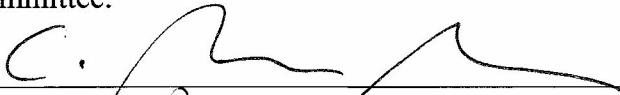


COYOTES DROWNING IN THE TREES

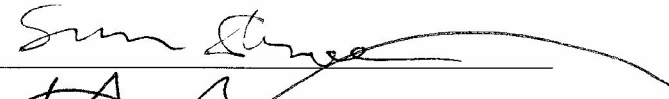
by

Benjamin Tyler page
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing


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Date: April 30, 2014
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Fairfax, VA

Coyotes Drowning in the Trees

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts
University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2010

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ABSTRACT

COYOTES DROWNING IN THE TREES

Benjamin Page, MFA

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Dr. William Miller

These stories follow two related, but separate arcs taking place in the early days of the twentieth century. The first set concerns Annie Edson Taylor, a 60-year-old woman who was the first person to survive going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. These stories explore what drove her to do this, a quest for fame and a kind of immortality. The second set follows Annie's manager, Tussy, who steals the barrel to make money for himself. He has his own issues with masculinity and struggles with the idea of a changing gender landscape at this time in America, one that forces him to take a backseat to a female daredevil.

IN WHICH ANNIE IMAGINES HERSELF LOST

Drawn onto her porch by times like these, Annie stands with her arms close to her chest. A September evening, the air is just beginning to chill. She coughs, a reaction to the cigar smoke filling her kitchen, where oil lamps burn just through the window. The poker game has gone into the night, Brenda losing the money she brought and Gladys drinking too much. Over a light breeze, Annie can hear the laughter, and all she can think is how unburdened these women sound, how typical they're behaving, given the day's news, given that it could have been any of them. Their friend, their fifth on nights when Edna wasn't available, found after a brutal and barren three days in her own backyard.

Her neighbor – an exhausted and overworked pharmacist – had discovered the body when he noticed a large number of vermin coming from the deceased's backyard. Following a raccoon around the fence, he found the body lying face down in the grass, her legs and arms covered by the fallen leaves.

“She never did like raking,” Gladys had joked before lying down a pair of jacks.

“She always was cheap,” Brenda had said. “It's what she gets for refusing to pay that plumber's boy to take care of her yard.”

Even Edna. Sweet, good-natured Edna, had taken a certain thrill in venturing that their friend's death had, in fact, been murder.

“Where better to hide a body than plain sight?”

“Ah, but she had no exterior wounds.”

“Poisoned by the pharmacist then!”

This had caused more laughter.

The deceased was old, had been, and lived alone, having long survived her husband and never bearing any children. What was she to expect? It was a situation many of the women were in themselves, and one they'd grown to accept, and to them, laughter seemed better than fear. The deceased's death was the first in a series of jokes that would last the rest of their lives.

But for Annie, all she could see was the image of a woman she had known, kneeling on her lawn, choking and confused without so much as a dog for company. Of course it could have been any of them lying there, and standing on her porch now, Annie takes survey of her own yard. The curve of flower beds wrapping around the stoop where too much dirt can be seen beneath the pine straw. The rows of sasanqua bushes that line the outside edges of the grass, planted to hide a vast view of wild and uncut plains. A miniscule front yard, but the side yard stretches outward, and at its center, a great oak tree, larger than any in town. Annie could die in any of these places, she thinks. Keel over silently in the nighttime with only a hope that some stranger might find her in the morning.

More laughter through the window. Annie hears her name being called, sees Gladys chomping on her cigar despite her bad teeth.

Hoof beats sound up the street, out of sight. A policeman making rounds. Someone. What if the deceased was murdered, Annie thinks. That would lend her some

credibility, that she should be so important, and at least then she wouldn't have died alone. Is Annie, herself, being insensitive now, she wonders. Still, she listens for the sound of the horse and glances up the street, past houses, past the bank, past the post office, waiting for a glimpse of the rider. For the deceased's sake, maybe it will be an outlaw, a vagrant, but when at last he appears around the corner of the general store two blocks away, Annie recognizes the sheriff. Even from this distance, he sees her too, two night owls, and throws up his hand before ambling away into the dark. Watching that man who is no stranger at all, Annie realizes her own funny concern. That in these, her later years, she should be afraid not of death, its mere existence, but that it should catch her too easily, half-asleep and with nothing better to do.

"Annie! Annie!" she hears from the kitchen. She takes her last look at her lawn, at the tree, and goes back inside.

"Had to get some fresh air," she says, swatting away the cigar smoke as she closes the door. "Coffee?"

"We were just saying," Gladys says. "This should probably be the last hand, late as it is."

"If I have coffee now I'll be up all night," Brenda says, smiling a bit unnaturally.

Taking her seat, Annie thinks they all seem unlike themselves. The table is quiet, and when speech does occur, it's gentle and feels cushioned. They've been talking about her.

"My deal?" Annie asks, and though Gladys already shuffles, Annie takes the deck. "What did I miss?"

“I was just saying how I’m taking Tom to the carnival tomorrow,” Edna says.

“Fair,” Gladys corrects. “Traveling fair.”

The mention of Tom, Edna’s redheaded grandson, strikes a bad chord with the group. His existence is a reminder that Edna stands apart, that she has, in her lifetime, continued her lineage. She has offspring to bury her.

“It’s in town for the weekend,” Edna says.

“Sounds like an awful place to take a child,” Gladys says, fanning her cards. “A bunch of drunks.” She hiccups.

Edna blushes and antes.

“I think it sounds like a fine time.” Annie glares at Gladys, who notices but pretends not to. “How is Tom?”

“Such a smart boy,” Edna smiles. “You should see the things he reads.”

“I don’t even read anymore,” Brenda says.

“He loves those adventure stories. Handsome men fighting through the jungle.”

“Maybe I should start reading after all.” Brenda looks for a laugh, but Gladys frowns, discards two.

“The Jungle Book?” Annie asks.

“Stuff like that, I suppose.” Edna sets down her cards. “He’s very excited about the carnival.”

“Fair,” Gladys says.

“Would you put that thing out,” Annie waves smoke away from her face. “My poor kitchen.”

“I’m winning!” Gladys shouts.

“You’ll leave without a dime if you don’t put that thing out.”

“Fold,” Brenda says.

“Fold,” Edna says.

“I should probably fold,” Annie says, and when Gladys raises her, Annie wins with three kings.

“One more round,” Gladys says, taking the cards from Annie.

Annie turns to Edna. “What’s he looking forward to?”

“The freaks probably,” Gladys interrupts. “Isn’t that what draws people to those things?”

Edna smiles. “I think he has his heart set on seeing some cowboys. I don’t even know if that’s a thing they’re going to have. Is it?”

“Oh I’m sure they will.”

“My brother was a cowboy,” Brenda says, discarding.

“Your brother was a postman.”

“He rode a horse.”

“Fold.”

“Stay.”

“How much longer is it in town?” Annie asks.

“Last weekend,” Gladys responds. “Thank God.”

“Annie, you should come,” Edna says, going to the sink to get herself some water.

“I’ll be across the street picking Tom up anyway. And he loves you.”

“Sweet boy,” Annie says. “Raise.”

Gladys throws in her chips. “I think Annie may be too much in mourning to go to a fair.” She keeps her eyes down and doesn’t look at anyone, least of all Annie.

Yes, Annie realizes, they had been talking about her. None of *them* had to stand alone outside for moment. None of them needed space to think, and they don’t understand this. “Raise,” she says. “Put out that cigar, Gladys.”

“Raise,” Gladys says, throwing in more chips.

“I’d love to go to the carnival,” Annie tells Edna. “Raise.”

“Good!” Edna says. “Tom will be so glad.”

“Call.” Gladys throws down her cards. Two aces and a pair of fives.

Annie bites her lip, thinks, as if there are any strategies left open to her, and then lies down her hand. A pair of nines.

Gladys grins between puffs as she rakes up her money, the largest haul of the night.

“Well, at least it was fair,” Annie says, standing and collecting dishes. “Or would you call it carnival?” She jerks the cigar from Gladys’s mouth and stubs it out on her kitchen counter, leaving a star-shaped soot stain on the wood that could never possibly be removed.

The next morning feels warmer than previous ones have been. Annie drinks her coffee outside, making slow laps around the oak tree, one to a sip. She practices her steeping routines, pausing at certain roots to bend a knee or place her toes on pointe, her

dress holding stiff and close to the ankle. With each circle, she squints as the sun shines from the east, inching around the trunk. She hears laughter from the fair, faint but present, drifting from the out-of-season potato field out beyond town. With the coffee lowered, she can smell the green of her plants, made fragrant by autumn and Annie's awareness that if she were to be found dead on her lawn, she would like it to be on a morning like this.

Each time a lap turns her south, Annie peers up at the sheriff's home across the street, where Edna will be picking up Tom any minute. When at last the pair appears in the sheriff's doorway, waving goodbye to Tom's mother, Annie rushes over to her porch. She sets her coffee mug on a wicker table and picks up a cowboy hat she left sitting in a rocking chair. A faded white passed down from her grandfather, she places the hat on her head – a size too big – and waves to Tom as they cross the street.

“Look,” Edna says, pointing. “She's a cowboy.”

Tom smiles, though he tries not to. Just barely ten years old, he thinks his grandmother has a tendency to baby him, to talk to him as if he wouldn't recognize a cowboy by the hat.

“Annie Oakley, actually,” Annie says. “Stick 'em up.”

Tom makes a gun out of his hand and fires from the hip.

Annie has lived across from the Jepsens for as long as she's lived in Bay City. She's watched Tom grow up, has seen him go through several sizes of shoes, and has nothing but fond feelings for the boy. On weekends and evenings, when the children gather to climb the oak tree in her yard, Annie keeps an extra watchful eye on Tom

through her kitchen window over the sink. A small boy, she has seen him treated with less respect than she would like.

“Do you think she’ll be there?” Tom asks. “Have you heard any shots?”

“Who knows what will be there.” Annie smiles to Edna. “Gladys get home okay?”

Edna rolls her eyes. “A rich, old woman stumbling home in the dark? Who would think to rob her?”

The whole walk through town, Tom remains mostly quiet. Both ladies ask him questions. What he’s learning, if he’s enjoying the baseball games his father has arranged, what he plans on eating for the day. Each time he responds quickly, mutedly. He hasn’t yet learned that conversation is a thing to be continued, not ended. Still, certain questions animate him enough.

“He loves bugs,” Edna says, looking for tent-tops peeking over the houses.

“Where he picked up that up I’ll never know.”

“That so?” Annie asks, peering down. The brim of her hat keeps the sun from her face.

“I’ve got a trail of ants in my room. I keep an eye on them.”

“A filthy state, that home,” Edna shakes her head.

“What do they do?” Annie asks.

“They come from my window. I know that much. They slip in underneath and then the trail goes down the wall, under my dresser, and they just all follow each other, all of them, straight toward my door.”

“Going for the kitchen,” Edna says to Annie. “I’ve told your mother to be more careful. Slings batter out of the bowl like she does.” Then to Annie again, “*Her* mother was a millworker,” as if this explains everything.

“They’re not going to the kitchen,” Tom says.

“I’m sure they are,” Edna says. “Ant’s need food.

Tom gets quiet again, and because they still have to make it past the bank and down another city block and through the mud flats by the Saginaw River, Annie asks, “Where do they go?”

“Don’t know,” Tom shrugs. “I can’t figure it out.”

“Well you just follow them, Tom.”

“I can’t!” he cries. “I try. They go into this crack in the wall. I’ve looked all over the house, especially the kitchen, to find where they come out again, but I can’t.” He goes on to describe the places he’s looked. Every inch of his room, he swears, but also in the cracks of the fireplace stone, along the stairs where he’s felt the wood warp beneath his feet. Under the table in the hallway where his father keeps his boots. “They vanish. I don’t know why they even come inside in the first place.”

“You should leave food out somewhere,” Annie whispers beneath his hat, and Edna laughs and rolls her eyes.

“I have,” Tom whispers back.

“What kind?”

“Biscuit.”

“Tom,” Edna says flatly, though still authoritatively enough to make him go quiet again.

“I’m sure you’ll find them eventually,” Annie says.

Tom doesn’t say anything at first, but then, “All I know is that they’re going along perfectly normal, and then nobody knows what happens to them.” And then he shuts up. He doesn’t say another word, and the three walk in silence until they see the bright crowd and the tents set up in the dead field across the river.

They arrive with their feet covered in mud and clinging strips of grass as if they’ve traveled farther than a few blocks. A wooden sign advertises the Chicago Worlds Fair, even though that was years ago, two states away, and a far grander event. The sign shows a charcoal drawing Roman buildings along a water pool, where a Viking ship is docked. A Ferris wheel rises over everything and there are tiny, black dots arranged to show that the entire expo was lit by electric bulb. Beyond this sign, there are no lights, there are no machines. There is no Chicago. Rising instead, like forgotten crops from the raked-over rows, stand dusty canvas tents, carts set up as vendors, all connected by strings decorated with multicolored triangles. Popcorn cooks somewhere out of sight. They could smell it back in town, and now it blends with wafts of fried dough and far less pleasant odors. The livestock. The sweat of the pigs heard grunting beyond a vegetable stand. Most of the town is here, on foot or on horseback, but still the fair feels under-attended. The chosen field is too large and attractions are spread too far apart. People

laugh and smile, but at the same time appear lost, as if left looking for children whose hands they already hold.

Annie and Edna lead Tom, who seems overwhelmed. He walks much slower, but Annie watches his head turn quickly from tent to tent to stall. He lingers over the Midget Revue, a large tent hanging pictures of children with lit cigars in their mouths, but then moves on. He's looking for guns, and thinks he's nearly found his cowboys when there rings a series of pops, and upon walking closer, men standing in a line with rifles pressed to their shoulders. But taking a breath, the air is too fresh. There is no smoke, the pops ring too soft, and Tom sees they are only pellet guns, a game, not to be taken seriously. Annie watches the boy's face drop, relates all too well, and they drag him onward.

"What do they have here?" Annie asks. Her mouth tastes dry, and looking over at Edna, the woman looks worn. Sweat rolls down from under her hat. The walk has taken something out of her. "Maybe something where we can sit down," Annie suggests.

"We just got here," Tom whines.

Edna dabs at her forehead and turns graciously toward Annie. "Oh I'm fine."

Someone screams, a vendor selling Halloween masks, wooden ones to be worn with string. It startles Edna, who brings her hand to her chest.

"We just got here," Tom repeats, pulling on his grandmother's arm.

"Tom," Annie says softly, and it is enough.

"Such an old woman," Edna flushes. "Maybe for a minute."

Looking for anywhere to sit, they follow a gathering crowd into wooden stands built around two steel towers, rising impossibly high above the field.

The event begins late. Tom fidgets for half an hour. While Edna spends her time watching the young – a couple who sits three rows ahead with their heads on each other’s arms – Annie keeps looking up. Between the two towers stretches a wire, barely seen with the sun, and from the ground climbs a man, shirtless, bearded, up along the rungs. Annie wonders how old he is, how young one must be to hurl himself so absolutely away from the soil. He glows, the sun highlighting sweat as it flies from his arms. He has earned this sweat, to be sure, climbing so, but Annie can’t help think that much of it is a put on, part of the act, that maybe he was behind the scenes doing pushups in the grass before his big moment, and even still he sweats less than Edna. She sits beside Tom, and though she’s a good sport, turns her gaze to the show, Annie sees her panting and knows that she struggles.

Reaching the top, the man stands, lifts his arms, and begins doing stretches, what few the tiny platform allows.

“He won’t,” Tom says, mostly to himself, using his hand to block the sun from his eyes.

“He will,” Annie says, and while she knows that this is an organized event, that the man on the tower must have done this successfully dozens of times – at least never dying – a part of her still wants to see him fall. To try and plainly, publicly fail, as the young seem to rarely do. “He will,” she repeats, though she thinks of the deceased on her lawn, of Edna wheezing beside her.

The man kneels, his thighs balloon, and he takes a long pole balanced across the platform just short of the wire. He lifts it to his chest, steps toward the wire, and an

announcer shouts his name. “The Phenomenal Funambulist,” he says. “Ze Phenom Funam.” He points high as the man on the tower plants a heel on the first few inches – the surest part – of the wire.

“He will,” Tom says.

Annie looks at Tom. He sits transfixed, staring upward. Somehow, from the face of a boy who’s almost nothing but sour these days, Annie sees him smile. The prospects here, the number of drastically different outcomes, is something Tom has never experienced firsthand. It isn’t the possibility of death, nor the implausibility of survival, that he finds thrilling, but that wire. That something so slight will make all the difference, that something so paltry should have so much circumstance. It is, for him, the prospect of his own life as yet unlived.

Next to him, Edna, too, can’t look away. She sits with a look on her face that is less in awe than Tom’s, but nonetheless rapt. Her face shows more concern, her mouth agape, her eyes narrowed. She has a son, and the idea that he may have grown to treat himself so recklessly is shocking, but captivating. To her, this seems like a severe exaggeration of what’s possible in the world. But despite its danger, the high-wire act somehow seems hopeful. This man on the tower expresses wonder, that the world need not be as limited as we make it, and this is a worldview that Edna hasn’t felt for herself in many, many years.

Throughout the stands, Annie sees everyone equally immersed. Men, women, and children sit with their necks aching, eyes toward a violent sun, all to watch this man step heel to toe at too tall a height. Heel to toe, alone, heel to toe as a dancer, and Annie

begins to find her own reasons for being drawn. She watches the steps he takes, the way he balances his body according to the wire and the wind, and she realizes that this isn't just men throwing themselves from cliffs, but that there is a talent to this. As he makes his way, inch by inch across the wire, Annie never sees a head fall, never sees a face lose interest.

He approaches the middle of the span, where the wire has the most slack. His legs shake and he has to pause for a moment to keep his balance. The announcer asks for quiet, loudly at first, but then repeats the request in softening whispers. The walker lifts his right leg slowly, holds his thigh perpendicular to his body, and then abruptly returns his foot to the wire, realizing it is not yet safe to walk. He sways, then sees still from the ground, then attempts to move again. He stalls as the wire shakes, and all at once the crowd becomes completely soundless as the walker's balancing pole is abandoned, tossed and left to fall into the stands. The walker himself steadies his arms, trying to maintain balance, but he soon becomes frantic. His body leans, his arms rise and fall, and in an instant he loses his balance. He slips loose from the rope, jumps to avoid falling head first, and as the crowd remains hushed, he catches the wire in his hands, hanging above the earth like a cracked and wounded larva. The crowd claps, exhales, relieved, as the man high above wraps his ankles around the wire and makes his way, hand over hand, to the opposite tower. The crowd claps, whistles, and even though this man failed, Annie sees Tom clap too. Not because he's doing what's expected of him, not just to follow along with the rest, but out of genuine relief. Annie watches the boy suddenly breathe easy. The announcer shouts the man's name again, the Phenom Funam, and still the

crowd claps, impressed that, if nothing else, he is alive. Annie watches him crawl across the wire, can't help but think how pitiful he looks, how feeble and suddenly aged, and she begins to clap too.

Hour by hour over the following days, Annie finds herself studying rooftops, horses, thunder clouds, wondering if it would be possible to dramatize them, to incorporate them into her story. All are dismissed. Her talents, she admits, are limited. She is no scientist, no trick rider, and can think of no impressive thing to do with the roof of the Bay City Bank.

In class, surrounded by nine-year-old ballet dancers in homemade tutus, Annie instructs with a mind toward the bold. She wants *pliés* exorbitantly low to the ground. She wants *pointes* to be balanced on toe nails. By the end of the day, girls are crying and telling their mothers that Miss Taylor made their feet bleed.

While walking home one evening, Annie sees a line of crows perched on the awning of the bakery. The ovens long cooled, they wait for crumbs, but when Annie watches one take flight, she thinks, "wouldn't that be a spectacle?" With the sun at its back, the way the black of the feathers matches her dress, Annie thinks maybe she identified with that bird.

At home, considering the idea of human flight, she realizes it may not be within her means. Men have tried for centuries. Da Vinci with that spiraling contraption she's seen pictures of. Men strapped into winged harnesses built from canvas and wood. None

of these every worked out, as far as she knew, and she didn't expect she would fare any better.

She remembers something she read in the paper years ago, of a man leaping from one rock to another. Though she can't remember the details, she is sure there must have been a great drop or a great distance involved. But this has been done, and anyway her knees aren't so good anymore. Leaping may be far too active a stunt. From here, she recalls stories of tightrope walkers, men who strung thin bits of cable over great precipices. Funambulists. An Australian had done it across Sydney Harbor. He had a wild mustache, as Annie remembered, at least. An Englishman had gone across a river, she recalled. Someone had probably done it over the Grand Canyon already, she thought, and what more was there from that? And besides, again, her knees.

Above the fireplace rests her father's gun, an old Kentucky Rifle he had no sons to leave to. Miss Oakley has been making a name for herself, Annie knows, touring the country and shooting things. Glass spheres, cigarette ash, God knows what. Annie had shot that Kentucky Rifle once, when her father had taken her out rabbit hunting. Lying in the weeds, with a jackrabbit only yards away in the field, her father had let her take the shot. She took her time, was more careful than she'd ever been, but when the lead ball bounced off a rock instead of going through the target, her father went chasing after, shouting he only had so many, reused the ammo as often as he could, and Annie never shot the gun again.

As the fire dims, Annie throws on another log and sets her drink on the hearth, looking at the gun. She lifts it from the mounts, weighs it, wonders if it would knock her down. She looks down the sight, then empties her glass.

In the morning, Annie sets crockery against the oak tree in her side yard. Old plates, cups and bowls she doesn't use anymore. From her porch, looking down the barrel, they're a good twenty yards away, and beyond that, only wild. She squints, pulls the trigger, and misses. The ball fires off into the brush, somehow not hitting a thing. Annie bites her lip, sets the stock down, and goes to work reloading like her father taught her. She pours the powder, packs it down, resets the charge, and raises it against her shoulder. There isn't a sound on the block. Annie swats a fly away from face. She fires. Again the ball misses every dish, but manages to bury itself, immutably, into the bark of the tree. Annie waves away the smoke collecting over the porch and rubs her shoulder. It aches. She coughs from the smoke. Staring at her unbroken plates she thinks that somehow she missed her chance at this, that Annie Oakley was probably shooting steadily since she was a girl, not just the once.

"Miss Taylor!" the sheriff shouts from the street.

"I know, I know," Annie says, leaning her gun against the railing. She moves to the shade of her tree where she begins stacking bowls.

The sheriff smiles, holds his hand in his pocket. He pulls at the edges of a mustache he's recently grown. "Scaring everyone in town, Miss Taylor," he says. "What are you shooting for?"

“Just testing my fathers gun, sheriff. Thinking of selling it.” She sighs as she drops a cup in the snow, but tries to be polite. “Tell that boy of yours I said hello.”

The sheriff says he will and walks up the street as Annie takes her gun inside.

IN WHICH THE LAW IS BROUGHT TO TASK

Over the winter, huddled around a fire in Jimmy Decamp's backyard, the boys see a ghost. They all see it, beginning as a vague presence of fog that hovers over the ditch before taking form and taking flight across the field. Everyone agrees it was the ghost of a man, though no one agrees on the ghost's former occupation. Billy says it looked like a troubadour, swears he saw a stringed instrument slung around its back, but all of the other boys agree that Billy is only showing off because he has recently learned what "troubadour" means and has been itching to put it to use. Paul thinks it was a lion tamer, but this is also dismissed on account of there not being any lion. Jimmy thinks the form looked like a stock broker, which is what his father does for a living. This receives mostly laughs, but Jimmy says it's his yard, and his ghost, and if he thinks it was a stock broker then it was a stock broker, goddamnit. The only boy not venturing a guess is Tom.

"What did you see, Tom?"

Tom doesn't know, is doing his best not to think about it. Still, he knows he disagrees with the crowd. He remembers the ghost being a woman, not young but not old, made all the more eerie by the fact that her dress blew in the breeze on such a windless night. She stood with her back to the boys, her head turned over her shoulder and staring low at the sodden ground. Tom realizes he wasn't afraid of her, that he had only been

afraid because it was the reaction of the other boys, because it was dark and starless, and because she appeared there, in Jimmy's backyard, instead of inside a home.

"A woman," Tom says.

The other boys consider this, but then roll their eyes and toss dirt into the wild. "It was not," they say. "Who? Your mom?"

Tom picks up a clump of grass and chucks it into the field past the light of their fire. "Well, it's what I saw," he says quietly.

"My brother saw one once," Paul says, sitting on a log. "Out in the woods. Probably some guy killed by an Indian once."

"Hell was your brother doing out in the woods alone?" Jimmy says. He wants the focus to stay on his ghost, not Paul's brother's.

"He was out there, all right?" Paul stares at Jimmy as they all sit down, none with their backs to the field. "Anyway, he said that lots of people were killed by Indians, so this guy must have done something bad himself to become a ghost."

"That's not how it works," Billy says.

"Only bad people become ghosts," Paul defends himself. "Why would you be afraid of a good ghost?"

"Nope," Billy says. He is an avid fan of the subject. "Woods, fields like this, they're full of ghosts, almost always, good and bad. Dead soldiers mostly, but some farmers too."

The boys stare off into the black of the field, the glow of a home warming their backs. They lean forward, waiting for some flash of blue to spirit forth from the dead

cotton. They listen for a cry or a twig snap. A gunshot, or even a shovel, driving itself into the topsoil, but for minutes there is nothing. A coyote somewhere far out. No matter how long they wait, the tract has proven itself to be deserted land, empty and visionless.

“Have you seen her before?” Tom asks.

“It wasn’t a *girl*, Tom,” Jimmy shouts, but then he gets quiet, afraid he’s ruined the mood. He looks at Tom, who seems to have shrunken inside his coat, and quietly says, “no. I never have.”

The boys sit silent for nearly an hour, waiting for a sight of something unknown before retiring to Jimmy’s house for the night. To appear brave, Tom waits outside for just a moment longer before he too stands and backs slowly toward the house. He swears he sees a glow, that something keeps the night brighter than it should naturally be. He backs away, refusing to turn his eyes from the wild.

Tom’s bedroom, a space his parents have given as his own, remains his least favorite room in the house, and while other boys complain about their siblings, he thinks wouldn’t it be nice, to share that space with someone who could keep watch. He hears things in the night. Scamperings, thumps, and while his parents have told him that it’s because his room sits over the porch, that it’s only raccoons and cats, he still sleeps with his back to the wall, eyes toward the dark. More than once he’s been convince of something in the room, and when he’s asked of hauntings, again his parents say, “raccoons.” As if it helps, as if raccoons aren’t also frightening.

On a Friday night, he wakes to a heavy sound. One that he tries tries, angrily, to dismiss as critters. One that sounds close, but not on the porch. His eyes widen, he is awake, and still the sound moves closer. Footsteps on floorboards. A bandit reloading his gun; Tom has been reading these stories. A knocking in the walls. Mice, he hopes, but possibly, more disturbingly, men.

But as his vision clears, as he sees he was more asleep than he thought, Tom realizes that the sound comes from outside, not his home, and that he recognizes it. Hoof beats. A horse that drags the creaking wheels of a wagon. A bandit still, maybe, but Tom leaps from his bed, tossing his covers on the floor, and dips quietly beneath his window.

Though he can't see anything, Tom is sure the horse has stopped in his yard. He hears it whine, but above that, he hears laughter, the laughter of men who aren't afraid of the dark.

“Keeping it here?” a voice says. “How is that fair?”

“How's it fair?” another voice shouts, then laughs.

Tom hears the horse move, the wagon roll forward a bit, and as he presses his forehead against the glass, he finally sees. A brown stag, made darker under the moon, bridled to an open wagon without rider. The men have dismounted and must stand about in the snow, joking. In the wagon's back, it's only passenger, Tom can see the curved edge, the crescent, of a wooden barrel. As Tom ducks his chin beneath the window frame, he hears a voice he knows as his father's.

“Pecking order, boys.” His voice has a lightness, an ease Tom's never heard used with his mother.

“Finders keepers,” another voice says, to which Tom’s father replies, “you find, I keep.”

A screen door creaks, someone whispers, and Tom sees his father leap onto the wagon, limbs wild. His shirt is muddied and one of his suspender straps hangs torn against his leg. Tom thinks he may look up toward his window, but he never does. Tom’s father only stumbles and slams his palm against the barrel.

“We’re set, honey!” he shouts.

A the whisper that must belong to his mother says something Tom cannot hear.

“Of course I am,” his father says. “We all are,” and there is laughter. “Grab a glass.”

The whisper continues, and Tom presses his ear to the window. He wishes his mother would speak louder, make her presence in this scene clear. He wants her voice so he has a hand to latch onto.

“Tom?” his father shouts once the whispering stops. “He’s not up. Or if he is it’s because he’s pissed himself.” Someone laughs, but another man steps into view and tries to usher his father down from the wagon. “Tom!” his father shouts as he steps down and disappears behind the roof’s edge. “Tom, you awake?”

Not wanting to be, Tom runs back to his bed and keeps an eye on his door, where he can faintly see the glow of a lantern his mother lit in the downstairs hallway.

“Come on, Eli,” a man says outside. “I’ll help you get it into the shed.”

“Everyone help, let’s go,” his father says. “I’ll be right in, sweets. We’ll keep it down, promise.”

Tom hears the screen door again, a swat, and the horse and wagon making its way into the backyard. For the next few moments, all Tom hears is an occasional, faint sound of laughter mixing with the dogs in the distance. He closes his eyes.

Tom doesn't hear anything until the backdoor slams.

"Would you quiet down," he hears his mother's voice. At last. She's angry, Tom can tell, and talks through her teeth like she does when he gets his socks wet. "Where did you get that thing?"

"Whiskey. Must be thirty gallons of it, we're set."

"I don't care what it is, I said where did you get it?"

Tom climbs out of bed and tiptoes toward the light beneath his door sill.

"These two fuckers..."

"Language!"

"Filchers. We caught them trying to move it over counties."

Tom pushes open his door, crawls to the banister, and there below his mother stands, holding her forehead in one hand and keeping her robe closed with the other. His father smiles with his head propped against the wall.

"Benefit of the job," he says. "Sometimes you get to keep the evidence."

"I don't want it in the house."

"It's not in the house, I'll keep it in the shed."

"You won't."

"You'll never see it again," his father pleads.

"I want it gone, Eli."

“Have a glass.”

“You’ve had it less than an hour and you already can’t stand up straight.”

“One glass, I’ll get you some.”

“Gone, Eli.”

Tom sees his father’s face change. He stops smiling, stops joking. Picks his head up off the wall. His mother stands straighter too, holds her robe tighter. Tom considers backing into his room as he watches his father raise his hand, something he knows would frighten him if he were downstairs. But from here, peering over the banister, it looks less than threatening. His father isn’t steady and his fingernails are dirty. It’s all Tom can look at, those greasy, weak fingertips pointing to nowhere. He isn’t afraid for his mother, and neither is she. She passes her husband and walks into the kitchen.

“Get rid of it,” she says, and Tom watches his father sigh and drop his arm before he slides back into his room, rushing to hide from the dark.

It must have only been a half hour or so before Tom wakes to see his father knelt beside his bed. “Boy,” he whispers, his breath hot. With what little moonlight comes through the window, Tom can see his father’s badge pinned to a sagging section of pocket, but more prevalent than that, his eyes, streaked red and not looking in a coherent direction. “Boy,” he says. “I was in a shootout tonight.”

Tom stretches and backs toward the wall because his father is too close, his breath too strong.

“You okay?” Tom asks.

“Of course I’m okay.” Tom yawns, and he adds, “I might have been grazed somewhere, haven’t really checked yet.”

“Bandits?”

“More or less. Smugglers, bootleggers.”

Tom closes his eyes, rests his head on the pillow.

“How many did you hit, dad?”

“Oh a dozen, a good dozen. At least.”

Tom nods and starts to drift off to sleep.

“Our pistols against their rifles.”

Again Tom nods.

His father takes hold of his shoulders and shakes him awake. “Hey, hey boy.”

Tom opens his eyes. His father’s face looks more stern. His eyebrows are further down.

“Did you feed those goats like I told you to?” he asks.

“Oh,” Tom rubs his eyes. “Well I forgot, and then it started getting dark...”

“And then you were afraid to go out to the barn.”

Tom nods.

“Goddamnit, boy.” His father stands. “Still?”

“It was cold,” Tom adjusts, stutters.

“No shit it’s cold.”

His father laughs. From one of his pockets – Tom can’t tell which – his father pulls a toothpick and places it in his mouth. Tom can catch glimpses of the shadowy tip shifting between his teeth if his father turns his head toward the window in the right way.

“Did you piss on yourself again tonight?”

Tom doesn't think so, not to his knowledge yet, but when he doesn't respond soon enough, his father reaches down and grabs a handful of the sheet. With the motion of his arm, Tom takes a heavy whiff of smoke. An awful smell, Tom thinks, trapped in his father's shirt sleeve. He looks up, and after his father lets go of the sheet, finding nothing, Tom thinks he can see a look of disappointment, a look of anger. It is now, as his father turns his back to him, that Tom wets himself, warmly, quietly.

“Get up, boy,” his father says, not looking at him.

“What for?”

“Get up and follow me. Don't wake your mother.”

Tom feels around the room for a dry pair of pants and follows his father down the stairs. As his father lights a cigarette in the open doorway to the back porch and cranes his neck for a sign of lamp light from his bedroom, Tom pulls his jacket down from the coat hook in the hallway.

“Don't wear that,” his father says. “That's your good coat.”

“It's cold.”

“I know it's fucking cold. Your shirt will be fine. Come on.”

Tom knows his mother wouldn't approve. She won't let him walk to the mailbox without a coat, even at noon in the heat of the day.

“Where's mamma?”

“Asleep, you know where she is.”

“It's cold.”

“It’s cold and it’s dark, right?” His father throws his cigarette down on the porch and lunges toward Tom. He throws a smoky arm around the boy’s waist, lifts him against his hip, and goes stomping out into the nighttime. The cold air hits him. His skin pimples. Tom struggles, thinks about shouting but doesn’t because his father tells him not to. “Shut your goddamn mouth, boy,” his father keeps saying, even though Tom isn’t saying anything, is barely resisting. He hears the dogs barking somewhere, hears the horse.

The barrel sits upright inside the shed, flattening the dust and loose dregs of hay. With Tom still in his arm, his father lifts a foot, kicks, fails, nearly knocks the barrel over, then kicks again, and forces the barrel’s lid onto the floor. The smell, his father’s breath, hits the room at once. His father keeps mumbling things about “cold” and “dark,” and Tom is lifted, handled, his bare arm scraped, and Tom feels the whiskey wet his toes before he’s thrown in altogether, sinks as the cuts on his arm ache and the liquor burns his eyes, as he scrapes his kneed against the wood, and as he swallows a mouthful. He comes up, thrashing for air, choking, whiskey dripping from his hair. He holds Tom head and pushes him under once more, and once more it pours into his mouth and ears. Once more it burns. Tom feels the hand release, gasps for air, and clings to the side of the barrel. He glares up at his father, who looks down at him, except no, he isn’t looking at him, is looking at the drops that fall from the tip of his son’s nose, the new stains on his son’s shirt. He is looking, Tom realizes, at the liquor, the amber rippling against the oak, and for the next few moments, it is the only sound that both father and son can hear.

“That’s what I did tonight,” his father says. He catches his breath, taps his toe against the barrel. “I shot a lot of men for it.”

His father wipes at a few drops of whiskey that have splashed onto his pants and lifts a bag of feed lying beside the door. Tom watches his father carry the bag toward the barn, and he knows that he'll have to find his way back to the house alone.

In the morning, Annie sips coffee on her front porch and keeps her eye on the sheriff's house across the street. She heard commotion there the night before, men making too much noise too late at night. Now, all is quiet. A wagon is parked in the front yard, and Annie thinks she can hear Sheriff Jebson rustling in the back, toward the field. She keeps hearing the ring of metal on wood, tools being tossed around. Mrs. Jebson steps onto her porch and gives a polite wave to Annie, which she returns. Even from this distance she looks sheepish, as if she wants to apologize, but doesn't say anything, only stands facing the wagon with her arms crossed against the cold.

In a moment the front door opens and her boy Tom steps onto the porch, puffed out in several layers. Mrs. Jebson pulls the boy to her and kisses his forehead. She points in Annie's direction and they both wave.

"Hello," Annie smiles and waves back. Then she remembers she has snacks, a few cookies left over from a poker game, and she motions for the boy to come over. He looks up at his mother from under his cap, pointing at Annie, and though Mrs. Jebson seems reluctant, she lets him go. Annie walks inside to get the plate as Tom goes tearing across the street.

“Morning, morning, Tom,” Annie says as she comes back onto the porch with the small plate. She sets it on the wicker table between her rocking chairs and tells Tom to have a seat in one. “What was all that racket last night?”

“Dad had some friends over,” he says, searching for the biggest cookie.

“Sounded like a fun time.” Annie watches across the street. Sheriff Jebsen has appeared from behind the house, rolling a barrel through the snow as his wife watches silently from the porch. “How is your math coming? The fractions? Half a cookie plus half a cookie is how many?”

“Easy,” Tom says, bored, eating.

Sheriff Jebsen stands the barrel on end just behind the wagon. He speaks to his wife, a plea maybe, but she shakes her head.

“What’s your pa got there?”

“A barrel,” the boy says quietly, rocking in his chair.

“Tom,” Annie says, smiling. “ should take that cookie away for an answer like that.” She watches the sheriff try like hell to lift it. Mrs. Jebsen goes back into the house. “I mean what’s he doing with it.”

“He found it last night.” Tom finishes his cookie and reaches down to pet the cat wandering through his chair legs.

“He found it? Last night? With some of the other boys?”

Tom nods.

“And they were all loud, and your mother wants him to get rid of it?”

Tom reaches for another cookie as Annie sees Mrs. Jebsen come back onto the porch carrying two long two-by-fours. She tosses them over the railing at her husband's feet. He jumps back, says something to her, but Mrs. Jebsen just goes back inside.

Tom swings his feet. Annie notices that he's quiet today, isn't saying much, and that he keeps knocking at the side of his head as if he has water stuck in his ear.

"You been swimming?" Annie asks, and when he doesn't say anything she goes back to watching his father. The sheriff has propped the two-by-fours against the wagon and puts all of his weight into rolling the barrel upward. Against those bony shoulders, Annie thinks he may as well be rolling a tree. "Looks like he's tearing the yard up, digging his feet in as much as he is."

Tom has been done with his cookie, doesn't reach for another, but makes no move to go back home. For a boy his age, he seems far too content to sit on a porch, she thinks.

"What's wrong, Tom," she asks, and when the boy's eyes start to tear, she kneels in front of him and takes hold of his shoulders. He cries quietly enough that his father can't hear and tells Annie the whole story of the night before. She pulls Tom to her, tells him what a good boy he is, and then goes into her back yard, where she pulls an ax from the shed.

The sheriff has just gotten the barrel into the wagon and takes a breath when Miss Taylor makes her way across the road. He sees her, holding the hem of her dress above her feet with one hand swinging a small ax in the other. Her steps are long and kick snow. As she sets foot in the yard, Sheriff Jebsen catches her mumbling, "if I ever heard a good

reason for temperance..." but cuts herself off as she pushes past him and throws her ax into the lid of the barrel that hangs over the wagon's edge. Whiskey gushes, soils the white snow brown, and Annie smashes again. And again, until the final drops dangle from splinters.

"Goddamnit, Miss Taylor," he says, keeping an eye on the ax. "I wish you'd done that before I got it up there."

"How could you do that to your boy?" Annie asks, pointing the ax.

Sheriff Jebson sighs and looks across the street to see his son on Annie's porch, rocking and staring at his feet.

"Miss Taylor, I barely even know what you're talking about." He swats at his pants. "He's a good boy," he says quietly. Empty, the barrel rocks back and forth a bit in the wagon.

"A sheriff," she says. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Just like my wife," the sheriff says. "It's being taken care of, Ma'am."

Annie looks into the barrel and sees the way that the liquor has darkened the wood, a deep, water-logged brown. Inside, she can't tell the wall from the bottom, but outside, the wood is dry, a natural honey color. There are numbers still legible, stenciled in black. On its side, a brand name, a pair of letters, GR, for some company's reserve. It occurs to her, seeing the barrel this starkly wet and dry, that this craft, so recently flooded, is watertight.

"He fit in here?" Annie asks.

Sheriff Jebsen looks at the barrel, rubs the back of his neck. “He was taller. If you want to get into specifics.”

It occurs to her that this device must float, and, if the pain in her arm is any indication, that it can take a beating.

“Where did you get this?”

“Listen, point taken, Miss Taylor. It’s being taken care of.”

“No, where did you get it?”

The sheriff sighs. “Took it off some guys trying to cross the river.”

Annie considers, sets her ax in the back of the wagon.

“Take me there,” she says.

With the sun and the time of day and the snow melt, the river is surging. The sheriff has made sure to keep the horse far enough away and ties it to a tree back from the bank. There are footprints left in the snow from where men ran the night before. In the quiet stretch of woods, limbs have been broken, and far enough back in the trees, a pair of frost-covered boots lie heel to heel.

“What exactly are we doing, Miss Taylor?” the sheriff shouts over the noise of the river. He keeps a close eye on Annie, as close as she’s standing to the bank. Any sudden slip in the land would take her. It’s when he thinks he sees her start to dip a foot in that he rushes over, only to find her staring at him blankly, as if nothing is dangerous.

“Well goddamnit, Miss Taylor, what are we doing here?”

Annie looks downriver to a bend about one hundred yards away, where the water cuts out of sight. It tosses plenty.

“I want you to toss it,” Annie says, hitting the barrel. “I want to make sure you do it.”

“It’s empty now, what difference does it make what I do with it?”

“Wash away your sins, sheriff. Wash away your sins.”

Sheriff Jebesen waits, unsure of how serious she is, but as she stares blankly into the water, the sheriff rolls his eyes, laughs, and grabs the barrel by both ends. He chucks it into the white and busy river.

It lands on its side, and with the first push of a wave, rights itself. The lid gone, it holds itself just above water level. They both watch it drift downstream as it crashes against rocks, but still holds together. The barrel takes on water, seems to bail itself, brakes as if hitting bottom, and then carries on. It nears the bend, its head becoming less visible the further it goes, and just before it would have rounded the corner anyway, the barrel swallows more than it can handle. A wave carries over too much, the cavity is suddenly filled to its brink, and the barrel, once thoroughly capable, drowns in the freezing current.

As the sheriff walks back to his horse with his hands in his pockets, Annie stands stuck to the riverbank. She’s got her stunt, she maybe thinks. She’s got her stunt.

IN WHICH ANNIE TAKES AN AXE TO HER TREE

The tree had to be chopped down at night. Annie had decided that with the onset of June, the beginning of summer, it had to be done this way. That along with the heat, the season brought the neighborhood children to her yard every day, all of them cheering and happy to be lifted by those enormous oak arms into a cloudless sky. Looking through her window she was sure to see at least a half dozen boys climbing, dotting the branches like ornaments. Until night came, when they would rush home to eat dinner and take baths and go to bed. To cut the tree down during daylight was sure to bring a protest.

For a hundred years the oak tree has stood here, its roots stretching out to steal gallons of rainwater, swelling to occasionally burst through the surface. Its trunk anchors thick branches that spread and hover over the lawn in all directions, spiraling upwards at perfect intervals, as if it had not grown, but been built as a staircase to nowhere. An arrangement so labyrinthine that its leaves could hide undiscovered rooms. An oak sustained as a jungle of one.

Here is Annie, watching from her porch on a cool night, as her two neighbors – burly enough men – go to stringing a rope around the tree's top. They hammer spikes into the lawn, mooring each end of the rope in order to guide the tree away from the house when it falls. The line is taut, and Annie can't help but rub at her neck as she sees the twine dig its way into the bark.

From her porch, Annie can see straight down Wilmore St., a dusty center of town lined by nothing but homes. The flicker of gaslights can be seen through a handful of windows, faintly illuminating the corners of roofs or the arms of porch swings. The impression of neighbors she knows are there, but doesn't see. Her own house is dark, hoping to draw less attention, but the clear sky and full moon make the moment feel less clandestine than she would like; a faint blue light casts itself over the grass.

“Can I get you two something to drink?” She asks softly. “A glass of water?”

The older man, Frank, takes off his fishing hat to wipe some sweat onto his sleeve. “That would be really nice of you, ma'am,” he shouts back, smiling.

Annie is filling glasses in her kitchen when she hears the first chop. It is loud, much louder than she expected, so much so that she checks to see if she left the door open or not. It is, shockingly, shut.

Back outside, she sets the glasses on the porch railing, trusts them there, but finds she has to hold them in place since each strike makes the ice rattle. Frank and John have developed a steady rhythm, one swinging while the other wrestles his axe from the wood, and as a result, a steady echo rings out from the tree. That ringing must travel, Annie thinks, and in a brief moment of panic, throws up her hands.

“Don't you two wanna take a break? Have some of this water?”

The recreational lumberjacks pause and glance at each other. “But we just started,” Frank says. He's right, of course; they've barely made a dent.

“How far do you think you'll have to chop before it just falls over?” Annie asks.

Frank looks at the tree, at the minuscule excuse for a scar they've cut in the two minutes since they've started. He could count the number of wood shavings on one hand. "A lot further than that, ma'am."

Annie smiles politely, and lets them resume their work.

For the next half hour, Annie watches from her porch, busying herself anyway she can. She spends a few minutes moving back and forth in her rocking chair, but then opts for pacing instead. She tries reading for a time, but decides it's bad for her eyes in such little light. She tries crocheting, but her eyes keep drifting down Wilmore St. And after thirty minutes, she looks at the progress and is disappointed to see that after so much time, and after so much noise, there is still a good ways to go.

And then down the street, appearing from an upstairs window, Annie can make out the silhouette of a person's head. A featureless shadow framed by bouncing shades of orange, the figure is only a few inches taller than the windowsill. The shadow turns its head, calling for another, and is joined by a slightly shorter silhouette, a younger sister. And once her attention is drawn to windows, she notices, two houses further down, another figure, this one leaning out over the roof, struggling to see what he hears and wishing he were taller. And from the house at the end of the block, a shadow that must be a child, because a larger one appears to pull him away from the window.

"Would it help much if I came over and pushed?" Annie whispered. "Helped push it over while you cut?"

"I don't think you wanna get in the way of these axe's, Miss Taylor." Frank rests for a moment, the persistent hum suddenly cut in half. He sees the look of anxiety on

Annie's face. "Why don't you go on inside, Miss Taylor? No need for you to have to sit out in this heat."

"How much longer do you think it will be?"

Frank looks at the cavity, chunks of wood and dust flying out from John's axe.

"Oh I don't know. Another half hour ought to do it, I suppose."

Annie smiles, plants herself in her rocking chair, and Frank tips his hat as he rejoins his partner.

So their axes are in unison again, one yielding to the other, a tick tock of herbivorous violence, showering the fresh spring leaves. All the while, Annie looks on anxiously, into the night, forcing herself to count fireflies but always ending with a tally of leaves. Three silhouettes cut from a blue night, a director and her shadows taking steps that will surely be talked about in the morning.

* * *

By daylight, the tree is lying on its side. The stump, ripped from the ground in its last moments, hovers over a shallow pit, its roots scrambled upward like a frozen flame. The surrounding grass is littered with irregular shards of wood muddled with dried clumps of dirt and leaves, pouring forth from a wound. The tree itself rests awkwardly, half its limbs maintaining their shape and stretching vertically, the other half crushed under its own weight. And toward the top, draped helplessly over the trunk and snaking through the grass, lies the guideline, the guiltiest rope the boys have ever seen.

There are five of them gathered around the scene, all in different states of awe. Thomas, too sleepy to react, looks on as his dog sniffs about the wreckage. Bobby, a real

vigilante, wants justice. Jack stands with his popgun dragging in the dirt, Tom is certain he will cry, and Stanley, who hid his favorite toy car in a hollow midway up the tree, wonders how he will ever get it back.

“I heard it fall,” Jack says as if he is guilty himself.

“I knew I heard something,” Tom says. “Do you think it was lightning?”

“What?” Bobby shouts. “No! No way. Didn’t you guys hear all that other noise last night?”

“I did,” Stanley admits. “It went on forever. A bunch of loud bangs.”

The developing mystery frightens Tom, a boy inherently afraid of intrigue. “It could have still been lightning.”

“It didn’t even rain last night, Tom!”

“Termites,” Thomas says flatly, stoically.

“They love wood!” Jack jumps on board. “They’ll eat your house up if you let ‘em.”

Tom also seems satisfied with this explanation. Before it occurs to him that these hypothetical bugs could pose a threat to his home, the promise of a solution is less frightening than an open-ended question. But Bobby and Stanley are not convinced.

“No, the noises guys! You can’t hear termites from down the block!”

“How do you know, Bobby,” Tom says. “You’ve never seen termites.”

“You tell me how you’re gonna hear a bug from four houses down.”

“Not one bug. Lots!”

Stanley approaches the tree, trying to decide how best to broach the issue of his toy car. “Maybe we can, I don’t know, maybe we can lift it, guys.” He has seen strongman competitions at the county fair and figures if one man can carry logs, surely five boys can raise one.

“What would we wanna do that for?” Jack asks.

“I’m not going near that thing,” from Tom.

“My goddamn car’s in there!”

Bobby sighs, mostly for show, and together, he and Stanley begin heaving as hard as they can. Bark comes loose in their fingertips and their arms snap a couple of sapling twigs, but aside from that the tree doesn’t move. “Let’s try rolling it,” Stanley announces, and launches his shoulder into the trunk, digging his feet into the ground, but again, the tree proves itself stuck.

“Maybe it was something else,” Thomas says just as lazily as his last proposal. In his silence he has been formulating a new theory based on watching his dog. “Something worse. A beast.”

This does more than scare Tom, and in fact affects all of the boys. They suddenly feel very exposed, vulnerable, standing in the middle of their neighbor’s lawn without the shade of their tree.

“Those noises last night,” Thomas continues. “Doesn’t that make more sense? If they were made by something...bigger?” As uncomfortable as it is, each boy ponders this.

“Well,” Jack begins, his thoughts developing as he speaks. “You would think, I mean the tree’s still there. If it was termites, don’t you think they would’ve eaten the whole tree?” This point proves popular.

“Yeah,” Bobby says. “And it’s so...smashed. It looks like it lost a fight.”

“What would you know about fights,” Tom accuses.

“I’ve been in plenty.”

“You have not.”

“Something knocked this tree over, guys.” Stanley pats the side of their fallen tree. “Something big. Probably something undiscovered.” He examines the guideline. “Something that’s using rope to do very bad things.”

“Murder,” Thomas agrees.

“Right, murder. That’s what this is, really. It’s just as bad.”

“Why do you think the police aren’t here yet?” Jack asks.

Bobby snickers; he has an attitude learned from his father that police are not people to be dependent on.

Looking back toward their homes, the boys see that Wilmore St. is as deserted as it’s ever been, the dirt lanes never so undisturbed. Their parents must be there somewhere, they think, inside their homes being perfectly still and quiet. Hiding maybe. When the boys woke this morning, did they somehow slip past their parents without trying? Were they too wily for their own good, and should they be hiding in closets right now with the rest of the world? It’s never occurred to them before, to know how long it

would take to run home from the oak tree, but what must be a good thirty seconds for each of them suddenly seems an all too lengthy race.

“I don’t believe in monsters,” Tom says.

“Yes you do,” Bobby says, pointing. “You believe in them more than any of *us* do.”

“I know I believe in them!” Jack admits, keeping an eye on the surroundings. “My mom’s told me way too many ghost stories to not believe. They’re all true, too. It’s what happens when you die.”

“Might be ghosts,” Thomas says. “Or it might be something with claws. You know, something that could be out in the daytime.”

Here, with his life threatened by ghosts and beasts and bugs, Tom storms over to the fallen tree. Frightened, shaken, on the verge of tears, if he doesn’t move toward this tree, he will run as fast as he can from it. He takes a small limb in his hand, one of the few that remains attached to the oak, snaps it free in one clean jerk, and begins beating it against the tree. Rising his club over his head, hammering against the tree, pounding against the tree, bark flying, and the whole time shouting for Bobby to quit being a jerk, Jack to stop agreeing with everything, Thomas to stop spouting off theories while he’s half asleep, and for everyone to just change the subject already because trees fall every day and he doesn’t, he really swears, believe in monsters.

The other boys stand stunned. Tom has shown a gumption they’ve never seen before and once his outburst ends, the neighborhood is just as quiet as before. Only now it is a different kind of a quiet, a calmer quiet, not one filled with foreboding. A quiet

that's supposed to exist because it's a summer morning, and that's how the summer treats these sort of days.

At last, and possibly as the result of being hit with a piece of stray bark, Thomas wakes. "Guys, maybe it was Miss Taylor."

The boys mull over this for awhile, wondering why an otherwise lovely woman like Miss Taylor would do such a horrible thing. Thinking it too mundane, the boys inject their imaginations into her motives: gangsters had been hiding bank notes and ammunition under the roots; her yard needed more sunlight to grow a new variety of super plant; she had hoped it would crush a snake that she was too afraid to touch herself. In the end Miss Taylor is decided to be a possible suspect, but not a likely one.

IN WHICH ANNIE TENDS TO A DEATH

The funeral exists for only a few people. The deceased, a handful of friends. It is a cold Wednesday morning. People track mud and snow onto the wooden floors of the church. People remove gloves once they get inside, shed extra coats, but no one cries. The deceased was old, as old as most of them. The deceased had a cough, a rasp. It had become harder and harder to understand her on poker nights. Friends had grown tired of deciphering her commands. Some accused her of cheating. One too many times the deceased had looked at her new cards before saying that wasn't the move she had meant, saying that she had really wanted three cards, or four cards, and to say sorry that her voice was going.

Annie had never accused her of cheating, and after handing her coat to the preacher's son – a filthy young man – she sees the deceased's casket on full display just past the pews. There are flowers, of which Annie has supplied none, but only a few. They are far from spilling into the aisles, as the deceased would have wanted. There is no variety. Most petals are the same shade as the snow: dirty. But above these, the casket, the box itself.

“Mighty fine,” Annie says to herself.

She takes a seat near the front, as close as she can get without being family, and sits next to a man she doesn't know. He nods cordially enough, a balding man with only a

ring of black hair that's grown shaggy over the ears. For reasons he doesn't go into, he has brought his dog, a setter with a golden patch of fur over one eye.

"Beautiful display," Annie says, though he only smiles politely. "May I pet her?"

"No thank you," the man says, shaking his head.

Annie sets her hands in her lap, and waiting for the service to start, she examines them. Aged, wrinkly, spotted. Not as able as they once were. She can't hold onto things. Arthritis is a growing problem.

The man's head, balding as it is, seems free of problems. At least thirty years her junior, the man's scalp shines smooth. There is one vein, most likely from stress, running from his left eyebrow, but aside from that, his skin appears youthful. His nose is large, angular, one that he probably had to grow into, but his jaw is firm, his cheekbones high. Annie realizes he is a handsome enough man who shouldn't have to sit here alone with his dog.

"I knew the deceased very well," she says. "Are you her son? You have her features."

The man shakes his head again. "Stepbrother."

This was something Annie hadn't known, that there was controversy in the deceased's life. "You're unmarried?" she asks. "A young man like yourself?"

"Only to my job," he says quietly.

"I hear they add bells to those things," Annie nods toward the coffin. "Just in case they're not really dead when you bury them."

The man nods. "I cut a small hole in the side for it. For the string. For the bell string."

"*You* did?" Annie asks, too loudly.

"My job. Carpenter."

"You made it? From scratch?"

He nods.

"What is it? Oak? Pine?"

"Pine."

"But oak would be better?"

He seems offended. "Oak would be fine, sure."

"Better?"

He hesitates. "Depends on what you're building."

"A casket?"

He looks at Annie, then looks forward. "Oak would be better," he admits.

From the back of the church, people still come in. The pews are far from full. Annie examines the casket lying dry behind the preacher. It's a fine enough job, she supposes. The corners seem flush, from her seat anyway. The grains look sanded down. Two thick strands of rope hang from each side as handles, painted to resemble brass. Annie leans forward, stretches her neck to try and get a glimpse of the deceased. She thinks she can see the nose, but isn't sure.

"Why is that?" Annie asks.

"Why's what?"

“What makes oak better?”

The man sighs. It’s disrespectful. If one shouldn’t work on Sundays, one certainly shouldn’t talk about work during a funeral.

“Lots of things, I guess,” he says. “It’s stronger. Stops fungus, bugs can’t get in it. And it looks better.”

“Well I think your pine box there looks wonderful.”

Though he doesn’t look at Annie, he smiles. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Annie smiles at the dog, who at least does look at her.

The service itself feels fairly standard. There is a sermon. The preacher talks about salvation with a meekness that suggests he’s done this too many times, is tired of bothering people. He slips in a message about prohibition, even though the deceased didn’t die from drink and rarely partook in the stuff at all. A choir sings “Amazing Grace,” though for the first time in her life, Annie isn’t moved. She doesn’t imagine herself a wretch wandering aimless, doesn’t see life as a precursor to eternity. She is making decisions for herself, and to Annie, that’s fine. The preacher encourages the crowd to also attend the burial, immediately following, but the turnout will be scant. It’s too cold to stand outside.

“I wonder,” Annie whispers as the preacher ends his final prayer. “Can you build other things?”

Snow still lies across the ground the following day, but the sun is out. Edgar leaves his coat open. He wears a cap, a green paperboy that thank God the cold allows. He's never gotten used to his hair loss and has a complicated relationship with his dog as a result; all of that hair, husky, firm, and permanent. Edgar pets him, but his fur is cold from rolling in the snow.

Rounding a corner by the post office, Edgar sees her house at the end of the street, smaller than she had let on, and with a great oak collapsed in the yard. And somehow, sprinkled across the lawn like leaves, Edgar catches stray glimpses of children. A head of shaggy blonde hair crouches by the stump before vanishing into the bushes. A pair of mean, blue eyes glare from underneath the log, but then close and are never seen again. As Edgar gets closer, the children seem to be gone, but he smells fresh bread, except also fruit, a tart, or a pie.

“Cherry!” Annie shouts from the porch as he approaches. “I hope it’s your favorite.”

Edgar seems distracted by the tree. He studies it as Annie cups her hand and waves it back and forth above the pie.

“This was a fine tree, Miss Taylor,” he says. “What did you cut it down for?”

Annie sets the pie on the stoop to let it cool, but the dog gets curious, so she holds it instead.

“How fine?” she asks. “Is the wood fine? Strong?”

Edgar squats, asks if there's somewhere he can keep his dog. Annie takes him and Edgar examines the trunk, runs his fingers against it. Lying dead for a day, its bark is still moist. He pushes some limbs aside, stamps them with his boot, and studies the other side.

"Fine, fine," he says. "There's some fungus toward the base, doesn't look like it got very far though. Oak's resistant to it, like I said."

Annie lifts a small slice of pie with her hand and absently feeds it to the dog. "And bugs?" she asks. "No bugs?"

Edgar sighs and moves toward the canopy brushed against the side of the house. "Miss Taylor," he begins, tripping, but catching himself on the log. "You really should have asked me out here before you cut it down. It really was a fine tree. And please don't feed my dog pie, Miss Taylor."

Annie tosses the half-eaten pie slice into the brush and ties the dog to her porch.

"Well? Bugs? Can you use it?"

Edgar kneels again, smells the wood.

"It should be fine. Might not be able to use the canopy end much, but that's not really the part you want anyway."

"Fascinating," Annie mumbles to herself.

"What do you need built? Table? Cabinets?"

Annie invites him inside where she's made the tea and coffee. She sets the pie on the table, and even allows the dog in the house, a thing she's judged others for vehemently. She pours him both beverages, without asking his preference, and tells him she needs a barrel, larger than average, but just short of her height. She tells him it needs

to be built firm, as water-tight as possible. That it needs the usual steel girders, except they need to be reinforced, and that while she's supplying the wood, she has no idea where to get the metal, but she hopes it can be found cheap. She tells him that there needs to be the usual cork hole cut into the lid, but to make sure it can also accommodate the pipe-end of a bicycle pump. Lastly, she tells him that it's fine, she's only fermenting grapes.

"How many grapes?" he asks, jotting notes furiously. He draws a sketch of the barrel with rough estimates of the measurements. "Good God, that will hold a lot of grapes." He sips his tea, then switches to coffee.

"It's for my son," Annie says.

Edgar looks up at her, takes another sip of tea and coffee each. "He likes wine?"

"He's thinking of starting a vineyard. Wants to test his process."

"With an enormous barrel?"

"Lots of investors." Annie serves him pie.

Edgar sets his pencil down, smiles at her for the food. "Miss Taylor," he says. "I have to say, we met in church. I'm a little uncomfortable building you a giant wine barrel." He takes a bite of pie. "And honestly, even that sounds suspicious. Why not two regular barrels?"

Annie busies herself at the stove. "Just wasn't sure if there was enough wood for two full barrels.

“That was one of the biggest trees in Bay City,” Edgar says, nodding toward the branches scratching against the kitchen window. “I could build you a wrap around porch with that wood.”

“Would you?” Annie perks up.

“Not sure I have the time for that, ma’am,” Edgar swallows, hoping he hasn’t committed himself.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to stick with the barrel.”

Edgar smiles politely, saves the spoon from his tea as Annie rushes the cup to the sink. With nothing to say, the room silent, Edgar looks down at his drawing.

“Miss Taylor, why so tall? Do you plan on putting a body in here? Have you *done* something, here?”

“Done something?” Annie turns to face him and suddenly it hits her. “Oh, no no no,” she shouts, serving up another piece of pie. “I’m not *burying* anyone. Good Lord, we met in church”

Edgar pushes away from the table a bit. “Miss Taylor?” he says.

Collecting herself, Annie serves Edgar more tea, then pours her own. She takes a seat across from her guest and waves her hand at the steam rising between them.

“I’ll level with you,” she says. “I’m probably going to have to, anyway.”

Edgar points toward the door where a young boy peers through the screen. Annie stands and tells the boy he has to go home now. She returns to her seat, smiles at Edgar.

“I plan to put myself in that barrel.”

“Yourself?”

She nods. "I plan to put myself in that barrel and get pushed over Niagara Falls and I plan to survive."

"Niagara Falls? Out east?"

"I plan to do it and I want you to be a part of it. I want you to share in this."

Edgar pushes his chair back all the way and stands to leave. "No," he says. "Miss Taylor, no. I don't build barrels don't know anything about it. Thanks for the pie, ma'am, I'll be getting my dog now." He grabs his coat and aims for the door where the boy had stood.

But Annie doesn't get up, doesn't respond and just takes another sip of tea, staring through her limb shaded window. This freezes Edgar. He isn't the type to storm out of homes. He needs acknowledgement, a goodbye, so is left hovering by the door holding his coat like a child, anxious with a loose grip. Annie starts cleaning dishes and he offers to help. She doesn't say anything, still, but hands him a glass.

"My husband shot cannons during the war," she says. "Never knew how many people he killed, but he survived the whole way through."

Edgar sighs, still keeping an eye on the door.

"Those bodies. He always told me it had to have been a high number, even if he didn't know how many. He was always proud of that."

"I don't know anyone that fought," Edgar says. "Most of my family are women." He gathers more plates from the table.

"Well, well I think that's good, because of some of his compatriots didn't think he should be so proud. Said it was easy to kill that many when you're behind a canon, that

it's different when you're on your feet in the field." She looks at Edgar, who absently looks for another dish, though there are none. "Would hate to think someone in your family said that."

"No ma'am, I really should be on my way though. Dog's getting antsy."

"I've already started my story, Edgar. Have a seat. Can I get you more tea?"

Edgar picks up his dog's leash and stands by the door. Annie sits at the table.

"Survives the entire war, the entire damn war, excuse me, and lands on his deathbed from tuberculosis. Coughed like something out of hell was coming up out of him. My sweet husband."

Again Edgar wants to push at the door, want to say he needs some air or anything, but can't leave an old woman talking about such things. He puts one hand in his pocket and nods.

"Do you know what he said to me just before he quit speaking? Tears streaming down from his eyes?"

Edgar sighs and looks at his feet. "What's that, Miss Taylor?"

"He told me he didn't feel brave." Annie looks at him quickly, then toward the window, where the light shines on her face just so.

"I'm sure he was brave, ma'am. The Union's whole."

"Bless you, sir," she says, dabbing her eye with a doily. "But he didn't feel it."

Edgar looks through the screen at the fallen tree, where another young boy ducks beneath a limb. "I don't think he intended for you..."

Annie breaks down crying at the table, lays her head in her arms, and Edgar takes a step toward her. Unsure of what to do, he pets his dog.

“Broke my heart,” she says. “I guess I just think...” Annie pauses. “I guess I just think I can show everyone that us Taylors are brave.”

“I still don’t think that’s the best...”

“We’re all gonna end up in a box like your sister one way or another, aren’t we? Bless her.”

Edgar guesses that’s true, if not simplistic. He guesses it’s Annie’s life, that he’s not a cop. But most of all he wants to get out of her kitchen and can think of few ways to do that.

“I’ll build you a barrel, Miss Taylor,” he says, running his fingers over his scalp. “What you do with it is your business.”

Annie smiles at him, showing gracious teeth. “I’ll pay you, of course. It will have to be later, though.”

“Uh-huh,” Edgar nods.

“You’ll come get the tree tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow morning.”

“You’re a fine man, sir. Fine as that oak.”

The next morning, Annie sips coffee on her porch as half a dozen men unload themselves from a wagon in front of her house. Stern, serious looking men, wearing denim over their white, stained shirts. They’re unhappy, hauling a vast collection of saws

and axes, twice as many tools as there are hands to hold them. This is work they aren't being paid for, work they're doing because it needs to be done, because a neighborhood widow needs a favor and that isn't the kind of thing you turn down. They take a moment to nod to Annie under their hats as they step onto the snowy grass, Edgar trailing the others. He explains he's recruited some help. The men drop their tools on the lawn and scatter themselves across the fallen tree. They cut at limbs, saw into the log, and before long, the children have returned.

They come slowly, sleepy, and line themselves along the yard. Seven, eight boys, more than there had been, and some have brought sisters. Some hold hands, some stand rigidly alone, but it is the look on their faces, the parted mouth of innocent confusion, that drives Annie from the porch. She gives one of the men a wave and carries her drink inside. No one else leaves, nothing changes. The boys stay and watch these men cut their tree down to its essence. They watch with the understanding that this is who they will be one day. One coughs, another scratches his ankle, but the men never acknowledge them. The work echoes through the morning and the timber is cut as the sun moves toward noon.

IN WHICH ANNIE EARNS SALVATION

A tent has been set up on the lip of the Falls by the grace of the First Presbyterian Church, stakes wedged into the stone. It is humid. The red and white canvas hasn't been dry in the two days since its assembly. In light of the pews, the tent's congregation sits in row after row of folding chairs. Men with cameras stand in back, elbow to elbow, and a few others try to reach their lenses through the tent flap.

The church's regulars are largely absent, edged out by a crowd of tourists. For the day, they attend service at an Episcopal church in town. For the day, at least, their faith is flexible. In the front row of the tent, palms together, kneels Annie. Actions here revolve around her. Whispers, glances. All photographs center on Miss Taylor. "Amen," the preacher says, and as Annie rises, so too does everyone else.

Crossing his arms between photographers in the back stands Mayor Wally, ordinarily and Episcopal. Annie sees him over her shoulder, thinks he's a bit of a hardass, and faces back to the front before a photo should catch her turning from the preacher.

A large man, bulbous, Annie thinks of the preacher. His white hair slicked back with gel, it shines darker than it would otherwise. His white robes blend with the stripes of the tent, an oversight on his part, Annie's sure. She holds her head high in front of him.

With the noise of the Falls, a great beating beyond the canvas, the preacher must shout. It shows that this isn't something he's uncomfortable with. Each time he speaks,

he throws his arms above his head, a gaping Y intersecting the cross behind him. With each yell, each exclamation about faith, or God, or Sunday, Annie thinks she can see him smile. A smirk presents itself whenever he looks in her direction, and by the shine of his shoes, Annie knows that he thinks this is his event as much as hers. He shouts again, waves his sleeve around, and this is his way of stealing the show. “Salvation,” Annie barely catches over the roar of the water. “Good,” and soon after, “love.” The corners of her mouth begin to turn down as she studies the preacher’s many chins, thinks she can detect stains in the armpits of his robe, is sure she can smell his breath from many feet away. Annie hears her name called, feels a stranger’s hand on her back, and is escorted to stage.

“Miss Taylor,” he shouts.

“Mrs.” she corrects.

“Mrs. Taylor. You have been saved by the Lord before, have you not?”

Looking over the crowd, seeing the cameras flash, Annie inches as close to the preacher as she can.

“I have been saved by the Lord many times,” she says. “Baptized only once.” She smiles, and whether the crowd could hear her or not, they laugh.

“Mrs. Taylor?”

“Preacher?”

“Does it still remain your intention to catapult yourself over that great precipice we call Niagara?”

Annie snickers. “I’m not sure if catapult is the word I would use. But I do intend to.”

The preacher lowers his voice and steps closer. “Take it easy,” he says, then shouts, “under the eyes of the Lord?”

“Under the eyes of the Lord,” she says. “Our Holy Father.” She does a kind of curtsy. It hurts. Her knees again.

The preacher addresses the crowd again, raises his fat arms, bellows. Annie holds her head high as the cameras flash, and as the preacher asks her to kneel, she keeps her shoulders back. She presses her fingertips to the wood of the stage, moist even though covered. Crouched beneath the wet and flapping tent, Annie closes her eyes as the preacher touches water to her forehead and delivers a blessing no one can hear. There is clapping, or still water crashing, and as she opens her eyes, Annie peers through the drops sliding from her eyelashes to see the nebulous visage of the preacher lit bright by the daylight. He appears exactly as the man wants to be. “May the Lord carry you,” she hears as he helps her to her feet. “May he keep you afloat.” A wet strand of hair clings to her ears. She returns to her seat.

Throughout the sermon that follows, Annie sits stony and dripping. Her back to the cameras, her face is free to sour. No one has given her a towel. Mr. Russell, absent, is God knows where. In this humidity, her hair will never dry. The preacher moves back and forth across the stage, shouting, though of what, she has no idea. His mouth moves, his arms, but the words are secondary. Annie catches only a few. Ankle-deep. Sons.

Great flood. Something about giraffes. Noah and his ship. Annie watches him for nearly an hour, but not once does he look in her direction.

By sermon's end it has begun to rain, except no one even notices until they're far enough away from the mist of the waterfall. People go forth from the tent and rush to find new shelter in town. The air smells faintly of salt. With the mud, peoples' shoes are dirtied. The photographers struggle to keep their cameras beneath their jackets. Annie walks past the preacher as he sits collecting his breath on the edge of the stage, looking winded and vulnerable. The crowd scattered, Annie marches from the tent without a word to the man.

Trudging downhill, the town barely visible through the fog, Annie hears a voice behind her.

"The lady of the hour." She turns to see the mayor walking with one hand in his pocket and the other holding a large, black umbrella. "Can I offer this to you?" he asks.

Rain and waterfall dripping from her hair, Annie declines. "I'm quite all right, thank you."

As Annie continues toward town, the mayor moves up beside her, doing his best to hold the umbrella over them both.

"And what did you think of the sermon?" he asks.

"Lovely." She picks up her pace. She wants out from under the umbrella, but the mayor is a tall man with a large gait, and Annie can't quite seem to get away.

“Presbyterians can be a bit verbose, if you ask me.” He smiles. “Unless of course that’s your church, then I think it’s just fine.” Annie doesn’t respond. “I like my messages plain and direct,” he adds.

“Simple messages for simple men,” Annie says. “Not that I think you’re simple.”

The mayor smiles. “Well, I thought it was a little...a little uncivil, myself. The sermon, I mean.”

“You could hear it?”

“Enough. You’ve done some local research, I assume? Or is that your manager fellow’s job?” They reach Water Street and step onto the sidewalk. “I didn’t see him there.”

“Mr. Russell’s a busy man.” Annie steps to avoid runoff from the roof of a florist.

“I think that preacher was having fun with you, Miss Taylor.”

“I’m sure he wasn’t,” Annie sighs. “Noah’s Ark seems appropriate enough.”

The mayor laughs. “That story means something different around here, ma’am.” They pause at a corner to let a cart pass. With the umbrella split between them, both stand soaked. “Let me buy you lunch, Miss Taylor. I’d like to talk to you before I don’t have a chance to.”

“I have a busy day.”

“Yes, well.” The mayor takes his umbrella back and stands dripping but sheltered. “Why not humor the man who gave you the go-ahead?”

Annie tries to read the man, to see if he is threatening her, but with rain running through her lashes, she can barely see, and decides it best to cede.

At lunch on the wrap-around porch of the mayor's home, the rain continues to fall. Looking over the railing, Annie remains separate from a town shrouded in fog and water. Barely visible across the street, she can make out candle light scattered through homes. People run as the storm worsens, doors slam. There are heavy drips in the gutter, heavy puddles on the lawn. Annie picks at her potatoes with a towel draped over her shoulder as the mayor apologizes that she and his wife aren't the same size. He takes a bite of chicken and goes into a local history Annie is unfamiliar with.

Over seventy years ago, three hotel owners – John Brown, William Forsyth, and a General Parkhurst Whitney – sat eating shellfish in Forsyth's Pavilion Hotel. As Mayor Wally describes them, they had grown thick, but trim, mustaches, and smoked cigars as they tore apart lobsters and spilled butter in their laps. On the agenda: a sudden decline in tourism, and thus, a sudden decline in business.

“Your lobsters are shit,” John said to William.

“So are your cigars,” William said to John.

“You're both shit,” said the General.

William said he'd smuggled better cigars than those, that he'd lost a case overboard which sat at the bottom of the Niagara River for three days and still tasted better than Johns. John said that's exactly what the lobster tasted like: drowned tobacco.

The General said he didn't care for either, and had gone there to discuss innovations. Anything to draw crowds. His own idea was boxing. They could build an outdoor ring, with full seating, right on Goat Island, overlooking the Falls. There could be

the chance that any wounded fighter could add his own blood and sweat to the Niagara River.

“That’s the punch line,” he said, slamming a fist on the table. “Longest fight in the world. Beginning here and lasting all the way into Canada, carrying that blood. Hell, you could even say our fights last for an eternity in Lake Ontario.”

William laughed, John shook his head.

“Families stay in my hotels,” John said.

“Sounds too philosophic for boxing clientele,” Williams said. “No one’s going to a fight for the view.”

The General said the lobster tasted like bait.

John’s idea was to involve the railroads, to include themselves in a package deal for travelers, to go in with Camden and Amboy. When the General pointed out that the nearest railroad was over three hundred miles away, John suggested that be part of the agreement, that local entrepreneurs go in with the railroads to expand the lines. There had to be industrialists in Buffalo who could benefit just as much as they could. The General thought about this plan, though not seriously. William said it would be too damn expensive, even with other backers, and needed too much organization that he didn’t want to deal with.

“Too ambitious,” he said.

The General leaned back in his chair, picking at his teeth with a lobster claw. He frowned, wanted to go back to his boxing idea.

“What have you brought to the table then, Mr. Forsyth?”

William grinned and ordered another glass of beer.

“Gentlemen, we don’t need any other attractions. We already have the biggest waterfall in the goddamn country. And we don’t need to fund new ways to travel. People have gotten here before, they’ll do it again.”

John sighed and lifted his napkin from his lap, placing it on the table.

“All we need,” William continued. “Is press.”

“Billboards,” John rolled his eyes. “I brought out my good cigars to hear billboards.”

“What are you thinking?” the General asked.

“All we need is a stunt. Something big for the papers. Big and different.”

They all agreed. They all laughed hugely, probably, the mayor thinks, tossed the lobsters over their shoulders, and on the following day, William traveled out to Tonawanda to see a man about a boat.

William knew a lot of fisherman from his smuggling days, men who did what they could to scrape by on pike and herring but managed to live comfortably by hauling game and spirits across the river from Canada. Of these men, William went to either Jacque Morgan or Michel Roy – the mayor wasn’t sure – but in any case it was an old Frenchman with a long, tangle-rich beard and pigeon-toed feet. He possibly had a third nipple and possibly cheated on his wife, but when William offered bottom-dollar for a craft just well enough to float, the Frenchman said *oui* and pointed to the *Michigan*.

“She’s been condemned twenty years,” Jacque or Michel said. The schooner rocked against a single post dug into the river mud which it was moored to. Only five feet

long, a mast rose just short of a first story gutter from the boat's center. An oar dangled in the current. Many planks were missing. William could see western sunlight through holes in the hull. Above the rudder, a rotting armoire stood in the stern. "I've just been using it to hold my late mother's furniture." William asked if it would make it to Niagara, to which the Frenchman said probably, but not much farther, and William paid him a cheap amount. He hired a black man to row it out with the cracked and splintered paddles.

John hated the boat when he saw it. He gave it a kick and knocked two boards loose. The General thought it wasn't much to look at. But William said it didn't matter, that it hadn't been festooned yet. Wives were hired throughout the following week to spruce – though not repair – the *Michigan*. Three women, working back to back on such a small vessel, swept pine needles from the deck, scrubbed the sections of hull they could reach, and, most importantly, draped a large sheet with the painted skull and crossbones down from the mast. After William inspected and approved, John set the women to work sowing and stuffing five short, straw men. John took it upon himself to string the scarecrows about the deck. He gave them wooden swords and black hats and an eyepatch to one, and after finding that the boat looked too crowded, he untied one and tossed it overboard to eventually drown.

It also fell upon John to hire a captain, someone bold enough to pilot the vessel on a sure enough course toward the brink before leaping ship and swimming ashore. Captain James Rough was hired cheaply enough, a rugged man trying to re-earn the respect of his wife. And with everything managed under budget, the *Michigan* was soon to crash over the Falls.

But that wasn't all. The boat acquired and outfitted, it was the General's job to wrangle the passengers. "Panthers, wild cats, bears, wolves," the fliers had said. "All manner of ferocious beasts."

"No ship's going to survive that drop," The General had said over the lobster course.

"There's a change," William said. "If she's towed through the deepest part of the river, depending on the ship, depending on our luck, she might survive," and after too long a silence, "should be a spectacle either way."

"The animals won't make it," John said.

"Some won't, true. But the good ones will. The strong ones will. And we'll make money off of them too! 'The fine specimens that lived through the tip of a lifetime.' We'll sell them to museums, zoos, whatever."

Except the General's connections were not as he said they were, and by the day of the stunt, he had managed to collect what local riffraff hunters had deemed too measly to kill. On a warm enough day in September, the boat sat crammed with two small bears, a pair of foxes, one raccoon, and one dog, all sharing space with fifteen considerably calm geese. Their wings clipped, they waddles about the dog.

Thousands of people had gathered on both sides of the river, the bottom and top of the Falls. Vendors wheeled out wagons. Children were given popcorn. Men ran betting tables dotted all along the shore, stacking odds against the survival of the animals, the *Michigan*, even the bailing captain. Little girls bought lemonade while their fathers argued over the exact definition of "drowning."

“Water in the lungs, what do you think?”

“How does a boat get water in the lungs?”

“If it doesn’t resemble anything close to a boat after the drop then it’s drowned.”

“Well I’ve got a pretty abstract idea of a boat, fella.”

“If I can’t stand on it without getting my shoes wet, then it’s drowned.”

“Fine.”

“Your shoes? Fine.”

The three entrepreneurs looked on from the bandstand erected on Goat Island as drunk men lead their families to vantage points, as boys dropped the paper hats they’d just bought and begged their mothers for a new one, as couples, already filled to the brim with festivity, shuffled back to their hotel rooms, and they knew that their venture was the right idea. They smoked cigars and spilled brandy as Captain Rough took his place at the helm of the boat, docked only a few miles away.

At 3 p.m. on September 8th, 1827, the *Michigan* was towed forth from Black Rock around the west side of Grand Island, around the eastern curve of Navy Island, and set loose in the Niagara’s current with only Captain Rough to keep it clear of the shore. As the boat came into view from around the bend, a great, drunken applause erupted from the crowd. The entrepreneurs drank with pride. William Forsyth stood with his shoulders back, hair blowing in the wind.

From the bandstand, from the crowd, the *Michigan* sailed smoothly enough. It came forth from the east with no wind in its sails but carried swift by the current. The sun just barely west from overhead, it cast a streak of orange in the water along the boat’s

starboard. For a quarter-mile, the *Michigan* flowed picturesque. From the bandstand, the print on the bow became legible. The dog barked. As it approached, the geese could be heard, running wild around the bears. And closer still, Captain Rough could be heard shouting, his arm seen flailing, because, as it turned out, he had always been terribly afraid of raccoons. Despite the captain's panic, the boat stayed on course, keeping to the deep channel, but as it came closer, the river became choppy.

The rushing water caused the schooner to rock, a bear latched onto the side as spray washed over the deck, and just as it passed the bandstand, the mast snapped in half. It crashed into the water, killing a goose as it broke through the portside railing. The sail caught enough water to set the ship barely off course just before breaking off altogether. The captain did his best to steady her, but with the Falls fast approaching, he gave up the rudder, dove into the river, and swam toward the Canadian side. The *Michigan's* bow pointed landward, but the current ushered the boat downstream.

Gasps went up as the boat drifted past spectators on both sides of the river. Boards tore loose in the rapids, and in only a few short moments, the *Michigan* had ripped in half, animals scurrying to either end. One of the bears slipped loose through the wreckage and paddled his way onto Goat Island. He pressed through the scattering crowd and roared off into the trees as a policeman opened fire with a bolt-action rifle.

The remainder of the *Michigan*, its cargo and straw-stuffed crew, continued downstream. The General shook his head and did his best to avoid the gaze of the crowd – though no one was looking at *him* – while John rushed down to the riverbank, calling across to Captain Rough to ask what the fuck had happened. But William stood

transfixed. He watched the two chunks of ship orbit one another as they approached the Falls, the animals clinging to boards as various parts of the hull dipped beneath the waves, as wood broke loose to avoid the plummet.

The aft section was first to go, the rudder hanging bare over the plunge pool far below. It hovered for a moment, an illusion that the rear section could crawl back upstream, but as the *Michigan's* bow section approached the crest, the two halves collided. The dog leapt from one to the other and a goose jumped ship, but all were sent tumbling, a helpless menagerie into the spray.

The Falls seemed silent, and then, one by one, the bodies floated from the mist, surrounded by wood and bits of straw. The geese came first, five of them, with their heads hanging beneath the water, their white bodies like pitch. The bear followed, its body a great stone. More geese, and then the dog. A mangy setter already malnourished, it was evident just how much he wasn't breathing, just how little the ribs and rose and fell. The current, suddenly calm, nudged them all northward, spun the remains like petals. The sun shone on Niagara like a mountain from which those beings just fell and the air was chilly. Feathers washed into the mud. Gentle fish swarmed then scattered.

But yet, somehow, ending the parade, a solitary goose emerged from the mist, honking and paddling as if nothing had happened. It turned to all sides to get its bearings, and then swam on toward a shore downriver. The crowd stood, quiet through it all, children held balloons, and then everyone gathered their things and went unceremoniously home.

“That’s what the story of Noah’s Ark means around here,” the mayor says, sipping coffee and looking out at the rain. “Greed, disaster, and one hell of a lucky goose.”

Annie sits with her chin propped against her palm. “What happened to the business men?” she asks.

“Animal cruelty laws weren’t what they are today,” he says, cutting into his chicken.

Annie leans back, chews on her fingernail before realizing she’s doing it, and wipes her finger on the towel around her neck.

“You brought me out here to tell me that?”

“I did,” the mayor nods.

That fat preacher, Annie thinks. She can still see him waving his arms, his sweaty cheeks lit up by camera flashes. The idea that he should so blatantly mock her, that a preacher should do that, of all people. She looks out at the storm and watches the water collect in the street and beat against windows. Getting to the hotel, she thinks, she could use a boat.

“Forsyth’s Ark,” she says at last.

The mayor looks up, then smiles. “Well, he’s not as famous as I may have let on.” He takes a bite and studies her face. “It’s not exactly a story people tell their kids, I mean.”

“Not kids of a certain age, at least,” Annie says absently, and the mayor isn’t sure what to make of this.

“So,” he says, lifting his glass. “The last thing we want is for a sweet woman like yourself to be made a fool of. So here’s to hoping you’ll reconsider your plans.” He nods his glass toward Annie, though she doesn’t hold one of her own, and takes a sip.

Annie stands and lies the towel over the chairback. “A thousand years we’ve been talking about Noah. And for nearly a hundred you’ve been talking about those animals.”

The mayor sees Annie smile faintly, sees a glow in her eye where before the anger had been. He quickly stands, urges her to have a seat, to have a cup of coffee, to help herself to more mashed potatoes, to tell him about her life in Michigan, a life she may never see again, but it’s too late. The mayor can tell he’s already made matters worse.

“I have to be going, Mr. Wally.”

“He’s taking advantage of you, Miss Taylor,” he blurts out. “Your manager.”

The same smile on her face, Annie says coolly, grandly, that it is she who is taking advantage of Mr. Russell.

She thanks the mayor for his hospitality, for a delicious meal, and excuses herself out into the pouring storm without so much as a hat on her head. Her dress trailing through the mud of the lawn, she walks through the rain, never runs.

IN WHICH ANNIE IS ANNOUNCED

On the day that the new typewriter arrives, there is an elevator crash in Birmingham, England. Attendees of a celebration party for the Mechanical Electric Institute fell six stories in what one witness called “a pretty ostentatious lift.” The elevator was overloaded – seventeen people – and its gold-plated doors were intermingled with the bodies. It was the worst elevator accident in the near fifty years since its invention, yet somehow, from the wreckage in the shaft, the body of a breathing, sobbing three-year-old was pulled. Today’s broadcast would include the basic news, a brief expose on the accident’s more high-profile victims, and a list of safety tips – should this happen again – direct from the Otis Company.

Walter sits at his desk. His new typewriter sits centered, most of the immediate clutter cleared. Still, his office is carefully arranged, a designed mess. Papers lie scattered, a corner trashcan overflows, books lean on books, deliberately placed askew to mimic use. *Lives of the Iroquois*, *Philosophie Zoologique*, *Moralia*, *General’s Return*. It is an office he leaves cluttered for guests.

He reads the tickertape as it comes in. More bodies identified, all academics. Walter is reminded of something he heard once, that if one were to jump just before a crashing elevator hit the ground, said person would become momentarily suspended in air, float at the moment of impact, and thus survive the crash. It doesn’t sound entirely

rooted in science, Walter thinks, but isn't that how roller coasters work? Isn't that how he lost his hat at Coney Island last spring? He decides it will be a good way to end his report, if only anecdotally.

He wants to write this part first. The rest will come later. "Old wives tell us..." he types, discards. "Scientists are learning new thing about gravity every day..." he types, discards. "God..." types, discards. The ideas aren't the problem, it's the machine. Every word Walter's typed, he's misspelled. The keys have been rearranged into a pattern that makes very little sense to him. The Q, most of all, seems curiously far from the U.

"If one could manage the smallest of jumps," he pecks out. "Then survival may indeed be possible, should our readers find themselves in a similar situation." It takes time to type this, but to Walter, it is prose. "When viewing gravity, consider yourself the apple, the world a tree, and you will receive only bruises." Walter isn't sure what this means, but he's sure his readers will connect in some way, apply it to their lives. Still, does this sound insensitive, he wonders. Has he taken advantage of the dead, not for the benefit of the living, but for his writing? Are bodies in an elevator shaft really his? Birmingham is a place he's never been. He can't describe it, has no idea if its streets are paved, what the air smells like.

"Early this morning, while most Americans slept, a tragedy occurred on the other side of the Atlantic." Walter can't find the shift key, doesn't know how to capitalize his letters. He doesn't know what the building looks like, if the whole place has been sealed off or if people are just limited to stairwells. He has a globe that weighs down a stack of newspapers on his bookshelf. He pinpoints Birmingham, northwest of London, east of

something called Wales, but he has no map. The Mechanical Electric Institute could exist anywhere within a ten-mile radius. What kind of hors d'oeuvres were served? Is there pollution?

Walter wants accuracy here, wants detail, wants to write with an accent, but can't. He tries a new sentence, "evidence suggests that had there been less weight..." and finds it artistically satisfying, but lacking credibility. He feels for these people, whoever they are.

He has done little work, but looks at the clock, and thanks God that it's lunch.

He has plans, he remembers. An out-of-towner, a Mr. Russell, has business to discuss. They are meeting in a seafood restaurant built, for some reason, far from the river, overlooking a lumber mill. Sawdust is all he can smell. Walter orders the oysters.

Walter finds Mr. Russell to be a hyper man. He loves Niagara, loves the people. He keeps asking questions about hydroelectric power. He asks how often Walter makes it up to Buffalo, without realizing that Buffalo is south. He seems very, very excited about the weather. "Surprisingly balmy," Mr. Russell says. Walter's vest is complimented, though Walter hates it, bought by his wife, and he wears it only once every three weeks. Walter is asked doesn't he think drinking is vile, that the temperance movement is a wonderful thing, except Walter likes scotch, pretends to anyway, and Mr. Russell changes his tune.

But once the food arrives – twenty-four oysters on the half-shell – Mr. Russell gets to his point. He is here because of his client, a Miss Taylor, who plans to traverse the Falls in a barrel.

“Come again?” Walter asks.

“Plunge,” Tussy says. “Straight through the mist.”

Walter beams, sucks down an oyster plain, though he prefers them with sauce.

“That’s incredibly dangerous,” he says.

“Incredibly, absolutely.”

“Will she survive, do you think?” Walter asks, leaning forward.

“We have every bit of confidence.”

Walter sits back, sips his water.

“Yes, yes,” he says after a moment. “But it’s possible she won’t. Maybe even probable.”

Mr. Russell seems bored suddenly. “It’s possible, yes.”

Walter nods, considers rubbing his chin, wonders if Mr. Russell will buy him a drink, and mumbles something about gravity.

When he returns to his office, Walter lifts his wastebasket and dumps paper across the room. He hammers out the elevator story on his typewriter – keeps it simple, just unadorned facts – and sets to work on Miss Taylor’s. He begins with vivid descriptions of the town, his own, and describes everyone’s childhood, tiptoeing along the wet rocks nearest the Falls. He opens his window to remind himself how the air smells, how many people fill the streets, how often he can hear horses, and all the while he leaves his door wide open so that if anyone should poke their head in, Walter can respond, “sorry, I’m really on top of something right now.”

Miss Taylor, unfortunately, is not a local. He isn't quite sure where she's from. Mr. Russell seemed dodgy on that. But isn't that better, maybe? Won't readers be more inclined to stomach the doomed exploits of a foreigner in their town than the other way around – the death of one of their own abroad? Don't people want to cheer on outsiders as fools to make themselves feel better about never moving out to a larger city? To make them proud of their own common sense? Doesn't Walter do this? Doesn't Walter tell Polack jokes at Christmas for this reason? The one about the light bulb?

Walter remembers once as a boy when he and his father had tossed stones from the top of the bluff. Watching them fall through the mist, it was impossible to see where they landed, if they collected in the same pile, impossible to even hear the drop. Tossing them, Walter thought there was no way he would want to be one of those stones, no way he would throw himself into that noise. And isn't that everyone's childhood here, Walter thinks, to watch the water and imagine themselves a falling thing? Something children outgrow once they hear about an accident. The body of a factory worker hauled lifeless from the pool by his overalls. The remains of a dog draped over the rocks. After your father reads you something like that from the paper, you grow up a little, you stop glorifying failed flight, and no one Walter grew up with would sympathize with Miss Taylor.

He types, gets his descriptions down, loves the sound of the keys. He writes what Mr. Russell told him and adds a bit about Annie's chances improving if she manages to jump at the moment of impact. But as he polishes the ending, he considers removing the tip. He isn't sure if he wants it shared, he isn't sure if he wants Miss Taylor to read it.

Whether the advice works or not, he wants Miss Taylor to fail. He wants her dead. The story is Walters, he thinks. If she survives, then the national papers take it. If she dies, the story is all his, something remarkable and local. The big papers won't want her then, just another body in a river.

Walter decides to hope for this best. He thinks of follow-up stories. The family she'll leave behind, the will, whether she'll die rich or die in poverty. Which would be better? He types everything out, rips the paper from the typewriter, and proofs it. Everything's fine, the words make sense, but something's missing. Walter decides that what he really needs, what will really make this story real, is a photo of the barrel. Walter will contact Mr. Russell tomorrow and tell him that he simply must lay eyes on this barrel.

IN WHICH TUSSY RUNS OFF WITH THE AMERICAN DREAM

Tussy has been sweet-talking all day. He started his morning, fresh, with an egg and fried bologna, and then accosted the permit office. So many forms, so many signatures, often not even his own. After, a meeting with the police chief, who Tussy thought had “a lovely sister,” except Tussy didn’t think that, found the chief’s sister boorish. But he left with police cooperation and a free cigar. After, lunch with the editor of the local Niagara Falls Gazette, a vain man whose silk vest Tussy took the time to compliment. Tussy paid, bought oysters. By days end he has met a dozen promoters and city officials in offices, lounges, restaurants, parks. His clothes smell of many things. He keeps conversation shallow. People get along better that way. People are more agreeable that way. The mayor, Tussy’s last stop of the day, as the sun is near setting in this foreign town, agrees to meet at his home.

Stepping from the post office, Tussy hears something. A pounding that seems out of place for this time of day. Heavy, metallic thuds that seem everywhere at once. It comes from downriver, then perhaps the border, but it is consistently in the air, something to be felt. Tussy adjusts his hat and walks.

The mayor's home is large, near the river, and because of this the mud in the street is thick. Tussy trudges through, collecting it in his cuffs. He hears the pounding, and looking up, Tussy sees the mayor crouched on his rooftop, hammering new shingles.

"Friend," Tussy raises a hand, squinting through his fingertips. "You'll keep your whole town awake with that racket."

The mayor smiles, gives a nod toward the street. "I told my wife," he begins, sliding toward the roof's edge. "I told her I would replace these as soon as my tenure was up. But after winning a third term, she got a little impatient."

"Hope it doesn't affect your fourth."

"Understanding people here." The mayor swings his legs over the gable. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," Tussy props his leg on the mayor's stoop. "I was thinking we could talk on equal footing."

"If I come down I'll have to come back up, and if you come up, you might fall off. This'll be fine."

Tussy lowers his leg, adjusts his hat. He smiles up at the mayor. The sun is getting lower, settling behind so that this perched man is only an outline. Tussy squints, shades his eyes, but still the mayor remains a shadow and a voice.

"You're here about Miss Taylor," he says. "A thing for a woman to do."

This is the third time today that someone has known Tussy's business before he mentioned it. He is not impressed.

"I am, sir."

“Wanting final permission, I suppose?”

“If you choose to look at it that way, sir. It can only be a boon to your town.”

“A boon?”

“A boon.”

The mayor looks down at his feet, and Tussy can see the silhouette thoughtfully tapping the hammer against his thigh.

“Mr. Russell, right?”

“Tussy Russell, yes sir.”

“Mr. Russell, I don’t suppose you’ll be going over those falls with her, will you?”

What a thing to say, Tussy thinks.

“Not exactly enough room for two, sir. Besides, someone has to watch over the financial end.”

“In case she dies,” the mayor says.

Tussy suddenly finds an urge to spit, an unpleasant mix of hours-old oyster and cigar smoke having found its way into his mouth. He swallows it.

“We have every confidence that Miss Taylor will crawl out of that barrel and into the papers.” Tussy rubs the back of his neck, a strain building from having to look up.

The mayor is silent for a moment, his silhouette doesn’t move. “Mr. Russell,” he says at last. “You always done this kind of thing for a living?”

Tussy decides, the taste still in his mouth, to spit anyway. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m guessing by the looks of that hand you’re squinting through that you’ve never touched a tool in your life.”

“Myself aside, sir...”

“And I’m guessing if you’ve never held a tool, then you probably didn’t have much of a hand in building that barrel.”

“Our carpenters...”

“I guess I’m wondering how, given that you didn’t build the barrel, don’t know much about building barrels, how you can be so confident that it won’t go to shit when you push it over those falls.”

“Now wait just a minute, sir. I don’t need to build a horse to know how to ride it...”

“I saw you from three blocks away *walking* to my house, not riding.”

Tussy hears a door click and looks down, eye-level, to see a woman looking through the screen door. She is young, late twenties at most, and though the mayor seems twice that age, Tussy assumes she is his wife. She stares at Tussy, comfortably, as if she has been watching him since he arrived. The talk of the town, the stranger, and whether real or imagined, Tussy thinks he can see a kind of hope drain from her eyes, hope that he would be someone different, someone robust. He smiles because her hair has fallen from her ear, because he wants her, but she does not do anything back.

“Mr. Russell,” the voice from above. “If you were any kind of man, you would take Miss Taylor back to wherever she came from as soon as she steps off that train.”

Tussy looks back at the young wife, and when he looks up again, the sun has moved behind the house. The silhouette has gone, and there sits only a stern, old man.

The mayor gathers himself, stands carefully atop the eave.

“You’ve already got the papers behind you?”

Tussy nods.

“The whole town will be there?”

Nods again.

“Poor woman.” The mayor picks up his hammer and carries on while there’s still light. Tussy turns to leave, barely catching a glimpse of the young wife as she closes the door.

The night feels empty for a tourist town. There are lights, in a few homes, in the factories along the bluffs, but few people. A young man walks his horse through the street, coming back from the river. A father helps his daughter up their steps, and they disappear into the light of their home. Laughter comes from somewhere, but mostly everything just feels heavy. There is a moisture in the air, more than Tussy has ever felt, and it seems to weigh on everything. It feels like something to part, as a curtain. The mist presses on his clothes, but more than that, the heaviness comes from the noise, the constant hum of a great thing crashing. It is a characteristic of this town, Tussy thinks, that you can’t find a single alleyway sheltered from the noise of those falls.

His hotel is on the far side of town, but there too feels empty. The lobby sees too little traffic, the walls are too thick. It caters to couples, not businessmen. Walking, he touches himself through his pocket, briefly, thinks of the mayor’s wife. Thinks of the mayor’s absence.

Plus, Tussy is hungry. It has been hours since lunch, and from a home he can smell someone's dinner. Peppered meat. A roast, a stew. Through this humid nighttime, over streets of dirt, Tussy looks for somewhere to sit down to a meal.

Off Falls Street, Tussy finds a small eatery. Estelle's. The lighting is dim, possibly for ambiance, but more likely to save on the bill. It is a place with tablecloths, candles, and wrapped silverware, but the menu selections are cheap, and gives Tussy the impression that, as far as restaurants go, Estelle's tries to appear more important than it is. Still, there are people here, and Tussy takes a seat at a table.

He'll have the corn hash, he says, with cornbread and a glass of water.

"Where's Estelle?" he asks the waitress, a girl he finds plump, but attractive. She smiles.

"Maybe I'm Estelle." She walks away. Tussy feels better.

As far as patrons, Tussy is uninterested. People are paired off in groups, and to squeeze himself in would require more of what he's done all day; small talk, weather, local economies. He's made enough friends. Still...

The waitress brings his food, and though she smiles, Tussy has lost interest. She knows he is new in town, is drawn to that, and this rings hollow. Hers is a hope he never lost.

The cornbread is stale, but glancing through the window, Tussy sees three dancers bending legs under a streetlight. Three women, practicing, drunk, before one hurries off with a boyfriend, while the remaining two settle themselves on the curb. They lean against one another, smile, talk, but theirs is a conversation Tussy would not be

comfortable in. He knows. To talk to either of them – not young, but pretty – would lead to a repeat of the day. Would leave him ridiculed, timid, wishing he hadn't become bored with the waitress.

Tussy pays his bill and leaves.

He walks in the opposite direction of the streetlight, even though it takes him further from his hotel. He hears laughing behind him and rounds the corner to get away from it. The smell of bread on the street, lingering from a bakery that's been closed since dusk. He could go to a bar, he thinks, but he's bored with drinking. No one goes anymore. They drink at home. Everyone feels guilty about it. There are signs hung on church bulletins. Tussy turns onto the river road and sits on a low, stonewall overlooking the falls.

"I know you," he hears, and turns to see one of the women, one of the dancers.

"Do you know me?"

"One of the dancing girls?" Tussy says, tired. "You're very talented."

The girl sits on the wall next to him. "You're that man that's here about the stunt. I was hoping you'd know me for a different reason."

Tussy introduces himself.

"Martha," the girl says. "What's she doing? Going over them in a canoe?"

"A barrel." Tussy laughs and looks over at her. She is smiling, leaning forward a bit against her palms.

“Smart woman,” she says, looking out over the water. Tussy has heard a derivation of the phrase from over four-dozen skeptics since he took on this endeavor. It is not clever, he ‘s concluded, but he always tries to look the other way.

“It’s customized,” he says.

“Well it has to be.”

“Your standard vineyard-brand won’t work.”

Martha shakes her head in agreement.

“Believe me,” she says. “I’ve been through all of this.”

Tussy smiles at her. She’s not as intangible as he thought. Even in this light, her hair is a light brown. Tussy would have described it to her as chestnut, except it actually reminds him of an untreated wood he and his uncle had turned into a fence when he was a boy. She had it parted to the side, and it fell in perfect, tight ringlets on either side of her face, hanging no lower than her neck.

“You’re here to sleep with me, aren’t you?” Tussy says, too abruptly for Martha, who responds with a snorting sound he doesn’t like.

“No,” Martha says. “I came to talk business. You’re better in dealing with men, I guess?”

“What kind of business?”

Martha nods toward the river.

“You’ve been over the falls?” he says. “Here I was thinking we would be the first to survive it.”

“We?” Martha says, and whether this is flirting or not, it rubs Tussy the wrong way.

“Miss Taylor.”

They sit quietly for a moment, then Martha points off into the darkness, down river.

“There. That’s what I did. The rapids, the whirlpool.”

Tussy looks, cannot see, but knows they are there, knows he would hear them if they weren’t being drowned out. He looks at Martha and sees that she isn’t smiling, isn’t flirting. This is a story she expected him to know.

“Martha Wagenfuhrer,” she says, and waits for a response, but Tussy has none.

“German?” he asks.

“Two years ago? No? You haven’t done your homework?”

“You went through the whirlpool, two years ago in a barrel?”

Martha smiles. “Now the falls, that’s going to be a different story. She’s steeled herself, I hope.”

Tussy assumes she has.

“A woman that age. What will she ever do if she survives?”

Tussy shrugs, he doesn’t care. Even wandering off on his own, he still can’t get away from shoptalk.

“I’m just a manager,” he says.

“Which means there must be money involved. Lots of it, I would imagine.”

“Less than you would think, I’m sure.”

“Believe me, I know, it’s always less than you think.” Martha slides a little closer, lowers her voice. “But those,” nodding toward the falls. “Those are world famous. Dangerous. And anyone going over them is going to find a lot more money than some local girl going down some rapids no one’s ever heard of.”

Tussy can feel one of her curls against his ear, can smell the alcohol on her breath.

“How long have you been following me today?” he asks, but she doesn’t respond, just grins at him. “If that’s what this is about,” he lowers his own voice. “Why don’t *you* go over the falls?”

Martha tilts her head, seems to think about this for a moment.

“When I was a girl, my brothers used to refuse to let me go fishing with them. There was a river about a mile from our house. They never even caught anything. Probably just went out there to play with themselves.”

Tussy adjusts his collar, laughs in a way he feels he’s expected to.

“But one morning, one morning finally, my big brother Billy says yes. And we were walking through the woods, middle of nowhere, and my hat gets blown off of my head. It never fit well, too big, but it landed on the other side of this little gully.”

“A nice hat?”

“My favorite hat,” Martha smiles. “I was going to go get it, but Billy stopped me, said he’d get it. He starts tiptoeing across this log, and just like that, his foot slips. Landed right on a branch. Doctor said it went through his lung.”

Tussy looks at her, but she doesn’t seem sad. “A long time ago, I guess.”

Martha looks at him. “All that just to get a hat for his little sister. He didn’t even hesitate, just knew I shouldn’t try to cross that gully.”

“Yeah, well,” Tussy says. “Quite a guy.”

Martha stands so that Tussy has to look up. With the lights and the fog, everything behind her looks beautiful.

“I guess what I want to know, Mr. Russell, is why *you* don’t go over the falls.”

She stands to leave, takes a final look toward the rapids, and steps over the wall. He hears her footsteps move away. He hates her.

“Mr. Russell?” she calls from across the street. “Are you coming?”

Tussy turns to see her standing with her arms crossed in the spooling fog, becoming fainter as the mist grows thicker.

“Where?” he asks.

“Home with me. I told you, I have an idea I want to discuss with you.”

Tussy resents this, but he is lonely. He peels himself from his seat as the haze thickens, and in what must be an early morning hour, he is led through a town he does not know, by a girl he can barely see.

The following week is filled with preparation. Annie arrives on the train, checks into a nicer hotel near the river. She is ornery, hasn’t slept much lately, and her hands are covered in splinters. Holding onto railings puts her in a bad mood.

There is word of mouth to spread, posters to hang around town, and before that, the posters have to be made. Designed, printed, copied. After that, interviews to be

arranged. Photographs to be taken, which means a camera has to be rented, which means film has to be processed. Critically important is the hiring of a boat, and experienced boaters who know the currents well, are brave enough to bring a craft near the precipice, are trustworthy, talented enough to launch the barrel on the path with the best chance of survival.

And of course, the most important part: the barrel itself. It arrives, not with Annie, but on a separate train a few days after, shipped from Michigan by way of Chicago. When Tussy meets it at the station, it is already placed on the platform, warming in the morning sun. It is big, bigger than any barrel Tussy has seen, and stands as high as his chest. The wood looks rough, but is hidden beneath layer upon layer of veneer. Tussy thanks the attendant and lifts the top. The mattress, a weathered white, is curled inside. Painted along the side is Annie's name in an arching white font. *Heroine of Niagara Falls*, and below that, smaller and less defined, is his own name. *F. M. Russell*, written as though it could be the name of a company, the barrel maker, something to be forgotten. He gives the man a tip, and the barrel is hauled off.

On the day of the plunge, Tussy sees Martha in a crowd as they make their way to an overlook. She doesn't notice him, seems to be with another man who looks poor, but broad-shouldered. He sees dozens of people, all making their way to the top of the bluff, some skeptical, but most not even remembering what they were walking toward. Women are too engrossed in their husbands. Husbands lift their wives in arms, and by the laughter he hears, by the touching, by the dresses, by the hands, by the blushing, he

knows that children will be born from this day. Girls named after Annie, boys named after presidents.

Tussy knows as he watches from his deserted patch of mud at the bottom of the falls, Canadian side, with a fisherman on either side of him, each with large iron grappling hooks. The noise is incredible, absolute. The fog is heaviest here, but he can still see these crowds far on the American side, carrying meals and each other to viewing spots.

While the fishermen check their watches, Tussy stares up to the waterfall's brink, where at any moment the barrel will float into view. The fishermen are bored, a feeling Tussy shares. He has tried to make small talk, to ask them about their lives, but they are uninterested.

Looking up, the barrel has appeared. From this distance, it is tiny, a brown speck approaching the void. It hovers for a moment, and without any indication, slips over the crest, joining the falling water. Across the river there is a collective gasp, faint, but audible, as everyone watches the craft fall.

Suddenly, no one is bored. The fishermen have become entranced, waiting for their moment. Even from this distance, Tussy can see heads in the crowds dropping, following the barrel as it goes. No one is bored but Tussy. Everything is going according to plan, exactly how he's imagined it a dozen times, and honestly he doesn't see what the big deal is. He doesn't get what's so damn great about it, pushing yourself over a cliff, that anyone could do it, that it doesn't require an education. He could do it, he could have

done it, except he's too smart for that. Tussy watches the barrel as it tumbles, vanishes into the foam.

At the sign of impact, the fishermen rush into the water, hooks brandished. In the excitement, one of the men collides with Tussy, knocking him into the mud as he hurries past. Tussy's clothes are covered, his elbow is hurt. He looks up, watches these men as they trudge toward a boat that is towing the barrel to shore. They are strong, they do or will have wives. They will tell about this day, their role in the event, how they hauled the old woman home with their bare hands, carried her to safety, like oxen who are dumb but able-bodied. They will be able to say that this was a thing that they did, even when they're too frail to pull a splinter from their skin.

Tussy swipes mud from his pants as the barrel is dragged ashore. It is beaten, but intact. The fishermen take crowbars to the lid, grope inside, and pull Annie free. She is soaked, and coughs as the men escort her through the fog, toward the roadside where a wagon is waiting.

The barrel lies there, covered in dirt and mud, two boards jutting from its braces, in a trench it seems to have dug for itself. The paint, the lettering, is either facedown or gone. The fog has become thicker; looking around, Tussy can see only the closest trees. Over the noise of the water, he can hear hoofbeats moving away and men moving through the brush. He sees the cracked wood, shards of what was once fine oak, and he is annoyed. Annoyed that people should care about this. Annoyed that Annie survived. Annoyed that a woman would be so showy.

He decides he will do it, whether Martha was serious about this plan or not. While he can, Tussy stoops down, grabs the barrel's edge, and rolls it from its trench and through the muck. It is fraudulent, Tussy decides, for Annie to claim this barrel as her own. He was too integral to the process. She's had her turn, had her fun. Martha said she would meet him somewhere far enough way. Kansas City, she said. The boards catch on leaves as he rolls, drag limbs. Occasional stones block the way, roots springing from the river, but Tussy manages. Puts his full weight into it, struggles only because it is large, struggles as any man would. He slips, steadies himself, and slips again. He presses his back against the wood, his palms, his feet, but he manages. He sheds his coat, tosses it toward the water, and wipes sweat from his brow, but he manages, and soon he will be gone. Tussy shoves forward, away from the road, checking over his shoulder for men coming through the fog.

IN WHICH A STRANGER ROLLS INTO TOWN

A young girl is the first to spot the figure on the horizon. While her mother hangs laundry on their clothesline, she plays with her ragdoll in the backyard. Squinting across the plain and holding up her doll, she compares its size to that of the few trees that stand higher than the prairie grass. If she holds it just right, she can imagine her doll being a real person, a grown woman in the distance, existing in the shadows of oaks. And here, supposing her doll a person, the young girl see's a real person approaching the town, moving slowly down the dust road that cuts a straight line through the grass.

After her, others notice. A few men carrying water to their horses look up from under their hat brims. A farmer taking plough to soil slows his mule. The girl's mother watches as she shakes out linens. All manner of townsfolk turned curious as to who could be approaching at this time of year, so long before the fair was due. As he gets closer, the town can see that the stranger is pushing something, no, rolling something, hunched over, and a little closer still, they can see that the object is a large wooden barrel. The man wears a three-piece suit, a hat, and a few people think they can see the sun reflecting off a gold watch chain dangling from his vest. Soon they can hear the barrel rolling, smacking against rocks stuck in the dirt. Rolling, rolling, rolling, and at last, after what seemed an endless road, the stranger arrives to a crowd of gathered townspeople.

He leans against the barrel, panting, and pulls a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his forehead. Then looking at the various faces watching him, he smiles.

“Hi, friends!”

There are a handful of smiles and nods, but all in all the crowd stays fairly reserved.

“Name’s Russell, Tussy Russell, folks, how do ya do?” He goes about shaking various hands as he talks. “Seems I had, well, seems I had some wagon trouble couple miles back. Wheel popped right off its spoke, as those things do. I reckon it was pure providence that brought me here to you fine people. Pure providence and my own good sense, of course. Now let me ask one of you, what’s the name of this town?”

A faceless voice from the crowd responds, “Cedar Bluffs.”

“An independent name for independent people. Cedar Bluffs.”

Questions begin to arise about the barrel. A dozen at a time, with people pointing fingers at the object in question. “What’s in there? Why didn’t you just leave that with the wagon? What are you sellin’, mister?”

“Nothing you need, sir, I’ll promise you that. But something you’re sure to be mightily interested in.”

With his hands in his pockets, Tussy strolls around to the barrel’s backside and props his heel against the wood. With a grin and a wave of his hands he gives the barrel a good kick and it rolls just enough to display, to the people of Cedar Bluffs, the writing on the side. Painted across the wood and iron girders, in white letters, are the words, “Annie Edson Taylor: Heroine of Niagara Falls; Oct. 24, 1901.”

“I’m sure word has reached you folks of Brave Miss Taylor? Queen of the Mist? Hailing from far away Michigan and then the even further shores of Niagara!”

“I think I’ve heard of her,” a man says.

“Well speak up then, sir! Tell the people all about her exploits. How she lowered herself into the rushing Niagara River, into nothing but a wooden barrel, and let that mighty current carry her right over the side of those pounding falls!”

Gasps and murmurs from the crowd only intensify when Tussy slaps his palm against the barrel.

“And this, you dear fortunate folks, is the barrel she did it in!”

“The very one?” someone asks.

“The very one! Annie Edson Taylor, folks, the greatest architect of American daredevilry!” Tussy points to an onlooker. “You there, young man, help me stand this on end.”

The young man steps forward and the two of them begin lifting at one end, the barrel twisting and rolling back and forth, cutting a line in the dirt, and it lands with a thud and a puff of dust.

Tussy gives his forehead another wipe with his handkerchief, props himself against the barrel, and asks, “Now, who wants to get their picture taken?”

So the stranger unfolds a portable camera and begins selling admission. For a cool ten cents, tossed right into the barrel, people get their photos taken posing inside Annie’s drum. He tells them to write down their name and address and he’ll mail the photos once they’re developed. Some hold their arms in the air , others crouch and rest their noses on

the wood, but nearly the entire town lines up, stomping on dimes like grapes. Through conversations Tussy finds the local artisan, and offers him a free photo if he'll fix his wagon in exchange. He finds the hotel owner and makes a similar deal for a free night's stay. He manages a free meal, a change of clothes, and a shower at the best temperature Cedar Bluffs can offer. The townsfolk are all too happy to oblige.

“You say she went over Victoria Falls?”

“Niagara, sir. If you could just look toward the camera.”

“I can't believe this is Annie Edison's real barrel!”

“Edson, ma'am. Edson Taylor.”

“The real King of the Mist, eh?”

“No, sir. Queen. Annie was a woman. Say cheese, now.”

The line moves swiftly, and after Tussy helps an older woman climb out after her photo, he turns to see a young girl, the same young girl who had watched him roll out of the horizon. The girl who understood him as an archetype, because she was too young to see people as anything but.

“You're up, cutie. Dime in the barrel.”

“Mister?” the girl began.

“Yes, dear?” Tussy knelt down to lift her up and into the barrel.

“Where's Annie?”

“Annie?”

The girl points down at the text painted on the wood. “If it's Annie's name on the barrel, where's Annie.”

Tussy smiles, looks down at the girl as she tries to hold herself up over the rim of the barrel.

“You know, you’re the first one to ask about Miss Annie all day. To really ask, I mean.”

The girl just looks back at Tussy. Frowns even.

“Miss Annie is...she’s indisposed at the moment.”

“What?”

“Indisposed. You know, she’s...she’s busy. She’s busy at home and I’m sort of doing the heavy lifting for her.”

“Are you her dad?”

“Well more like her son. You could say I’m like a son to her.”

The girl looks down at her feet, shuffling a few coins around with her toes.

“And this is all her money?”

“Most of it. Have to take a cut myself, of course.”

“How much?”

Tussy takes his hands from his pockets and kneels down.

“You got a lot of questions. Bet you like school, don’t you?”

The girl nods.

“Tell you what. Why don’t you hang onto your money? This one’s on the house. What do you think?” And before the girl can respond, Tussy takes a few steps back and aims his camera. “There we go, there we go.” He steps up to help her out of the barrel.

“A lovely photo for a lovely little girl,” he says. “Worth the price?” He smiles, but she doesn’t get the joke.

Tussy tells her to run along and she walks off to join the crowd, but she keeps an eye on the stranger from over her shoulder as the next man in line steps up.

“How do you do, friend?” Tussy says. “Dime in the barrel. Listen, the local barkeep wouldn’t happen to be in line, would he?”

“No, sir! We’re principled people.”

Tussy forces a smile. “Oh good. I was hoping it was that kind of town.”

That night, the young girl lies in her bed, nearly asleep except for the noise of the prairie outside her window. Crickets seem louder than usual, and their alternating chirps create a near constant hum. An owl sounds so clear she imagines it must be resting on her neighbor’s roof, and in the distance, there is the faint howl of a coyote or a wolf. She knows that if her mother were to walk in and ask why she is still awake, she will blame it on these noises. But of course, these noises are nothing new, occur every night, and it is really her thoughts keeping her up, her suspicions. That she adds her own imagined racket to these sounds – the rattling of a sack full of dimes. Of course, her mother will not come in, because it is late, too late even for grownups.

Except that soon after hearing another howl, the girl begins to pick out a new sound. Hoof beats coming down the road. She climbs out of bed and peeks around the edge of her window curtain to see Tussy approaching the town again, this time being

pulled by a single horse on his wagon. Rolling in the back of the wagon, racketing back and forth, is the barrel.

The girl sneaks out of her room and makes her way down the stairs, stepping along the edges to avoid creaking. As she hears the hoof beats coming closer, she rifles through the drawers of her father's desk, and then makes her way onto the porch.

Tussy brings his horse to a stop as he approaches the girl, standing on her porch in a nightgown with nothing close to a smile on her face.

"Well, if it isn't the most curious girl in Cedar Bluffs," Tussy smiles. "Up a little late, aren't you?"

"I thought you were staying in town for the night."

"Well I was planning on it, but we got the wagon fixed up sooner than I thought, so I figured I'd go ahead and hit the road."

Tussy waits for a response, but the girl doesn't give one, only stands stony faced.

"Shouldn't you head inside? Go to bed?"

The girl takes a deep breath, and decides to come right out with it. "I think you stole that barrel."

Tussy, a little taken aback by her frankness, laughs. "You do, huh?"

"I do."

Tussy looks up at the night sky. "Now I thought we covered this. I'm just handling Miss Taylor's business for her."

The girl looks down at her feet for a moment, as if she is hesitant to do what she is about to do, but then looks the stranger in the eye and pulls, from behind her back, her

father's Colt revolver. Its black metal is barely distinguishable against the bare backdrop of the prairie nighttime, and would be completely invisible if it weren't for a faint gleam of moonlight around the barrel. She points the gun right at the stranger, aims it, just as he had aimed his camera earlier.

It takes a minute to register, for Tussy to realize a ten-year-old girl is pointing a gun at him, but when he does he leaps from his seat and takes cover behind his wagon.

"Jesus Christ, I hate a precocious kid," he mumbles to himself. "That's not a toy, kid? How old are you? Where did you get that?"

The girl doesn't answer; only stares steady and tilts her head back in the direction of her house.

"Well I figured that much." Tussy starts to ease out from his cover. "I'm guessing that's your daddy's gun. Now what are you doing with your daddy's gun?"

It occurs to her that she isn't sure. This is what she's seen cowboys do in the pulps; point guns at robbers until they give up, as they inevitably will. That justice works that way, is just that simple. So simple, in fact, that she never thinks to ask why a child is the one to confront theft in the middle of the night.

"I'm gonna...I'm gonna take you to the sheriff," she says.

Tussy smiles and steps to the side, putting his horse between him and the girl. "The sheriff's asleep, honey. Just like you should be. He doesn't want to be woken up for this."

She thinks how angry her father was one Saturday, when he had been napping in the living room and she had dropped a plate in the kitchen. It shattered on the floor, and

the crash was loud enough to wake her father in the next room. He went storming into the kitchen, shouting.

“He’ll be mad at you, not me,” she says.

“You think he’s going to be happy about you holding a gun in your hand?”

No, she thought. Probably not. Her arm loosens, the gun still pointed, but not as certainly.

Tussy steps over the wagon tongue and stands with his hands in his pockets, leaving nothing between him and the revolver. He is much taller than the girl, and stands up straight so she knows it.

“Maybe I did steal the barrel.”

Her aim tightens again, suddenly more confident.

“Maybe I’m keeping all of those shiny dimes for myself. All for me.” He eases toward her across the dirt. “But Ol’ Annie’s doing fine. She’s living comfortable. She’s famous!” He moves onto the porch steps, one, then the other.

The girl doesn’t say anything, just keeps the gun pointed at the stranger.

“It’s very sweet of you to care. Very nice. Very nice indeed.” He steps across the porch. “But sometimes,” he says, standing directly in front of the gun and looking down at her.

She doesn’t look up, but frowns down the sight of the gun.

“Sometimes that’s just the way things go.”

And Tussy reaches down and wraps his hands around the revolver, pulling it loose from her fingers. Lifting his jacket he slides the gun into his waistband, tucks it safely

behind his belt. The girl's arms drop to her sides and she looks up at Tussy, furious. He can see it, and she thinks how unfortunate it is that it took him taking her gun to make her mad enough to use it.

He turns and walks back to his wagon, climbs up into the seat. But before he takes the reins, Tussy pulls his camera out of his jacket pocket, and unfolding the lens, aims it at the girl. Without bothering to focus or adjust, or to even look through the viewfinder, he points and shoots.

IN WHICH THE FIELDS BLEND INTO TREES

Tussy still isn't sure about women. His mother had always seemed like a mixed bag, her moods constantly shifting, and he never knew if trips into the kitchen would reveal her to be in good spirits or bad. Some days she would turn from the window with a bowl of cornmeal and ask if he wanted to help with dinner, to spend an hour or two working and talking with his mamma. On others, she wouldn't say anything to him at all. She would cook all evening while he stood watching in the doorway. She would brush past him to set the table. She would call him for dinner and they would eat silently, waiting for his father. Tussy still isn't sure about women. Even as an adult they seem to run hot and cold with him, bright and beautiful one minute, angry and yawning the next.

Martha doesn't seem to be much different. Ever since he met up with her in Youngstown – her stepping off the train all lovely and charming, the way she had been that night in Niagara Falls – she'd become nothing but sour. Their first night on the road, standing beneath the lamp light with the barrel, Martha got annoyed by a joke he had made to the audience. One his father had told, and one that he had always found to be a decent crowd pleaser, but one that Martha said was tacky and amateur, crude and unbecoming of world-class acts. When Tussy had argued that theirs wasn't a world-class act, that theirs was a sham, national at best, they'd fought all night. She said words Tussy had never heard from a woman. She said words that implied terrible things. They slept in

back of the wagon, parked in a grass field with the barrel on the ground by the feet, and she never made a move toward him. An entire wagon theirs, out beneath the sky, and they didn't even touch accidentally. The next night, somewhere outside Olean, Tussy said he wanted her like in Niagara Falls and he would take her if he had to, but she just laughed and slept with her front toward one of the wheels.

After too many days together, Tussy and Martha ride west looking for towns, ones small enough to be lost on maps. North Corry had turned out nicely, earning them ten dollars, which they split evenly and planned to spend on food for the next few days, at least. Still, even there, with such a successful crowd, Martha had gone onstage upset and Tussy was left to count money out back beneath the trees. He watched her move back and forth across the stage, answering people's questions, reenacting the fears they'd decided Annie felt. He'd see her laugh, stand next to the barrel, and whenever she rested her hand on the oak, he couldn't help thinking that it was his barrel, that he'd gone through all of the risks to take it and she'd just gone along for the ride.

"You've been quiet," Martha says. She lies in the back, resting her head against the barrel while Tussy guides the horses. The sun has been dropping for what feels like hours, and it leaves a band of purple hanging over the road ahead.

"Men are quiet sometimes," he says, and hears Martha laugh behind him.

"Listening to those coyotes or whatever they are, I bet."

"Sure," Tussy says.

Martha reaches over her shoulder and takes the hat from Tussy's head, a larger straw one he's been using to keep the sun from his eyes. She yawns and rests it over her face. "How much longer before we park?" she asks.

Her voice comes out muffled through the hat. "What?" Tussy asks.

"When will we stop, you think?" she shouts. "All this shaking."

"We'll stop when it's dark."

Martha peers out from the hat, and with the sunset behind her, she sees only stars. "Whatever you say, chief." She lets the hat fall back over her eyes.

Any other night, this would be the time of day that Tussy would pull the cart off to the side. The sun is getting low, he feels tired, and it's been hours since lunch. The air gets cold, and he'd like to build a fire to sleep by. But to pull over now would be giving in, would mean doing so because Martha had asked. Tussy leans forward, squinting to see the road in what little light remains. The horses grunt, and across the fields he hears the coyotes Martha was laughing about.

"It's getting cold, anyway," Martha sighs. "We might have to burn this thing for warmth." She hits her hand against the barrel. "It's more trouble than I thought."

"You're not the one loading and unloading." Tussy thinks again of her on stage, of himself barely present.

"I'm the one traveling with it back here. Takes up a lot of room."

"Take the horses for awhile, then."

She shakes her head. "Mens work."

They ride in silence. the wheels clap against the dirt. The horses breathe heavier as the air gets colder. The barrels thumps against the wagon and Martha rustles a blanket she's covered herself with. Tussy is barely sure of where they are, but the darkness reminds him how remote these fields must be. During daylight, an occasional barn could be seen on the horizon just shy of the tree line, but now there is nothing to prove they were there. No lantern light, no echo of axes splitting wood in the last evening light, no wife calling in a family for dinner. For all there was to see hours before in this fresh countryside, now they have only themselves to hear. Tussy turns toward the coyote howls and at last decides it is time to rest. "We'll stop here," he says.

"Wonderful," and Martha sits up as Tussy guides the wagon off to the roadside.

It takes Tussy half an hour to get a fire going with the logs they've kept stored in back of the wagon. They were still damp, holding in the rain from days before, and Martha made it known that it had been her idea all along to keep the logs covered, but that Tussy had insisted, "It'll be fine. It'll be fine."

"And food?" Martha asks as the fire finally catches. "You must be hungry, too."

"What's left?" Tussy sits to watch the embers.

Martha unties a potato sack, searches around, and pulls out two cans of tuna. "Not much." She tosses one into the weeds by Tussy's feet and opens the other for herself.

"And grain for the horses?"

She tosses him another sack. “Running low on that, too.” She dips her fingers into the can and pulls the fish to her mouth. She looks out at the field. “You couldn’t have slipped some money from her books, too?”

Tussy looks up from his can. “It was all I could do to get the goddamn barrel out of there,” he says, pointing to where it stands in the wagon. “She didn’t have any money, anyway.” He pulls the can top and tosses it into the fire, watching the metal melt. “What did you do, sleep with the sheriff while I got away?” He glances up, afraid he may have taken it too far, but she barely responds, only stares off into the dark and mumbles, “You’re a nasty man.”

A gun goes off somewhere in the distance. Hunters, most likely, though Tussy can’t imagine any soul finding game in this light, much less hitting it. “How in the hell are they doing that?” he says, waiting to hear another shot.

Martha shrugs. “I wouldn’t mind having whatever they’re catching.”

Another shot, further away. It can’t be hunters, Tussy decides. No one could manage it. “Jealous husband,” he says. “He won’t hit anything.”

“Hmm,” Martha says.

They eat in silence, and once they’re done, Tussy throws feed in the field for the horses. The grain sack empty, he tosses it into the wagon.

“Feels like it might snow,” Martha says, palms out to the fire.

“Stop being dramatic.” Tussy climbs up the wheel and sets a lantern on top of the barrel. It takes him three matches to get it lit.

“Do we have enough blankets if it does? Do we even have any way of not waking up buried? And the horses.”

“It’s not going to snow,” Tussy shouts. “It’s too early. You’re just not used to sleeping outside.”

“My daddy would punch you in the mouth for that.”

Tussy pulls a folded map of the northeast from his jacket pocket and spreads it by the lantern light. Martha stands with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and leans against the wagon, looking up at him.

“You know where we’re going, right?”

“I know where we are.”

“And you know where we’re going?”

Tussy glances down at her. “That’s what I’m looking for.”

Martha rests her chin against the wood and holds the blanket tighter. “I’ve been thinking,” she says.

Tussy just grunts as he runs his finger across the map.

“I’ve been thinking about Chicago,” she says.

“Don’t be stupid.”

Martha pulls herself up into the wagon and hits the lantern onto the ground so that Tussy has to jump down and keep the weeds from catching fire.

“We’re not making any goddamn money,” she says.

Tussy wants to shout at her, feels like that’s the thing to do, but he doesn’t. He mumbles and sets the lantern back upright on the wagon’s edge, glaring up at her.

“These small towns aren’t paying off. What did we steal it for if we’re sleeping outside?”

“Do you have any idea, *any* idea, how far Chicago is? I know you’re used to traveling in these things...” Tussy hits his hand against the barrel. “But Chicago is a hell of a long way for two horses to go.”

Martha looks around and takes a seat on the barrel. “New York, then.”

“New York would never have us. They’ll know it’s stolen.”

“You’re her manager. I’m her. That’s the point, we convince them otherwise.”

“It’s too risky.”

“Well that’s why I said Chicago,” Martha shouts.

“Same problem,” Tussy shouts back. “Big cities are out.” He looks up and sees Martha framed by the sky, knows he’s only framed by dirt, and climbs back onto the cart. “Look,” he says, lying the map across her lap and lifting the lantern. “Agloe is next. Only a few miles out.” He puts his finger on a small dot north of Roscoe, feeling her thigh curve underneath. “These small towns are going to pay off.”

Martha looks at him, lifting and lowering her leg beneath the map, lifting and lowering his finger. “These small towns do not *seem* to be paying off.”

Tussy reaches across and folds the map, returning it to his pocket. “Why don’t you leave the financial side to me.”

“You’ve been doing such a fine job of that so far.”

“Get up,” Tussy says.

“Excuse you?”

“Get up. Time for bed.”

Martha frowns at Tussy as she stands, crossing her arms beneath the blanket.

Tussy drops the tailgate and turns the barrel on its side, giving a good kick that sends it rolling off and landing in the dirt a few feet from the fire.

“Take it easy, you boar!” Martha shouts.

Leaving his jacket hanging over the seat, Tussy lies down. He waits for Martha, and then spreads their thickest quilt over them both. They leave the fire burning, and Tussy can just barely make out the glow beyond his feet. Martha sighs and turns her back to him. He looks over at her shivering beneath the blankets, her light hair made dark by the nighttime.

“Not tonight?” he asks quietly, though sure she’s awake.

Martha doesn’t respond.

Tussy turns toward her, pressing against her backside. “Nothing tonight?” he asks again, sliding his hand up and down her arm.

“No. Not tonight,” she says.

Tussy sighs, continues rubbing her arm, and when still she doesn’t respond, he holds her shoulder and pulls her onto her back to face him. “When was the last time, goddamnit?”

“I’m tired and I’m cold and we’re broke. You haven’t exactly been wining and dining me.”

“Bullshit,” he says.

“Play with yourself. I won’t look.” She turns away again.

Tussy sighs and crosses his arms across his chest. He peeks under the cover where it just barely hovers over the space between them, and sees how her hips curve out, how she manages to hold her body both near and away. He thinks about how the last time he touched her, really touched her, she'd felt so close, and how now, with her legs pressed barely but undeniably against his thigh, they may as well be sleeping on opposite sides of the field.

"It's a cruel thing you all do," he says. "Running it off and on like that."

"I'm not here to make you feel better about yourself," Martha says without turning over.

"You looked so nice getting off that train."

They both close their eyes. For a moment, the breeze thickens and all they can smell are the horses.

"I'll make you a bet," Martha says at last. "If you're right and it doesn't snow tonight, I might be in a better mood tomorrow."

"Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm." She nods, half asleep.

"Tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night."

Tussy isn't sure he believes her, wonders if she'll even remember in the morning, but he falls asleep counting the clouds in the sky and knows the weather's fine.

By the morning, the fire has burned out, steaming underneath a light rain. Blankets damp, they wake up early, half an hour past sunrise. Martha frowns at Tussy

and opens her umbrella over her head, taking a seat up front as he loads the barrel back onto the cart.

“No snow,” he says.

“No snow,” she agrees.

Tussy rolls the barrel up the pair of planks, bearing the weight against his shoulder. He finishes with a muscle ache he’s been feeling for days, and with the rain running down his face, he sees Martha staring rigidly forward, yet again unaware of the effort he’s gone to.

The rain turns out to be a blessing. Tussy leaves a pail in the back to gather water for the horses, who had no fresh water the night before. Martha, too, holds a mug just past the shelter of her umbrella and shares what she collects with Tussy. For breakfast they eat from the same tuna can, since neither is very hungry, but Martha still spends large sections of road complaining about food they haven’t had for days, listing meals she will order once they reach Agloe. During all these miles, Tussy stays mostly quiet, watching the grey clouds lie low across the birch trees left standing so far across the fields. This was how his father acted, staring off at things as if the world was far away and not where he stood. After dinner on Sundays he would go out into the yard to get firewood and stay longer than he needed to, doing nothing. It was the opposite of how his mother tended to be. She talked, did her best to keep her present company present, and when it came to his father this usually ended in frustration, usually ended with his father studying storms from the front porch and his mother going inside, letting the screen door

slam. Tussy leans forward to pat one of the horses and absently watches them tow like he's got a lot on his mind. He doesn't. He's not so sure if his father ever did, either. Still, he decided a long time ago that this was one way for a man to get through life. He looks over at Martha, expecting her to be watching him, expecting her to be biting her lip, wondering what he could be thinking. But she isn't. Martha isn't facing him at all. Instead she's turned toward the field, watching the same clouds as him. Tussy starts to say something, but then thinks of his mother and doesn't.

Around noon, Tussy stops the wagon and they begin searching a field for potatoes forgotten by the pickers weeks before. There are dozens, scattered like dusty rocks, and Martha boils rainwater over the fire Tussy has built so they can soak. They wait. Tussy take his knife and stabs individual spuds to see how far along they are. They eat. The potatoes taste bland, unsalted. Once they're done, Tussy takes their boiling pot and tosses the water to steam across the ground. Martha shouts that they should have saved it, that who knew when it would rain again, and Tussy shouts back that it was as good as ruined anyway, and they get back in the cart and carry on.

As the rain stops, Martha says she's tired. She lies in the back, keeping her umbrella open to block the emerging sun. She says the boards are wet, but there isn't much she can do about it. As the wagon rocks, Tussy can hear water sloshing inside of the barrel. It can't be much, given how little it rained, but Tussy thinks that water has probably been collecting for days, maybe even weeks. He's worried about the wood, about how many years it will take the rain to eat through the oak.

He looks back at Martha, lets her sleep, and by mid-afternoon they approach the crossroad that reads “Agloe” on the map.

The crossroad lies empty, with nothing but the same exhausted potato fields stretching from its four corners. There is no railroad, no telegraph lines, which is good, Tussy knows, and keeps things low-key. But there is also no post office, no general store, no bank, no hotels, no restaurants, no city hall, no homes, only more of the same, more of the last hundred miles.

“You’re lost,” Martha says, pushing her umbrella aside and going over to rub one of the horses behind the ears.

“I’m checking,” Tussy says, his map spread across one of the horse’s backs. “We’re not lost.”

“This is Agloe?”

The map places the town on Route 206, drawing water from Beaver Kill Creek. Tussy looks up and reads 206 on a wooden sign hanging off-kilter from its post. Up the road that leads into the distant mountains, a small wooden bridge runs over a creek. No town lies in sight for miles in any direction, and aside from the bridge, the only structure standing is a farm house a good half-mile to the west.

“This isn’t a town,” Martha says.

“We’re not lost,” Tussy says again. He checks and rechecks the map.

Martha looks at their surroundings, petting the horse. She looks at the farm house. Tussy looks up and sees her staring off, studying that home in the distance, and he turns

toward it as well. A lone figure moves there, working between home and shed, raising and throwing an ax down toward the ground. He works this way, splitting firewood for the evening, and then stops and holds his hand over his eyes, squinting toward their wagon. Tussy must appear, he thinks, as the same kind of distant, potent presence, except he looks over at Martha, sees her unbridling a horse, and in an instant gallops off toward a home that can't possibly help.

Tussy unbridles the other and chases after her.

He arrives with Martha mid-conversation. He doesn't say anything, only ties his horse to the porch railing while keeping a firm eye on the man. He's middle-age, Tussy guesses, with a deep tan on his face and forearms. His clothes are dirty, mostly with soil, but also from sawdust and wood bits. When Tussy goes to shake his hand, he smells. Even without the immediate access of a bathroom and a home, Tussy knows that he smells better after weeks on the road, only washing faintly in streams with lye. His teeth are barely there, but his suspenders rest on the kind of broad shoulders women seem to love.

"He says Agloe isn't a place," Martha says, turning toward Tussy once he arrives.

Tussy shakes his hand, introducing himself. "Jeb," he says cordially enough, but from then on out seems inhospitable toward the idea of other men in his home.

"Jeb says this place doesn't exist," Martha says.

"What place is that?" Tussy asks, staring Jeb in the eye.

“Aglloe,” Jeb says. “Never heard of it.” He nods politely to Martha and then goes back to chopping wood.

“It’s the town you’re in,” Tussy says. He puts his hands in his pockets. He stands between Martha and Jeb.

“I don’t know what you saw coming in,” Jeb says. “But I’ve lived here a long time and never seen a town.”

Tussy takes in the view from the property, hoping to find something to prove Jeb wrong. A burned out school, a graveyard, anything. But everything looks the same as it did from the crossroad.

“Where do you get your feed from,” Tussy asks. “Your milk, your meat?”

Jeb lets the ax rest for a moment. He looks at Tussy and Tussy is suddenly reminded that he has never lived on a farm in his life.

“We go for supplies sometimes down in Roscoe,” Jeb says. “But we’re pretty self-sufficient here.”

Tussy looks back at Martha, who looks at Jeb. “Who’s we?” Tussy asks.

“Wife and I.”

“Where’d she grow up?”

“Not in the place you’re looking for.”

“Do you have an extra room,” Martha asks, and once she speaks up, Tussy glares at her because he has things under control.

Jeb stacks the wood he’s cut and lifts it in his arms. “Ma’am,” he says. “You get your friend to help me carry this wood in and you can stay as long as you like.” He smiles

at Martha and carries his load past where Tussy stands with his hands in his pockets.

“One room?” he asks.

Martha smiles and says one room is fine.

As Jeb goes inside, leaving the front door open, Tussy laughs to himself and kneels to pick up the remaining firewood. He looks at Martha. “One room?”

She shrugs and turns to walk toward the house.

“What about the cart?” Tussy shouts after her. “The barrel, Christ’s sake?”

“Go get it.” She climbs the stairs to the porch and begins studying the home like she’s looking for something. Tussy watches her look over the windows as he unties a horse and rides it back to the road.

By the time Tussy gets back and gets the horses fed and gets the wagon tucked in Jeb’s barn, the dinner light shines through the dining room window. Tussy can make out half of Martha’s face except for when she throws it back to laugh at something Jeb has said. He sees her raising a fork to her mouth and knows that they’ve started without him. “Damn fool,” Tussy hears her say when he comes through the front door, and when he sees it’s just the two of them eating beef stew in the candlelight, Tussy asks where might the missus be.

“Other room,” Jeb says, picking at his stew and half laughing still at a joke Martha had made.

Tussy pulls up a chair and serves himself stew from a pot on the table. He's thirsty too, but doesn't want to ask for directions to the kitchen. "Should I bring her dinner?" Tussy asks.

Jeb and Martha both are still coming down from their joke. Martha covers her mouth. Jeb's eyes water and he wipes them with his napkin. "Better not," he manages. "She's had consumption two weeks now."

"Oh God," Martha says, no longer laughing and clearing her throat. "Is she okay?"

Jeb nods, swallowing a spoonful. "She coughs a lot," he says. "That hurts her, I think. Strong woman though."

The room gets quiet, and when Tussy breaks the silence to say something as simple as "I'm sure she is," they both look at him as if he's interrupted.

"Yes, well," Jeb mumbles, chewing at his jaw. He smiles at Martha. "Nice of you to ask, Miss Taylor."

Tussy looks at Martha. He isn't sure if this was the best situation to use her alias, if it might bring with it unwanted attention. In truth, he realizes it was probably the correct choice, that Martha's identity should remain consistent as they travel, but he still glare at her for making the decision on her own. She shrugs, doesn't understand what he's mad about.

"She's lucky to have a husband like yourself," Tussy says. "A lot of men would have run out the door."

"She's in bed most of the time."

“The best wives are.”

Jeb doesn't laugh. He stares at Tussy as if this stranger in his home doesn't understand dying. Then he turns back to Martha. He says he wants to hear more about her days as a dancer, more about her life growing up in the Pacific Northwest, details Tussy hasn't heard and isn't sure are true. Still, she goes into a story – about her father losing the lottery – that sends Jeb into hysterics, and Tussy sits between the two of them wishing he had gotten to Jeb first.

“She *is* lucky,” Martha says, once they stop laughing.

“You do well out here, friend?” Tussy asks. The clutter in the home seems disorganized, but expensive. A nice collection of cast iron pots hang from a rack by the fireplace. The dinner room table, made out of a strong, dark spruce, rests on a bear skin rug. Through the doorway, looking into a sitting room, Tussy can see a wall mostly covered in taxidermy. Boar's heads, deer, elk. Off-center, toward the ceiling, hangs the head of a coyote, the ancestor of those cries heard the night before. “Hunt much?” Tussy asks.

“Some,” he says, then turns back to Martha. “Bet if your pop had won, you wouldn't have ended up broken down by the road there.”

“And wouldn't that have been a shame,” she smiles.

Tussy digs his boots into the bear skin rug, hopes they're dirty.

“What do you make of Agloe, then?” Tussy asks. “I'll tell you, a man in Youngstown sold me a map that says it ought to be right here.”

“Never heard of it,” Jeb says.

“Well...” Tussy pulls the map from his pocket and spreads it on the wood between him and Jeb. “This is 206, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“And here...” Tussy lies his finger on the map. “This is your intersection here, right?”

“Right.”

Tussy nods, takes another bite of stew. “And you’ve never heard of Agloe?”

Jeb chews. He looks at the map, and then at Tussy. “Doesn’t exist.”

“He’s never heard of it!” Martha shouts. “Jesus.”

Tussy look at Jeb, who shrugs. “Never heard of it.”

Martha starts folding and straightening her napkin on the table, and Tussy decides to fold his map away. “Just lucky we found you, then,” he says.

After dinner, Jeb says he has a few things to take care of, animals to tend to, and that Tussy and Martha should help themselves to the guest room, first door a the top of the stairs, but to – for God’s sake – avoid the master bedroom at the end of the hall, where his tubercular wife slept.

“I’ve been using the guest room myself,” he says. “But I’ll take the couch tonight.”

Martha smiles as Jeb goes back into the yard, and Tussy takes hold of her arm.

“You really are a slut,” he says.

“Take your hands off me,” she shouts, jerking her arm away. “What are you talking about?”

“You and your goddamn eye flutters at Jeb all night.”

He’s letting us stay here,” she says. “Decent food, a *bed*. I’m just being nice. One of us has to be.”

“Have you seen the way he’s been acting towards me?”

“He gave you a free meal! You should be out there helping him right now. It’s not his fault you’re lazy.”

Tussy wishes she would keep her voice down. Who knows how close Jeb is to the house. “I think he’s wealthy,” Tussy whispers.

“I think so, too.” Martha, too, has been observant.

“Well let’s grab some stuff while he’s out. Money’s probably upstairs.”

Martha laughs.

“What?” he asks.

“Now you want to make an effort?”

“You want to keep eating like this, don’t you?”

“I do,” Martha says, flatly.

Tussy stares at her, wonders if she meant that the way he took it. He follows her into the sitting room, where looks over each of the those stuffed and prideful creatures. She pauses underneath the coyote.

“Are you going to sleep with him?” Tussy asks.

“It’s none of your business what I choose to do,” she says without looking at him, still studying the animals.

“Lord knows, if you don’t have the clap already, you’ll get something from him.” He steps back into the hall and looks toward the front door for any sign of Jeb. “It is my business,” he whispers. “You promised me.”

She turns toward him to laugh again, but then sees that his face looks too serious for that.

“We haven’t made any money,” she says.

“So lets rob him! Lock him up with his wife, where he oughta be anyway, and take everything we can get.”

Martha shakes her head and takes Tussy’s hand, standing closer to him. “Well that wouldn’t really be *you* providing,” she says. “Now would it?”

Tussy hears Jeb’s footsteps land heavy on the porch, hears a few stomps where he’s trying to get the mud off his boots, and Tussy pulls away from Martha to go upstairs before he hears the screen door creak open.

The bedroom smells like old paper with a hint of wood smoke from where the beef cooked downstairs. Lace curtains hang over the window, yellowing from too much daylight. Underneath the bed, Tussy finds a flask bottle of whiskey, three-fourths gone, and two crumbling photographs of a woman lying stretched beside a river. She’s looking at the camera with her dress hanging off one shoulder, and Tussy guesses she must be Jeb’s wife, attractive and young and healthy. He helps himself to the whiskey, and it’s only a few minutes after he blows out the lantern that he hears moaning from downstairs.

He closes his eyes, but all he can see is Martha, happy and glowing warm by the fireplace.

Tussy sits up, relights the lantern, and pulls the photographs out from under the bed. Her dark hair pulled into a bun, a few strands have slipped loose and drape across the grass, across that one bare shoulder. Tussy looks at his fingertips, which have gleaned a light layer of gray from holding the photos. He hears the horses outside, whinnying as the wind picks up. He hears the wind chime – homemade from old utensils – rattling against itself, and he hears Martha, so clearly unaffected by the world outside. In the photographs, the woman's dress – white, nearly blending with the grass – lies floating against her body. Outside, he hears coyotes again, howling, still, from a great distance, as if they're never any closer, as if they exist at the ends of rainbows after storms. The curve of her neck. The collarbone. Her skin peeling off, onto his fingers. Wood smoke and this bed frame, built by hand, built from local timber. Jeb and his wife chopping wood together in the forest. Jeb chopping as his wife admires him from the riverbank. Martha moaning downstairs while this woman lies untouched in a bedroom above their heads.

Tussy steps into the hallway and peers down the banister. The downstairs rests dark, without even shadows. He hears them clearer now and walks away from the stairway, down the hall. The floor creaks, but he doubts they'll notice. He's left the photographs in his room, but he wishes he'd taken them. He hears a cough coming faintly from the end of the hall, then silence, and then a more violent retching.

He presses his ear to the door at the end of the hallway, and even here he can still make out the sounds of Martha and Jeb. The woman coughs on the other side of the door

and Tussy knows that if he can hear them downstairs, then Jeb's wife can hear them downstairs, too. There are few things that can be kept secret inside a home. He knows she must have heard them having dinner without her, heard her husband laughing after hearing another woman's voice.

Tussy knocks on her door. He has no name to call her, but knows that if she lets him in, he would fuck her right then. He would do it because other men are afraid to because she is diseased and broken. He knocks again and hears her cough, only softer this time. He knocks once more, and this time the light seeping out through the door sill by his feet goes out. It's for the best, he thinks, because he probably wouldn't have touched her anyway.

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BIOGRAPHY

Benjamin Page graduated from Southern Nash High School, Bailey, North Carolina, in 2006. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from University of North Carolina Wilmington in 2010, where he was Prose Editor for the literary magazine, Atlantis. He received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2014.