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Threads: A Collection of Short Stories

Samantha Alleman

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Threads: A Collection of Short Stories

by

Samantha Alleman

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Mr. James Bennett

Department of English

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Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Introduction	v
“Waffles”	1
“The Passing of the Crown”	16
“Adventures”	33

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ABSTRACT

Threads is a collection of three short stories that wish to look further at the way families interact with one another. The Introduction gives a brief explanation of the inspiration and reasoning behind each respective short story and the project as a whole, giving the reader further insight into the author's thought process. "Waffles" takes a look at a broken home and the effects of that on the child left behind, especially when that child is grown up. "The Passing of the Crown" is a modern-day *Hamlet*; a son's loyalty to his duties towards his father is tested against his own dreams for his life. "Adventures" focuses on what happens when a child must step up to the mother role for a sibling before he or she is ready and the burdens that accompany it. With this portfolio, the author wishes to further the understanding of human nature between those members in a family, connected by the various figurative threads that come with sharing the same blood.

INTRODUCTION

The family unit is one of the most inspirational places for fiction writers. A multitude of authors before me, from the great to the small, have tried to explore the various aspects of different families and the way their members interact. I have always been intrigued by the way that each person is furthered or hindered by the family he or she were born into. I see families as connected by threads: it can be strengthened or broken quickly, depending on the effort put behind the relationships. As I wrote the original stories for my Short Story Writing class and later revised them, the common theme I wished to convey was that while we cannot choose those to whom we are related or influence the decisions that they make, we still have the ability to make our own decisions in life and must be able to live with the consequences of those decisions.

“Waffles”

This story began with the idea that a woman had problems connecting with others that stemmed from an absent mother in her youth. I wanted the main character to seem well-adjusted, just disconnected from those around her, and for her to be initially unwilling to connect. Because the situation is more common in today’s society, the broken family almost becomes the ideal beginning place for a portfolio focusing on the family. I chose to make the mother the one that was not in the girl’s life because that is not as common as a missing father. Also, when a girl is growing up without a mother, the father must take on a second role as the substitute mother, influencing his relationship with his child in a new way. The daughter, in this case, reacts positively to the parent serving two roles, for the most part. The story begs the question: when broken homes are the norm, what kind of person is created in that environment? Instead of telling the reader about this past, I used flashbacks to give glimpses that the reader can extrapolate from. The flashbacks are from various points in the past where having an absent

mother particularly affected the main character. With this story, I also tried to use everyday inspirations to add to the story; the main character's flaw of being always three minutes late comes from a phone conversation I heard walking on campus.

"The Passing of the Crown"

The inspiration for the second story began with a class I was taking at the same time as my Short Story Writing course, Studies in Shakespeare. It focused on *Hamlet*: the text itself, evolution of criticism and how *Hamlet* has influenced other works. Many works of literature are based on *Hamlet* or just a modern re-telling of the story with different focuses, such as Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and David Wroblewski's *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*. Once I decided to do a re-working of *Hamlet*, I had to decide how to change it and make it my own. One aspect that always interested me in the original work is the only interaction Hamlet has with his father is from beyond the grave. We do not see in person how he and his father relate to one another, unlike Hamlet's foil Laertes, who loses his father only later in the play. Also, we have the relationship between King Hamlet and Claudius that we do not get a sense of for the same reason. In my re-working, I decided to explore these chances for potential relationships. To add to the family dynamic, I made the setting a car dealership in modern-day south Georgia and the family of Italian descent. The dealership invokes the idea of a kingdom, while the Italian ancestry and setting in the American South both give the reader a sense of the importance of loyalty and family, themes also seen in its inspirational source.

"Adventures"

The final story was always set in a rural area, later decided as Depression-Era Oklahoma. I chose this part of the country and time period because of the current events of the day—

hopelessness abounded in the region with the combination of the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Our main character, a girl forced to age before her time, has the burden of taking care of her mentally handicapped brother after her mother dies in childbirth. The type of family I wanted to explore in this story was the one where one is bound by a combination of necessity and guilt: the main character blames herself for the life she has been passed onto her and sees living it as penance for her past actions. When she is given a chance to escape, the conflict arises, for she does not know whether she should be forgiven. The relationship with her younger brother shows how lines become blurred when one takes on a more parental role towards their sibling, taking more responsibilities for their actions and protecting them in ways that could be unnecessary. As the main character has to make her decision, she is given, as she sees, two clear choices: living for her family and living for herself. When seen in this light, her final decision becomes clearer and understandable for the reader.

“Waffles”

Joan didn't even want to try to get there on time. She was always three minutes late, and it had been that way for as long as she could remember. Joan, though, couldn't *not* try, so she sat at her desk, hurrying through all the last minute tasks that needed to be done. Call this client, e-mail that one, double check the numbers on that calculation. A stranger would have been oddly mesmerized with the way she multi-tasked. This was how Joan worked best, when she was forced to handle everything at once, like those guys who balanced spinning plates on sticks. She liked the feeling that she was the calm in a chaos of work.

She sat and worked in her shiny office, shelves lining the far wall. A few framed prints and various figurines and decorations filled the shelves. Only the framed diplomas belonged to Joan. The right wall was mainly composed of a window, but most of the time Joan kept the blinds shut. There was no left wall, just a large glass pane. It allowed Joan to see out to the cubicles and vice-versa. She didn't like the pane and would have rather had a full wall there; the pane allowed for her to see everything that happened, which was sometimes distracting. Behind her were large shelving units for all the folders, binders and files from her clients.

After some time spent clearing out her task list, Joan was sorting all the paperwork on her desk when her hand knocked over the framed photo in the corner. It softly thumped on the carpeted floor. Joan leaned over and grabbed the frame, pausing for a moment to look at the photo inside. It had been taken on the morning of her fifth birthday, about 22 years before. Joan noticed all the same things in the photo she always did-- her father, smiling close-mouthed as always; her gap-toothed grin beside him; the birthday morning waffle set in front of her. It was

one of her favorite photos from her childhood. She set the photo down, making sure that it was far enough from the edge not to fall off again.

Joan glanced at her clock, one of the fancy ones that was in tune with the atomic clock in Colorado. 13:57:38. It would take her at least two more minutes to get everything ready for the 2:00 meeting. Her boss had said that he had some very important announcements for the company. He didn't indicate what they concerned, but everyone knew that a new head consultant would be named. Otis Williams was retiring at the end of the month, and his replacement had yet to be revealed. Joan knew she was being considered, though she didn't know how seriously. Other assistant consultants like herself were in the running, but she really hoped that she beat them out. She couldn't stand not knowing how she stood as a candidate.

She could see out of the corner of her eye the drifters making their way to the meeting. She knew their names, and little else. Joan generally preferred working with numbers rather than people. Numbers didn't let you down; if they did not equal out, it meant you made a mistake, a clear concise reason for the discrepancy. Everything could be explained, not like with people. They let you down, without any warning.

As she rushed out the door, she glanced at her clock. 14:02:04. It would take about a minute to get to the conference room. She would be three minutes late. Again.

The sunshine came in the kitchen window on that early summer day. It shone on the sink, glistening dirtied plates that had been waiting to get clean.. Carl carefully placed the waffle on the neon pink plastic plate, generously pouring the maple syrup into the squares of the fluffy breakfast. He grabbed a nearby box of blueberries and sprinkled a handful over the waffle. Plate in hand, Carl walked into the connected dining room and placed it at the head of the table.

He called loudly, “Joanie!”, before heading back to the kitchen. He opened the fridge, got the milk jug and placed it onto the counter.

As he reached up into the cabinet for the plate’s matching cup, a woman with disheveled, hairspray-coated hair sluggishly made her way across the mint-green linoleum. “Carl, what...the hell?” She squinted in the sunlight, protecting her eyes from its harshness by her left hand. “It’s 8 o’clock on a Sunday morning. Why...the *fuck* are you yelling?” She hacked loudly into her other hand and wiped the spittle on the front of her large t-shirt.

“It’s June 3rd, Dee.”

“Yeah, and? Gimme a cup.”

Carl handed Dee a cup but held onto it even after she had a grip on it. “June the third. Joanie’s birthday.”

Dee frowned, “Oh...yeah. I forgot.” She then shrugged before pulling the cup away. “Well, I know now.” Dee walked over to the sink, pushing aside the plates before turning on the tap to fill her cup.

“That’s something.” Carl poured the milk into the pink cup then recapped the jug and put it away in the fridge. “Are you hungover?” He grabbed the aspirin bottle on top of the fridge before Dee even answered. He placed it on the counter beside the sink.

Dee smiled close-mouthed, but her smudged makeup made her look less than inviting. “You always takin’ such good care of me.” She uncapped the bottle, pouring two pills into her hand before closing it again.

“Someone has to--”

“DADDY!” The pitter-patter of small bare feet running across the wood flooring in the hallway echoed until Joan reached the kitchen. She pummeled into her father’s legs, hugging them with all of her five-year-old muster.

“Well, look who it is! Happy Birthday, Joanie!” Carl beamed at his daughter.

“Good morning, birthday girl,” Dee said with as much enthusiasm as a person with a splitting hangover could. She popped the pills into her mouth before taking a gulp of the water in her hand.

“Morning, Mommy. You have a headache?”

Dee bent down to Joan’s level. “Yes, Joan, and do you remember what we do when Mommy has a headache?”

Joan pouted, “We play the quiet game.”

“That’s right, baby,”

“But I don’t wanna—“

“Joan, please, for me?” Dee whined.

“Okay, Mommy.”

“Alright, Joanie, let’s go eat your birthday breakfast!” Carl nudged Joan towards the dining room, her cup in his hand. “Dee, grab the camera please.”

Dee started to run her fingers through her hair, “But, Carl, I’m a mess!”

“You’re just taking it, not in it,” Carl sighed. He walked to the dining room and set the cup of milk on the table beside the plate. “Joanie, let’s you and Daddy take a picture!”

“What about Mommy?”

“Mommy looks awful, baby. I’ll take one with you later, okay? Promise.”

“Okay.” Joanie climbed into the chair, kneeling on the seat. Carl crouched beside her, putting his arm around her.

Dee counted off. “Okay, and 3...2....1...Smile!” She clicked the disposable camera.

“Daddy, turn on the radio!” Joan stuck her fork into a syrupy blueberry. Carl reached over to the radio on the nearby side table and clicked the radio on. Belinda Carlisle loudly belted into the air, “Ooo, heaven is a place on earth!” Joan wiggled in her chair with glee and began to sing along.

Dee’s hand sprung to her temple, “Joan...stop it.”

Joan stopped singing along as she ate her waffle.

Joan opened the door to her office. As she sluggishly walked over to the desk, she wondered why she didn’t get the promotion. She knew she deserved it after all the work she did for this place, but here she was, without it.

She plopped into her chair, almost too disheartened to work. She wanted to just clock out early, but she’d never done that before. She wouldn’t even know how to do it. She was straight-laced and had rarely done anything out of line. Her dad had taught her that following the rules was the way to get ahead, and it had been, until now.

It wasn't even worth it, she decided, since it was already 16:17:41. With that, she talked herself out of it, just like she had done all the other times the thought had crossed her mind. She grabbed a nearby folder for one of the companies that she'd been helping with and started to calculate their success rates and company growth figures since the company had hired the consulting firm Joan worked for.

As she crunched the consistently reliable numbers, Joan began to really think about why she had not been given the head consultant job. Sure, she hadn't been here as long as some of her fellow assistant consultants, only for 4 years, 3 months and 8 days. But her bosses had stressed that all assistant consultants had been considered. And it wasn't because of a "boy's club" agenda; the new head consultant was Anna, who had been hired about the same time Joan had been. It still puzzled Joan, though. *Why her over me?* She'd seen the woman's work and ideas. They weren't groundbreaking by any means, and Joan's got chosen more often than Anna's. Joan couldn't figure it out, which bothered her immensely.

There was a light rapping at the door. Joan looked up and saw Phil. He was an assistant consultant too, hired spring of last year. They were working for the restaurant headquarters together. He was a nice enough guy. Joan thought he was cute, but past rejections always held her back from seeing if there could be something there. "Hey, Phil, I was just doing the calc..."

"Oh, I'm not here for that, Joan. The presentation isn't 'til next Thursday."

"I know. I wanted to get it done." She figured that one day, she would get everything done in time so she wouldn't be three minutes late.

“Oh...” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Anyway, I was wondering, a bunch of us are going to celebrate Anna’s promotion. And by celebrate, I mean curse her and drown our sorrows away.”

Joan smirked for a moment, “I don’t think so—not really my scene. Remember when everyone went out for Otis’s 75th birthday? I don’t think I talked to a single person the whole hour I was there.” It was true; she sat with her Coke in the corner, people watching until she had felt enough time had passed for her to leave. People in crowds just made her uncomfortable. It was the reason why college had been so difficult; she couldn’t muster what was needed to confront people in such a large setting. Who knew which one you could connect to best?

Phil looked from side to side outside the office then entered and closed the door. “Look, Joan, I’m gonna be honest with you. That’s why you weren’t picked over Anna.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s my strong intuition that the guys upstairs don’t think you connect with people.”

“What do you mean? I know everyone here! You’re Phil,” she motioned towards the cubicles outside, “there’s Steve and Joy.”

“That’s not what I mean. Sure, you know names, but have you ever once asked about our lives?”

“Well—”

“See, Anna does. She knows that I’m from Albany, that Steve likes his coffee black, that Joy owns four dogs. She *connects* with people, outside the office setting.”

“Well, I knew that about Joy,” she crossed her arms in front of her. One of Joy’s dogs had been run over by a crazy biker and ended up with two brown legs. Joan was still livid that Joy had requested her days off be counted as a family emergency. “But I don’t think that’s why Anna was chosen.” How could it have been? That stuff wasn’t important, not for work. Joan believed all that personal stuff was extra, unnecessary information.

“Yes, it is. See, the guys upstairs probably asked Otis for who he wanted to take over, and he likes Anna, so he probably recommended her. Because she has gotten to know him, and you haven’t.”

“Really?” Joan slouched. She was rejected for her “lack of social skills.” She cursed herself inside her head.

Phil stood up. “See, that’s why you gotta come tonight. You gotta show the guys upstairs that you can get to know people. So when the next time comes around, you’ll get it.” He headed towards the door and opened it. “We’re meeting at Pete’s over on East 18th Street at 8. Hope to see you there.” He turned to leave her office.

“Wait, Phil!”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you telling me all this? Why do you want to help me?” It was an honest question. Sure, he’d been nice to her, but not enough to warrant this.

He sighed and smiled, “Someone has to.” He then left down the hallway.

Joan didn't know what to think. Did she really get rejected because of social awkwardness? Were Phil's parting words indication of a possibility? She looked at the clock. 16:59:05. Time to start clocking out.

She leaned down to grab her briefcase and paused. Joan looked down at her attire: black pants, black blazer, light gray blouse. She realized how plain it was and thought of how everything in her closet was similar. If she decided to go, what would she even wear? There had been so few times where she had tried to connect socially. She hadn't gone out since Otis's party, so she'd forgotten what was appropriate to wear for things like that.

There was that little boutique on the way to her apartment...maybe she'd go after all.

"Oh, Joanie, I'm so proud of you," Carl beamed.

"I know, Dad. You've only told me, like, 20 billion times." Joan brushed her dark brown hair and straightened the wrinkles out of her sleeveless, square-necked black dress. The dress was the most expensive piece of clothing her father had ever bought her. It cost him \$60. He had said it was worth it as he reluctantly wrote the check out to the cashier.

"Well, who are you and where'd Joanie go?" Joan turned around to see her dad leaning against the door frame. "Look at you," he exclaimed. "My little Joanie, all grown up."

"Dad," she whined.

Carl walked over and stood behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "You look beautiful, Joanie. Just like...like she used to." He squeezed her shoulders a bit.

“Please, don’t do this. Not today,” Joan sighed. Ever since he had kicked her mom out when Joan was little, Carl seemed to forget how horrid Dee had been, how she mostly drank her way through Joan’s toddlerhood. Joan hadn’t, though. She didn’t want to talk about it. Her mom was a bad parent; there was nothing else to say.

“Joanie,” Carl shifted his eyes down, “I’ve been meaning to tell you. I knew you wouldn’t invite her, so I did.”

Joan tensed up. “Why did you do that?”

“I thought, you know, it’d be nice for her to see you on your big day—“

“But I don’t want her there!” Joan huffed as she paused to take a deep breath. “Whatever, it’s not like she’ll show up anyway.” Joan glanced at herself once more in the mirror. “Alright, Dad, let’s go. We’ll be late if we don’t leave soon, and I know how much you hate that.” Joan grabbed her purse and left her room.

Carl sighed to himself as he ambled to the living room. He called out, “Joanie, you know you’re always late.” He then mumbled to himself, “Just like her.”

As Joan walked down the hall, she wondered if Dee would actually show up, what would she say, if maybe she’d finally sobered up. The idea of hugging her mom and hearing her voice again didn’t sound so bad to Joan anymore. It sounded nice.

Joan stumbled into her office. It was 1, maybe 2 AM, she wasn’t sure.

Joan had decided to go to Pete's, wearing a simple knee-length skirt and low-cut blouse she bought at the boutique. She'd walked in, worrying co-workers would think it odd she had suddenly changed her ways. They hadn't. At first, it was like always—her in the corner, watching the rest of the crowd. Phil then walked over with another co-worker, began a conversation and ordered a round for the three of them. It had been awkward at first with Joan not knowing what to really say or ask about, but things got easier after her second drink. She began conversations, and people actually seemed interested in her and her life.

As she drank more, it seemed that a part of her brain had clicked. She had never been a drinker; that was a result of her father, a stiff advocate of temperance. Even in college, she had stayed on her own rather than going to the normal local haunts for those her age. She wondered in her inebriated state if that would have changed her, but the thought soon passed. Her lowered inhibitions gave her the courage to flirt with Phil. Her drunk head voice had convinced her it was now or never. Ordering him a drink, joining in his conversations, getting close to him when possible. He was friendly enough to her advances, so she had assumed in her ever-growing intoxicating state that he must have liked her as well.

After her 5th drink, she finally decided to make a real move on him. She slid her arm around his waist and squeezed at his side. Phil grabbed her hand, removed it from around his waist and pulled Joan to right outside the bar. He screamed, "What the hell are you doing?"

She sputtered, "What do you mean, Phil?"

"Look, I think you got the wrong impression," Phil lifted up his hands in front of his body in surrender. "I don't date co-workers. Besides, you're not my type—I'm gay. I'm sorry if I led you on. I was trying to be nice, honestly."

An alcohol-fueled anger filled Joan's body. "Oh, I'm so sure. You probably just don't think I'm good enough for you, huh? Joan's not hot enough for Philly-Boy!" Joan turned to the street, holding out her hand for a cab.

"Joan! That's not it, let me explain—"

A cab pulled up quickly. Joan got in without listening to anything else Phil said. The entire ride was a drunken stupor for Joan. When the cab dropped her off at the office, Joan realized what she'd done—she'd told him her work address. She figured she could go in anyway, sober up some before calling for a cab home. She unlocked the building with her set of keys. Every employee had a basic key to the building and a key to their office if necessary.

And now, here she was. Joan threw her purse onto her desk and slumped to the floor. What the hell just happened tonight? She wasn't entirely sure and definitely not capable of trying to think it out right now. Instead, she looked at all the papers that had been knocked on the floor by her purse. She'd worry about cleaning it up later. What caught her eye instead was the upside-down photo frame beside the sheets. She picked it up, looking at the photo again. This time, instead of just seeing the photo, she remembered the person who took it—her always drunk and absent mother. The mother who had never been there to teach her the intricacies of social skills, never been there to listen to her go on and on about her crushes in junior high, never held her after a broken heart. The mother who had frankly wished she had aborted Joan.

She threw the picture across the room at a shelf, knocking knick-knacks onto the floor and smashing the frame's glass. Joan started sobbing, overwhelmed with memories of her mother's absence and what could have been if Dee had only stayed. Her father didn't prepare her for things either, she scorned. He had tried to shelter her away from everything that could hurt

her: alcohol, heartbreak, connections. “Selfish, both of them,” as she curled up on the floor.

“They’re the reason I’m so messed up.”

She drifted off to sleep on her office’s carpet floor to the hum of the traffic outside.

“Joanie?” Carl looked in his daughter’s room.

Joan was under her bed’s comforter, but her crying was still audible. He walked over to her bed and pulled back the thick blanket. Joan was curled up, hugging a pillow.

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought...just maybe...,” she blubbered, “maybe she’d show up.” The thoughts of being able to reconcile with her mother shattered when Joan had looked out into the crowd earlier that night and saw Carl sitting alone.

“Oh, Joanie...” Carl leaned and hugged Joan. “I know it hurts. And I understand wanting her to prove you wrong, but only being disappointed again.”

“It still hurts. I really wanted her to be there.”

“I know you did. I know. Me too.”

That had been the last night Joan wanted to see her mother.

“Mees Hanny-gan, Mees Hanny-gan, you need to wake up!”

Joan woke up to the nudging of a foot. *Where am I?* The foot kept on nudging.

“Mees Hanny-gan!”

Joan sat up and rubbed her eyelids. She was in her office, with one of the weekend cleaning crew ladies standing there, her arm resting on her hip.

“Mees Hanny-gan, what happened to you?” The lady’s words were kind, but her tone indicated a lack of sympathy.

Joan squinted in the sunlight, protecting her eyes from the harshness with her right hand. Pieces of last night’s memories flashed through her mind. “Oh, it’s a long story.”

“Well, I didn’t want to mess with all thees,” she motioned to the scattered papers, “but I deed clean up the pee’chur frame glass.” She pointed to where Joan has thrown the photo the night before.

Joan wanted to thank her but couldn’t remember her last name. Hernandez? Lopez? Something like that... “I can clean up the rest, but thank you, Miss Lopez.”

The lady’s eyes and nose flared open as she cleared her throat. “It’s Schwartz...” Mrs. Schwartz sneered before storming out of the office, shaking her head and sputtering Spanish the entire way.

“Sorry!” Joan called after her. Another example to add to the list of Joan’s wonderful social interactions.

She turned to the papers and sighed. She would bring them home, sort them out there. As she gathered them together, more and more of her memories from last night came to mind. She cringed at her actions. What had she been thinking, letting herself get that drunk? It made her stomach churl. Or maybe that was the hunger. She picked up the other things from her desk and placed them properly before walking over to the shelf and doing the same.

She picked up the now broken frame, looking at the photo again. Since last night and remembering her mother, she decided that the photo was going home with her, to be put somewhere out of sight. Her mother had not been there, so why should she remind herself of that void every day? She'd bring another photo of her dad and her together. Maybe from her last visit home or from her college graduation. He hadn't been perfect either, but at least he had tried.

She picked up the folder of papers and the broken frame as she headed out of the office. Her stomach growled. She pulled out her phone and scrolled through her contacts before calling Phil. "Hey, Phil? It's Joan. I'm sorry about last night, and I wanted to apologize by treating you to some food. How's that sound? Really? Great! I know this diner near my apartment that serves great waffles."

“The Passing of the Crown”

“Calculation never made a hero.”—John Henry Newman

Tony looked up at the sky as he lay on the hood of one of the cars in the back part of the lot. It was an overcast day, with winds that suggested something was off with the weather. The smell of pine needles and magnolia buds carried over the whole of the small town of Sperry. Around his family’s dealership, the earthiness in the air mixed with rust, oil and new car smells. The trees rustled softly, interrupted every few minutes by another loudspeaker announcement by Big Tony.

We welcome all of y’all to Marino Chevrolet! Whether you’re lookin’ for somethin’ new or wantin’ somethin’ pre-owned, we got it!

Tony groaned while chewing his turkey sandwich. Lunchtime was his alone time. It was one of the few moments of the day where he was not expected to do anything, just to be. During work, he was the “young blood dealer.” Even if he wasn’t that great at it, he was given the task to appeal to housewives wanting to be complimented and giggling teenage girls getting their first cars on Daddy’s dime; he only got the position because he was the youngest. At both work and home, he was the dutiful son, always complying with his parents’ wishes. He was only free from when the clock ticked 12:30 to 1:30 pm.

Tony popped the last bite of his first sandwich into his mouth and pulled out the second one. He always ate more food than he really wanted, to his mother’s pleading. She usually made sure he did this by slipping more food his way, like she had this morning; after Tony had made his lunch, Millie had come up, made another sandwich then slipped it into the bag. She had always complained he was too skinny. His dad said his brain took all the energy from his food

because of “all that readin’ nonsense.” Tony saw his reading as his only way out. His mother encouraged him as a child, much to Big Tony’s chagrin, to read more; perhaps her way of condoning his desire to learn was to feed his body with food, give him the energy to burn the night oil if he wanted.

He’d graduated from Georgia Southern, just a county over, with a degree in philosophy. Choosing his major was the one decision in his life he’d stood fast on. He had always been interested in philosophy, the different ways that people approached the same issues with theories based upon their own beliefs, even while living in dream-stifling Sperry. Big Tony had always told him he’d take over the lot one day, so Tony had convinced his parents it didn’t really matter what he majored in. If Tony had really gotten his way, he would have continued his education, all the way to a Ph.D. He then would have written, taught, something to enlighten people, make them think. His parents, more his dad, gave him no choice. Big Tony had made a deal with him back when he first went to college—Tony could only go off and study whatever he wanted, if he would come back. If he did not come back, Big Tony would consider the tuition a loan and would start charging Tony, with interest. There had been a contract and everything. Besides the financial impossibilities, Tony knew the stress it would put on his mom to leave, and part of Tony could not let down his dad. So, Tony stayed. It had been five years since he had graduated, and here he was, still in Sperry.

Tony pulled out a copy of Martin Luther’s writings when he finished the second sandwich. He’d read Luther countless times. The religious aspect of the text was interesting, but Tony admired Luther more. He wanted to be able to stand up like Luther did, tell this huge power that he did not want to follow anymore. Tony wanted to create his own way.

Big Tony Marino here! You know that we like to keep your family's business. So, if you've bought with us before, any member of your family gets a discount! For all your family's automobile discounts, at Marino Chevrolet, we got it!

Tony grunted in reply to the loudspeaker. "Always here. Even when he's not."

Big Tony hadn't been in the dealership for a couple of weeks. He'd gotten dizzy and sick one night with massive headaches. He was brought to the hospital and discovered there was a tumor in his brain. The doctors said it was malignant, and Big Tony started chemotherapy. He sat around the house these days and had become a ghost of his former self, just waiting for the next appointment.

Tony's Uncle Dom had been running the dealership since the cancer. Dom, the younger of the two brothers, walked around with a spring in his step these days. Dom had started out upset at Big Tony's condition, but Dom had recently become more happy, more joyous. The sudden change in attitude bothered Tony. Something wasn't right about it. His uncle used to be a sad, pathetic man, trying too hard to get Tony to like him. Buying him gifts, always offering advice, taking his side in an argument—all to the point of annoyance.

Tony knew why though: Dom was jealous of Big Tony, who had it all—success from the family car lot; his pretty, quiet wife Millie who never made much of a fuss about anything; a son to carry on his name. Dom had none of those things. Being brothers in general was an eternal conflict, but Dom and Big Tony were always making bets, competing on everything. Big Tony was nine times out of ten the winner, and when he wasn't, Dom hadn't won by the most honest of means. The strained relationship had become even more tense when PaPa Marino, their father

and Tony's grandfather, had passed away, leaving the dealership and house to Big Tony, while Dom had gotten a few pieces of furniture and a small amount of money.

"Tony!"

Tony jumped up from the hood of the car to see Millie walking up. She worked as a receptionist at the dealership. She normally stayed home, but a few days before Big Tony got sick, the former receptionist turned in her two-week notice. Once Dom took over, he said he had no time to look for a new receptionist and called Millie in. Big Tony hadn't said anything, but it was evident he didn't like it by the way he sulked when Millie told him.

"Tony, Dom wanted me to tell you to take the rest of the day off."

"Why?"

"Just 'cause."

Here at Marino Chevrolet, we're about keepin' your business and workin' hard to keep it. Bring in your car for repairs here, even if it didn't come from here! We'll get done the quickest and for the best price. For all your repairin' needs, at Marino Chevrolet, we got it!

Tony scoffed at the timing of the overhead voice. "I wonder what he'd think about it," he stated as he cocked his head towards one of the large speakers.

"Tony, don't start that again," Millie sighed.

"What, Mom? Uncle Dom took over, and now he's changing the way Dad had things. You know Dad would never let me leave work early."

"I think you're just in shock you're getting offa work," she chuckled.

“No, Mom, I’m not. I just see how things really are.” Tony picked up his book, put it in his plastic lunch bag and started walking towards the road. “But if you really don’t need me, I’m not going to fight. See you later,” he called over his shoulder without turning his head.

Millie looked up at the darkening sky with a furrowed brow. “You sure you don’t want to take the car? I can get a ride later.”

“You know I like the walk,” Tony answered back.

“You sure?”

“Yes, Mom.”

Tony liked walking to and from the lot, rather than driving. It gave him time to think, time to himself, away from the machines that he spent all day trying to peddle to customers. He began to think about Uncle Dom and the odd allowance to leave early. Tony saw the way his uncle looked at his mom, and he didn’t like it. He knew Uncle Dom wanted a wife of his own; the guy always looked so lonely. But was it specifically Millie that he wanted?

It had been weird that his mom accepted the receptionist position in the first place. She was usually one to do as his dad wanted. It was one of her biggest flaws that she had unfortunately forced upon her son: being a people pleaser. She had told him as a kid, “Do as your dad says.” Tony couldn’t remember a single time when his mom asked him to do something for her. Because she was always the one around for him, that desire to live up to his dad’s expectations became second nature. Millie’s desire to always please Big Tony became second nature to Tony, because he’d spent more time with his mom than with his dad while growing up. Millie had been slowly changing recently too.

He looked down the road at the pines lining his path, and it reminded him of how confined he felt in Sperry. Once Tony had started college, he had realized how much he wanted out of the world set up for him. He had seriously contemplated forgetting everything and setting off on his own. He had told his mother once he did not want the dealership. Millie had said that he had a contract with his father and it would be wrong to turn back on that. She never brought up Tony's confession again. It was then Tony knew that however much his mom was kind to him, she wanted to please Big Tony more than she wanted Tony to be happy. He had not looked at her the same since then, and their relationship had deteriorated from the closeness they had shared in his younger years.

Tony turned down the gravel road that led to his house. The clumps of rock and sand crumbled under his feet. The weather began to roar and soon erupted in rain, and Tony began to run to escape it. His thoughts from before crossed his mind again, and he stopped for a moment to glance behind. The idea of turning away from it all at this moment sounded wonderful. But he sighed and began jogging towards the house. He couldn't get the courage to do it. Not now. He could not turn his back on his parents, no matter how much he disagreed, not when his dad was dying. If Big Tony passed, who would be left for Millie? Tony knew that "who" was him. He wanted to leave, but he knew he could not leave and not feel guilty about it.

As he walked in the front door of the house, Tony noticed immediately that all the lights were off. For a moment, he thought that the electricity could have gone out, but he soon heard the clicking sound of channel surfing. He walked to the bathroom and grabbed a towel to dry himself off before walking into the living room. In a huge recliner sat Big Tony, his eyes glazed over in disinterest and pain medication. The blue-white reflection on his dad emphasized the recent paleness and loss of weight from the chemo. Tony still was not used to seeing his dad

looking so frail, so hopeless. The big man that had scared him as a kid and had seemed almost mythic was now just a dying man. It made Tony feel guilty for even wanting to leave.

“What’chu doin’ home?” Big Tony growled.

Tony jumped out of surprise of hearing his dad’s voice, still as strong as ever. He then replied, “Uncle Dom said to come on home.”

“What for?”

“Didn’t say.”

“Didn’t ya ask?”

“Nah, Mom gave me the message.”

Big Tony grunted in reply, “I see. You shoulda just stayed. You need all the experience you can get for when you run the lot.” Tony opened his mouth to answer, but his dad kept on talking. “You gotta follow after me, son. It’s your job.”

“I kno—“

“You gotta stand up to Dom and demand that he treat you with respect, dammit. I mean, you’re gonna run the damn place in a few years. He should get used to lookin’ up to ya. Got that?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Good.”

“Going to my room now,” Tony said as he walked away. All of his recent conversations with his dad had been similar. It had become part of his daily routine: wake up, work, lunch, work, conversation with Dad about duty, supper, bed. He entered his room, opened his lunch bag and removed the book before dropping the bag onto the floor. He plopped onto the bed to read and enjoy this time to himself that he normally didn’t get.

He dozed off after a while and was awakened by a light rapping at his door. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Come in,” he mumbled.

Tony then saw it was his Uncle Dom who had knocked. Uncle Dom stepped over to the bed and sat down beside Tony. “Taking a nap?” Dom asked.

“Uh, yeah.”

“That’s good.” Dom had always been a bit awkward. He looked around the room, looking for the words to say. Tony hated that about Dom: the way he waited before he said anything but seemed to still say something unintelligent. He lacked the charisma that Big Tony had. Tony might have found his dad overbearing, but he couldn’t help but like the guy; nobody could. Dom finally spoke, “Hey, I just wanted to come on down and see how you were. I let you go for the afternoon ‘cause I thought you looked tired. Wanted to make sure you got some rest.”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, that’s good.” Uncle Dom started twiddling his thumbs. “Yeah, I talked to your dad for a moment in there. He wants me to start you on commission with your sales. Said something about ‘lightin’ a fire of motivation under your ass.’ I, of course said that you should stay on the salary. Don’t know exactly how many people are gonna buy cars these days, with the economy

an' all," he grinned his dumb-looking smile. It looked plastic, clown-like, and like the smile cartoon villains made, making Tony think Uncle Dom was hiding something.

"Um, thanks."

"Good!" Uncle Dom patted Tony on the back twice, slowly. Tony knew Uncle Dom was trying too hard. Uncle Dom then stood up and walked around the room, looking at the posters and pictures on the walls. "So, how's Big Tony been doin'?" he asked.

"Alright, I guess. He doesn't say much."

Uncle Dom nodded and grinned again, "Ah, gotcha." He strolled over to the door. "Well, I better get goin'. Got lots to do an' all." He closed the door on the way out.

Supper was quiet and separate as usual. Big Tony ate in front of the TV, Millie ate at the kitchen table and Tony ate wherever. This night, he decided on the front porch. he was joined by his mother. The food tonight, grilled chicken and beans, was KFC takeout. Apparently, Millie had a long day at the office and did not feel like cooking. She also had decided to join Tony on the porch. It was odd, but he didn't say anything. The two ate in silence. Tony leaned down to grab his book to read when his mom broke the silence. "How was your afternoon off?"

"Good."

"What'd ya do?"

"Read and napped some."

"That's nice." She tapped the arm of the rocking chair for a few seconds before she started again. "I think you're bein' too critical of your uncle lately."

“Why would you think that?” Tony never looked up from the page.

“Well, you were askin’ why and all. He was just bein’ nice. He thought you---“

“Yeah, he told me he thought I looked tired.”

“Ah, he did come by after all. I’m glad. I told him that might be a good idea.”

“There’s more, I’m sure.” Tony could always tell when his mom wanted to say something else.

“Well, lately, you seem like you think he’s up to something.”

“Mom,” Tony looked up and stared her down, “what do you expect me to think? All of a sudden, Dad’s dying, and he’s happy all the time. You know as well as I do that Uncle Dom is jealous of Dad, so maybe he’s glad that he’s dying.”

Millie scoffed a little, “I doubt that.”

“I don’t. With Dad passing on, he gets all he wants—he gets the dealership and gets to run it his way. He *thinks* I’ll turn to him in grief, which gets him the child he always wanted. He’ll come after you next, first slowly, wrapping you around his finger—“

“Anthony James Marino, you are out of line.” Her face reddened, her teeth clenched, but she stayed sitting. “You know better than to speak like that.”

He sighed and looked back down at his book. “Sorry, Mom, but I don’t trust him.”

Millie cleared her throat slightly and took a loud deep breath. She stood up and stated, “You should give Dom a chance. Do it for me.” She walked back through the house.

Tony would have liked to say he was shocked, but he wasn't, not fully. His mom never asked for anyone to do anything for her. But now, she had, for Uncle Dom's sake. Tony knew it: his mom was sleeping with his uncle, or at least had a relationship with him. It sickened him. The thought of them. Together. He didn't want to even go there. But he couldn't stop seeing it in his mind—his mother, leaning in to kiss his uncle while he was smiling that smug grin. He wondered if his dad knew.

Tony then stopped and realized what the implications of this new development meant. Uncle Dom had always wanted three things: the dealership, Millie and the affection from a child. Now that he had the first two, he would be focusing completely on winning Tony. Big Tony would soon figure out something was up if he hadn't already. He wanted three things in his life as well: the dealership, Millie and a dutiful son. Since he would have lost the first two, all his efforts would go into making the third wish true. Tony knew that from this moment on, he would be pulled by the two sides. Any chance of being his own self was slowly dying. His future seemed inevitable, unless he did something, unless he took this chance.

First, Tony wanted to tell his dad what was going on. Tony went into the living room, and Big Tony was in the same spot Tony had left him hours before. "Dad, can I talk to you?" His dad grunted, his signal for Tony to make it short. "Well, about Mom. Um," he paused to make sure Millie was still away in one of the back rooms. "Dad, I think that Mom and Uncle Dom, well I think that, possibly, they're sleeping together."

Big Tony's eyes said all that Tony needed to hear, but his dad still made a slight vocal response. He sighed and looked down, in a move wholly uncharacteristic of Big Tony. It was the look of defeat, and Tony was surprised to see it on his dad's face. That face though told Tony

everything. Big Tony then put his hand over Tony's arm and said, "Your momma, I noticed how she was actin' different. I asked Dom about it one night, and the bastard spilled the beans, though it was more like poured them out. He wanted me to know. He likes that he's winning. For once."

Tony could not take hearing anymore. "I'm going to take a walk." He turned to the door.

"Don't say anything to Millie," Big Tony said, regaining his usually tough demeanor. "I mean that, son."

Tony nodded in compliance before heading out the door.

As he strolled underneath the dark night sky, Tony was angry. He knew that Uncle Dom was annoying, but had he really shoved his affair in his dying brother's face? And what was Tony to do? He couldn't confront his mother about it, so that left Uncle Dom. Tony ran to Uncle Dom's house, only a few minutes down the road. He ran to let off anger. Tony was not typically a violent guy, but this made him furious. His Uncle Dom was not only taking advantage of his father's condition, but even shoving it into Big Tony's face. The feud between them had not been that bad ever. Or had it? Had Uncle Dom been simmering all this time, lying in wait for his moment to coil and strike?

Tony got to Uncle Dom's house but stopped outside, just staring at the lone light in the den. What was he thinking, coming here? He had no idea what he was going to do to his uncle, but he wanted to do *something*. He could not just sit there and wait for Uncle Dom to take everything from his dad while he died. But he didn't know what to do. He paced back and forth on the front lawn, trying to decide what to do. Should he confront his uncle? If he did, what would he say? What would he do?

He did not realize he was no longer alone until he heard Uncle Dom clearing his throat. Tony turned to look at his uncle, who had that grin that Tony hated so much. It was too much to handle right now. That grin to Tony was everything that he hated about Uncle Dom: the way he always seemed to be scheming, how he had betrayed his own brother, how he stole Millie...

Tony clenched back and punched Uncle Dom in the face, the way Big Tony had shown him long ago in an effort to make Tony more manly.

Uncle Dom crouched, his hand reaching up to where Tony had just hit. He chuckled a moment to himself. It was an Uncle Dom Tony had not seen before. Not the bumbling clod that was hiding his true intentions, but the conniving man that wanted to win, no matter what the price. "So, I'm guessin' the old man told you what I been doing with your momma. How I've been sneakin' behind curtains and—"

"I swear, I will hit you again." Tony was shaking. He did not want to have to punch Uncle Dom again; his hand already hurt enough

Uncle Dom put up in hand, half-surrendering, half-blocking. "Alright, alright. Got it." His hand fell. "So, what do you want from me? Wanted to just clock me one, for your dad?"

"No."

"So, what is it? I haven't got all night." Dom's sliminess was oozing out now.

Tony just decided to be as blunt as possible. "Well, I know you want the dealership."

"Yeah, and I pretty much got it now."

"Yes and no. You might be running it, but it's still in Dad's name. He's still alive."

“And?” Uncle Dom’s eye cocked up, his hands sliding into his pockets. He was enjoying this too much for Tony’s taste.

“If Dad still technically owns it, where do you think it’s going?”

Uncle Dom’s face blanched. He had been so worried about usurping his brother from the throne, he had forgotten the chain of command. But the color soon returned, and he grinned slowly. “Well, Tony, I believe we can strike a deal here. Sure, your daddy’s gonna leave you the place, but you don’t really want it, do you? You could get away, like you always wanted. Your mom told me once, you know. This is your chance.” Dom ran his hand over his head, slicking back his hair like every good used car salesman. “I would be willing to buy it off your hands, and you can go read, write, whatever you want. It’s your way out.”

Tony could not believe his mom had divulged so much to Uncle Dom, but then again, if wasn’t exactly a secret Tony didn’t like it here. The idea of having the money, to be able to go, pursue his dreams, Tony wasn’t expecting that. It was so tempting, the chance to run away. As he looked back at Dom, seriously considering the deal, he was stuck by the similarities of Dom to his father. And that settled his decision: he was not about to be manipulated by this man. He took a breath before speaking. “Some things are more important. But, I might allow you to stay and run the place, if you agreed to certain conditions.” Uncle Dom was greedy, and Tony was enticing him with something he had wanted for years.

“What are they?” Uncle Dom took the bait.

“You’ll become the manager of the lot. Running things the best way possible for business. Which, as we’ve seen with the success so far, mostly means Dad’s way. I’ll go off, go to school like I want.” Tony paused for emphasis of how serious he was.

“How’s that different from what I said?”

“The last condition. You’ll never sleep with my mom again.”

Uncle Dom plastered his fake smile on. “Sure, I think that’s fair. You’ll get to go off to school. And I’ll stay here. I promise not to touch your momma again.” He put up his fingers, the same way Boy Scouts did when they swore.

“Oh, you won’t if you want to keep you place at the dealership.”

“Well, I can’t control your momma.”

“That’s true, but if given the choice between you and me, we both know who she’d pick.”
Millie loved Tony more than she could ever love Uncle Dom.

Uncle Dom shook his head, still surprised at Tony’s gain of courage. “Where the hell is this all comin’ from, boy?”

Tony shrugged a little, “Dad’s dying. That leaves it to me.” He turned away, to enjoy a walk under the night sky.

As Tony strolled away, he hoped that his decisions pleased his father. That mattered to him most. He hoped that he had done the right thing, and that his mother would stop sleeping with Uncle Dom.

When he returned home, he saw Millie on the porch once again. He didn’t have to think; he knew she knew what was going on. He sat opposite from her, ready to interrogate.

“Care to explain yourself? Mom?” He spat out the last word with contempt.

She wrung her hands together. “I can’t expect you to really understand it all, but just know that you’re not the only one here wanting more.” Her eyes pleaded with every word.

“Dad’s dying, and you go sleep with his brother? How could you have done that?”

“Keep your voice down,” Millie looked through the window into the living room, “your father’s sleeping.”

“Like you care,” he scoffed

Her face scrunched and brows furrowed, “I do care.” Her harshness faded. “It’s why I couldn’t lie to him anymore. I confessed to your father earlier, after I had talked with you. I haven’t loved your father as a wife should in a long time.” She looked off into the distance, as if viewing the memories on a screen. “And Dom flattered me. I didn’t think about them being brothers. I didn’t really think. I just, I felt—”

“Stop, no more.” He didn’t want to hear about them together.

“Tony,” Millie reached and grabbed his hands, “please. Don’t hate me.”

He shook her hands off. “I’m not the one you should be worrying about.” Tony left his mother on the porch. As he walked past his father’s sleeping body, he couldn’t help but feel obligated to this man. Big Tony may have been stricter than most, but Tony realized that it could have been worse.

Big Tony passed on the next afternoon. Tony told him goodbye, and the man nodded before closing his eyes for the last time, giving silent permission for whatever his son chose to do. Tony gave the dealership to Dom, not wanting it nor any bribe money Dom offered. He did not want to become part of Dom’s way of life by taking money. Millie tried to get her son to

stay, but he adamantly refused multiple times, stating, “I just can’t.” He could not look around seeing his father everywhere, wondering if there was anything else he could have done.

As he drove away from Sperry for the last time, Tony looked back in the window. Some might have said he was running away, but he saw it as avenging his father’s good name. He exited town limits, not knowing where he was going, but knowing that the ghost he was leaving behind was not worth his sanity.

“Adventures”

Adam still asks ‘bout Billy. I’m su’prised he ‘members, since it was ‘bout a year ago. I tell ‘im that Billy had to go on back. Adam says, “Buh, Fwanny, wha ‘bout us livin’ wit ‘im?” I smile at ‘im with tears a’comin’, “We can’t, Adam.” He asks why more but he wouldn’t understand why I didn’t and why we had to stay. I’m kinda glad he don’t.

I guess it might help to tell what happened. First off, Adam was born. Mama didn’t want people to know she was pregnant again outta wedlock. First one was me, back 13 years before. Mama was embarrassed, so she just pretended she wasn’t pregnant, ‘cept for eatin’ more. Our daddies weren’t ‘round, so I guess Mama never tol’ ‘em, or they ran off when she did.

Then Mama started gettin’ pains, after she’d been pregnant a while. It wasn’t in her stomach tho’; she felt pains in her heart. We don’t have a phone, so I had’ta run to the nearest house that did after she fainted to call the doctor. By the time he got there, Mama had died. If I had called him just a lil’ bit sooner, maybe things would be diff’rent and maybe Mama would still be alive and Adam wouldn’t be the way he is. The doctor went ahead and got Adam out tho’. I got to name him, which I liked, and I named him Adam. The doctor tol’ me, “Franny, he’s not gonna be smart. Since your Mama died, he wasn’t getting enough air. But we’ll have to see how it turns out. It’ll be hard all the same.”

He was right, and Adam turned out slow. It was hard, taking care’a Adam and workin’ cleanin’ houses ‘round there in the country. All the families were nice, lettin’ me bring Adam with me to jobs and stuff, lettin’ me have leftovers if I cooked. Sumtimes, ladies from the local church would bring me food after their potlucks on Sunday. If we’da lived in the city, they’da

brought me and Adam to the orph-nidge. But in the country, they figured they could help us better than any orph-nidge. The cops overlooked the fact we had no Mama or Daddy. If anyone came snoopin', sumone would say that they were takin' care'a us. People stick together out here, 'specially after the banks lost all their money 'bout 10 years back, and since it got too dry to farm here. I think it made 'em feel better to help us, but it just made me feel useless.

Adam bein' slow didn't help anything. He wasn't walkin' and talkin' and babblin' like other babies, so I tol' the doctor that. He tol' me that I just had'ta be patient with him. He wasn't gonna be able to do everything right away, but he was gonna be able to do what he needed to. And the doctor was right. Adam started talkin' fine'ly when he was 'bout two years and two months ol'. There'd been a big storm the night 'fore, and Adam had been scared and cryin'. I 'member bein' so tired and hearin' sum'thin'. I thought it mighta been sum'thin' outside. But then I looked over in his bed. Adam was pointin' to the window an' sayin', "Light! Light!" I think I started cryin' but I was so proud o' 'im. It was 'bout three months after that that he was walkin'. I had takin' way his fav'rite toy, so he got up to try an' get it back.

But that was a while ago. Now, Adam's older than I was when he was born. It's weird to think 'bout it. He does some schoolin', but it's all thru' the ladies I clean house for. He learned to read thataway. He can read okay. Not good for a normal 17-year-old, but good for him. He likes readin' out loud, tellin' me 'bout them Hardy Boys. I just listen to him readin', slowly but surely, answerin' questions when he asks. It takes him a few weeks to get thru' the book, then he'll start it again. I think he's startin' to understand what he's readin', 'cause he's been askin' less and less questions. Once, he told me, "Fwanny, you Frank, I be Joe. We gonna go on 'ventures,!" I smiled and nodded. But I knew that we'd never leave Doone's Creek. I had to stay, to make up for killin' Mama an' Adam bein' slow, which meant that we'd be here 'til we died.

A while back, it was my day to go clean Mrs. Klein's house. I like her, 'cause she keeps to herself. Some of the other ladies ask me how I'm doin', if I need any help, all like I got a bad leg or sum'thin'. I know it's 'cause of Adam, but it still gets under my skin. I just wanna do my work, 'cause it gives me less time to think on other things. Mrs. Klein though, she's real nice. She lets us in, shows Adam to the nurs'ry and walks on over to her sewin' corner. The nurs'ry was the only room in the house with no fancy things for Adam to break, so that's where he goes. She barely says a word, unless Adam comes and asks her sum'thin'.

I was sweepin' the front porch when I see far'way a big dust cloud comin' up the road. Those cars do that out here in the country. As it gets closer, I stop sweepin'. No point, since that car's gonna hit up all that dirt onto the porch again. It fine'ly got up to the house and stopped, but I still had to wait for all that dust to settle.

A man got outta the driver's side, and I won't lie: he looked mighty fine. His hair was the color of the sandy dirt, a color that make me think of home, his eyes the color of choc'late. With a cap on, and a nice lookin' white shirt and light brown pants and suspenders, I thought two things: one—he couldn't have been from here; two—who was he?

Mrs. Klein opened the door behind me, smilin' from ear to ear. "Billy!" She ran down the stairs and wrapped her arms 'round him. "Oh, Billy, what are you doin' here?"

Billy smirked like a lil' kid who'd done sum'thin' bad. "Do I have to have a reason to come up and visit my Aunt Nell?" He hugged her back tightly, but the whol' time he was lookin' at me. He fine'ly called out with frien'ly grin, "And who might you be?"

Mrs. Klein answer'd for me. "Oh, that's Frances. She lives down the road there. Frances, this is my nephew Billy. He lives up in Oklahoma City."

He tipped his hat towards me as he said, “How’d you do, Franny?”

I nodded back at him but went back to sweepin’.

Mrs. Klein was too taken up with Billy’s arrival to notice my not answerin’ back, so she swept her arm underneath Billy’s and half-walked, half-drag him up into the house, talkin’ his ear off the whole way.

It was a good minute after they went inside ‘til I thought about Adam. Worried that he might interrupt Mrs. Klein talkin’ to Billy, I went in and checked on him in the nursery. He was nappin’, curled up on the floor with a tiny baby blanket slung over his big ol’ body. His brown messy hair that was much darker than mine covered his face up sum’. It was these times, when he was sleepin’ that I forgot how he tried my patience and remembered only the good stuff.

I jumped a lil’ as I heard from behind, “So, who’s that?” I turned ‘round to see Billy there, lookin’ down on Adam with his face scrunched.

“That’s Adam, my lil’ brother. I take care’a him, so he comes with me when I clean.” I felt no need to share more than that.

“Why ain’t he in school? He’s like, what, 16?”

“17, and he don’t belong in school.”

“Why not?”

Mrs. Klein came up from behind and answer’d Billy, “ ‘Cause Adam’s a lil’ slow, and Frances thinks it’s best he’s with her.” She look’d kinda mad, but it was at Billy rath’r than at

me. “Billy, I walk away from the parlor for a moment, and you’re already nosing around here, bothering Frances.”

“It’s fine, Mrs. Klein.” It was weird; I wanted to stand up for Billy, even tho’ he was bein’ nosy. I stood up for Adam all the time, but I’d never wanted to do it for anyone else. This Billy was weird. I thought that he was bein’ nosy, but part of me wanted to tell ‘im all ‘bout me.

Just then, Adam started to stir. “Fwanny? Time ta go home?” he mumbl’d all sleepy, his hands rubbin’ his dark brown eyes, just like mine. Just like Mama’s.

“Not yet, Adam.”

“Actually, Frances, I have no more work for you today. You and Adam can go if you’d like, since I have company today.”

I lowered my head and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Klein,” before going to Adam. I grabbed the blanket, foldin’ it and puttin’ it to the side.

Adam got himself up and started walkin’ towards the nursery door before exclaimin’, “Fwanny, gwab book!” I looked around, seein’ it near a pile of toys. I picked it up before grabbin’ Adam’s hand to leave.

As we ‘re leavin’, Billy said, “What are you reading, Adam?”

Adam smiled big, “Har-dee Boys. They my fav’wite. I like they ‘ventures and stuff. I wish I had a bwodder like dat. Not dat I don’t like Fwanny. She take care’a me good.” Adam grinned at me even bigger. I couldn’t help but smile back when he did that.

“Where’s your mother?” Billy asked. I froze up. I didn’t like people askin’ ‘bout Mama. I had avoided the subject the best I could with Adam, but people like this Billy were real nosy. I hoped that Adam wouldn’t start askin’ questions. I didn’t like talkin’ ‘bout Mama.

“Don’t got one. Just Fwanny an’ me,” Adam replied as if a boy without a mama was perfectly normal.

“What happened to her?”

“Billy! Stop intruding on Frances and Adam’s business, it’s rude,” Mrs. Klein yelled.

Adam and I fine’ly got out the house and started walkin’ down the dirt road. Billy called after us, “Need a ride?”

“Nope, we’re fine,” I hollered back.

“In a wheal car?” Adam stopped and started jumpin’ up and down. “Fwanny? Can we let that man drive us home? Pease? Pease?”

I could hear Billy laughin’ in the background, but I didn’t know why. I think seein’ a grown boy beggin’ for sum’thing like a lil’ kid coulda been funny to’em. I also knew that if I said no, Adam would start cryin’ and hollerin’ like a toddler, and I didn’t wanna deal with that today. I gave in, “Oh, alright, I s’pose.”

Adam cried out in excitement before runnin’ towards the car. Billy opened the door, and Adam scooted to the middle of the seat. I got in, and Billy closed the door behind me. He called out, “I’ll be back soon, Aunt Nell,” before walking around his door and gettin’ in. He cranked up the car, and we were on our way down the dirt road. “So, which house is yours?” Billy asked.

“It got wooden sides!” Adam answered, remembering how I described our house to him when he was younger.

“Once you get up the end up here, right after the curve, there’s a side road. You follow that, and it’ll led you there,” I added.

“Easy enough,” Billy replied. “So, Franny, you clean houses? What else do you do?”

“Take care’a me,” Adam said.

“He’s right. All I do is clean the houses ‘round here, and watch over Adam. Sum’times I cook for those houses, but that’s ‘bout all I have time for.”

“But how do they pay you?” Billy seemed really int’rested.

“Well, they mos’ly pay me by feeding us an’all. A lot of’em give me ol’ dresses and curtains and stuff for our clothes. Sometimes I get money, but it’s rare, since I don’t have time to go into town, ‘cause my only day off is Sunday, and I’d just rather rest. It’s easier thataway.”

“Hm. That’s smart,” Billy poked out his bottom lip and nodded.

The rest of the way nobody talked. Pretty soon, we were at the house. Billy stopped the car. I started to open my door, and Billy said, “No, wait! I’ll do that for you.” He ran ‘round the car to open the door. Adam and me scooted out the car, and Adam ran on into the house. I started to follow after him. “Franny,” Billy said in a deep, serious voice. I liked the way he said it.

“Yeah?”

“Franny, can I get to know you better?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you’re interesting, and I want to learn more about you.”

“Billy,” I sighed, not knowin’ where to start since I’d never had to do this before, “Billy, you’re nice an’ all, but I don’t think that’s best. I mean, I’ve got Adam to worry over, and I’m too old for all that nonsense. Go find a nice girl more your age.”

“Franny, how old do you think I am?”

“I don’t know...21, 22?”

“I’m 25. I’m old enough to know what I want, and that’s the chance to get to know you better.”

“Well, even if you are, I still got Adam...”

“Look, Franny, I’m not asking you to run away with me. I just want to go on one date. Will you go on just one date with me?”

And that’s how I started seeing Billy Klein. He took me out to a restaurant in town while Mrs. Klein stayed with Adam at our house. We talked for a while. After the beginning, it got easier to talk to ‘im. He asked ‘bout Adam, why was he slow, ‘bout how it was raisin’ him on my own. He tried to approach the subject of Mama again, but I figured that was a good time to ask him about himself. Like Mrs. Klein said, he was from Oklahoma City, and he told me he worked in bankin’. The bank he worked for was lookin’ to start up sum’thing here in Doone’s Creek, so he had come since he was the one with relatives here. He was stayin’ with Mrs. Klein for the time bein’, sum’times goin’ back to the city for a few days. When he brought me back, he told

me that he wanted to take me out again. I reminded him that he only asked for one date, but that I'd think 'bout it. I decided goin' on dates with the boy wouldn't hurt anythin'.

Since Oklahoma City wasn't that far, he took me to my first pitcher show one night. He took me to see *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, which I liked. He also bought Adam a book 'bout Robin Hood, but it was kinda big. It did have pitchers tho', so that was sum'thing. Adam would read it out loud, and he'd ask me questions, more than he did for the Hardy Boys. But I answered him all the same, explaining that Robin Hood wanted to help out the poor people. Once, Adam replied, "Like Billy?", and I just nodded, kinda hoping that being poor wasn't the only reason he was seein' me.

But me and Billy didn't go out all the time. Sum'times, he just came over to eat with me and Adam. It was nice, but Adam didn't always like it. He wasn't used to anyone else 'round, so he started hollerin' and cryin' a couple o'times. Billy just walked out to the porch when he did that, 'til Adam calmed down. I liked that he didn't try and help, 'cause I know how to deal with Adam best.

One of those nights that Billy came over, I put Adam to bed by readin' him a bit of Robin Hood. Adam fell 'sleep soon after. I got up to leave Adam when I saw Billy in the doorway. After we got far 'nuff away to not wake Adam up, I went, "I told you to wait out in the front."

"I heard you reading to Adam. I had to come listen. Your voice was soothing." He smiled at me, and I felt my cheeks turnin' red.

"You don't have to say stuff like that."

“It’s true. I like that even though you’re this hard-working person, you still have this gentle side, if someone digs deep enough to see it.” He then grabbed my chin held it as he gently kissed me. That was the moment I think I fell for him. That night, I sat with him on the porch and told him all about Mama, ‘cept how she died. I didn’t know if he’d ever be ready for that story.

It had been a few months since we started seein’ each other when my birthday came ‘round in mid-September. Billy had taken me out again in town, but this time he asked me to walk ‘round town with him for a lil’ bit.

“So, you know that I’m leaving Doone’s Creek next week,” he said as he grabbed my hand. It was warm, and I squeezed it a lil’. He squeezed back. “Well, Franny, I’ve been thinking about it, and I’ve been looking around the city for a nanny.”

“What for?”

“To take care of Adam. I want you and him to come live with me.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. “Billy...you know mine and Adam’s place is here.” I kinda had expected this, but I still had been hopin’ that he’d say goodbye and leave. That’ve been easier.

He turned to me, and I could see he wasn’t askin’ me anymore, he was beggin’. “Franny, you’ve had it hard. But you and Adam deserve better.”

My jaw got real hard, ‘cause I knew he was right, but it still sounded like he was puttin’ down what I’d done so far. “I’m not some charity case.”

He sounded kinda mad after I said that. “I have never seen you as that, Franny. You know that.”

“Still, we don’t need your help. We get along just fine. It’s not broken, why fix it?” I dropped his hand.

Billy sighed, “That’s not what I meant. I want to be there if you need me. I love you, Franny.”

I started to tear up a lil’, but I wiped them away. I had been afraid that he’d fallen in love with me. I fallen in love with Billy as well, but that wasn’t for me. “Billy...I’m sorry.” It wasn’t what I wanted to say, but I did anyway.

I thought he was gonna get sad and just let it drop, but he kep’ on. “I’m not sorry about it. And it’s fine if you’re not ready to say it back. I just want to see a smile, get a ‘Thank you’, something.”

“But I can’t,” I said sof’ly, my throat chokin’ a lil’ bit, “I don’t deserve to be happy.”

“Why not?” he’d gotten madder now, and I didn’t feel like talkin’ ‘bout it.

“Just take me home, Billy. Take me home.”

“I will if you answer my question.” Billy stopped me, put his hands on my shoulders and looked me straight in the eye. “Why don’t you think you deserve to be happy?”

Lookin’ at those eyes, I couldn’t lie. “Because it’s all my fault that Mama died, that Adam’s slow, and I gotta pay for that for the rest of my life,” I cried.

Billy pulled me into his arms until I stopped crying. We didn’t talk the whole way back to his car or when we rode home. When he got to the house, he walked in, got Mrs. Klein and gave me a kiss on the forehead before leaving. I could tell she wanted to know why my face was all

red, but her being a quiet lady, she knew not to ask. Adam had seen it too, but he didn't know better. He looked down on me sitting on the tatter'd couch and asked, "Fwanny, why you sad?"

"It's nothin', Adam, just go on to bed." I looked away from him, 'cause I knew more tears would start fallin' if I didn't.

Adam sat down beside me and hugged me. "It's okay. I stay here." It only made me cry harder. We sat there 'til I heard Adam snorin' on my shoulder. I led him to bed, and then went myself.

Layin' in bed that night, I thought about Billy's offer. Could we really get up and move to Oklahoma City? How would Billy take it? Would he be made fun of? I really started to think it could work, but then I realized the main problem was Billy. Pretty soon, comparin' me to those city girls, he'd realize that I wasn't worth it. Where would Adam an' me be then? On the street. And those coppers wouldn't be so understandin'. They'd throw Billy into a home or sum'thing. And then I'd never be able to make up for what I done. I knew that it wasn't gonna be easy, but it was best: we had to stay here.

The next Sunday, my one day off, I was sittin' lis'nin to the radio when I heard that car drivin' up the road. Billy apparently wasn't done tryin' to convince me yet. Adam came runnin' into the livin' room, smilin'. "Billy's here!" he said, like I hadn't heard the car. I walked outside with Adam followin' behind.

Billy slammed his car door and walk to the end of the steps, lookin' like he had a purpose. It was kinda cute, the way he was tryin' to look all strong and manly. "Franny, I want you to hear me out."

I called back, “Okay,” an’ nodded for him to go on.

“I know that Doone’s Creek is all you’ve known. I know that the idea of living in a city could be scary. So, I talked to my managers, and they said, if I want it, I can run the bank branch here in Doone’s. I love you, Franny, and I want to be with you. I don’t care where.”

As he stopped to take a breath, Adam whispered in my ear, “He Wobin Hood, Fwanny, ‘member? You Maid Mawian!”

Billy started again, “Franny, I know you don’t feel like you deserve happiness. And I know why you think.” Billy came up the stairs and grabbed my hands, holdin’ ‘em tight. “But, you should know, it’s not your fault. You don’t have to live a hard life because you have to make up for something. It was all an accident. It wasn’t your fault.”

For that moment, I thought we might have a chance. Maybe we could be together if we stayed in Doone’s. But outta the corner of my eye, I could see Adam, waitin’ to see what I’d say. And I thought about how sum’times with him, I wished Adam was normal. But then I’d get over it, ‘cause I knew I still had’ta deal with it. And after that, I knew what I was gonna say.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said, lettin’ go of his hands. “It was, and I don’t deserve you. So, I think it’s best you just go on back to Oklahoma City.” I turned and went into my room, before either of ‘em saw me cryin’.

Someday, I need to forgive myself. But I think that’s impossible, and that’s why it’s gonna be me and Adam, up ‘til the end. It’s gotta be.

Mrs. Klein tells me that Billy's doin' alright, but I don't ask exactly how. I don't wanna know just what I'm missin'. I just keep on cleanin', lis'nin to Adam read aloud about Robin Hood and Maid Marian. Adventures that weren't meant for me.