaustion in his muscles made him sleep soundly, something he hadn’t done in many years. After years of anxiety-ridden nights, he had forgotten how it a full night’s rest felt—things were bright and clear and his mind moved sharply. He found he loved the physical things of life, the way his back felt when he bent it, the sun on his neck. He enjoyed sweat beading down his forehead and he loved wind twisting his shirt around his torso.

Jim felt the presence of God. He had been asking questions about suffering, death, and human's longing for heaven. Here as he built his church, he heard a resounding answer that couldn't be put into words, but emerged from what he saw and did and felt. God's grace came to all in the simplest ways, the sensations and sights that were interesting and beautiful and made life bearable.

Maribel's visits disrupted this. Talking to her made him see things with human eyes. He could only focus on the details that related to people. He lost sight of God's creation. When she was there, he focused on her face and listened to the words she said, and her voice made the place he was standing in feel foreign. He felt lifted out of his paradise and into somewhere that was more complicated and sinful.

But Nathalie was a part of this place. She enriched it, made it holier. He brought Nathalie with him, to see what he was building. So young and empty of experiences, she could believe what he said fully. She didn't try to put it into other words she'd heard before.

The first time he brought her to the church was a Saturday morning, before the sun was up. She woke up too quickly, as though she hadn't really been asleep in the first place.

"I'm building something," whispered Jim. "I want you to be the first to see it," he said.

"Where is it?" asked Nathalie.

"We have to leave the house," Jim explained. "It's too big to fit in the house."

Nathalie asked if she had to brush her teeth first. Jim laughed and said it didn't matter. The two went out into the woods, and Jim carried Nathalie, so that her feet would stay warm away from the cold, damp ground. There were still stars out, though it was beginning to get light. The stars didn't fade until the sun had risen all the way.



When Jim first showed the church to Nathalie, it still had a humble rustic feel. It didn't feel ancient and ornate yet. The sides of the walls weren't finished. He hadn't finished landscaping the surrounding trees and rocks into shapes that would feel like natural ruins. But even though it was hardly more than a shed then, there was something about the proportions of it that felt harmonious and lovely. And there was something powerful about the place he'd chosen, the burnt trees and the rock formations that surrounded the place.

Jim watched Nathalie's face as she turned around and regarded everything. She looked absorbed in it, and he was convinced that she felt the way he did. "What is it?" she asked. "Is it a house?"

"Yes," said Jim. "It's God's house. He lives here."

Nathalie furrowed her brow. "God lives everywhere," she said. This is what she had been taught in Sunday school.

"Yes," said Jim. "He does. But this is one of the places in the world where he meets with us."

Nathalie walked into the church—the floor was unfinished, so she stepped carefully. "How did you find out that God lives here?" she asked. She was whispering now, and looking upwards as if God would appear soon in the sky.

"I spoke to him," said Jim.

It was flurrying, even though it felt too warm for this to be happening. Jim thought he heard music in the distance, music that was too quiet to hear, but that could be sensed in the ears and in the body. The music was just a quiet buzz that was different from silence and quieter than the sounds that the forest made.

“I want to talk to God,” said Nathalie, still whispering. “I don’t mean just praying,” she said. “I want to talk to him like you talk to him.”

Jim sat beside Nathalie and the wind rushed into the unfinished building through its cracks and made them cold. He held her close and said, “God, this is your servant Nathalie. I have brought her to you, because she wants to know your presence. You can shape her, God, as you will. She is ours.” They were crouched side-by-side and he kept his arm around her back.

“What’s he saying?” asked Nathalie.

“Be patient,” said Jim. “I thank you,” said Jim, “for remembering me in my time of need and for blessing me with your inspiration and your presence. I ask that you do the same for Nathalie, that you show to her your glory, even more than you have shown to me, God. I ask that you enter her thoughts, Lord, and that your presence abides with her for all the days of her life. That you protect her, Lord, from evil, but not from truth.” Nathalie was watching him talk. She didn’t close her eyes—that would make this moment feel too much like an ordinary prayer, something you could say in a big warm church, not here, where it was only just light and where her father spoke to God.

“Can I talk to him?” asked Nathalie. Jim nodded and so she began. “I want to know how my dad talks to you, and I want to know if you still talk to people on earth, God, and not just to angels and dead people and people who lived a long time ago in the Bible. I want you to talk to me,” she said.

The two waited in silence. Nathalie listened very closely. There were hairs standing up on her neck and arms. Nathalie said, “I think when you finish you should leave the windows without any glass.”

“Why is that?” Jim asked.

“I think it is nice to hear the wind,” she said.

“Do you like it here?” Jim asked, and Nathalie said that she did.

“But I don’t think I’ve heard God yet,” said Nathalie, “and I’m a little cold.”

Jim took Nathalie home and she crawled into bed before Maribel woke up and got her ready for school. After that day, Jim often took Nathalie with him to his place in the woods. It was their secret. Nathalie usually managed to look asleep in her pajamas in the morning before Maribel woke her. Sometimes Jim told Maribel he’d take her to school and she stayed with him in the woods while her classmates sat and learned grammar. “Talk to me about God,” Jim would say, and Nathalie would ramble. “Sometimes I think about how big God is,” she’d say. “I try to make him as big as I can in my head. I think about standing next to him and he’s tall and stands taller than I do and then I think about how he’s even bigger than that and I think about coming up to his knees and I think about being as high as his ankle. And I think about standing next to his toe, and then standing on his toe like it’s the ground, because he’s so much bigger than people are.”

“What would you say to God if you could?” Jim asked. Nathalie scratched her head. “I don’t know that I’d have much to say. I think I’d be scared.” She was sitting on a stump swinging her legs and kicking her heels onto the stump.

Jim was making a ladder, because he couldn’t reach the roof easily enough to work on the details. It was nice to do something simple and functional that didn’t have to be perfect. “You can ask him anything, Nathalie.”

“I don’t know,” Nathalie said, shrugging. “I’d ask him stuff. I’d ask him how come Mom and Julia are so sad. I’d ask him why he lets people get sad. He doesn’t get anything good out of people being sad, you know? That seems funny to me that he’d want anybody to be sad.”

Jim stopped what he was doing for a few moments. “That’s a bit like what I talk to him about,” he said. “The lives he makes us lead don’t make much sense to me.”

“And he doesn’t answer you?” Nathalie asked. “Even though you’ve talked to him out here?”

“It’s not quite like that,” said Jim. “I get a sense that he is responding over time, but he doesn’t usually use words with me.”

“He has used words with you?” Nathalie asked.

“Yes. Sometimes I hear him. When I’m very quiet and very patient, sometimes I hear him.”

“But he’s never answered your biggest question?” Nathalie asked. “About why people have bad things happen to them and why we have hard lives?”

“There are many questions he answers as I build. Building this church helps me find the answers.”

“I want to build it, too,” said Nathalie.

Jim smiled. The Lord had blessed him with a daughter who loved God. Praise him. He taught Nathalie how to build. Her small hands weren’t as steady as they needed to be. His smallest hammer was still a bit too heavy for her and her hand shook as she lifted it and she brought it down at strange angles. It took her many tries before she could put enough force behind it to put a nail into wood. “You don’t have to hit it hard,” Jim said. “You just have to control and hit it on the top.” Nathalie was precise when she measured things and she understood why building the church was important. Mostly, it pleased Jim to watch her do his work with him, and the work of God. She had also been called to his holy mission. She would, when she was older, know God better than Jim could know him in his lifetime.

This went on for some time until one day Maribel came to the church. Nathalie and Jim were there in their normal routine of working and praying and talking about God. Jim was finished with the ladder and he was filling in the roof, laying boards over the rafters. It was hard work, and hurt his back. They heard Maribel screaming Jim's name. The birds flew up in fear. The squirrels and crickets held still and stopped making their sounds. Even in the open air where sounds are easily lost, Maribel's voice was clear and shrill and angry. Jim and Nathalie heard her stomping through the woods and they exchanged looks. "Should I hide?" Nathalie mouthed, but Jim shook his head 'no.'

She came into view before they'd decided what to do. "Why wouldn't you answer when I was screaming your name?" she demanded.

They said nothing.

"Nathalie's teacher called. She says Nathalie has missed more than a week of school. What on earth do you have to say, Jim? What in the devil has been going on?" He didn't answer right away. "I won't let you stand there and say nothing," she said.

Jim cleared his throat and said in a soft voice, "Maribel, I know it's difficult to accept, but the Lord has also called Nathalie to create God's work here."

"Don't give me any of that nonsense," Maribel said. "I want to know exactly what happened. You lied when you said you'd take her to school in the morning. You lied to my face, over and over, and you are telling me right now that God told you to lie to me."

"It was needed to complete his work."

"I'm glad," Maribel spat. "That you and God are so chummy that you don't even have to do what he says in the Bible. That's awfully kind of him to give you special permission to

trample over anything he's said about right and wrong. You're keeping your own daughter from school, and you're lying to me." Her mouth stretched and was so tense and full of rage that her words were hard to understand. Maribel turned to Nathalie. Her voice softened a little, but not enough for speaking to a girl her age who had only done what her father told her. "Tell me, Nathalie, what did he tell you? What happened?"

Nathalie looked at Jim and back at Maribel. She folded her hands in front of her, trying to assume an obedient pose. "I wanted to come," Nathalie said. "Dad said that God lives here and we can talk to him."

Maribel's eyes grew wide. She turned back to Jim. "And you've talked her into your nonsense," she said. Jim scowled at this. Maribel had called this place nonsense, she who lacked the purity of heart to see what this place was. She had hardly looked at the grand things Nathalie and Jim had created here. The trees surrounding the house had been felled into a pattern and their branches were shaved of bark and carved into smooth curves. And the church was almost done.

"It is nonsense to you, because you have not purified your heart, and God will not permit the wicked to feel his presence here."

"Oh, God, Jim," Maribel said. "Jim, there's nothing here. It's just a building you made. Look at this. You don't even know anything that's going on with us, with your own family."

"Maribel, please. You have to take longer to try to understand it."

"I understand it," said Maribel. "I understand you're trying to get away from us. I'm not standing for it, Jim." She covered her face with her hand. She was crying, without tears. Her face was anguished. "You're self-deceived, Jim. When God talks to you, he only says what you want to hear. Don't come back home tonight, Jim," she said. "Don't come back. And don't infect Nathalie with your nonsense." Maribel stumbled forward and took Nathalie's hand.

“Maribel, please. I will spend more time at home,” said Jim. “I will. And I’ll let Nathalie go to school. I have to finish, and Nathalie has to be a part of this. That’s all,” Jim was saying, but Maribel was ignoring him.

Nathalie was crying now. She was hugging Jim with the arm that Maribel hadn’t taken hold of. Maribel had to nearly drag her apart, but once she’d let go of Jim, she walked obediently away.

And Jim sat there, amongst God’s creation, alone. He had to cleave only to God, now. There was nothing that he could lose that was worth more than this place. He felt relieved at seeing Maribel go, at being forbidden to return, because returning would have been such a burden.

## Chapter 6

Julia stopped going out with other boys as soon as she heard that Peter was coming back. Word had gotten around that Peter was going help his father out with his business, using all the things he'd learned when he was at school. Julia saw his graduation announcement in the church bulletin. He was coming home, maybe for as long as a year.

It was lucky that she got the news around the same time that her dad started "working on a construction project," as Maribel said. She was nervous when she said it, although the words she said sounded perfectly reasonable. "Jim is doing some work in Mr. Reid's yard, some landscaping, and he's building a shelter out there. Mr. Reid is looking at making the place a bit friendlier, sort of like a public park. So Jim is helping him. We could use the money," she paused here. She swallowed and tugged at the fingers of one hand with her other hand. "And the change of pace as well. Working at the store has been so frustrating for him lately."

"Sure," said Julia, not looking up from her magazine.

"He won't be around as much lately. He's working longer hours," she said.

Julia tried not to smile at this, but it was fortunate. He'd be tired now. He'd come home late and fall asleep right away. He wouldn't know that she'd stopped misbehaving. She couldn't have born him thinking that he'd won—that his kind discipline had made her obedient.

So she could concentrate on winning Peter back. Even if he hadn't thought it any great shame to lose her in the first place, he'd remember, once he saw her. Julia knew something now, that she was irresistible. She started preparing again. She looked at herself in the mirror and remembered the faces she'd used to seem pretty, coy, caring. She thought about him day and night and what it would be like to hold hands with somebody again. She thought about weddings and the color white. She even began praying, though they were nonsensical prayers about only



her own wants offered up to a God she no longer believed in. Sometimes she just prayed Peter's name to the Lord. She couldn't imagine what would happen when she saw him again or how things would be. Having Peter was a goal in itself. She didn't think about the ups and downs of being with him or what time spent together felt like. Peter was a place. He was a belonging. And he was coming back soon.

Maribel noticed the change in her. She told her, "Julia, I'm happy you seem calmer now." It wasn't the right word to use. Julia was buzzing and jittery with anticipation. "You know, I've heard the news about Peter, but we still don't know really what his plans are."

Julia's face dropped. She stared at Maribel with an expression that said everything. She had no choice but to win him back. She couldn't consider other possibilities.

Maribel made as if to hug Julia, but Julia hardly hugged her back.

Julia checked the phone every few minutes starting from the day he returned. She thought any moment he'd call. She couldn't bear to call him. It wouldn't suit her, the personality she inhabited when she was with him. So she waited until Sunday. She struggled to think of anything else. When Sunday rolled around, she wore a pink dress she hadn't worn since high school. It wasn't as flattering as it had once been. It used to fill out her slim figure in an appealing way, but now it was tight in the chest and the wrong shape for her body. The worst part was waiting for the service to end. Nobody spoke before the service. Sometimes they whispered or murmured something you couldn't hear to one of their own folks sitting on the same pew. But they waited until the end of the service to chat unabashedly.

Julia caught Peter's eye and smiled at him. She inhaled deeply as he looked at her and exhaled when he started walking towards her. He stopped halfway and said a few words to somebody, but it didn't look like he wanted to talk to this person. He'd just grown shy about

coming up to her. Well Julia could fix that. She marched up to him and touched his shoulder. He startled when she did this. When he turned around, he said her name. “It’s been so long,” he said. He laughed nervously. He stood too far away from her. It felt unnatural. His eyes didn’t quite focus on her but darted around the room nervously and passed by her every now and then.

“It has,” said Julia. She poked his ribs teasingly. “How’d you get it in your head to go so far, anyhow?” she asked. “The girls are prettier here,” she said, putting her hands behind her back and swaying a bit.

Peter laughed again. He leaned backwards on his heels like he was trying to put distance between their faces. “That so?” he said. Something about his voice had changed—his accent was different. Julia had never before noticed that he had one—he’d always sounded like a Northerner compared to the others down here. But now any trace of a drawl was gone. And Julia hated the way he ended words with crisp little t’s and k’s.

“You don’t agree?” asked Julia. “Peter, you’re gonna shame us girls,” she lost her teasing tone when she said this. Something else crept in—there was a quaver in her voice on the words “us girls.”

“Julia,” he said. He lowered his voice and tipped his head downwards. Julia came close and enjoyed, for a minute, that they were creating a private space with their bodies, their shoulders hunched over. “You know, I’ve got a girl. She’s coming down for a visit in a little bit. I just wanted you to know before she showed up all of a sudden. You know a lot of time has gone by.”

Julia had thought about how he might have some other girl nowadays, but she wasn’t prepared for that condescending little bite in his voice when he said “a lot of time has gone by.” He didn’t know the first thing about what a lot of time felt like, waiting around and bored by

everything for four years. “That so?” was all she could say. Someone else, an intrusive little old lady wanted to talk to him about the big city and everything he’d learned. Julia should have walked up the aisle and out the door, but she didn’t. She leaned against the pew on the other side of the aisle and listened to Peter talk to this woman about everything he’d done and seen in big cities. She stared at him, trying to force him to turn her way, but he didn’t. He’d gotten stronger since he’d left. She marched out of the church. Nothing had changed, she tried to tell herself. She’d planned all along to win him back no matter what he thought he wanted. But it wasn’t just his girl. It was the way he hadn’t looked at Julia and the way his voice hadn’t changed to the tender tone he used to use with her. And the girl was coming. Julia would have to look at this god-awful girl when she came back. She would be fancy and educated and she’d be from a place where girls did what they pleased. Julia walked home, and she cried. When her eyes were dry, Maribel knocked and came in.

“Hannah is her name,” Julia told Maribel. “That’s what he said to the lady who was talking to him after the service. He went all the way up North and got himself a girl with a country name.”

“Why don’t you go wash your face,” Maribel said. She used to give Julia this advice all the time. When Julia was a girl, it was the only thing that calmed her. “Wash your face, and put on something that fits you, and tell me everything.”

Julia did as she was told. This is what a girl who Peter would love would do—she’d obey her mother. It had been so long since she’d been told to wash her face, since Maribel had talked so tenderly to her. It felt okay right now, to be treated like a child. The water was cool, and rubbing it into her face calmed her. She felt cleaner, baptized. Then she came back and sat on the bed.

“It isn’t fair,” she said. “He went off to college and has his own plans and all these folks who know him up North, and what do I have? What do I have that makes me equal to that?”

“You’ve got plenty to be grateful for,” Maribel said. “Jim and I have worked hard to get you a few classes at the community college. We must give thanks in all circumstances,” said Maribel, quoting the Bible like Jim used to. She’d never really known the Word well enough to do that before. She had big dark circles under her eyes and it looked like she’d been crying recently herself.

“It isn’t school that’s the problem,” said Julia. “No it isn’t that he’s more educated than I am. He knows things and he’s got this posture, and when he talks, he doesn’t have an accent anymore. You know I heard he went to New York with a buddy for a week. Hailed cabs and wore suits and went about going to fancy places. I’ve got nothing like that, nothing he’d be curious about, nothing to make me different.”

Maribel rubbed her back. Suddenly Peter not loving her anymore felt like a small problem, a skinned knee. “Julia, you can’t win this here,” Maribel said. “He’s in love with a nice girl. You’ve got to let him be.”

“He’s mine,” said Julia. “He’s always been mine.” She sighed and examined her nails. “I want a white wedding with my first love,” she said. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

It was a funny thing coming from a girl who seemed to want the modern way when it came to boys, go about kissing on all of them and apologize to nobody. But she’d made up her mind, and she was sure now that she’d get what she wanted. She felt as if her life while Peter was gone didn’t count for anything to her. And now that Jim was out of her way, nothing reminded her of the men she’d been with and the names she’d been called while Peter was away, so she could forget it completely.

Julia became another girl entirely. She was like an actress researching a role, one she intended to play for the rest of her life. And in this role, she played the piano. Julia had played piano since she was little. Jim was determined that his children would play hymns. They couldn't afford a piano, so Jim asked to use the church piano, got a key, and drove Julia to the church three times a week. Julia couldn't be persuaded to play anymore by the time she was a teenager. She hadn't touched the thing since she was fifteen. But she got working at it once Peter was back. She played at the church every day, for two hours or more, and she got good, really good. She played all kinds of music that nobody learned here. She learned the church stuff, of course, but jazz and other things, city kinds of music. She was sharp, though nobody knew it (her laziness and glamorous feminine manner usually fooled people). She memorized notes quickly. Then she would think about every line and how it made her feel, how she could play it so that others would feel the same way. She played until she became sensitive to it, until minor chords pained her and major chords made her triumphant.

She asked the pastor if she could lead the service. Mrs. Holdsworth wasn't getting any younger, and she lost her place on the page, playing too many or too few verses. He asked to hear her play a bit and when she'd finished he wiped his eyes and said yes, and God bless her, and praise God for her salvation. The pastor knew about her wild days, Julia supposed, but the piano playing was enough to convince him that she was a convert.

Peter's family always sat at the front of the church and on the left side of the sanctuary. They sat right in front of the piano. The first time that Julia played in church, she saw herself from Peter's point of view. Julia had that delicate complexion that made her look like she was always about to cry, but the lighting there at the front of the church hit her just right, made her look peachy and girly and not like a white rabbit. Of course, it wasn't just the way she looked. It

meant something for her to be up there playing piano. She seemed sophisticated and in charge. She sang, too, and her voice was clear and loud and pretty, and sharp only every once in a while. From where Peter's family sat, you could probably hardly hear anybody else singing.

She never spoke to Peter after the service, not one word. Sometimes she looked like she was about to walk up to him, but turned and spoke to somebody else. She made friends with all the older ladies at church, and they came up to Julia after the service and said things about Julia that weren't at all true. "You've become such a beautiful young lady," they said. "So elegant, and very mature for your age," they said. "And your piano playing is remarkable. You can go far, you know? You can go up to New York and be a real musician."

She wouldn't have dreamed of it. Nobody there had a white wedding with their first love. But she *could* go there, and that was what counted. She *deserved* to go there. She was worthy of any city in the world, and of any man.

It was after a church wedding that the plan came together. The wedding had been perfect, the kind Julia wanted, where the bride looked sweet and perfect and the sermon compared her to the church of Christ. The church had been decorated with white roses. The reception was out on the family farm of the groom, which looked picturesque with a little bit of ribbon and Christmas lights. Rumor had it the girl was going to have just the teensiest bit of dancing at the reception, and of course, it wouldn't suit to dance anywhere near a holy place. Someone played a guitar softly and couples swayed together. Julia could see Peter coming towards her out of the corner of her eye, but she waited until the right moment to turn her head and look at him. He seemed startled when she turned to face him, like he somehow didn't expect this conversation to happen. "You look great," he said. He was still an ordinary boy after all, who didn't understand how to say anything other than the thoughts running through his head.

“Thank you,” said Julia, shrugging as if she didn’t care too much what he thought.

“Beautiful night for a wedding,” she said, not because it was the cleverest thing she could think of, but because being too clever right now would only scare him.

“It is,” said Peter. “They don’t have these kind of weddings up North, I don’t think. Something I didn’t know I missed about living down here.”

“Well, I’m sure they have some really classy affairs,” said Julia.

“But it isn’t the same. I like things better down here,” he said. “I didn’t think that was true, before, but it is. Things are nicer, and people know each other better.”

Julia looked at the lake as if she were starting to lose interest.

“And you were right about the girls here. They are prettier. And sweeter, too.”

“Now that isn’t such a nice thing to say. What would Hannah think?”

“Well, she’s never been here, so she wouldn’t know how true it is.” Peter sighed. “Things aren’t going to work out between us. She’s too different from me. She was raised different.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Julia. “But you shouldn’t be telling me, you know, not until you’ve told her, if that’s how you feel.” She held a finger up. “Girls like nothing more than for a man to be honest about how he feels. You remember that,” she said, putting the finger on his chest and pushing back a little.

“Of course,” said Peter. It was quiet for a while as the guitar player finished the song. Some kids were playing near the lake and one of them almost pushed another in. Julia chuckled at it and Peter chuckled even though he wasn’t looking in the right direction and didn’t know what they were laughing at. “I’ve been thinking about you Julia,” he said.

“And what do you think about me?” asked Julia, cocking her head to the right.

“Well, I just have all of these good memories about when we were together. I didn’t

know then, how rare it is to feel just that way about somebody. I'm older now, and I've wizened up."

Julia laughed slightly. "I should hope so," she said. "Awful waste if you'd gone up there and learned so much and didn't figure out just what was important to you."

Peter put his hands in his pockets and fidgeted nervously. "Well, I'm figuring it out," he said. "I've got an idea anyway."

Julia smiled. "I know what you're saying," she said. "You should think about it just a little harder before you change everything for me."

"Of course," he said. "And I'd want to know if you feel the same way about me," he said.

Julia stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek lightly. "Well, I think you're awful sweet," she said.

It wasn't long before the two were a couple again. Julia started wearing that gold cross necklace again. Ordinarily, the town would have been furious at Julia for breaking off somebody else's romance like that. It helped that Hannah was a Yankee and Julia was a conversion story, a prodigal child.

"I'm happy for you," Maribel said. "Mostly. I don't know how you did it. I wonder sometimes if you realize just yet how hard it can be to love somebody, since nobody's ever said no to you, as far as I know."

"It isn't hard," said Julia simply. "Boys are predictable and simple."

"I don't know if that's true of boys," said Maribel. "But it isn't true of men. I don't know anybody who's more complicated than your father."

Julia fell silent. She'd noticed that her mother hadn't been eating well, and sometimes she heard her crying late at night. But she was sure a part of her was glad he was gone the way she



was. “I don’t know if he’s all that complicated,” Julia said. “I think he’s just mean and hateful. I’m glad he’s been gone more often. I’m so much happier now that he’s gone.”

“Don’t say that,” said Maribel. “He’s your father. You know that I don’t like how harsh he is with you, but he loves us. I have to believe that he loves us.”

“Well, I don’t have to believe that,” said Julia. “I’m not sure that he does love us.”

Maribel scolded her and went to her own room, but Julia didn’t regret what she said, not really.

Julia knew that the real reason Jim was away was more complicated than Maribel had said. She hoped they got divorced. Back in high school, when she was still friends with other girls, before they started turning their noses up at her, her friend Suzanna had been through all of this. Her parents were teachers at the same school, and they had been for years. Then suddenly one of them up and became a substitute. It wasn’t even a year before they were divorced and all of their things were divided up between them. She didn’t think it would actually happen—her parents were too old-fashioned to make it official. But it was a good thing he was out there, doing his own work and coming home late, ignoring them. Julia found she could be who she wanted to be, even if that happened to be someone her dad might have favored a bit more.

## Chapter 7

After Maribel found Nathalie at Jim's church, she held her hand as they walked out of the woods. Nathalie was not crying. For a girl so young, she was oddly shamed of crying. So her chin quivered and her face contorted, but she wasn't tearing up. "I'll do all the work I missed, I promise. I want to be with Dad. Why can't I?"

Maribel realized she was squeezing Nathalie's hand too tightly. She loosened her grip and Nathalie slipped her hand out, began rubbing it to sooth it. "Nathalie, listen to me," she said. They crouched in the woods. "Lying to people in your family is not okay. Do you understand?" she asked.

Nathalie nodded. "But we didn't lie. You never asked."

"Don't say that," said Maribel. "Neither of you told me the whole truth, and that's the same as lying."

Nathalie was still rubbing her hand. It was red and Maribel wondered just how tightly she'd been squeezing it. "I'm sorry," Nathalie said. "But please let me go back, just when I don't need to be in school."

"Do you believe what he told you?" asked Maribel. "That the place is special or that God lives there or anything like that."

Nathalie's eyes welled up. "No," she said. "I don't really."

"Are you sure?" asked Maribel. "Because it was only a moment ago that you said you believed him." Nathalie's eyes were on the ground and so Maribel took her face in her hand and turned it toward her. "It is never okay to lie to me. So tell the truth now." She let go of her chin.

"Well I don't know," said Nathalie. "I think it would be nice, if God lived there." She sniffed. "But I never saw anything," she said.

“That’s because it’s just an ordinary building out there, do you understand? Dad will realize soon that it’s just an ordinary place.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Nathalie asked.

“He will.”

It was cold, and so the two walked quickly out of the woods and came back to their house. It was beginning to get dark, because it got dark so early these days, and the light on the highway hadn’t lit up yet. Nathalie went to bed without dinner, even though Maribel didn’t tell her to.

Maribel called Paul. “This is Maribel. It’s Jim again,” she told him. “I know it’s late, but I’ve got to talk to someone. He’s been lying to me, and he’s gone and made Nathalie believe a bunch of nonsense, and now I’ve told him not to come home. Good God, he’s going to spend the night out in his church he’s building. What have I done?”

Paul told her to stay calm. “Start from the beginning,” he said. “What happened?”

“Please, just come over here. My nerves are jumping and I want someone here and talking on the phone just isn’t the same. I’m sorry, I know it’s late. But if you can manage, I’m too ashamed to talk about it with anyone else.”

Paul promised he’d come soon, and Maribel hung up the phone. She paced and pulled at her hair and it would have been nice to cry, but she was too angry. She thought of Jim’s face as she’d taken Nathalie away—that heartbreak. What had she done? What else could she do? She poured herself a glass of something, but she didn’t want to drink it after all. The smell of the alcohol just made her nauseous.

Paul arrived just a few minutes later, like he’d jumped straight in his car and sped off straightaway. Dependable—that was the word to use for him. It was her own fault that Maribel

had never fallen for a man like that, who did what he was asked and showed gentleness and tenderness. Maribel was still holding the glass of bourbon when he came.

“Put that down,” Paul said gently, taking the glass from her hand, like Maribel had hoped he would. It was nice to be allowed to need help.

“You won’t believe what he’s like now,” she said. “I can’t tell if he believes what he says. He can’t possibly think he’s being honest with himself.”

“I’ve talked to him, too,” said Paul. “I haven’t stopped trying to make him take a step away from that church he’s building. Something happened didn’t it? That’s why you called? What happened?”

“You know, I’m not welcome at that church of his,” said Maribel. “I’m not a part of it. That’s what God says.” Maribel curled her lip in disgust. She wished she had that glass back just now. “But he’s been sneaking Nathalie off in the mornings to come there,” Maribel whispered, even though Nathalie was the only other person in the house. “Can you imagine? A ‘holy’ man like Jim lying to my face and sneaking her off to be a part of his holy church. I figured it all out just today. She’s missed a whole week of school.”

“What’s it all for?” Paul asked. “What does Nathalie have to do with anything?”

“I don’t know,” said Maribel. “Jim is fond of her company, and it’s probably lonely out there with only his God. And as far as I can tell, this whole thing is really just about getting away from the people he doesn’t want to see. So shameful of him, to pretend it’s what God wants.”

“I know you’re upset,” said Paul. “And maybe some of what you’re saying is true, but I think it’s a little more complicated than that. He’s confused, and he’s exhausted, and he believes some things that aren’t quite true.”

Maribel didn’t pay much mind to this comment. “He taught her to talk the way he does.

Sometimes she'll say a thing and sound just like him." Maribel shuddered. "I can't stand it. He's ruined our girl. She isn't a girl anymore. She talks like a pastor. She says things she can't possibly understand."

"Nathalie's got his disposition," said Paul. "For better or for worse, it isn't just Jim that made her that way. It's the girl's personality."

"She's still here. She's probably listening in on us now. She never sleeps. Keep your voice down. Jim is spending the night out in the woods, because that's what I told him to do," said Maribel. Her throat clenched up and the next words came out unevenly. "I told him not to come back."

Paul said Maribel's name. He put an arm around her, but it wasn't comforting. It was distracting and odd and uncomfortable.

"Even though he was saying he would spend less time on his church and he'd let Nathalie go to school, and even though he's been trying, for so long, to forgive me, I told him not to come back." Paul didn't say anything, so she continued. "He's never really forgiven me, you know? Sometimes he's warm and loving towards me, but he usually isn't. And the way he treats Julia, I can't stand to watch it. I don't know what to do. Sometimes I believe it's all my fault and sometimes I get angry at him, for never forgiving me, after I've been so sorry and I've loved him so much."

"Maybe there's something to having time apart," said Paul. "I know it doesn't seem like it's helping or going anywhere, but you couldn't have let him stay here. When you're ready, we'll welcome him back home. He'll be lonely now, without Nathalie, and he'll probably want to come back to his own hearth and get back to his senses."

Maribel reached for the glass that Paul had taken away from her. Paul got up and poured

it into the sink this time. “None of that,” he scolded.

“Can I tell you something?” asked Maribel and she leaned close. She was whispering. “There’s a part of me that doesn’t want,” she stopped and leaned back away. Then she lowered her voice to a humble squeak, “That doesn’t want him to come back.”

Paul said nothing but took a deep breath.

“I love him, and I miss him terribly, but the old him. I didn’t realize until now just how long ago it was that he’s been someone I could talk to. He takes no interest in the daily things, working for our living, caring for our children. He owns Nathalie. He hurts Julia. And he’s cold and useless and hateful.” Maribel cried. She thought of Julia, and how she could sometimes hear her crying after the lights were out and everyone had gone to bed. Her desperation for the company of boys was Jim’s fault. His anger made her that way. “I’m so angry,” she confessed. “I can’t stand feeling this angry at anyone. It tastes bitter and it hurts.” Maribel was biting her lips now. She now wondered why she’d brought Paul here. It didn’t make things any better, having someone here to watch her fall apart. Maribel shook her head. “I don’t know how a person can change so much, not even slowly, not even over years. He was a humble man when I met him, simple.” Maribel looked at Paul’s boyish face as she said this. She had never thought about it before, about how Paul was so much like the way Jim used to be. When Maribel had met Jim he was shy, the kind who never did attract much attention from women. He frowned mostly, but warmed whenever Maribel spoke to him. That’s what she’d liked about him—that she could read his face so clearly and see how she swayed power over him. He was religious then, thoughtful and opinionated, but so vulnerable. He had nobody to talk to but her until he started preferring God’s company.

“Maribel, you can’t think like that. You can’t wish he were something he isn’t anymore. I

knew him a bit, in his simpler days like you say. Even then, he loved the Lord and he had questions most folks don't ask. You just weren't paying attention to all that back then."

"And now look at what's happened," she said.

"I wish there were something I could do," said Paul. "It's hard to watch you and the girls hurting," he said.

"I still love him," said Maribel, "I keep thinking that any day now things will turn around and start coming back to the way they were."

Paul didn't say anything to this. Maribel felt naïve and ashamed for saying it. "I'm trying to understand the way he is now," said Maribel. "I'm reading the Bible. I'm ashamed to say I've never read it all the way through, even after all these years in the pew every Sunday."

"And what are you learning?" Paul asked.

"It's no wonder the book made him crazy," said Maribel, and she laughed, even though this wasn't funny. Yes, misery could be funny, but this wasn't the right kind. "I don't understand a thing about it. When you take away the pastor's words, it's all nonsense."

"There aren't too many folks here who'd feel comfortable saying a thing like that," Paul said. This, and nothing else, had made him feel uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry I made you come all the way out here for this," Maribel said. "There's nothing I know of that you can do. I just needed somebody to talk to. I hope you understand."

Maribel stood up and Paul took hold of both of her hands. "I can't imagine what you're going through," he said. "I'll think of something, some way to help you and help Jim and get everybody back on track. Just give me time, and I'll think of something." Paul left.

It hardly took any time at all, after he was gone, for Maribel to start feeling lonely again. She felt lonesome all the time these days, and she was tired of fighting that feeling.

The same week, there was finally a call at the furniture store—somebody who wanted to buy something. It was from someone who lived far away. It would take Maribel more than an hour to drive there, but she promised she'd do it. "Yes, of course," she said. "It's not a problem at all. We deliver the furniture all the time. No, we don't have a delivery boy. It'll be me," she said. She tried to hide her desperation, but it was next to impossible at this point, with lenders calling every day and the house growing cold and the pantry that had been full of cheap bland things was slowly emptying. She was glad this man was from far away. She didn't feel so at ease with the people from their own neighborhood anymore. Most of them knew about the debts, and she wasn't sure, but she kept imagining that they knew about Jim—maybe not everything, but that he wasn't with them anymore. They could have noticed that he'd suddenly stopped working at the store, if anybody ever came to the store.

Maribel loaded the dresser he'd wanted into the back of Jim's pickup. It was theirs, more properly, but it reminded Maribel of Jim. It smelled like him and the headlights were like Jim's wide-set eyes. She kept thinking she'd sell it, but then how would she lug all their furniture around? Maribel looked around the store for something else she could convince this man to buy. She picked up a smaller end table in the same style as the dresser. She climbed in and imagined how much she'd ask for. She fantasized, sometimes, about somebody buying up everything left in the store—a big hotel wanting everything. She daydreamed about this, because her daydreams about Jim confused her. She didn't know what it would be like if he came back and apologized. She yearned for it, but couldn't imagine it. Someday, she told herself. It has to happen that he'll come to after all this time. But how would she forgive him? She knew she would, but *how*?

Maribel got on the road and drove. It was nice to be going somewhere—it was bright out



today. She was speeding, a lot, because it was the first time in weeks she felt like she was doing something productive. She gave in to fretting far too often these days. She looked at herself in the mirror of Jim's truck and she thought she looked good today. She had color in her cheeks. She was having a spasm of happiness after feeling glum for too long and the effect made her dizzy. She drove with the window rolled down even though it was still too cool for this.

The man's house was enormous. You could fit 16 people in it, easily. And everyone would have their very own bed. Maribel pulled into the driveway and got out. This man had room for everything Jim had ever made in his house—even Jim's church. You could put the whole thing in this man's house, cram every holy bit of it in there.

Maribel walked to the door. She felt aggressive, frighteningly so. *Be feminine*, she told herself. *Be sweet. Pretend it isn't a contest, that nobody is going to win.* She rang the doorbell and waited. While she waited, she tried to calm herself. She couldn't tell herself, though, that she might not make the sale. She had to. It had been so long since she'd succeeded at anything.

"Hello," she said. "I hope you don't mind I'm a bit early," she said, glancing at her watch. Maribel had been expecting someone older. The man had sounded older on the phone. Perhaps he smoked.

"Oh, I don't mind," the man said. "I'm lucky to have a day off today." He smiled and his teeth made Maribel think about money. These people who lived here all had perfect teeth, and all their children had metal braces in their rich mouths.

"I'm glad to hear that. I hope it's been pleasant," Maribel said. The man started to respond to that, but Maribel cut him off by mistake. She told herself again to be calm, to wait for him to finish speaking. She knew his type. If she just cocked her head to the side and listened to him like they were on a date, he'd be sure to buy it. "The piece is in the truck. Shall we go out

and have a look?”

The man agreed and they walked up his long driveway, and Maribel opened the bed of the truck to show him. “The picture doesn’t quite do the finish justice,” she said. “I hope you like its color just as well in person.”

The man surveyed the furniture with more attention than she’d expected. He didn’t seem like one to know anything about design, judging from the fashionable but tasteless way he was dressed. He looked sharp, the newest brands, but he wore dull colors that must have been selected for him by a wife who knew he couldn’t combine brighter colors properly. He shrugged. “Well, my wife’s not into things that are so ornate, you know. She says simple is the style these days. It looked simpler in the photo, I think. Is this the same one?”

“Yes, it’s the same one,” said Maribel. “If your wife saw the photo and she liked it, there’s no need to second-guess her opinion.”

The man nodded.

“But in any case, it’s your home. Do *you* like it?”

The man chuckled and shrugged. “I don’t have much of an opinion on interior decorating.”

“Of course you do,” said Maribel. She laughed gently and made eye contact. “Don’t you have a favorite room, or some chair that is your favorite to sit in?” She would win him over like this—a man like him loved to have his opinions honored.

“Well, come to think of it, there’s a leather one in the study that I like.”

“Well there you have it,” said Maribel. “So you do have an opinion on these types of things.”

The man nodded, seemed pleased with himself. “Well, to tell you the truth,” he said. “I

don't think it's something I'd like. I honestly don't know what my wife plans to put in it," he said. "We've got plenty the same size, just about."

Maribel frowned and backpedaled. "Well, but you know that she wanted it," she said. "And it's not so different from the picture your wife liked, you have to agree." He seemed unconvinced. Maribel ran a hand through her hair, but the flirtatious gesture was lost in her agitated way of speaking. "How about I leave it with you?" she asked. "And you can put it in any room you like, see how it agrees with that leather chair you're fond of. If you like it, you can send me the money, and if you don't, I'll come back and pick it up." This was a trick Maribel often used, and it worked. People paid more for a thing once they'd grown to love it and they thought of it as theirs.

"Oh I don't want you to have to come back here," the man said. "It's a long drive, after all."

"You don't want to see me again?" she giggled, and she was horrified to hear herself, sounding like a teenage girl, like Julia did on the phone with boys she only pretended to like.

The man frowned. "I don't think I'm interested," he said. He wasn't looking at the furniture, but at Maribel.

She stammered. "Well, like I said before, leaving it here would give you more time to think about it. You know, I think somebody else ought to be free to pick it up, if you decide in the next couple of weeks." She was muttering into the ground—she had lost it, their only chance at a paycheck and a brief moment of success.

The man told her he'd think about it some more, and he'd come by the store if he changed his mind. Maribel was blushing when she left. He'd have to explain to his wife why he hadn't bought it after all. He'd probably say that the saleswoman had flirted with him, and that

would be the truth. She looked at herself in the mirror again and her eyes looked puffy. Her crow's feet were getting worse by the day. She was a fool and she'd cost her family the last shred of money they could have got their hands on and now she was going home to an empty bed to sleep alone.

Their year lease on the furniture store was almost up. She didn't have much time before she'd have to decide if they could make another year paying two rents. She thought of all the times Jim had said they ought to give up on the place. But where would she go? Jim had his church, but she had no place that she loved as much as the store.

Months passed and Maribel waited for Jim to come back. The day to renew the lease on the store came, and as hard as she tried, Maribel couldn't justify keeping the place open. She had children to feed and two rents, one of which only gave them grief. She'd been anxious lately. She desperately wanted to act and change things, but she couldn't think of how. She and Jim had talked long enough about moving this stuff out of the store. But it used to smell so wonderful here, when there was fresh work just done in the workshop and the smell of pine filled the air.

Maribel and Paul moved everything out together. The physical labor was a welcome distraction from it all. Maribel loved the pain in the small of her back and the ache in her arms. She'd let herself grow weak lately, and now was the time to rebuild all those muscles, make herself a new body.

"This can't possibly be as easy for you as you make it seem, Maribel," Paul was saying. "We don't have to go at such a breakneck pace, you know."

Maribel saw that there were beads of sweat on his forehead and his neck. She felt proud of this, at outpacing a man, even if it was one who'd spent the last year in a dark house mourning

his divorce and growing weaker. “I just want to get it done, today,” said Maribel. “I just want to get it over with. If I have everything half moved out and if I dawdle, I won’t be able to do it. I’ll change my mind. I’ll lose my mind,” she said. “Don’t make me think about it,” she warned him.

“You’re really going to put all of this in your house?” Paul asked. “Doesn’t seem like it’ll all fit.”

“Oh it’ll fit if we stack it up right. And I can throw out some of the oldest things.”

“I’ve got plenty of room at my place if that doesn’t turn out to be true.”

“I’m still going to try to sell this stuff. I can’t afford not to. So I’ll need to pick it up at a moment’s notice.” Maribel thought about Jim, and how much hard work it must be to build something from the ground up, how sore he must be, how work could take a person away from the complicated things. Pain and the sweat and the air outside were gifts. Anybody could mistake this for something spiritual, and maybe it was.

She was going to change everything about her life—she was going to change so much that Jim’s absence would be absorbed in all the other millions of changes she was making. She was going to make him just a bump along the road, by making the road bigger and bigger. She hadn’t decided yet what she’d do after all the furniture was gone. She’d find some sort of job, somewhere, something with a steady paycheck and something resembling dignity. She’d fix the leaks in the roof and pay off their debts.

“Any favorites in here I should handle with a bit of extra care?” Paul asked.

“Not anymore,” said Maribel. “It’s all the same to me.” Of course, among the things they were loading into Jim’s green truck were some items that had once meant a lot. There was a jewelry box that Jim had made for Julia when she was a child—it ended up here, because Julia never did get much jewelry. There was the rocking chair where Maribel sat during the day. That

rocking chair had felt like home, like being in one's own bed after spending nights camping or away. There was a bit of reckless aggression in Maribel's movements and her voice. She was always wrangling her thoughts and scolding herself for getting off track, for staring out of windows and wondering when Jim was coming home. She'd disciplined herself into never going to see him—there was no use unless he came of his own accord.

"I don't think we can fit much more," said Paul, after they'd loaded in one last end table. "Let's drive it back."

Maribel jumped into the driver's seat before Paul could. She was a ball of nerves. She couldn't stand the thought of sitting still and letting someone else drive the truck. Julia and Peter were at home babysitting Nathalie, if they hadn't taken Nathalie out to the library or the park so that the town could see what a sweet sister Julia was. It was strange how that girl had changed, even if it did make Maribel's life easier.

"How did Jim react, when you told him about all this?" Paul asked.

"I didn't tell him," said Maribel. "I haven't been able to go back to him. I just don't know what I'd find if I did."

"But it's his store."

"That isn't true, not to the least. He never loved this place the way I did, and he said a million times that we ought to do this, because we couldn't afford anymore to live like the store was working."

"He'd still want to know," said Paul. "He's thinking about you, Maribel. He's doing better."

"He speaks to you there?"

"Not about the church and not anywhere near the church. It's off-limits to me, too. But he

does talk to me.”

“Does he make any sense? How can you still speak to him?”

“He’s alright,” said Paul. “It isn’t crazy to think there’s something special about the place. It is special. It just isn’t supernatural. The church is just about finished. I’ve taken a peek when he wasn’t around. Matter of fact, I can’t see anything unfinished about it. It’s perfect. There’s something about it. He says it ain’t finished, but I think that’s just because he doesn’t want to leave just yet.”

“I just don’t understand why I’m not welcome there,” said Maribel. “I don’t deserve that.”

The two drove back to Maribel’s house and began taking the things into her living room. “Here, Maribel?” Paul asked. “But where are you going to sit?”

“I’ve got no time for sitting,” said Maribel. “Not with the mess I’m in.”

They unloaded half the truck, but once Maribel saw everything invading her home like that, all these things that didn’t belong here, she changed her mind. “I can’t stand to look at this mess,” she said. “I can’t abide clutter these days. It looks liked I don’t have my life together, with all this nonsense on the floor.”

Paul shrugged. “Well, I don’t think it looks so bad,” he said. “But if it bothers you, I got a big basement downstairs and not a thing in it.”

“Let’s shove it all there,” she said, and started un-stacking chairs. She liked all of this being Pauls’ mess to deal with. It would blend in at his already disordered home. Let him wallow in it. So they dumped everything in Paul’s house. Maribel dropped it carelessly on the floor of his basement.

But once she returned to her home and saw how empty it was, she wish she’d left it all

there, just something to distract her, to fill this space and make it feel like there were more people here than just her. And she was seized again with missing Jim, like she often was. She thought of her perfect euphoria when she was on the move, when she was working and exhausted from the bending and picking up and the throwing her life in the bed of a truck. She could understand how this feeling would help a man like him—make him want to stay where things were simple and pleasantly painful. She prayed, and when she prayed, she felt that God was just a little more holy and a little less familiar than she used to imagine. Times like this you needed a God who could be seen and heard.

Maribel went out to the church one night. She had a flashlight and a lot of gumption and she was going to tell him how she felt—that she was starting to understand his fool-headed crazy idea for this church. She wanted to be with God now, and she wanted everything to change, and she wanted to be absorbed in something, just one thing, so that the rest of her thoughts would calm themselves. The forest wasn't as inviting in the dark. There were animals out here, but they feared humans. Maribel wondered what she'd build if she wanted to create a church. She'd probably just build a house, just an ordinary ranch style house with three bedrooms and a bath like everyone had here. Because God was not so different as people thought. He got angry and hurt by the things people did just like the rest of us, and he could be disappointed and frustrated like anyone could. And even though you weren't supposed to say so, sometimes he even seemed to make mistakes—got unreasonably fussy over something, expected too much from people. That's why she'd just build him a regular old house with a stove and a shower. It wasn't sacrilege—Jesus was a person, so it wasn't shameful to think of God as a person.

Maribel drew close to the church and knocked. Jim had been lucky, that things had grown



to a crisis point between them just as the weather was getting warm. Lately, it wouldn't be so bad to live in a simple wooden building with no heat. She knocked. No answer came. "Jim, it's Maribel," she said. No one answered. She hit the door with her forearm. Still no answer came, but the door opened.

It must have been something about the way the slatted wood directed the light from the stars and the moon. There had to be some explanation for it, but it seemed like it was lighter in the church than it was outside, even without a light bulb or a lantern. When Maribel turned the flashlight away to the surrounding woods, it still seemed like the church was giving off light. She looked around her at all the landscaping Jim had done out here. How had he managed it? That she still didn't understand. How could he guess how the trees would react to what he did? How could he tell? Some trees were felled strategically, and some shaved of bark and carved ornately in a scattered, chaotic way. Jim had created arches and columns surrounding the church. Maribel went into the church and she called Jim's name, even though she'd realized now, he wasn't here. She wondered where else he would be sleeping; he had no money to be anywhere else as far as she knew.

Maribel sat on the floor of the church. She couldn't deny that what Jim had created had some power to it. It was beautiful, that was sure, but she wished it were even more, that God were here. She gathered her knees to her chest. Interesting that Jim hadn't made any furniture to go in it. No pews, no pulpit, no graveyard in the back. Just this building and the work he'd done outside. Maribel wished there were a God, not the comfortable one that she kept in her handbag with her Bible but one who controlled life and understood things that people would never understand. That was the kind of God she wanted. She called Jim's name some more, until it didn't sound like a name, but just a word, the only word she knew. She felt like an animal that

can only make one sound, an owl calling *who*. She prayed. *Dear God, bring him back to us the way he was before, knowing the truth and right and wrong.* This was all she could manage.

Hearing Jim talk so much about how God lived here made Maribel expect to turn around and see him. She was afraid she'd see lightning or hear a thunderous voice. She waited to hear from God, for him to say something about Jim, but no answer came and so she left and returned home, resolving to come back the next day.

In the morning, Jim was at the church. He looked stronger from being outside and building the church. He looked like he'd managed to eat something out here. He smelled strongly, having not done laundry or bathed for a long time. Maribel was moved by the way he looked, the way he'd changed. He looked like a prophet. His haggard appearance made his words and his mission seem more sincere. "Jim," she said. "I came to the church last night. Please don't hate me for it. I understand it now, Jim," she said. "I understand its power and the work God does here." She wasn't sure, as she spoke, if she believed herself. It had seemed true, last night, but perhaps it was only her emotions speaking to her and not God. It had seemed true, but that was in the dark when the wind was howling and she was fatigued and short on sleep, and here in the light of day and in the reality of everything, it seemed absurd, like even Jim couldn't believe what she was saying about the church. "I mean it, Jim," she repeated. He was looking at her and Maribel could tell that some part of him was relieved to see her face after so long. He walked towards her.

"Did God bring you here?" he asked.

Maribel was crying. No, he hadn't, she'd only come because she was looking for Jim, but at the same time, yes, who was to say that God hadn't brought her here? She chose to say "yes."

Then she said, “God brought me here. I have been studying the Bible and seeking him.”

“Tell me,” Jim said. “Tell me what you felt when you were here, how you experienced God.”

Maribel stammered. “I came here late last night. I’ve hated living without you, Jim. I feel so alone. And I hate trying to explain it to Julia and Nathalie. It isn’t fair to them, what’s happened. And I came here to pray, and I asked God to help us. And I did feel some relief, Jim, from everything,” she said.

Jim’s eyes were wild. They looked red and damaged. “But what did he reveal to you? Did he speak? Did you learn something about him?”

Maribel shook her head and wiped her eyes. “I don’t know anything about God,” she said. “I came knowing nothing, but I’ve confessed I know nothing. Please, Jim, can’t you see I’m trying so hard to understand? Haven’t I been punished enough?” Maribel looked down and waited. She knew she wasn’t making sense, trying to pretend she took part in Jim’s obsession while begging him to leave it behind. She’d say anything, to make him come back to himself.

“I hoped he had spoken to you,” said Jim, “because he doesn’t speak to me here as often as he once did,” Jim said. He had confided something in Maribel. How long had it been since that had happened? Maribel felt lighter, because he’d said this.

“What do you mean?” asked Maribel.

“The well is dry,” Jim said. “God has abandoned me, even though I have toiled for him.”

“You’ve created something beautiful,” she said. “And God will bless it, I’m sure. But please, Jim, it’s finished now. It’s perfect. Please come back to us. I closed the furniture store. I put everything in storage. We don’t have a thing left,” she said. “Except God and you and now this place,” she said, gesturing to the church.”

“I haven’t yet found what I sought,” said Jim. “God has closed his heart to me, and I must wait until he opens it again. I am not finished here,” he said. “The Lord has not told me yet, if it is time to return.”

“But *I’m* telling you it’s time,” said Maribel. “Everything has changed,” said Maribel. “Everyone is ready for you. There’s no store, there’s nothing to weigh us down. I’m seeking the Lord again. I can pray with you, Jim, I’ll devote myself to him the way you do if only you’ll come back. And Julia is obedient to him, too. She’s grown up. She’s in love with a Christian man. Nathalie misses you terribly. She cries every night. Everyone is ready for you. You won’t find us as sinners.”

Jim spoke quietly. “I will pray on it,” said Jim. “I will wait on God’s command.”

Maribel shook her head. “Jim, don’t you see? We’ve done everything. You can’t ask us to do more to be righteous enough to you. There isn’t another thing I can sacrifice.”

“I can’t return,” said Jim. “I can’t. My conscience forbids it.”

Maribel couldn’t speak. She struggled, crying without tears. “Then that’s all,” she said. “There’s nothing else.”

When she returned home, there were messages on her phone—her daughters were at Peter’s house and everyone had Peter’s parents had called four times hoping she’d pick up. Maribel picked them up, and Julia wouldn’t stop asking where she’d been and Nathalie guess rights. She wailed and cried that it was unfair that she had gone to see Dad without her.

## Chapter 8

Most girls say they can't believe it when they're finally engaged. They make a bunch of silly remarks about how quickly they've grown up—how they had never expected to arrive so soon at this point in their lives, how they couldn't imagine what life would be like as a married woman. Julia, on the other hand, wasn't surprised at all when the moment came. She had thought of every detail and knew exactly how she would react, not only the words, but also her expression and her tone of voice. On the day Peter proposed, she felt certain that she had earned it, every bit of his affection, and every carat of the ring.

She was relieved that he knew better than to take her to dinner or someplace conventional and unromantic where people buy things with plastic cards and dress like department store ads. He proposed on her own porch after he'd had dinner with Maribel and Nathalie. They had a little fountain next to the porch, something Maribel had bought in nicer times. It gurgled and lit up. She had turned it on just for that night.

They were sitting together and Julia was resting her head on Peter's chest, like something a girl he'd like would do. They were quiet because they'd been talking for hours and their mouths were dry. And as Julia had her cheek up against his heart, she could feel it thump steadily. It started to thump faster and faster and Julia knew, because she'd earned it, planned it, and made it happen from beginning to end, that he was about to propose. She lifted her head up and said, "What is it Peter?"

So he dropped to one knee and asked her to marry him. Julia's eyes teared up and she put her hands on either side of her face. "Peter," she said, like a stage whisper, a loud exhalation. She said yes and the two held each other.

Julia told Maribel about the engagement the next morning. “I just couldn’t tell you last night,” she said. “I was too excited about it. I didn’t want to share it with anybody.” The news broke Maribel out of her usual listless fog.

“Good Lord, he proposed?” she looked at the ring on Julia’s finger. “It hasn’t even been three months since he came back.”

“But we’ve dated before,” Julia said. “And I haven’t changed.” Julia resented the look of confusion on Maribel’s face that followed. “Well I know it must have seemed like I changed. But that was just a phase. I’m really the girl I was back in high school when we were together.”

“Oh, Julia.” Maribel sat down on a stool in the kitchen. “But you two are so young. I hope you’re planning a long engagement?”

Julia frowned and shook her head. “I wasn’t thinking of one, no. I’ve waited long enough as is.”

Maribel shook her head. “Julia, are you sure you’ve really been paying attention? People change. Both of you probably has, even if you haven’t noticed it yet. You could use a little bit of time to figure each other out, after all this time apart.”

Julia shook her head. “I know this is what I want. You shouldn’t try to change my mind. It’ll never work, for one.”

Maribel shook her head. “Engaged already. I ought to have known. Well isn’t that something?”

It was quiet for a while in the kitchen. It was earlier than either of them was usually up. The sunrise streaming through the window was turning the kitchen orange. “Julia, how come you’ve hardly wanted to know anything about Jim, about what’s happening with him lately?” Maribel shook her head. “Nathalie cries just about every night. She comes into my room and

asks where he is and says she can't sleep unless he tucks her in. I know you and Jim weren't on good terms, but I don't see how you can just be unaffected by it."

"Can't we wait to talk about that?" said Julia. "I'm *engaged*."

"And weddings are family things," said Maribel. "And so are marriages, usually, if the two manage to settle down close to somebody's folks. I can't imagine it, getting married at a time like this when you've barely seen your own father in months."

Julia's fists were tightened up into little balls. "Dad doesn't have anything to do with this. If he wants to have something to do with it, he can show up at our door and tell us. I'm happy he's gone. I hope he stays out there."

Maribel scolded Julia for this.

"It's true. He hates for Peter for reasons that nobody could understand and he doesn't have to take part if he doesn't want to."

"Now you stop that. You're only thinking about the last few years. That might seem like an awfully long time to you now, but it won't when you're older. You'll remember how he fathered you when you were a baby and for all of your growing up and you'll want to be on good terms with the man who did all of that for you. So you stop your complaining and hurrying. We've got plenty of time—time for you and Peter to get better acquainted and find out if this is really what you want to do, time for us to keep talking to your father, bring him back home with us, and sit the two off you down so you can make amends. We've got all the time we need for any of these things. So you stop acting like there's a fire to put out."

"Do you like him mama?" Julia asked. "Peter, I mean. Aren't you happy for me?"

"Of course," said Maribel and held her. "Of course I am."

Julia already had the wedding half-planned. She was going to have a fondant cake that looked just as smooth as a table—something made for looks and not to be eaten, so that the jealous girls wouldn't even have a nice slice of cake to console themselves with. She was going to have a dress with a train, something victorious and regal that a queen would wear. She was going to walk under arches of flowers, white roses. Damn anyone who said she couldn't wear and use white. It was going to be big and all the women who'd judged her and warned their sons about "girls like that" would be unable to resist coming. It was going to be grand and loud. She wanted an organ and pianos and a great big old choir, the choir from the bigger church that had close to sixty people in it. Damn anybody who said she didn't deserve it or couldn't afford it. She'd tell them, in elegant and condescending fashion, how wrong they were. She had the best man in town and she'd be in a better town soon. The other girls would be pained with jealousy—the ones who had studied hard or acted sweet for boys to try and leave. Even the obedient ones, who had followed their mothers' advice, never planning on leaving, would realize just how enviable Julia was.

Julia rambled to Maribel about her wedding plans, until one day, Maribel interrupted her. "This isn't what's important, Julia. Nobody is going to care, after the wedding, about the color of the flowers. You need to take a good look at your father and the way you two have been before you get any more steeped in this plan of yours."

Julia fell silent. "There's nothing else to learn about him," said Julia. "And I don't care."

Maribel shook her head. "But you will. You probably know already that I'm making excuses for Jim, that things aren't exactly as I've told them. But if you're planning on marrying Peter and joining our families together, you need to know something about your own. Don't look



at me like that, Julia. You can't write him off. You will realize someday how tremendously important he is to you. You already know it deep down." She had made Julia a cup of tea as a gesture of kindness though Julia didn't drink it. She let it steam in front of her.

"Mama, I know. You kicked him out. He's probably in some sorry motel that smells like an ashtray. Good riddance"

"No Julia." Maribel's face grew stern and dark. "Listen to me. He's building something in the woods, on Mr. Reid's land. He's building a church."

Julia narrowed her eyes. "A church? For Mr. Reid? What does he want a church for?"

"It's something he's doing on his own. Mr. Reid doesn't even know the whole story. Jim got it in his head that this was the most important thing he could be doing with his life, and nobody's been able to talk him out of it."

"But what is he going to do with it? Is he going to be the pastor? Who would come?"

"It isn't like something where other people come and worship. It's more private than that. It's an artwork. It's supposed to say something."

Julia shook her head. "I'm confused. How does it say something? What does that mean?"

"He wanted a way to tell people what he knows about God, and he wanted a way to get away from sin and things he doesn't approve of. So this is what he did. He built a church."

"But that doesn't make any sense. That can't be what's happening. You're bullshitting."

"Julia, your language." Maribel sighed. "It's a little more complicated than that, yes. It's not your place to know everything, but he's said some things about the place. He just puts a lot of faith in it, and he's very private about it. He doesn't want me to be a part of it. And he wants Nathalie to be a part of it and he confused her and told her things that weren't true." Maribel stopped herself. "But this is too much. This is more than you need to know."

“Oh mama, he’s gone crazy, hasn’t he? Good, God, he’s lost his wits.” Julia was breathing fast shallow breaths and she gripped her hair and pulled it back.

“Now calm down. I’m telling you this, because I want you to understand him. I hope that someday the two of you will reconcile, but it can only help you to understand him.”

“What the hell, Mama? Is it something a person can understand? He’s crazy,” she said.

“I can keep explaining, everything I know about it at least,” said Maribel. “But more than anything, I think you need to see this place to understand.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to him.”

“And that’s fine,” said Maribel. “He doesn’t spend the night there. It’s already dark, so he shouldn’t be there. You won’t have to talk to him.”

“Oh, God, why didn’t you give me more time to...I don’t know...think about it. I don’t understand. Is it just a normal church building?”

“It’s unusual,” said Maribel. “It’s creative. It’s powerful. Julia, I know this is a lot to take in, but this is important, and we don’t have much time. Jim wouldn’t appreciate my bringing you there, but it’s got to happen. You’ve got to do your best to understand your own father.”

Julia nodded. She agreed to go, mostly because now she was burning with curiosity and fear and she hoped it wouldn’t be as bad as she’d imagined. She hoped it was something orderly and contained and spoke of a well-ordered mind. She couldn’t decide if she wanted to meet God there. She hadn’t prayed since the day her father had found out she wasn’t a virgin. She did, secretly, believe in God, but she usually didn’t believe that God loved her. Julia walked behind Maribel and she wished that it would still feel normal for her to hold Maribel’s hand, like when she was a child and they were crossing the street or walking somewhere unfamiliar. “I’m scared,” she said quietly, but Maribel must not have heard her, because she didn’t turn around.

They walked through Mr. Reid's forest. It was evening, but the sky wasn't black yet. Julia used to play out here as a child. She used to dress like a princess and pretend she was running away from the palace to escape being married off to someone she didn't love. They walked and the setting sun made the trees cast narrow shadows over the ground so that it was evenly striped.

They came to the church. Julia could not have pictured this place. It didn't look like anywhere she'd ever been. Broken branches had been carved and stacked into archways and columns. She wasn't sure where the natural part ended and the manmade part began. She felt small, even smaller than she had before. But it wasn't like standing by the ocean, when her smallness made her feel afraid. She wished she could feel smaller, and smaller still. It was her own size that frightened her. *Humbled*, that was the word for what she felt. A part of her wanted to bow, not like people in her church bowed, but with her body curled and her arms outstretched before her, forehead on the ground. "It's beautiful," she said, and Maribel rubbed her back gently. "Can I go inside?" she asked, gesturing towards the church door.

"I can't give you permission, but go," said Maribel.

Julia opened the door of the church. Maribel stood behind her. There was now something that looked like an altar, stones stacked into a round pit, but there were still no pews or chairs, so Julia felt out of place as if this were not for humans who had weary arms and legs and needed to sit, but for God, who didn't get tired. "Hello," Julia said, and she wasn't sure who she was talking to, to God, or to someone who might be in the room. The wind sounded louder from inside the church. There were large windows, without glass, that channeled the air through it. Julia breathed deeply and turned slowly around. She came out, feeling as if she was waking from a dream as she stepped out. Maribel was still standing outside, afraid to go in. Julia stood beside

her. "This isn't what I had imagined," she said.

"No," said Maribel. "It would take quite an imagination to dream up this place."

Julia heard leaves crackling. "Is that him?" she whispered. "He's coming back. Let's get out of here," she said.

"Wait," said Maribel.

"It's him isn't it? Who else would it be?"

"Julia," she said sternly, and held on to her wrist. "You can face him," she said. "Just hold your ground. He's changed, I think. You two have to face each other."

"What?" Julia cried. "You said he wouldn't be here."

"But he is," said Maribel. "And there's no use in running away. You two have to speak to each other soon anyway." Jim came into the clearing and saw them.

"Jim," said Maribel. "Before you say anything, I brought Julia here, because she deserves to know why you're gone. I'm begging you to speak to one another about this, or about anything."

Julia looked at Jim. He was pitiable like this, living in the wilderness like an animal. He was pitiable and also frightening. She couldn't decide if she'd be more or less terrified of him if he weren't her father. "It's beautiful," said Julia, surprising herself as the words came out of her mouth. "The church, I mean," she stammered.

"Have you brought her here only to anger me?" asked Jim, to Maribel. "You know that this is a sacred place, set aside by God, free of sinners."

"She's done nothing to you," said Maribel.

Julia felt as if she didn't exist. These people were standing around talking about her as if she didn't, and so it must be true, she must not exist. She hoped it were true.

“You can’t stay here,” Jim said. “It is not meant for you.” Julia started to back away.

“We’ll stand wherever we wish,” said Maribel. Julia stayed where she was. “This has gone on long enough. I don’t care if you finish this building. I don’t care if you ever come home. It’s clear now I can’t make you do that, not even if I beg. But you should have the courage to speak to your own daughter, to explain to her something about what you’re doing out here and why. It shouldn’t have to be my job.”

Jim turned to Julia, “God has called me to complete this church to honor him. He has revealed himself to me, and it is my duty to share what he has taught me to the world.”

“I’m asking that you two work out what’s happened between you, because Julia’s a grown woman, and she’s engaged to marry Peter, and she may be leaving soon after they’re married,” Maribel said. Julia looked at Maribel like she had gone mad. Why would she tell Jim that she was engaged?

“Engaged? You say this like I have no say in the matter.” Jim said, stepping towards her. “She’ll make a fool of him,” he said and turned to Julia. “You’re not ready to be married. You’ve lived in sin. You have not sought the Lord.”

“I didn’t even have to tell you,” Maribel insisted. “But I wanted you to know that things are going to change, that this is your last chance to treat her like your daughter, like someone you love.” Maribel walked closer and she nearly whispered. “I’ve said I was sorry a million times. But let me be clear. I was sorry for being careless and cruel, and you’ve more than repaid. You’ve been more careless and more cruel, and you’ve pushed away your daughter who loved you and did nothing wrong to you.” She backed away again. Julia lingered back and listened to Maribel. She’d never seen her talk with so much conviction. “We’ll leave,” said Maribel. “There’s no point in staying if you won’t listen, if you won’t try to be reasonable. But I meant

what I said, and I don't regret coming here. When you realize your mistake, tell us. I'll wait as long as I need to," she said. She led Julia out of the woods, and Julia was trembling.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think he'd act like that. Paul told me the church was losing its grip on him," Maribel said. "You have to know something, Julia. The way he treats you has nothing to do with you. His view of the world has been distorted by something I did."

"I think I know what happened," said Julia. "Please, you don't have to tell me. I know what happened." Even though she was still trembling and scared, she felt freer. She felt lifted out of things. She was free to pity Jim now instead of loathe him, and it was a relief, but she didn't think Maribel was going to win or that Jim would ever apologize. Best to be married quickly and leave before the church stopped distracting him.

"Peter, I've got to get out of here," Julia told Peter the next time she saw him. "How soon can we have this wedding? I want to leave town," she said.

Peter furrowed his brow. "What happened, baby?" he asked. "You were saying July earlier."

"Some things have come up. It's my dad," she said. "I've got to get away."

"You're a grown girl now," said Peter. "I hope you aren't letting him bully you. What happened? Your mom said he was away, construction job way out there," he said.

"Yea, but he didn't take the engagement as good news, and we've got to move on with it before he comes back."

"I know he didn't always do you right, but I hope you'd want him to come back for the wedding. A girl can't get married without her dad to walk her down the aisle."

Julia shrugged. "But it won't happen. I'd wait for that if it would ever happen," she lied.

“You could get a job anywhere. If I were like that, there wouldn’t be a darned thing that could make me stay.”

“That’s crazy talk,” said Peter. “What are people going to think if your dad isn’t there? We can’t keep it a secret from him. We can’t. And Julia, it’s been so long, how do you know we can’t make him approve? He hasn’t seen me for years. Doesn’t he want a gentleman to take care of you?”

“You don’t really know him and it’s a blessed thing,” said Julia. “We can think of something for why he isn’t at the wedding, and spread our own rumor about it,” she told him. “But I don’t want him there and I want to leave soon.” Julia could tell by the look on his face that he didn’t understand. She knew she could win this argument, and he’d help her hightail it out of here. All she had to do was explain about the church, and about the crazy things he’d said to her a few days back. But she suddenly felt very protective of these things. Jim was crazy and he frightened her, but Peter would be even more baffled by him than she was—baffled and scared and disdainful. She thought of how Maribel had said she needed to understand him, and she knew she never would if she listened to Peter say that Jim was crazy. “There’s no harm in leaving,” said Julia. “We’ll always have each other to remind us of this place, but I don’t want to stay. I’m bound for somewhere else, and soon.” Julia’s eyes were glassy and green and she saw Peter’s eyes soften as he looked at her. He fidgeted again. Julia realized that she wasn’t usually so authentic with him. She’d slipped out of character.

“Besides,” she said. “A smart boy like you ought to go someplace where the big guns are, right? You’ve got everything it takes. You deserve to see the world, right?” she put her arms around him and he hugged her back.

## Chapter 9

Jim found that something about the church changed once he knew he couldn't return home. He felt far more alone. It didn't help that the church was getting closer and closer to finished and it was getting harder to think of what it needed. He couldn't work uninterrupted, thoughtlessly, until he gained the kind of clarity and simplicity he got from hard physical work. He paced circles around the work he'd done, surveying it for imperfections or incomplete parts, and it didn't feel any different from pacing circles in the kitchen at home. He prayed to God, saying *Dear Lord, if it is in your will, please remind me why you have brought me here. I have labored to create a place that bespeaks your glory, that demonstrates the power you have in our lives, the ruin and the awe that you bring. But Lord, do not let me leave this place as only a gift to others. Give me new knowledge of you. Please show me what more must be done and what should be my next step when I complete your work.* He thought about his family and wondered how they occupied themselves, who was keeping them safe. He imagined conversations with Nathalie until he became worried that he'd forget what she'd really said and what she was like in reality, as compared to in his imagination. He thought of Maribel and what a warm bed used to feel like.

And then he wandered. He went to a nearby town where nobody knew his name and he sat in a diner all day once, trying to remember what it was like to live among people. Nobody sat near him. He watched as customers came in and found the seats farthest from him. He wondered what he must look like to those people, people who went home to their families at night and had never spoken to God. He thought of Moses, and how others could not bear to look at his face when he came down from the mountain, because it shone with the glory of God.



He asked Paul questions about his family. How everyone was getting along. Until he told Maribel that he couldn't come home, he had never even considered that he could have lost them permanently. He'd assumed from the beginning he could return when he wanted. He was their patriarch and they would obey him when he returned. Paul came by often, in the evenings usually. He walked with Jim to the edge of the woods and then parted.

"Maribel told me that she came with Julia to the church, and she tried to make you two have some kind of a conversation."

"She trespassed here to tell me Julia is engaged."

"I was surprised about what she told me. I thought you'd been thinking about them more often lately. I don't see how you could have been entirely displeased to see them, after so much time away from people you love."

"They disrespected my work here. And Maribel is a fool to think that Julia's engagement is a reason to reconcile, when she is disobeying my will by marrying him."

"What are you going to do about it?" Paul asked. "Are you going to try to stop them?"

"I'm waiting to see what God is trying to tell me by this. God has kept distractions from me until now. He's testing me, I'm sure of it. I don't know which of the commandments he's given me is more important—to complete his church or to guard my family."

"I don't know that there's a good reason to try and end it. Julia's young and I'm not sure if the two know each other as well as they think they do, but they'll work it out. You ought to see your own daughter get married. And you ought to say something to her before she's gone. How long has it been since you told her you loved her?"

"She must not marry him. She throws herself at men. She has no control over her carnal desires. She is a sinner, and she will hurt him in the end."

“Funny thing coming from you,” said Paul. “You hate him. Why would you care if he gets hurt?”

“Because I will not allow Julia to ignore to her duties to pursue righteousness. Peter turned my daughter against me. He flouted her sin before everyone. There wasn’t a soul who didn’t know what he’d done. He had no respect for her shame, for her feelings. He took her joy from her. She was another girl, one who hated God, when he left.”

“There are a lot of reasons she reacted the way she did,” said Paul, not saying that she’d been abandoned by two men.

“He shamed Julia and he shamed me.”

“Jim, I’ve got to tell you something you don’t want to hear,” said Paul. “It wasn’t his fault that you and Julia fell out. She was scared of how you reacted and one thing led to another and that’s how that happened. He’s just a boy, and he was in love with your daughter. It’s hardly a rare thing, Jim. It’s how people grow up.”

“It’s against God’s will.”

“Well, Jim, if he’d have wanted to stop it, I reckon he could have, being God and all. Things rarely turn out the way the Bible says they ought. That doesn’t mean that it isn’t good to know what’s in the Good Book. We’ve got to have something to aim for or hope for. But it isn’t life, Jim. At least, it isn’t our lives.”

“I don’t like it when people trivialize the Word, Paul.”

“I’m not trivializing anything,” said Paul. “I think I believe the Bible more than I did before, even. I’ve been thinking about your church a lot, and it’s made me want to understand more. Maribel too. She weeps at a word of the Bible. She doesn’t know what it all means just yet, but she’s moved by it. God has a new power for her. If you wanted to bring your family

closer to the Lord, I think you've done it Jim, but not how you wanted to. It's the hardship that's driving them to God. It's the misery of being away from you."

Jim was silent for a while. It was hot, and the men were panting from walking quickly. Their frustration had made them walk faster than usual. Jim's back hurt. Now that the church didn't require the same hard work it used to, the old pains were coming back, the ones that came from inactivity and felt worse and more persistent than the ones that came from exhaustion. "Is that all I've done?" asked Jim. "Am I just the trial they're overcoming?"

Paul was quiet. "There's some value to the church, I think," he said. "It says something about God. But not as much as a life lived honorably."

Paul had to go and so he left once they'd reached the edge of the woods. Jim watched him go and he was alone again, in a place where humans didn't reside and where God didn't pass among them.

It was early in the morning, and Jim was returning to the church. His body was sore from sleeping curled up. He saw in the distance two boys at the church. Even from afar, he could tell they were young from how lanky their limbs were and the relaxed careless way that they moved. He thought God would protect this place from any of their ilk. These boys were coming closer to the church. Now they were going inside.

"Hey!" yelled Jim. "You stay out of there! This isn't for you. This is mine, now get out," he said. One of the boys was already in the church. The other perked up and looked at Jim. He was squinting. The sun was shining in the wrong direction, and Jim probably looked like a shadow to him. "I mean it," said Jim. "Don't you go in there. This place is mine," he said. He didn't say, as he normally would have, that it was God's.

“Who is that?” a voice came from inside the church.

“I don’t know,” said the other boy. “Who are you?” he yelled out into the woods.

“We aren’t acquainted,” said Jim. “But this place is mine, and you’re trespassing.”

“You aren’t Mr. Reid,” said the boy. “He’s the one who owns this. Aren’t you trespassing too?”

“You are,” said Jim. “And it might be Mr. Reid’s land, but this place is mine. I built it.”

Jim was drawing closer. He realized that he knew these boys. He’d known them since they were kids. The Mason boys, people always called them. The one who’d seen him first was Neil and the one who’d gone into the church was Titus. They were cleaner-shaven the last he’d seen them, but there was no mistaking them. They were around Julia’s age, and used to leer at her in front of God and everybody, even in church.

“Mr. Shaw,” Neil said. Titus came back out of the church.

“You built this?” the other boy asked. “What the hell is it?”

“You watch your language,” said Jim. There was a time they’d have listened to him when he was an elder of the church. “I don’t owe you any explanation,” he said. “It’s mine and that’s every reason you need to get out of here.”

“So this is what you’ve been doing this whole time? You just up and built this thing after your wife kicked you out?” asked Titus, sneering.

Neil looked at him uncomfortably and elbowed him. He mumbled something quietly.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” he said.

“This is a piece of work,” said Titus, taking in Jim and the church at the same time.

“Some piece of work.” He whistled.

“This is sacred ground,” said Jim. “It belongs to God and I won’t allow you to defile it.

Go.” He didn’t know if he believed what he was saying. A man in the wilderness talking the way he did would scare off most boys, the ones who loved being reckless for its own sake.

“Sacred?” asked Titus. “What sacred? The dirt?” He knelt and picked up a handful.

Neil kicked him gently. “What are you doing? Let’s just go,” he said between his teeth.

“How do you know it’s sacred?” asked Titus. “What happened? Did you see the old man upstairs? Is he here?”

“You speak of things you cannot understand,” said Jim. He drew close to them. “You have no right to be here,” he said.

Neil turned around and started to walk away. “Come on,” he said, gesturing. Titus looked at him, but shook his head. “If you don’t leave, I’ll leave without you,” Neil said and started to walk.

“I want to know,” Titus told Neil. “You hear God out here? Have you seen him?”

Neil turned back around and grabbed Titus. “What the hell? You’re getting out of here!” he said and started to drag him, but Titus pulled away.

“I feel the presence of God here,” said Jim. “And if you were men of honor, you would feel his presence, too. You know not the way,” Jim said.

Titus was laughing. Neil said something to him that Jim couldn’t hear. “Fine, I’m going, I’m going. Geez, what a nut,” he said and began to walk away.

Jim hated them. He’d forgotten out here, how much he hated them and others who didn’t know the Lord. It had gotten worse since he’d retreated to the Lord’s dwelling. Sinners were crueler now than they had been before, more callous and insensitive to the voice of the almighty. He prayed. *Dear God, he prayed. Punish the sinners. Please do not allow them to gain more ground over your creation, over your purpose and holiness. God, I ask that you seek vengeance*

*upon them. I can't bear to see them mock you any longer. Protect me from the wicked, dear Lord, and keep their worldly thoughts far from my mind. And show me, oh God, why you have brought me here. Show me how this place will make me bold to face those outside, teach me how to bring the devout here, where we will find the devout in this broken world. Amen.*

Jim felt refreshed, as he usually did, after saying a prayer. But the comfort was fleeting. God's presence had fled this place. He used to believe that he had an agreement with God, that if he build this place according to God's will, that God would someday fill it with worshippers, perhaps in Jim's lifetime or after. But the place had gone cold, and now God was allowing the worst of sinners to invade God's place.

## Chapter 10

Julia thought about the church often, though she didn't return and. She thought of Jim differently. She felt sorry for him, sometimes, because he was confused, and he wanted impossible things. She was thinking about him when she went by the old furniture store. The Mason family was taking over the place. Mr. Mason thought it'd be a nicer place for his tool shop, so they were moving everything from their old store, which was way outside of town. They'd noticed some funny things about the building. They said sometimes the lights went off for no reason and they couldn't figure out just how to mess with the switchboard to make it work. They had called the Shaws earlier to ask if there were some trick to it. Maribel had said she couldn't come, though this probably wasn't the truth. She didn't do much lately—she had bouts where she cleaned like a maniac or started working on something—a new plan for getting a job or uprooting the whole garden. But the next day, she'd suddenly lose interest and cast it aside. So Julia had to go. She knew the Masons a little. She used to hear Mr. and Mrs. Mason arguing downstairs when she was with one of their sons. They were funny folks, to be able to argue for so long without ever getting tired of it or coming to a head.

Julia opened the door to the store and Mr. and Ms. Mason weren't there. It was just the Mason boys. "Hi," she said. They didn't seem surprised to see her. "Your parents said you needed help with the lighting."

"They do," said Neil. "I thought Maribel was coming."

"She can't make it," said Julia.

"Why didn't your dad come, then?" asked Titus, and Neil glared at him. "He knows a lot of things us regular folk don't know. Maybe he can pray and fix it that way."

"He's gone doing some construction work out in Greenridge County," she said, without

blinking. She'd given this answer plenty of times. It's what she and Maribel had agreed to say. "I'll show it to you and we'll leave." She went to the back of the store where the switchboard was and opened it up.

"How have you been lately?" asked Neil. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"He's missed you," said Titus. "But I've got other ladies already."

Julia glared at Titus. "I'm engaged," she said. "I brought tape to mark which switches they are, these two. You have to hold them both to the left. They're wobbly and they won't stay in place if you don't push." She felt Titus leering at her. "Are you listening? I'm not coming back and doing this again," she said.

"I'm listening," said Neil. "I've got it. I'll remember."

"Good," said Julia, and started to march out.

Neil went to the back of the store to have a look at the switchboard. Titus stayed where he was. "Are people buying that nonsense?" asked Titus. "About the construction work far away? What do they say to that? Does Peter buy it? He must be a pretty gullible fellow if he'll take your word for anything."

"Shut up," said Julia shaking her head. "They believe it, because it's the truth."

"Is that the only lie you've been telling lately? Does Peter think he's been your only? Does he buy it?" He lowered his voice. Whispering made it more offensive. "Does he hate me for it?"

"In just a few short months," Julia said. "I'm going to laugh at you from my New York apartment. I'm going to have everything I want, and when I get bored, I'll remember what a sucker you are and I'll laugh."

Julia wasn't listening to this, so she slammed shut on the last words. She wondered what



the hell he was trying to pull, but she felt elated anyway, because she'd told him. She'd told him just how things were going to be.

Julia had taken to sitting in church with Peter's family. She liked being at the front of the church with his arm around her, so that everybody could see that arm and know that she was a clever girl who would have everything that she wanted in life. Today, her engagement announcement was in the church bulletin. It was on the last page and there was an invitation to the wedding inside. Peter's sister had taken the photo. They were in black and white in front of Peter's beautiful house and she was smiling. Peter's sister had said she looked like a model, a toothpaste model she'd said. Julia had insisted that her hand be in the picture, so that you could see the ring. She had put her arm up to hold Peter's arm in every shot, and sure enough, you could just make out a blurry thin band around her finger that said everything. Peter's arms were around her in the picture, and his face and arms made a frame around her. Julia smiled thinking about everyone opening that bulletin and admiring how handsome they were or frowning in jealousy. She didn't turn around to look, though.

The pastor took to the pulpit. "Before the sermon, a few announcements," he said.

Julia waited for him to read the wedding invitation and the engagement announcement.

"There have been some rumors circulating around our young people, and we want to be very clear about where we, as a church, stand on a particular issue. Young folks have been going out to a building up in Mr. Reid's woods. They call it a church. There's been some superstitious talk about this place, and folks have been saying that it has a special divine presence. This isn't the kind of devotion that God wants. We are not to make a graven image of him, and we are not to indulge in fantasies of the supernatural. Parents, please urge your teens to put to rest any

superstitious.”

Julia squirmed. She thought of how enraptured of the place she’d been when she went and now she was being rebuked like a teenager, she who was soon to be married. And the pastor could make her father’s work sound so ridiculous. She had never realized before that what he was doing was probably contrary to the scriptures. “And we ask all of you, out of respect to Charles Reid and to Maribel Shaw, that you do not trespass anymore near this place.”

At this, Julia’s heart sank. He’d said her mother’s name. He hadn’t even said it like it was a secret. Folks knew that Jim built it, or they knew, at the very least, that her family had something to do with it. Did they know that Jim didn’t live with them anymore? Did they know that he didn’t love them? Julia’s cheeks burned. She forced herself not to look around her, to see if people were looking at her and how. Of course, it made sense now, the Mason boys bullying her earlier. They knew. They were mocking her. Julia grabbed Peter’s wrist for comfort, and she realized that she was digging her nails in when he flinched. She looked at him, with wide eyes. She wanted to know how long he’d known, what he knew.

“I heard rumors,” Peter whispered. “But I didn’t know what was true about him.”

Julia cast her eyes down at the Bible in her lap. She didn’t dare look at the pastor. Peter’s parents seemed un-phased. They sat still and looked forward, expressionless.

Julia fidgeted during the service. She shifted from one leg to the other. The pastor was talking about idol worship, inspired, she supposed, by the church out there. He preached from the first two commandments and talked about “idols of the heart,” things people want even more badly than they wanted God. And he talked about graven images, and how nothing could bear the spirit of God in it. Julia thought that maybe the church was both, the thing her dad wanted more than God or anything and the graven image that contained God. Her stomach turned and

she felt anxious. They rose for a last hymn, but Julia couldn't stand it, even those last three minutes. The song was "Great is Thy Faithfulness," the one that Julia sometimes hated and sometimes loved, because it was so hopeful. She stood up and left. She felt herself beginning to cry, but she believed that it wasn't obvious, that her eyes were only a bit glassy, and only if you looked carefully. She didn't know how her face had turned pink from the effort of not crying, and her eyes were squinting and looked weak. Peter stood and finished the last song, even as Julia walked out of the church. She waited in the churchyard for him. She prayed nobody would have the indecency to talk to her at a time like this, but they did. Julia had time to drop a few tears into a tissue before the song ended, and everybody began flooding out. She didn't see Peter right away, but the older women who loved the part she played found her.

Mrs. Holdsworth said, "I was so sorry to hear about your family's troubles. So difficult to imagine, a sweet girl like you going through all of that on your own. You don't mind that I mention it, I hope? I don't mean to pry. You don't have to say a thing about it, but I hope things turn up for you. And I hope Jim can come to your wedding. It's going to be beautiful. Best wishes to you both." The people her own age avoided eye contact with her, pretended she wasn't standing there. Nobody asked her how Peter had proposed. Nobody wanted to see the ring.

Peter came out finally, and Julia ran and put her arms around his neck. "Does the whole town know?" she whispered in his ear. "Why didn't you tell me they were talking about it?"

"Come here," said Peter. "Let's get out of people's ways."

They took a few steps away from the church door. "I heard stories, but I never put any stock in them, and you didn't seem to want to talk about your dad. I think it was one of my sister's friends who first told me, when she was over, about how there's a strange building out there in Mr. Reid's woods. She said the Mason boys were out there, probably looking for a place

to smoke, I don't know, and Jim came and told them it was a sacred place and they should leave. That's the story that's been going around. Other than that, all I know is what the pastor just said."

"They said some awful things to me, the Mason boys."

"They're idiots. Julia, why didn't you tell me this was happening? How could you bear to keep a thing like this a secret? I would have said something. I thought it was a stupid rumor anyhow. But it's true isn't it? I can tell by your face." Julia nodded. "There, there," said Peter, holding her. "It isn't going to change a thing," he said. "We were going to get married with or without his approval anyhow. Now at least people know it isn't our fault we can't have it."

"They pity me," said Julia. "They pity me and they're scared to talk to me."

"They just don't know what to say. They'll come around. Everybody in town loves you."

Julia shook her head. "No they don't. They think I'm a fake. They think I'm white trash. And they think I'm a slut."

"Stop that," said Peter. "Don't ever call yourself that again, do you hear? God have mercy. Where did that come from?"

"Nobody asked to see the ring," she said. "Nobody asked how you proposed. Nobody said I was lucky."

"Doesn't mean they don't wish us well. Julia, how can you be thinking about that kind of thing? Tell me, I want to know about Jim. How have you been holding up? What's wrong with him?"

"Oh to hell with him," Julia said.

Peter's face changed altogether. He frowned at her, scowled.

"He's always been a mess. Nothing's changed except he's out of my hair. He was out of

my hair until he started ruining our wedding.”

Peter was quiet for a while. “Nobody’s ruining our wedding. And I hardly think that’s the most important thing in any case.”

“I hate this town, and it hates me. Let’s ditch this place.”

“What do you mean?” asked Peter.

“You heard me. Forget the wedding. Nobody here wishes me anything good anyhow. They want me to be a beautiful fuck up.”

“Stop the melodrama. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I mean it. I’m not getting married in front of these people. I don’t want people whispering about how I don’t deserve to wear a white dress, and I don’t want to hear people say bless my heart if only my father had loved me. Let’s skip town. You can get a job in another city.”

“Give it a day or two,” said Peter. “I’m not talking about any of this until you’ve had a day or two to think it over. You’re upset. You aren’t thinking clearly. But you don’t want to leave without giving our folks proper goodbyes and having a good honorable wedding.”

Julia shook her head. “I’m not going to change my mind,” she said. “A day or two won’t do me any good.”

“We’ll see,” said Peter.

Julia was right. In the days that followed, she kept expecting Jim to show up at the house at any moment, warning her not to marry Peter. She could hardly stand to go to the store, because of the pitying looks and the comforting pats on her back. She hated most of all seeing men that she used to be with, how they looked at her with a sense of ownership, of entitlement. They smirked at her, she imagined. They stared at her chest. She thought they were imagining

how she used to be. This was no place to have a wedding, a place where everybody knows everything about you and nobody understands any of it. There wasn't one darned person she wanted to invite just because they'd be happy for her or just because she'd like to see them smile in the photos. This was no place to have a wedding, and she was no girl to pretend to be a bride of the purest sort.

And then Jim came back. Maribel was out trying to find a use for the last bit of the furniture, taking it to thrift stores or friend's places where she was asking for small sums. She'd taken Nathalie with her. Julia had been spending the day with Peter. She came home, wiping the sweat off her forehead, because it was finally hot outside. She put her purse on a hook nailed to the wall. Then she turned around and saw Jim at the dining table.

"What are you doing here?" asked Julia. Only a few months ago, she'd lived with this man, and though they fought and he said and did cruel things, he used to have the familiar feeling of a father. She had once been accustomed to him. That's why it was strange that when Julia saw him again, her heart raced faster than it needed to. She considered running away, from the man in her kitchen who had raised her from infancy.

"It's my house," said Jim, as if nothing had happened. "And you are my daughter. And I have a responsibility to tell you, that you ought not to marry Peter." Julia had forgotten what it was like to be defiant, to feign boredom and disdain in times like these. She didn't remember how she had accomplished this.

"You haven't paid any attention to us for almost a year. You can't come here without Mom's permission and tell me what to do."

"He took your purity, Julia. It isn't the behavior of a man who loves God and Godly

women.”

“Dad,” said Julia. “I’m an adult, and I’m making adult decisions now,” she said. “Peter is a good man, and he’s the only good thing that’s happened to me.”

Jim stood up. “I’ve had time to reflect,” he said. “I’ve been with God and I’ve spoken with him, and the time is coming when he will close himself off from me, and I will come back to you and to your mother and my worldly duties. I have sinned against you, by my anger against you. I’ve been confused, and the devil has clouded my judgment about how best to train you in the ways of the Lord. But know that there is hope for your salvation and for your redemption before God and man. Peter made a mockery of your morality and your spirit. He is not a man to lead you in the ways of righteousness.” Julia was silent for a while. Jim reached out and took Julia’s arms. He was gentle when he did this, and Julia startled from the gentleness. “The Lord will redeem you and our family,” Jim said.

Finally, Julia spoke. Her voice was quiet and broken. “Where does this all come from?” she asked. “How do you know these things?”

“I have found a place where God speaks to man,” said Jim. “And this is what he has taught me in that place: I was wrong to hurt you for your sins, to discipline you as it was only God’s place to discipline you. But you must know that your wildness, your departure from the way God has ordained for men and women to love one another will lead men who love the Lord away from you. Your sin will become a burden to you, for a man cannot love the righteous part of you when it is obstructed by sin.”

“He loves me,” said Julia. “And my past doesn’t matter to him, and your opinion doesn’t matter to me.” She stood there with her arms crossed. “Don’t wait for me to leave,” she said. “This isn’t your house anymore, and you should be the one to go.”

Jim stood up slowly. "I must return to my work," he said. "But think on my words, Julia. You must make righteous your own heart before you wed."

Maribel noticed Julia was tense and upset when she returned. "Julia, remember there's no hurry. Nobody's making you do this at any particular time. It's perfectly sensible for you to be nervous. You just speak up about it if you think it's all happening too fast."

"It isn't happening," said Julia. "I just know it, in my gut, it isn't going to happen."

"What do you mean by that? He loves you. There's no harm in waiting a while."

"Everybody's whispering about us," said Julia. "I can tell. When I went into the store earlier today, I could hear everyone chattering from outside the store, and as soon as I came in it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop."

"It's only a matter of time until something else comes up more interesting. I don't see why that would bother you so much."

Julia's voice wavered. "Do you think they know about how he left us? Doesn't it drive you crazy having everybody know he'd rather live in the woods than be with us?"

Maribel frowned. "Well, I suppose it ought to," she said. "But you know, I stopped caring what they thought a long time ago."

"It doesn't matter what I do now. I'm a pitiable little screw up."

"Don't say that. It'll wash over. You just take things one step at a time."

Julia called Peter every night and asked him how soon they could leave. He told her they couldn't leave without a wedding—his folks would be crushed. But she was persistent. A friend told him about an empty apartment up in New York where he lived and Peter told him to hang on to it, just in case.



And there was a night that Julia came to him with all her bags packed. She showed them all to Peter, just to show him she was serious. "See? Everything's in here," she said. She even unzipped them and started waving her clothes before him. "I packed everything, every last piece. I want to leave. Take me away from here."

"Please, Julia," he said, seeing how red her eyes were and how the veins in her neck stood out. She looked ill, like someone who'd been suffering. "Just explain it to me, why you're so upset."

And Julia did the best she could. She was too tired to think of anything clever, so she didn't. She told him the truth. "I can't stand being here. And there's no point of having a wedding here. There's nobody here who I'd want to come. My dad's done lost it. He's finally showing everybody just how little he cares about us. And everybody knew it already, that he didn't think much of me. My mom thinks we should wait, and she hardly cares anyway. She spends too long staring out of windows and she isn't how she used to be. And there are all these boys, people who I was with at one time or another." Julia blushed. "You were gone for so long, and I was upset, I needed to be with people, with anyone." She didn't say exactly what had happened, but she hoped he'd understand, by her hesitation and her stammering. "And they just sneer at me. I hate running into them. They think I'm a joke. And everybody else feels sorry for me, and they aren't ever going to forget that I was poor or that my dad could hardly stand to look at me. Peter, tell me you wouldn't be dying to leave if you lived like this. Just tell me that honestly, if you can."

Peter's eyes softened and Julia hated, for a moment, the look of pity in them, but she'd have to ignore it. He was her only way out. She couldn't leave with no reason to leave. She had no car and no money and no way to get a job once she was there. "I know. You've got to get

out.”

“Everybody will forgive you for taking off anyhow. Everyone here loves you. You don’t understand what things are like when that isn’t the truth.” And so they agreed to leave quietly.

They had been driving for six hours when the misery of long travel began to set in. It was hot in the car, sweltering actually, and if they opened a window, the whole car rattled so loud it sounded as if the door would fly off and go bouncing down the highway. Julia was sweating. It was running down her forehead and neck. She’d done her hair up with a broken pencil she found on the floor of the car. She was thinking about how she’d never even seen pictures of the apartment where they’d live in New York. Peter swore it was a nice part of town, some place he’d been before. He’d told her that he got the place through a friend, somebody who wouldn’t cheat them out of anything. When sweat got in Julia’s eyes it stung a little bit. She had a throbbing headache. She asked Peter to pull over.

“Why? What’s the matter?” Peter asked.

“It’s this headache,” said Julia. “I think I’ll be sick. It’s all these turns, and the heat. Isn’t there somewhere we can stop and get a gallon of water and some medicine?”

“We just stopped a second ago,” Peter reminded her. “It didn’t help the headache like you thought it would. I don’t think there’s anything that can be done.”

She asked for medicine again.

“At the next town,” he told her.

“How far is that?” asked Julia.

“There’s a map in the glove box,” Peter said. “I don’t know without looking at it.”

“I can’t look at a map like this,” said Julia. “I can hardly see straight.”

It was quiet in the car for a while, with the rumbling of the highway underneath them. It was windy, and it was pushing the car sideways, so Peter had to pay attention.

“I don’t know why we didn’t take a plane,” said Julia. “Twenty years old in a week, and I’ve still never been on a plane.”

“It isn’t as great as you think,” said Peter.

“But I don’t get to decide that, because I’ve never been. I wish we’d gone on a plane.”

“You have to book a flight weeks ahead of time,” said Peter. “You came to me in the middle of the night wanting to go. You wanted to leave right then, remember? You had your bags packed and everything.”

“I wonder why I bothered. Nothing I have is going to seem good enough up there, anyway,” said Julia. “I’m going to throw everything in the trash once we get there. Do you think they’d call me Jewel if I asked them? Is that a city girl type of name?”

“It’s a name for a woman of ill repute,” said Peter.

“Well that seems about right for me then,” said Julia.

“Why are you saying a thing like that?” asked Peter.

Julia looked out at the big full trees. “What other kind of girl runs off with her boyfriend without a ring on her finger? They’ll think you got me pregnant.”

“You wanted to do this, Julia,” said Peter.

“Call me Jewel.”

“Stop being a brat.” Peter tried to laugh. He tried to make this comment a joke. It was hot as hell in the car. If only they could roll down a window.

“You know what your sister and her friends are saying right now? They’re saying bless her heart, that girl never knew when to quit. And now she’s gone and made your brother just like

her, a prodigal.”

“Nobody says the word prodigal,” said Peter. “Maybe your dad and some of his ilk, but most folks in the church talk just like anybody else.”

“I like to think about them, standing around with their mouths hanging open in shock at what a slut I am.”

“If you’re well enough to talk like this, you’re well enough to get out that map and figure out where the next town is. I’m thirsty as hell,” Peter said.

“My Dad’s probably thinking about beating me,” she said. “I bet he wishes he could wail on me.”

“Stop saying that, Julia. We’re leaving, do you understand? We can be who we please. Once we get up there, there’s nothing sordid or odd about a young couple living together. You know what they’ll say? They’ll think it’s sweet. They’ll think we’re lucky to find each other. They won’t give a damned we aren’t getting married.”

It was quiet for a while. Julia mopped sweat off her brow. “We aren’t getting married,” she said solemnly. “You just said we aren’t getting married.”

“I meant right away,” said Peter. “We aren’t getting married right away. We’ll get married just as soon as thinks have shaken out back home and we’ve got the money for a wedding.”

“That’s not what you said, though. You said we aren’t getting married,” Julia said. “You know what my dad said before I left? He said my sin was going to keep men from loving me how they should. That’s what he said.”

“Well I don’t know what he meant by that, but I didn’t mean that we aren’t getting married,” he said.

“I’ve been lied to before, Peter. I know when somebody’s lying to me.”

“I’m not...it’s just hard to explain. Here’s the thing. You won’t want to get married once we’re gone. You’ll see how things are up there. There’s nothing so special about getting married. It’s a piece of paper and people don’t bother with it up there.”

“He was wrong about me you know? He said there was still hope for my salvation.”

“Who?” asked Peter. “Who said that?”

“My dad.”

It was quiet again. Peter had learned that he couldn’t say anything about Julia’s dad. If he said something good about him, Julia would rant about what a cruel and impossible to understand man he’d been. If he said something bad, she cried.

“I think we aren’t so far from Raleigh,” said Peter. “We can get water and ice there.”

“You don’t even know that what you said is important,” said Julia. “What an idiot, you don’t even know.”

“We’ll get married,” said Peter. “I never said that we wouldn’t.”

“No, you ain’t that honest,” said Julia. She was crying now, and the water felt good on her face. It cooled her cheeks, ever so slightly, and got rid of the burning in her eyes.

“I was ready to marry you,” said Peter. His tone was gentle now, and it made Julia feel like he was the same person she’d always wanted. “You were in a hurry to leave, so we left.”

“But you wouldn’t marry a girl who’d run off without getting married. You wouldn’t marry the kind of girl who wouldn’t demand getting married first. You’d only marry a girl if you had to, so that you could be with her.”

“That isn’t true.”

Julia cried in the seat next to Peter and he didn’t say anything to her, because he’d run out

of things to say. He didn't understand, and couldn't. "I want to get out," she said.

"We'll take a break soon."

"I want to get out of the car now." She wiped her nose with her sweating arm.

"Why, Julia? What's that going to help?"

"I've made up my mind. I'm not coming with you to New York. Stop the car."

"What? Hold on. You're saying things that aren't true."

"I'm not coming with you. Stop the car."

"I'm not stopping here. There's nowhere to go," said Peter. "I'm not going to just leave you in the middle of nowhere. Take a deep breath. Things aren't so bad."

"I'll hitchhike. I'll go wherever I want. I'll go someplace nobody knows who I am."

"Nobody knows who you are in New York."

"Except you," Julia said, and looked at him. "Pull over."

"No."

"Do it, or I'll open this door."

"You wouldn't," said Peter. "You'd kill us."

"Pull over, or I'll do it," she insisted, and she put her hand on the handle, began to pull it.

"Good God!" Peter cursed and pulled to the side of the road. He stopped. "Please listen to me," he said, grabbing Julia's arm, but she jumped out of the car with only her purse and started running down the highway. Peter pulled out the car keys and followed her, running. He was faster than she was and caught up to her, grabbing her again. "I don't understand what you're doing Julia. What happened to you?" he asked her. She was crying, but her tears blended into the sweat and it was hard to see how she was.

"I don't want anything to do with this," she said. "With New York and with modern ways

as you call them and doing whatever you please and meeting your rich friends. It isn't where I belong and it isn't what I want."

"But you did, you wanted it before."

"I hate things back home, but there are more than two places in the world, back home and New York. I'll go somewhere else, but I'm not going somewhere where there aren't any brides or churches or people who believe in things. And I'm not running off with somebody who won't never marry me."

"I didn't say that," said Peter. "I proposed."

Julia shook her head. "But you won't. Once we're living together and you think you can have anything you want from me and there isn't a thing in between us, you're not going to marry me."

"If all you care about is a wedding, you shouldn't be getting married in the first place."

"No, I shouldn't," she said. "Not to you, not now."

They looked at each other and Peter's eyes got glassy. "Well alright then," he said. "It's settled then." His voice was cracked and broken. "Still and all, I'm not leaving you out here. I'll drive you back home or something," he said.

"I'm not going back there," Julia said.

"Then I'll drive you somewhere else," he said. "You don't have to stay with me, Julia, I'll find another apartment for you. You can stay with one of my friends until then. If you don't want to live with me you don't have to, but don't you want to know at least one person where you're going? Don't you want to still see me from time to time?"

Julia began crying fresh tears. "It'd still be running off with you, don't you see? It still isn't an honorable way to live."

“I’ll drive you to the next city and leave you with money for a train,” said Peter, shrugging and looking at the dirt underneath their feet. “It’s the least I can do. I won’t do less for you.”

Julia didn’t move at first, but there was reason to what he was saying. There was no reason to stand out on this highway waiting for someone else to come by. “Okay,” she said, and she got back into the car.

“I don’t understand what you’re going through and why we’ve done all of this,” said Peter, once they were back on the road. “But I wish you the best, okay? I do. And please, Julia, you’ve got to give me an address or a number or something and tell me you’re safe. I’ll lose my mind wondering if you’re dying out here. Do you promise? You’ll give me something?” Julia nodded. “And don’t think of me as some jerk,” he said. “I loved you a lot.”

It meant less to Julia than it should have, because she knew everything about why he loved her, and it wasn’t so special as he thought to love a girl who did what she did, who researched him and did just about everything she could to have him. Anybody could have made him love her if they’d studied him and worked hard at it like Julia had. He’d done what she’d predicted. He’d done what she wanted, all of the time. She wanted someone she couldn’t own. It was too easy to own him. Julia thought of her mother. She thought of how Maribel and Jim spoke to each other, always anger and love rolled together. They weren’t a success, but they were a challenge to each other, made each other better despite themselves. Even that, miserable as it was, might not be worse than Peter, Peter who obeyed her, Peter who worshipped her, Peter the tool, Peter the manipulated. Loving Peter was like learning to do a thing, as dull as knitting or churning milk. It wasn’t a thing you could be proud to do.

She was going to go to Raleigh. She would have \$60 in her pocket from Peter to buy a



train ticket. But she wasn't going to buy a train ticket. She was going to buy something to eat that would keep her going for a few days and she was going to find work. She'd live in her own apartment and nobody would know what she'd been through and nobody would ask.

## Chapter 11

Maribel was digging up her garden. She wanted to change everything, everything about this house and everything about how her life looked and felt. She had a shovel, and that was enough to change everything. She was sweating. It had grown so hot in the last few days. Suddenly it was summer and the spring flowers were too delicate for the heat. They were wilting, and they had to go. Yesterday, she'd looked at job ads and the only ones she'd found were the brutal hard-working kind that would leave splinters in her hands and pain in her back. Back when Jim had worked in construction, she knew a lot of people who had that kind of job. It made them short with people and their faces always looked pained. But this, digging up the garden, was something she could handle. She was digging up this garden and nobody could tell her she couldn't. She'd get new seeds from neighbors and start all over again. She hated these neat little rows. She wanted sprawling piles of flora. She heard a faint noise, a slight ding. She heard it again and realized it was the doorbell. She stopped and rested the tip of the shovel on the ground and wiped her brow. "Paul!" she yelled. "I'm in the backyard!" She leaned the shovel against the wall of the house.

"Mrs. Shaw?" a boyish voice called out. It was Peter's voice. Julia was gone this morning when Maribel woke up. It was rare for her to wake up so early, but then being a bride-to-be had put a new spring in her step. Lately, she spent most days with Peter's folks planning the wedding and spending their money.

"Coming!" Maribel called. She went in the house through the backdoor and stopped by the sink to splash water on her face. She must seem strange to someone like Peter who probably only saw his mother in full makeup and pearls sitting with her legs crossed. She opened the front door where Peter was waiting. "What is it?" she asked.

“I called,” he said. “But nobody answered. And it didn’t seem right to not let you know. That wouldn’t do.”

“Come in,” said Maribel. He’d probably had a falling out with Julia. Maribel tried not to smile. She hoped it was the right amount of awful, that they’d break it off and get back together a month later, but more cautiously, and they’d want to wait to get married. “Would you like a drink of water?” she asked.

Peter shook his head. “We were going to run away,” he said. “Julia was impatient to leave, and my friend had an empty room in New York.”

Maribel’s mouth tightened up. There was always something awful happening, any time she thought things might improve. “You wanted to elope?” she asked. “After everything I’ve given Julia and everything your family has provided for you?”

“I didn’t want to,” said Peter. “I wanted a wedding fair and square,” he said shaking his head with his eyebrows pressing together earnestly. “She was miserable here. She begged me to go. I was scared for her. I didn’t understand everything about why she wanted so badly to leave, but she said she was being treated badly, and I just wanted to get her out of here. Please know I was only trying to do right by her.” He paused, but Maribel didn’t say anything, she just leaned forward, and so he went on. “We drove six hours before she started saying she didn’t want to do it after all. She was going to open the car door on the highway and kill us both if I didn’t pull over,” he said. “So I did, and I gave her money for a train, but she said she wasn’t going back home. She was going to settle in the nearest town for a while. This was near Raleigh. I made her get back in and drove her to Raleigh, but that was as far as she’d go. There was nothing I could do.”

“So you left her there,” said Maribel. “She’s in Raleigh, North Carolina.” Peter nodded.

Maribel stood up and started pacing. “Of all the foolheaded....” She started. She went to the phone and started calling.

“I’ve called her four times already,” said Peter. “She’s not picking up the phone.”

“She’s not picking it up for you,” said Maribel. “The girl still has some sense.” She waited as it rang. Her eyes welled up, but she turned away from Peter. He stood in the kitchen watching her. It went to voicemail. “Julia, Peter told me what happened. Please tell me you’re alright. And tell me how you’re getting home and when. I can come for you if you need.” She paused for a minute to collect herself. “I’ll pick you up from anywhere,” she said and hung up.

“I’m so sorry,” said Peter. “I know you probably hate me right now. I had to tell you. It wouldn’t have been right any other way.”

Maribel turned to face him. “You don’t even know half of the trouble you’ve caused,” she said. “This whole thing started when your parents brought you here and you apologized for being with her. That was the beginning of all of this. Jim and Julia used to love each other, did you know that? You’ve probably only ever heard Julia say awful things about him, but she used to love him like any girl loves her father. And you turned her against him.” She was talking like Jim would. Jim’s way of seeing things was easier—he believed things were simple and that nothing was his fault.

Peter frowned and looked confused. “I’ve always tried to treat her well. I don’t understand what happened.”

“You’ve done enough,” said Maribel. She started crying and she couldn’t imagine why Peter hadn’t left yet. What a strange young man, who could stand there and watch all of this. For him, composure wasn’t something he chose to show. He had it and couldn’t help having it. “You couldn’t have known,” said Maribel. “If Jim and I had been different, loving Julia wouldn’t have

caused any harm.” She covered her face. “Don’t just stand there. Please, that’s all I need from you.” Peter left, walking backwards and watching Maribel as he left.

Maribel called and called again, not expecting an answer. Finally, Julia picked up. She hardly let Maribel talk. “Mom,” she said.

“Oh thank God you answered. Please tell me what happened,” Maribel said in one breath.

“Mom, listen. I’m staying out here for a little while. I can’t stand to go back and Peter isn’t right. We aren’t going to be together any more. I answered, because I don’t want you coming up here to get me. I won’t come back with you if you do. I’m safe and I’ve got a place to stay for the night and enough money to last me a week or so if I’m careful. I’m going to manage on my own. It shouldn’t be too hard to get a job for a few months. Don’t send me anything, and don’t come up here.”

“Why would you do this?” Maribel asked. “Why are you staying up there? You’ve got a home down here.”

“I can’t go back there. I’ve told Peter all about it. I don’t like folks knowing about Jim and that thing he built and how he hasn’t been living with us. I don’t like the way they talk and the way they look at us. And Jim came to the house. He came to the house to tell me I shouldn’t marry Peter. He was different. He was gentler, but he scared me. I can’t deal with it right now, don’t you see? It’s better for me to be up here.”

Maribel was astonished to find that a part of her agreed that she shouldn’t be here. “Jim came? When? Why didn’t you say something about it?”

“He came and, I don’t know, I think he might have been trying to apologize. You know how he talks these days. He’s hard to understand. But I’ll explain everything later. I have to go,” said Julia. “I have to sort things out on my own before I can talk about him or face everyone.”

She hung up and Maribel cried for just a few moments. She wasn't sure how to feel. It all depended on Julia, how long she stayed out there and what she was going through.

She called Paul and told him what had happened. He drove over right away. It was so easy to bring him here whenever she wanted him. He always did what she said. He never shut her out of anything. Now that Julia was gone, he was the only person like that. "Julia's gone. She was planning to run away with Peter," she told Paul. "They were going to run off and be together without a proper wedding or anything. I wouldn't have imagined she'd do a thing like that. It isn't the indecency. That I can imagine. It's that she would have shut me out of her life. She's never really shut me out. She shut out Jim, but not me.

"But they didn't leave?" said Paul. "What happened?"

"Oh God, she made him leave her in North Carolina. She had a fit and wouldn't listen to him—that's what Peter said. What a nightmare."

"Why? Why didn't she want to go to New York with him?"

"I don't know. I guess she just got cold feet. What should I do? Should I follow her? She called and said she wouldn't come back with me if I did, but she's only got enough money for a train ticket, however much that is. And she's got no job and no place to live."

"She won't want to stay out there long, I can't imagine," said Paul. "She's stubborn, but she isn't crazy. She'll realize soon enough things aren't so easy on your own."

"How will she realize it?" Maribel asked. "When someone take advantage of her? When she runs clear out of money and goes hungry for days?"

"You're imagining the worst," said Paul. "But it doesn't have to be so bad. She's smart and she's been through a lot in her life. She doesn't trust people easily. That'll do her good up there."

“Should I go to her?” Maribel asked.

“She said she wouldn’t come with you if you did, didn’t she?” Paul asked.

“But what does she know? Maybe when she sees me...”

“She is older than you realize,” said Paul. It was quiet for a while. “You know I can’t say that I’m surprised. It isn’t easy being her. A lot of folks have nasty things to say they ought to keep to themselves. It shouldn’t have happened this way, but she’s old enough to move on and be independent. And it might do her good to get away from what’s going on.”

“I’m going through everything she’s going through, almost everything anyway. But I can’t just pick up my life and do something else. I just keep waiting on people and watching them do crazy things.”

“You’re moving on. You’re doing your best. Nobody could do better. I know it wasn’t easy, closing the furniture store.”

“No, it wasn’t,” said Maribel. There was a pause. “She said she talked to Jim. She said he was different. Maybe something I said that day at the church meant something to him. He tried to apologize. That’s what she said.”

Paul was quiet. “He’s coming around I think.”

“He isn’t coming around to me,” said Maribel, and Paul didn’t answer. “Does he even ask about me?”

“He asks about the family,” said Paul.

“That means no.” It was quiet again and Maribel felt like she was underwater. She was forgetting to breath. She felt pressure from all sides. “I used to think this had something to do with God,” she said at last.

She embraced Paul and he embraced her back.

Maribel went to the church. At times like this, she used to go to the furniture store, but it wasn't there anymore—it was full of tools and the Mason family. She hated thinking about other people being in her furniture store. She wished it would at least just stay empty out of respect to her. She went to Jim's church. The path from the highway to the church was beginning to look a bit worn. Like the pastor had announced in church, there were too many people making the trek to see it. It was too easy to follow the trail through the woods. She wanted something more secluded. It was impossible to escape the people of this town. They saw everything. Their curiosity never ceased. She walked up the path and when she saw the church, she could tell something had changed, but she wasn't sure at first what. There were subtle details that Jim had added. He'd worn down some edges and given the wood texture so that it looked ancient. The walls of the church looked so natural, as if trees had simply grown in the shape of walls. There was something else, too, in the corner of the church. Someone had carved their initials with a pocketknife. They weren't Jim's initials. People here respected nothing. This place was beautiful, and for the right eyes it could do all that it was meant to do—reveal God's glory, give people rest. And it did say everything about Jim's God. But this town wasn't the right place for Jim's church. The people here thought they knew God already, too well, in. They'd lost respect for the divine. Maribel went inside and she prayed. *I've been abandoned*, she told God. *And I have nothing that I want*, she said, because it was true. *And you did this to me. You gave Jim the excuses. He lost his wits about you.* She was in God's house and she was blaming him for what had happened. If he was there, he ought to have struck her down. *Go ahead and do it*, she prayed. *What do I have left?* She asked him. *Why won't you. I'm telling you, you ruined everything.* She wasn't praying to her God, the gentle one who loved people, but to Jim's God,



the one who confused people and hid himself just to watch them scramble and weep and beg to understand him. It was this God who had taken things from her. She stayed in the church and she cried. Nathalie was going to get out of school soon. She'd have to be home then, she told herself. But this wasn't true. This was the kind of thing she told herself to keep going—that she was needed, that she was different from Julia and Jim who could run away from their lives and do as they pleased and the people around them would survive. She heard a cracking sound outside the church. She didn't move at first. She stayed completely still as she was, curled with her forehead against her knees. She heard another crack, and a creaking noise. She wondered if there was somebody outside the church, Jim or Paul or some idiot come to stare at her family's strange plight. The sounds grew louder and became, clearly footsteps. Maribel waited. When the person had drawn near, she walked out of the door to the church. She recognized the face, somebody who went to church most Sundays, but she didn't know her well. She wasn't even young. The pastor had said it was just teenagers and fools coming out here. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "Weren't you listening to the pastor on Sunday? You're not supposed to come near to this place.

The woman took a step back. "I'm sorry, it was just an accident. I was just out taking a walk. I didn't know a thing about what this was."

"I don't believe that," said Maribel. "Now go," she said, and the woman began backing away. After Maribel watched her leave, she began walking to Mr. Reid's house. Jim had made this place, but it wasn't his, because he hadn't suffered for it like Maribel had and he wasn't here to protect it anymore. Maribel arrived at Mr. Reid's house and knocked at the door. She must have looked frightening, her eyes red and her hair with pieces falling out of her braid. She had no money to offer him. She had nothing.

Mr. Reid opened the door. “Maribel,” he said. “What a surprise. Come in,” he said, and she did. His house smelled like cinnamon and potpourri. It was orderly here. This was how houses of happy people looked and smelled. Maribel didn’t visit friends like that anymore. He told her to sit. “I guess you’re here to talk about that fascinating structure your husband created out there,” he said.

“Yes,” said Maribel. “Yes, I don’t know what you must think of us, after I told you he was building a cabin and then you saw that. I don’t know what you must think.”

“Well, it was unusual,” he said. “I don’t like to meddle in other people’s business is all, but now I suppose I have to. I finally went out there and had a look at it myself after somebody called me and told me about it. It was the Waters, I think, who told me. They said they’d heard through the grapevine that there was a new development out there and they wanted to know what it was. I told them I didn’t have a clue. I’d forgotten what you said about the little old cabin, and they weren’t describing a cabin in any case. So I went and had a look for myself. Maribel, I couldn’t believe my eyes. How did he do all that? How did he learn to? And why?”

“I should have talked to you about it sooner. I’ve been overwhelmed. Ever since he started working on this, I...” she wanted to confide everything, for no other reason than that he was here and listening. “...Well I haven’t had as much help around the house,” she finished.

“Please don’t tell everyone what I’m about to tell you,” she said.

“Of course not,” said Mr. Reid.

She didn’t need to tell him everything. She knew how to make Jim’s obsession seem so ordinary. “Jim built that church, because he loves this woods and he used to pray and do his devotions out here. It’s always been a special place for him, and he says he can concentrate on God’s word out here. I’m not sure how it started, but he thought it would be of some special

significance to build a church right there on this place he held dear. He said he'd build it so that it would teach people about God. And he got really carried away. He hasn't been interested in practical things and working to provide for his family. And he doesn't spend much time at home anymore." Mr. Reid nodded. He didn't look as though this was completely different from what he'd expected. Maribel wondered what the town knew. It wouldn't be so hard to notice that Jim didn't live with them anymore. It only took one gossip to notice this before the whole town knew. "I want to make it mine," said Maribel. "Jim doesn't care for it anymore. He isn't there. He won't care if I buy it."

Mr. Reid cleared this throat. "Well how do you know that? It sounds like he cared an awful lot about it. Otherwise why'd he spend so much time and work on it?"

"He told me," Maribel lied. "That it's done what it could for him and he doesn't love it anymore." She had heard something along these lines from Paul, though it was hard to say if it was how Jim would feel next week, and the next.

Mr. Reid nodded again. "If you say so. I can't say I completely understand why you want it, but there are practical matters to attend to in any case. This land could command a high price someday, if I sell it all in one piece. Maribel, I'm just aching for you and your family and what you're going through. It's just that the church is right there in the middle of the land, and selling that little patch makes the whole tract less useful."

"Who were you going to sell it to?" said Maribel. "Somebody's going to bulldoze it someday, aren't they?"

Mr. Reid shook his head. "I don't know. Landowners around here tell me Duke Energy is buying up land."

"I don't want to beg," said Maribel, and Mr. Reid nodded sympathetically. "But I will.

That place cost me all kinds of heartache, and I want it. I deserve it. I'm the one who sacrificed for it."

Mr. Reid was quiet. "I can't say that I understand the feeling."

"I waited for Jim when he was out there working on it. I waited for him until I realized he wasn't coming back. It's mine. I deserve it," she said. "You said you went out there?" she asked.

"I did," said Mr. Reid. "Curious place. It does have something to it. He's a good architect, your husband."

"If you care about keeping the place cared for, you have to let me protect it. I went out there and people are carving their initials on it. People are traipsing all over it. It's mine. I don't have much money to pay for it, but I've paid already. It isn't fair that something that took so much from me can't be mine."

Mr. Reid's eyes softened. He said in a low voice, "I can sell it to you, but I can't promise that it'll heal your heartache," he said. "I think there will come a time when you'll be ready to let go of it," he said. "And I trust you'll do the right thing and give it back to me when that time comes. Do you understand that? That's the only reason I'd consider it, because someday you'll realize you don't want it."

Maribel nodded. "That might be true. I don't know."

They settled the sum. Maribel had nothing. She promised to pay him later, and she nearly promised, though she couldn't completely, that he was right—she'd someday stop wanting to keep the place as her own. She hadn't told him about her guilt, about how she was going to love this place tenderly, because it might be all she could have of Jim, if he never forgave her.

## Chapter 12

Paul told Jim the news about Julia. When he heard, Jim looked at Paul and, without saying anything, started running. Paul tried to run with him, but he hadn't been living in the wilderness for the past months—he didn't have Jim's strength or stamina. So Jim outpaced him easily and ran back to his old home, the one he'd become afraid of. He wasn't sure if Maribel saw him as he was running towards it. She was standing in front of the kitchen window, he thought. The window was dusty and the lights weren't on in the house and it was dim outside, so he wasn't sure. But he thought he caught a glimpse of her face. It was a plaintive one, the kind made for staring out of windows. He jumped into his truck. He'd taken it out before in the months that had gone by, to go to strange towns where nobody knew him and look at human faces and remember what it was like to live among people. So he had the keys and he started the car. He pulled out of the driveway and this time he was sure he saw Maribel's face. Her eyes widened in alarm—it was the movement of her face that made it easier to see. She ran out the door as he was pulling out. He could have driven off. But she was running towards him.

"Jim," she said. "Jim," she screamed.

She ran to the truck and so Jim told her. "I'm going to find Julia," he said.

"She won't come back with you," said Maribel. "She won't come back with me. That's what she told me on the phone."

"I know," Jim said, shaking his head. "But I have to talk to her. I have to try again to tell her what happened."

Maribel screamed at him, "She won't want to see you," she said. "After everything that's happened, she won't want to see you."

"I know," said Jim. This answer only seemed to make her angrier.

“I know you aren’t coming home again,” said Maribel. “I know you aren’t, and I wouldn’t know what to do if you did. So you don’t have to, and you don’t have to say you’re going to. So you don’t have to lie to me anymore or give me any reasons. I wronged you and we won’t overcome it, and that’s all.”

Jim knew she was right. He tried to think of what to say. “I love our daughter,” he said at last. “And I’m going to go find her. She shouldn’t be alone.”

“Yes, Jim, go to her. I want nothing more.”

He took off. Driving gave a man too much time to think. Julia would hate him when she saw him unless she knew, right away, that he had changed. His time in the church hadn’t been for nothing, though God had left him again to join the world of men. It was God’s sovereign will that he not be allowed to retreat forever. He had begged to join God and heaven and he had refused. He could not argue with God any longer. God would not allow it—worse, he would not respond to it. And then God had sent Julia far away from him, to draw him away from the church, to force him out of his retreat.

He thought of how he could find her. It was a big enough city. And nobody knew her name. She had no money—that part made it easier. She’d live in the cheapest place she could find, probably a motel. But what if she changed cities? What if she used the train money Peter had given her and left? It was a risk he had to take. He prayed to the God who no longer answered him in words or in feelings, but in text and hymns and the dry things humans resorted to in his absence. *Dear God, let me find her. You know that I believed myself to be walking in the way, but I have failed her God. Let me bring her back to the fold and to you.* Perhaps she was still talking to Peter. Peter might be the only one who knew where she was, if only he could bear to talk to him.

Jim thought of the last time he'd spoken to Julia. She had been utterly different from how he'd remembered her. She had listened to him. There was a time when she would feign disinterest, boredom, disdain. She'd spoken boldly, certain of her own words. He thought of her as he left the city limits.

He arrived when it was dark and he had to find a place to stay for the night. He had no money—he hadn't for a while, so he found a parking lot and slept in the cab of the truck. He feared people more than he had feared nature when he was living in Mr. Reid's woods. In the morning, he started by asking around where the least expensive hotels were. He didn't understand the strange looks people gave him when he asked. He wasn't sure anymore how he seemed to people. He drove to motels on the outskirts of town and asked for a Julia Shaw. The men and women at the desks of these places curled their lips at him, an old unkempt man asking about a girl. Jim wondered if this was the only punishment sinners got—a curled lip, a sideways glance. If they believed what they seemed to, why didn't they rebuke him in the name of God? Weren't there any God-fearing people here? He slept in his truck every night, and the city noises of construction and people driving by made it hard to sleep. He spent a week looking in hotels, and after that time, he figured she must have an apartment by now, and a job.

He used a pay phone sometimes, to ask Paul if he'd heard any news. Paul didn't have any news of Julia, but he said that Maribel was spending time out at Jim's church. He said that she was building a fence around it. "It's to keep out intruders," said Paul. "She hated the things people said about you and the things that they did to the church. She's doing it to protect the church, so please don't tell her she's not permitted out there. I think it might be doing her good, strange as it seems."

“God’s will for the church is different from what I’d imagined,” said Jim. “His blessing is not upon it now.”

“Well, maybe not for you, but Maribel says it makes her feel at peace.”

Jim asked Paul for Peter’s phone number, once he’d reached a point of desperation searching for Julia. Paul made Jim promise not to threaten him or do anything rash. “He’s a good honest boy and he got way in over his head with Julia.”

“I do not wish to threaten him,” Jim assured him. “He might know where Julia is.”

Jim called Peter again and again and left messages. He must have changed his number. He must have been screening his calls. Of course it made sense, Jim knew, that he wouldn’t trust him, not even enough to pick up the phone.

The first news of Julia came from Maribel. When Jim called Paul, he passed the phone to her. “I shouldn’t be telling you this,” Maribel said. “Because I have no reason to believe that you’ll be kind to her, or that you’ll say what she needs to hear. But I want you to make things right with her, Jim, and this is your only chance. So listen. She’s working as a waitress. It’s a breakfast diner. She says she likes it fine and nobody’s given her any trouble. She can pay for a room she shares with some college girls.”

“What’s it called?” Jim asked. “The diner? What is it called?”

“Well, I don’t know the name to be honest.” It’d be near the college, I imagine, if that’s where she’s living.”

And so Jim began searching there. Sometimes he ordered coffee. It was as cheap as a quarter in some places, and with enough cream and sugar, had enough in it to be a meal. He used to think himself a Godly man and here he was, sitting among the sinners who smoked and talked



about the waitresses' breasts in language Jim had never heard. He probably seemed even worse than they did. Men alone, with no friends and no family, were suspect, apt to be lunatics or adulterers or wanton, lonesome people.

He searched almost a month before he saw Julia. She was her in an apron and baseball cap carrying a tray of eggs and simple foods. Jim saw her as he was opening the door. The door had a bell on it. "Have a seat where you like," Julia said, in a tired voice, before she looked up and saw him. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "What are you doing here?" she said again.

The men at the table turned around and the chefs and managers behind the counter glanced backwards and pretended to mind their own cooking. "I've been looking for you," said Jim. "I looked everywhere. This is a strange city and I've found nothing but strangeness. But God has kept you safe, hasn't he?"

Julia mumbled "excuse me" in the direction of the chefs. She ushered Jim outside the door of the diner.

Jim and Julia stood face to face in front of the neon signs of the diner. "What do you think you're doing? I told everyone that I don't want to see anybody from home here. Not even Peter is supposed to know exactly where I am." She sounded like Maribel used to. She had a stronger voice.

"Julia, I haven't come to scold you. I haven't come to berate you or force you to come home," said Jim.

"Why are you here then?" Julia asked.

Jim's face looked hurt, pitiful.

"I mean it. Why? Don't look so surprised. What were you expecting? You couldn't have expected me to want to see you." She caught herself and stopped herself from saying more, not

for Jim's sake, but for Maribel's. She had wanted so badly to see them reconciled.

"I know you're angry. But I'm beginning to be able to see my faults," said Jim. "And I know that building the church was at odds with my earthly, practical duties."

"Is that all you're apologizing for?" Julia asked.

"No, Julia. So much has changed. I want you to know that things have changed, and that I'm not who I was when I hurt you. I know now that I lack the power to forgive, and that's why I cannot claim to know God better than you or Maribel do. I know now that I have not the ability to forgive transgressions. I've been made humble."

"Is that all? Don't you see that there's nothing to forgive me for?" Julia said.

"I have not forsaken my beliefs, Julia. A Godly woman ought to conduct herself in a certain way. This remains true."

"You said you wouldn't scold me," said Julia. "Don't go back on your word. I believed you when you said that, against all odds."

"I haven't come to scold you. And I won't." They fell silent for a while. There were cars driving by, full of college students in flannel and baseball caps. It had rained earlier that day and the ground was wet. The cars spread rain as they went. "God has blessed your way here? You've found a job, a place to live?" Jim asked.

Julia's eyes softened for the first time. She uncrossed her arms and stood still without leaning backwards away from him. "Yes," she said. He was speaking the way he always had, in Biblical tones with more gravity than the situation merited, but it was such an ordinary question to ask, if she was doing well. "And how are you? Has God blessed your way?" Julia asked, trying on his language to see how it felt. The words sounded the smallest bit sarcastic in her voice, but only because she was unaccustomed to saying them, and stumbled.

“Yes, yes. God has denied me his presence, but I am learning to worship him as other men do.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Julia. “I think. What does that mean?”

“I once believed he’d given me more access to his thoughts than he gave most men. I’ve realized that it’s not true anymore. Perhaps it never was.”

“How did you find me?” Julia asked. She listened to Jim’s story of searching at cheap hotels and sleeping in his truck and finally learning about the breakfast diner and the college. “I called Peter,” he said. “I called him to find out where you were, but he didn’t know anything.”

“You called him?” Julia asked. “That’s really something.”

“Yes, but he never answered. I was fortunate to find you. God must have guided my steps,” Jim said.

“I don’t suppose you know anything, about Maribel and Nathalie and Paul?” She was shocked to see this happening, this simple conversation as though between friends.

“Paul tells me how the family is doing. I hear Maribel is finding grace in the church I built. I have opened my heart to others staying there and finding grace.”

Julia’s eyebrows went up. “Is she living there? How is she ‘finding grace’?”

“No, not living there. She stays there. Paul told me she spoke of building a fence around it, to protect it.”

Julia leaned against the side of the diner. “She’s building a fence around it,” she repeated.

“Yes, to protect it from intruders,” said Jim.

Julia furrowed her brow. “What are you going to do now that it’s been discovered?” Julia asked. You felt so strongly that nobody should see it.

“I am waiting on the word of the Lord. Your mother seems to find peace there, and

though it was not in my plan that she would someday worship there, I have accepted that God's plans for the church are not my own."

Julia nodded. "So nothing's changed then. You're still waiting for him to speak to you. Nothing ever changes." Jim was startled by the sudden change in the tone of her voice. She sounded harsh and agitated. "I feel sorry for you," she said, realizing this was true as she said it. "Out there waiting on God. I stopped believing in him a long time ago. He never answered my prayers, not even when I was in pain."

"I know I caused much of that pain," Jim said. "It was my intention to keep you away from evil. I believed that I was following God's commands. I obeyed my conscience, but my conscience was flawed. I regret it, but I am confused that God did not grant me a proper conscience."

"Yes of course," said Julia. "It's still God's fault," she said. Jim didn't seem to understand her sarcasm. His expression didn't change. He still looked earnest. "Well maybe it is," she said. "Is there anything else to say? I'm going to get fired if I stay here any longer."

"I looked for you for such a long time," said Jim. "Let me stay."

"I can't force you to leave," said Julia. "But I don't have anything else to say." She went back into the diner. Jim stood there for a while. He knew the others in the diner were looking at him with suspicion as he stood there watching Julia for a short while. He didn't know what else to do. He'd said all he could say, and it hadn't been much. He walked back to his car and started driving again.

## Chapter 13

Maribel came to tuck Nathalie in. This had always been Jim's responsibility, and as long as he was here and as long as there was a chance he was coming back, it didn't feel right to do his duty. But Maribel marveled at how she had let Nathalie grow so old without ever kissing her on the forehead before sleeping. It wasn't right for a mother to not know her own daughter.

Nathalie always went to bed obediently at 10pm. She didn't need to be told—perhaps she even looked forward to sleeping. The transition hadn't been easy on her. Maribel walked upstairs and knocked gently on her door. "I already brushed my teeth," said Nathalie.

"I know that," said Maribel. "I came to tuck you in." Nathalie didn't respond to this, so Maribel opened the door. "Hello," she said and walked to her bed. She sat down. "Tell me how you've been," she said. "How was your day?"

"It was okay," said Nathalie, shrugging. "My new school is so big."

"But you're making friends alright?"

Nathalie frowned. Maribel realized that to her, this probably sounded like a scolding, like she ought to be making new friends. "I hope the other children are nice."

"They're different," said Nathalie. "They're more like grownups. I don't mind them, I guess," she said shrugging.

Maribel nodded.

"Why are you tucking me in?" said Nathalie. "Did something happen? Did you come to tell me something?"

Maribel shook her head. "No, no, I just thought it might be comforting. There have been so many changes, I know."

"I don't like being in school for so long, either," said Nathalie. "I didn't use to go to

school for so long did I?”

“No, we used to pick you up in the afternoon. But I have to work now. I have to protect what Jim made.”

Nathalie nodded. “Yes, it’s just so long,” she said.

“Would you like a story or anything before bed?” asked Maribel.

“That’s okay. I usually read by myself.”

“I’ll read with you.”

“You don’t have to,” said Nathalie.

“Your father used to brag about how many questions you had. He said it meant you were smart. Don’t you have any questions for me?”

“Why didn’t Dad say goodbye to me?” asked Nathalie. “He said goodbye to you, didn’t he? Why couldn’t he say goodbye to me?”

“I don’t know,” said Maribel. “But he loves you very much.”

“When are things going to go back to normal?”

Maribel put the blanket up closer to Nathalie’s neck. This is what it meant, after all, to tuck someone in. “This might be the new normal,” she said. “We’ll see. We have to wait and see.”

“Can I go to the church with you tomorrow? I don’t want to go back to school.”

“No, honey,” said Maribel. “School is a better place for you. Just keep your chin up.”

In the morning, Maribel rose and went to fence in Jim’s church. She and Mr. Reid had marked boundaries for the part that was hers now, a little square in the middle of his land where she was going to protect Jim’s church. After she’d told him that she wanted it, they’d gone

around and put down little wires with bright tape on them to mark the boundaries. Jim had left his tools in the woods when he'd gone off chasing Julia. Maribel gathered them together and learned how to be Jim, how the tools made her feel powerful, how the work relieved her of pain and sleeplessness. Maribel cut wood from inside her portion of the land. She was afraid, at first, that one of the trees would fall the wrong way on her. But she had learned how the trees were and how they wanted to behave. She grew stronger so that she could chop wood all day. In the beginning, she would cut a few branches and then sit, exhausted, praying. She sometimes lost track of time in these exhausted states. She swooned in the heat and had dreams while still awake. She dug holes for the stakes. She loved being close to the dirt. She liked knowing what lived under the leaves. She liked coming home with dirt up to her elbows and washing it off in the shower. She put the stakes in and bit by bit, she was building a fence. It took a long time to build. It wasn't the kind for animals, a low fence with gaps between the planks. It was to keep people out. It was a fortress. The wall she was building could withstand more than it needed to. She loved seeing it grow. She wished she could build a roof over her land. People didn't come here anymore. They were probably afraid, as they should be, of the place that had changed Maribel and Jim both so much. Maribel no longer went to church. She didn't see other people except for Nathalie on most days.

She was working on the fence when she saw somebody in the distance. She questioned her own eyesight at first. Nobody came here. But there was certainly something moving, and it didn't move the way deer did. "Hello?" she called out.

"Mom?" Julia's voice came out in the woods.

"Oh, God," Maribel said. She was seized momentarily, with a sense of humiliation. Julia would think she had gone Jim's way. She would treat her like a child. She would be angry or

ashamed or confused.

“Mom!” Julia called. She came close, and she embraced Maribel. Maribel was sweating from the day’s work. She embraced Julia. Julia felt relaxed and strong as they hugged, not like the anxious and nervous embraces they exchanged before she ran away. “Jim told me about this,” Julia said. “He told me you were building a fence, that the church belonged to you now.”

“Yes,” said Maribel. “It’s true. Oh I’ve missed you so much. You can’t imagine how hard it’s been to leave you alone like you wanted. Tell me what you’ve done, first,” said Maribel. “I can’t talk.” She was wheezing a bit and seemed like someone coming up for air from underwater, so Julia did as she was told.

“I’m so sorry,” said Julia. “I know you must have been scared to death. I didn’t mean to do that to you, I swear. Maybe I was just following a bad example,” she said, trailing off. “I was driving off with Peter. We tried to run away. We wanted to go to New York and live there.” She shook her head. “But I realized he was never going to marry me, we were too different and he didn’t love me, not really. He didn’t know me well enough to love me. And I didn’t know how to be alone, and I wasn’t happy, and it was impossible to know if I could be happy with him. So I left him there. I told him to stop the car and I got out and he gave me money for a train to somewhere. I didn’t buy a ticket right away. I stayed at the cheapest hotel I could find for a week. I got lucky. I got a job as a waitress my first week there and I got an apartment. I don’t know what I was thinking or how long I was planning to stay out there. I just wanted to know if I could manage on my own, I guess. I wanted to know if I really knew how to do anything on my own. I played pianos in bars late at night, too. They were right, back at home. I’m good enough for a big city. Well, sort of. I never got paid much. It was something to make me feel like I was getting there, doing something special. But what was I doing there? There wasn’t anything so



noble in it, after all, and I didn't feel safe living off on my own like that. And I kept thinking about what Jim had said when he came." Maribel sat down suddenly on the ground, and Julia sat down beside her. "I can't quite explain what happened. He said he looked for me for a month. He told me God had healed him of his hate. He tried to ask how I was. He told me he called Peter when he was looking for me. I don't think he got what he came for when he spoke to me. I don't really know what that was, anyway. But he told me that you were here, and the church was yours now. And that's part of why I came back—to make sure you were okay. I missed you, and I was worried about you"

"I'm so glad you're here," Maribel said. "And I can't believe he found you, and I can't believe he called Peter. And he apologized, did he?"

"Yes," said Julia. "Or at least, he tried. He thinks very little of himself now, I could tell, and it's because of what happened, I think. He wouldn't say so, but I think he's a bit ashamed of having done all of this," said Julia, gesturing towards the church in the distance. "But tell me, what are you doing? When Jim said you were building a fence, he acted like it was all just fine, but I don't understand. Why?"

Maribel felt embarrassed of this. It seemed so plain and practical and unnecessary now. "I'm building a fence to protect what Jim built. Please don't think I've gone crazy or that I feel the way Jim did about this place. People were carving their initials on it and trampling all over his work. And this is all I have to show for everything I've been through, and I just want to protect it. I want it to be mine. I don't expect Jim to ever be the way he used to be. And this is all I really have of him, and it's a place I can call my own. I hope you understand."

Julia looked around her, at the fence that was beginning to take shape behind them. "Perhaps," she said. "If it were me, and this land mine, I don't know what I'd do. I think I might

set fire to it.”

“Why?” Maribel asked.

“I don’t know. It would look so beautiful while it was burning. And then once it was gone, maybe I’d be able to forget about it.”

“I’m too old to try that,” said Maribel. “I never forget the things I want to.”

“I’ll help you,” said Julia. She stood up and helped Maribel back on her feet. So she set to working. She was young and quick and Maribel envied her fast way of moving. She made the strength she’d gained over these weeks seem unremarkable.

Maribel thought about what it meant that they were this place’s safeguards. Jim had abandoned it and so she had something in common with it. She knew how it felt; she knew it needed to be protected. Julia and Maribel spent a month constructing the fence together. They began when the sun was rising and the fence posts’ shadows rotated as they worked until night fell and they returned home. When she wasn’t in school, Nathalie came with them. The fence grew longer. It was tall and sturdy, and it coiled around the church like a shell.