

THE RUINS

by

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

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family and friends.

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I would like to thank the many family and friends for always being there for me. Thank you to Tania James and all those who read and helped shape this collection into something that I am extremely proud to put my name on.

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ABSTRACT

THE RUINS

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This thesis is a collection of linked short stories centered around the loss and guilt of one family. Marie is the mother of Lila and the grandmother of Nicole. Marie's mother dies when she is young, causing her to grow up fast to take care of her father. This provides Marie with the strength to take care of the rest of the family when Lila's daughter, Melody, disappears. Lila takes her children, Melody and Justin, camping with their cousins, Nicole and Mitch. Lila shares a ghost story that Marie had told her when she was young about the "laughing spirit" in the nearby spring that takes people. Melody becomes entranced by the story and a few nights later disappears. Lila becomes depressed. She feels guilty, believing that the story she told Melody led to her death. After visiting the site of Melody's disappearance, she starts to believe that "laughing spirit" took her daughter. This belief causes Lila to drown herself to be closer to her daughter. Marie feels responsible for her family's pain. She made up the story that led to both her granddaughter and daughter's death. She must figure out how to move past this to help

her grandson, Justin, who turns to drugs after Lila's suicide. Nicole, Marie's granddaughter and Lila's niece, struggles with her aunt's suicide. She has always been compared to her aunt. When her husband brings up having children, Nicole is afraid of history repeating. She struggles to move past her fear and communicate with her husband.

THE CASTLE

Marie pulled the pot off the stove and strained the pasta. Her dad would be home soon and she wanted to make sure dinner was ready for him, just like her mom used to. Marie took over the cooking and cleaning after her mother died. Her father tried at first, but, the chicken was always burnt and her clothes came out itchy and stiff. So, she did the only thing she could – she learned how to do it herself. She had watched her mother enough to get the gist of things and anytime she wasn't sure she asked her best friend's mom. At first, her father had told her she didn't have to, that it wasn't her job, but, it didn't take long for him to get used to it. Marie was placing the plates on the counter when her father walked through the door.

“Smells delicious in here, honey. What did you make?”

“Spaghetti, you're favorite.”

Her father smiled and went to his room to change out of his work clothes and clean up for dinner.

Dinner was quiet, her father asked about school and she asked about work, each gave vague, general answers, “It's good...,” and then they finished eating in silence. Typically, Marie would do her homework after dinner, but tonight she didn't have any, so she looked around her room for something to do instead. A few days ago, she found a small box among her mother's sewing things and had brought it into her room. It caught

her eye and she decided to see what was inside, she opened it and pulled out a handful of papers. Most of them were pictures she had drawn as a child; castles, unicorns, princesses, fairies, and such. They made Marie smile, she used to love fairytales. Her mother would tell her stories before bed about princesses that lived in beautiful castles with dragons and princes, and all things magical. Marie would then draw pictures to accompany her mother's stories. As she got older she began making up stories on her own. She would write them down and then illustrate them, giving them to her mother as gifts. Many of these were also inside the box. She never knew her mother held onto them. She reread the stories in her hand, picturing the smile they always brought to her mother's face.

She stuck her hand in, to grab another set, but pulled out a pamphlet instead. It was for a hotel, on the cover was a beautiful mansion, that to Marie, looked a lot like a castle. She remembered her mother taunting her with a "big birthday surprise," just a few weeks before the accident. This must've been it; fairytales had been their thing, and this looked like a castle right out of a fairytale, it was even high up on a cliff. The name Ha Ha Tonka Castle was in big, bold letters just above the image. Marie set the pamphlet down and started to gather up the other the rest of the papers. She paused when she heard a knock on her door. Her father stuck his head in to say goodnight and saw the papers she held. "Your mother always loved your stories." Marie looked at the box sitting on her bed. Her father cleared his throat, "Well... goodnight, then... love you" and shut her door. That night she dreamt of castles, and princes, and her dancing in ballrooms with her mom.

After dinner, one night the following week, her father stopped Marie before she escaped to her room. In his hands was the same pamphlet Marie had seen in her mother's box.

"Your...eh... mother had been so excited to surprise you with this." He looked at the paper in his hand, "She wanted..." he cleared his throat, "it was supposed to be your birthday present."

"I know, I saw the pamphlet the other day" Marie said, looking at the hallway that led to her bedroom.

He nodded, still not looking at her, "I know your birthday was a few months ago, but, you've been doing so much..."

"I don't mind, really" Marie interrupted.

"I know you don't, but, I still think you deserve a break, so, I talked to my boss and got a few days off from work. I thought we could take a trip."

"To where?" Marie asked, eyeing the pamphlet in his hand.

"I know that castles and fairytales and everything was your and your mom's thing. And, I know it won't be the same without her, but... but, she really wanted to take you. And I think we could have a fun time." He finished quickly. He finally lifted his eyes to look at his daughter.

"Really," she whispered, "I don't need a vacation or anything."

"Your mom *really* wanted to take you..." He looked back down at the pamphlet.

Marie studied her father's face, "And I'd love to go," she sighed. "I mean, you know, if you're *sure* you can take the time off work, because if not it's really..."

He looked up and gave her the brightest smile she'd seen in six months cutting off her words.

Maybe it wouldn't be *so* bad.

Marie gripped the door beside her, as the car slowly crept up the hill towards the stone mansion. When the car finally made it to the top, Marie got out and stopped. The castle was so much bigger than Marie had pictured. The pamphlet didn't go it justice. Her father came around the car, just as two bellhops came outside with a baggage cart. Marie's father opened the trunk and helped them put the two bags on the cart. Marie's father turned towards her, "You ready?" She nodded her head and he followed the bellhop towards the door, Marie took one more look at the outside of the castle, then followed.

A woman was waiting at the front desk, right inside the door, and her father walked straight towards her, but, Marie was distracted. The doors to the ballroom were wide open and she was itching to go explore it, she loved dancing. Her mother had been teaching her steps since she could walk, and had put Marie in ballet when she was five. She stopped lessons a few years ago, she preferred more modern dances now. Her friend's older sister had been teaching her swing dancing and Marie loved the fast pace movements. She wandered towards the ballroom and peaked inside.

The ballroom made up the very center of castle, Marie's breath caught the moment she glanced inside. The room was bathed in sunlight from above, reflecting off the gold tints in the wallpaper, making the whole room sparkle. The floor was made of light wood planks that continued from the entryway. She stepped inside and glanced up;

she saw two levels of balconies looking down at her. Her eyes continued upward until blinded by the light flooding the glass ceiling above. She could imagine exactly where the band would set up. The floor would be full of men lifting women in the air and swinging them around their waists, moving in time with the upbeat music. Marie would take the floor and all eyes would be on her. She closed her eyes and pictured the steps she and her partner would dance. She didn't realize she was actually moving until she heard a low chuckle behind her. She turned around and saw a boy with dark hair, standing in the doorway.

“Nice moves.”

Marie looked down at her feet, blushing, “Thanks.”

“You're welcome,” he took a step towards her, “You ever dance with a partner?”

He took another step.

“Just my friend,” she didn't move.

“My name's Dalton,” he reached her and extended his hand.

She looked at him a minute before taking his hand and shaking it, “Marie.”

“So, you want to try that again, with a partner?”

Her blush deepened, “There isn't any music.”

He started to hum and reached out his hand again.

Marie was about to accept, but her father stepped into the doorway. “Marie, are you in here?”

“Yeah, dad, right here,” she said, sighing.

He stepped inside and looked around, “Wow, this is amazing.”

Dalton looked between Marie and her father before saying, "It's one of my favorite rooms."

Her father looked at Dalton, seeming to notice him for the first time. He walked over to him and said, "I'm Mr. Falcon, Marie's father."

"Dalton."

"Nice to meet you, Dalton. Are you a guest here, too?" Mr. Falcon asked.

"No, I help out around here. I live in town. And actually, I should probably get to the kitchen. I'm supposed to help with the dinner service tonight." Dalton responded, glancing at his watch. He turned to leave, but when he reached the door he turned back around, "I'll see you around, Marie."

Marie responded, "See you," but he was already out the door.

"He seemed nice," her father said.

"Yeah," Marie said, still staring at the empty door.

They walked up the grand staircase to the second level. Their room was on the 'back side' of the mansion. Across the hall from their door and a few feet to the right was another door that Marie suspected led to the balcony she saw in the ballroom. Her father opened the door and Marie was instantly in love with the room. In the middle sat two beds and across from those stood an elegant fireplace, with a fire already burning, to chase away the October chill. On the far side was a large window, and her father moved to open the curtains. She followed, and her breath, once again, caught in her throat. The castle had been built on the edge of a cliff for a reason, whoever stood on this side could

see the sprawling lake below. This view would mesmerize anyone, with its beauty. She stood looking out the window, while her father unpacked his bag.

When it was time for dinner, Marie changed into her favorite dress, a light blue floral print. Her mother had made it last year for her. The fit wasn't perfect, but, it was the closest she could get to bringing her mom with her. She walked down to the dining room with her father, excited to see what was on the menu. The smell hit her the second her feet touched the wood flooring on the main level. Mrs. Evans had prepared a delicious meal, and Marie and her father devoured the Southern baked ham, candied yams, rolls, and even the green beans they were served. Marie didn't think she could eat another bite, but, then she smelled the fresh apple pie, waiting to be served. She loved apple pie, she would help her mother make it every fall, after they went apple picking. She tried to make one a couple of weeks ago, but, she couldn't get the crust right, it had crumbled in the oven. She took a bite, it was as good as her mother's pie. Marie and her father talked very little during dinner. The little conversation they did have revolved around the food and the beautiful view from outside their bedroom window.

When Marie and her father had finished their meal, she wanted to explore the other rooms on the main level, and he hesitantly agreed. They started in the West Parlor, which was right off of the dining room, inside Marie found sofas and lounge chairs surrounded by shelves of books. A few tables were placed off to the right side. There were a few men and women sitting in the chairs reading. Marie didn't want to disturb them, so she directed her father to the next room, the East Parlor, which was across the hall. Inside was a different scene, entirely. In one corner, was a grand piano where a

woman sat playing expertly. Around her a few couples danced, while others listened, swaying in tune. Further inside the room, Marie saw more people laughing and talking in small groups. This was obviously, where the guests came to socialize. Marie started to walk towards the piano, but her father stopped her.

“There’s still a few more rooms to see, let’s finish our tour and then we can come back.”

“Or, we could listen for a bit and then finish,” Marie countered.

Her father looked around at all the people inside the room, “If we get sidetracked we’ll never finish.”

Marie saw the discomfort on her father’s face and looked around one more time, before following him out the door.

The game room was next and was less crowded than the East Parlor. Marie walked through the doorway to find a billiards table in the center of the room. She also saw a few tables set up by the walls where a few men were playing cards. She expected her father to want to stay a bit, since he loved playing cards, but, he barely looked around, before deciding to leave. The kitchen was across the hall, and Marie wondered if Mrs. Evans was still in the kitchen. She thought about asking her how she got her crust so perfect. She turned to ask her father if they could check out the kitchen, but, he wasn’t there. She glanced around, but, didn’t see him. There was still one more room left, the sun room, and he must have headed there thinking she was following him. She was about to do just that when out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone come through the kitchen doors.

She turned and came face to face with Dalton. “Marie,” he sounded glad to see her.

“Hi...” she wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Exploring?” he asked.

“Yeah, there’s a lot to see.”

“Did you check out the East Parlor, yet? Evie, is amazing on the piano...”

“We did, she sounded really good.”

“We...?” Dalton looked around her.

“Me and my dad. I think he headed to the sun room, I was about to follow...”

“It’s night... the sun isn’t out,” Dalton smirked.

“I should go meet my dad.”

“Or, we could go listen to Evie...”

Marie remembered him asking if she’d ever danced with a partner, earlier, and blushed. She wanted to, but the image of her father sitting along pulled her towards the sun room. “I think I should go find my dad,” she said, starting to walk away.

Dalton followed, “Ok, mind if I join? It’s a pretty clear night so we can probably see the stars.”

“I... I guess.”

Marie and Dalton walked to the sun room, and found her father sitting in a lounge chair. Marie walked to the chair next to him and sat down, Dalton took the other chair next to Marie.

Marie half listened as her father continued to ask Dalton questions. She learned that Dalton was from Camdenton, the closest town to the castle and his father worked in the stables, and Dalton helped out around the property, doing whatever they needed. He was working in the kitchen that day, because one of the staff members was sick and they needed an extra hand. Dalton had to be at the hotel early the next morning to help with breakfast, so, Mrs. Evans had agreed to let him stay the night in one of the empty rooms. Dalton carried most of the conversation, but, her father interjected comments here and there; it was the most Marie had heard him talk in a while, actually. When they started to talk about fishing, she tuned them out and concentrated on the stars. They were so much brighter here, then in the city. She never realized there was so many. The moon was just a sliver of light, making the stars shine even brighter. She found the Big Dipper, Orion's belt, and the Milky Way, her mom had taught her the constellations. The sound of silence brought her back to Dalton and her father. When she looked up, both were looking at her. Dalton's smile looked like it was about to turn to laughter, but, her father was frowning.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked, looking at her father.

"I didn't say anything, Dalton asked if you wanted to explore the grounds with him tomorrow."

"Oh," she glanced at Dalton, then back to her father, "I thought we might go explore together, after breakfast..."

"I guess we could. I hadn't really thought about it," he looked at his daughter, "I was thinking of checking out the books in the West Parlor, after breakfast, but, if you'd rather..."

“Oh, well if you want to do that, that’s fine too,” she interrupted, not wanting to change her father’s plan. She looked at Dalton, “I thought you had to help out in the kitchen?”

“I do, but I should get a couple hours between breakfast and lunch. But, if you’d rather not wait,” he looked at her father, “I could give you guys directions to some of my favorite places.”

Her father was silent a minute, and then Marie heard him say, “Yes, that would be nice. I think I’d rather do that, then stare at books all day. Good idea, Marie.”

“I’ll write it down and give it to you tomorrow at breakfast,” Dalton said, standing, “I should probably head to my room, it’s getting late and I do need to be up early.”

It wasn’t long after Dalton left, that Marie’s father decided it was time for the two of them to head to bed, also. Marie took one last look at the stars and went inside, excited to wake up and go exploring with her dad.

Marie and her father woke up early the next morning and went down to breakfast. Dalton was already there, laying out breakfast for the guests. Dalton brought out waffles for both, setting it down in front of Marie first telling her, “I made it myself,” and then handed Marie’s father his, along with directions to the Colosseum Sinkhole. “It’s one of my favorite sights, I think you guys will really enjoy it.” Then he headed back to the kitchen. Marie’s father looked over the directions while he ate his waffle.

The trail leading to the sinkhole started at the edge of the trees on the right side of the castle. Marie’s father led the way, pointing out anything she might trip on. Marie

enjoyed being outside, in nature, more than she thought she would. She had started to find a comfort in the quiet, calm feeling it gave her. Her father stopped and she peered around him to see why. In front of her was a large stone bridge, as she stared at it a car drove over it, on its way to the castle.

“Did we drive over that?” she asked her father.

“Yes, don’t you remember?”

“Not, really, I guess I wasn’t pay much attention” Marie never paid much attention anymore when in the car.

“I thought it was neat when we drove over it, but, seeing it from this perspective, it’s even neater. That’s not something you’re going to see in the city.” He started walking, again.

“No, it’s not,” Marie agreed, and followed him.

When they reached the structure, Marie’s father walked beneath it, but Marie hesitated.

“What if... what if it falls?”

“I don’t think we have to worry about that. Who knows how long it’s been standing here. They wouldn’t let cars drive on it if it wasn’t safe.”

“That’s my point, I mean, what if it can’t stand any long, what if it falls and we’re under it?”

He walked over to where the rock met the ground, “Come here.” Still she hesitated, “You don’t have to go under it if you don’t want to, but I want to show you

something.” Marie finally moved. “You see this?” He pointed to the rock base, “See how thick it is?”

“Yes,”

He banged on the rock, “Hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“That noise, listen, do you hear the noise it makes when I hit it?”

“Yes...”

“That sound means its solid. This rock isn’t coming down anytime soon, honey.”

Marie’s head snapped up to look at her father, he hadn’t called her honey since her mom’s funeral.

“But, if you don’t want to walk under it, I understand...”

“No, if you say it’s safe, then I trust you,” still she hesitated. It wasn’t until her father reached out his hand, that she moved. She grabbed hold of his extended hand and followed him under the bridge. He stopped in the middle and she looked up. Solid stone floated above her head, it looked black from the shade. She looked behind her and saw that the tops of all the trees were cut off. She let go of her father’s hand and walked to foot of the bridge and felt the stone, the mixture of the chilly air and the lack of sun made it freezing. She turned to see her father smiling at her.

“Pretty neat isn’t it.”

“Yeah, it is,” she smiled back.

“Come on, according to Dalton’s directions the sinkhole is just beyond the other side.”

Marie, again, followed her father. It wasn't long before the sinkhole became visible. Marie found it eerie to think about how deep the hole must go. She didn't want to get too close. She could see enough from where she was standing to know the ground was very steep. Marie's father walked a little closer, and sat down on a rock. Marie found a rock to sit on herself, and listened to the few birds still singing. She didn't know how long they sat there, but, eventually her stomach started to growl, so she called out to her father, and they started back to the castle.

At lunch, Dalton asked about their hike. Marie told him the sinkhole was interesting, but, the natural bridge had been her favorite.

"You should check out the spring, next," he said handing Marie's father another set of directions.

"As nice as that sounds, I think I'm all hiked out. I think a quiet afternoon with a book on the sun porch is what I need now."

Marie's head fell.

"Marie, if you want, I can show you the spring," Dalton suggested, "They have plenty of help for dinner, so I'm sure Mrs. Evans wouldn't mind."

Marie looked at Dalton and smiled, "Yeah, if you're sure they don't need you."

"I'm sure. I'll just go let Mrs. Evans know."

Marie met Dalton in the entryway and he led her to a different trail than the one she and her father had used that morning. They walked side by side, in silence for a while, before Dalton started asking her questions about her home, school, and friends. Marie answered them all and asked him about the same things. The walk went by quickly

and before Marie realized it, they were at the spring. All the talking had not only made the hike fly by, but, it had also made Marie realize how comfortable she was around Dalton, more comfortable, even, than she had been this morning with her dad.

“This leads to the lake you see outside the hotel’s windows,” Dalton explained.

“It’s moving a lot fast than I would have thought,” Marie said watching the water rush past her.

“Yeah, it moves quickly, that’s why it’s best not to get in it. That and well, it’s freezing.”

“Really?” Marie asked, moving towards the water.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Dalton said as she was reaching her hand out to touch it.

“Why not?” Marie asked, taunting him as she slowly knelt down by the water’s edge.

“Because, it’s so cold you could lose your hand...” He stepped closer to her.

“Really!?!” Marie said, jerking her hand back.

Dalton laughed, “No, not really. It’s just really cold, and what with it being *October* it’ll feel even colder once you pull you hand out.”

“Scared?” Marie taunted, again reaching out to touch the water.

“No, just smart.”

“No, I think you’re scared,” Marie looked at the water and put her hand in, “It’s not that bad.”

“Yeah, well why don’t you pull it out and hold it up in the air for a minute,” Dalton challenged.

“Fine,” Marie pulled her hand out and raised it above her head, just as a gust of wind hit her. It took all her strength not to pull it down and hide it in her pocket. She stared down Dalton the entire time. After what felt like a minute, to her anyway, she pulled her arm down, “See not so bad.”

Dalton laughed, “Fine, you win.”

“Now it’s your turn, stick your hand in and then raise it above your head.”

“No way!” Dalton shook his head.

“I knew you were scared,” Marie folded her arms.

Dalton looked at her smug face and finally gave in. He walked the last few steps and stuck his hand in, but, before he could take it out, Marie stuck her hand in as well and splashed him.

“Hey!” Dalton yelled and jumped back.

“That’s for taking too long,” Marie laughed.

“You think that’s funny?” Dalton moved back to the water and splashed Marie. After that it was a full-blown war, that didn’t end until both their coats were soaked.

“Okay, okay,” Dalton said, holding up his hands. “Truce?”

Marie looked at her coat and nodded, “Truce.”

Without the movement, it didn’t take long before they were both shivering. Dalton gathered up some wood and built a fire by the water’s edge. They sat close to it, warming up and trying to dry out their coats.

“It’s really nice up here,” Marie said through chattering teeth.

“Yeah, I love it here,” Dalton said looking around. “Do you know why they call it Ha Ha Tonka?”

“No, why?” Marie asked, truly curious.

“Ha Ha Tonka means ‘laughing water’ in Osage. The Osage Indians named it, this area was one of their settlements.”

“Laughing water? Why did they call it that?”

“Stop and listen for a minute,” he paused and Marie listened. “What do you hear?”

“The water...”

Dalton stared at her before speaking in a deadpanned voice, “What does it sound like?”

“I don’t know... water...”

“Close your eyes and listen.”

Marie followed his instructions and listen to the water rushing over the rocks.

“Laughter!” Her eyes sprung open, “the water sounds like laughter.”

“Exactly!” Dalton said, “Now do you see why the Osage called the area Ha Ha Tonka?”

Marie nodded, and she sat listening to the water for a moment, before she spoke again. “I have a question for you.”

“Okay...”

“I really like Mrs. Evans’s pie last night, and you seem to know her pretty well...”

Marie paused.

“Yeah, she’s a close family friend…” Dalton said, leading her on.

“Well, do you think she’d teach me how to make a pie crust?” Marie asked, looking out over the water.

“Sure, she loves baking. I’m sure she’d be happy to teach you. I’ll take you to ask her when we get back.”

Marie looked at Dalton and smiled, “Thanks!”

“Can I ask you a question?” Dalton asked, looking at Marie.

“Sure.”

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to…” he trailed off

“Okay,” Marie said a little more hesitantly.

“Where’s your mom?”

Marie looked away from him, out towards the water, “She died a few months ago.”

“Oh, I’m… I’m really sorry.” Marie nodded her head, that’s what everyone said.

“How did it happen?”

“Car accident, she was coming to get me from school and another car hit her.”

“I’m really sorry, I shouldn’t have asked…”

Marie nodded again. “That’s why I want to learn how to make pie crust. My mom always made the best pies, I helped with the filling, but she always took care of the crust.” She paused again, “My dad was always happy when he came home and saw a pie cooling on the counter.”

Dalton reached out and grabbed her hand, “I know Mrs. Evans will be happy to teach you.”

Marie looked down at their joined hands and smiled, “Thank you, you know, for helping me ask her.”

Dalton nodded and smiled back at her. Marie expected him to take his hand back, but he didn't. They sat in silence for a little while, and the whole time, Dalton held her hand. She didn't know if she should say something. But, the feeling of his hand in hers brought a comfort she hadn't felt in a long while, so she held on. It was only when he said they should head back and got up to put out the fire, that he let go.

The hike back was more silent than the hike there, the whole-time Marie was trying to figure out why he had held her hand. She didn't know if it was because of what she had told him about her mother or because he wanted to. By the time, they got back to the castle, she was convinced that it was because he felt bad about bringing up her mother, but, then, why didn't he let go right away? And why would holding her hand make that better? She was trying to figure out these new questions when they walked through the front door and he turned to face her.

“Mrs. Evans will be in the middle of getting ready for the dinner service, I think we should wait until after the dining hall closes to ask her about teaching you.”

She had completely forgotten about going to talk to Mrs. Evans, “Okay, if you think that's best. I should probably go find my dad, anyway.”

“Okay. I should go see if Mrs. Evans needs any help serving tonight. I'll see you at dinner then?”

Marie nodded, telling him she would see him at dinner, and went in search of her father. She found him in the sun room, reading. When she sat in the chair beside him, he asked her if she had fun and she told him all about the spring, the splash fight, and Dalton building the fire.

“... And did you know they call it Ha Ha Tonka because the sound the water makes as it moves. It sounds like laughter.”

“I didn’t, but, that’s very interesting. Sounds like you had a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, I did,” Marie said.

When she didn’t say anything else, her father opened his book again, and continued reading. Marie looked out at the water below, thinking about everything that had happened earlier.

After dinner, Dalton was true to his word, he took Marie to see Mrs. Evans, who was in the kitchen cleaning up. Mrs. Evans was planning on making more apple pies for dinner, the following evening, and she said she would be “delighted” to have Marie’s help. She told Marie to come to the kitchen tomorrow after lunch and she would show her how to make the perfect crust. Marie was so excited to finally be learning how to make pie crust, that she didn’t realize where Dalton was leading her until he opened the door and she heard the piano music. Suddenly, all the thoughts from the hike rushed back into her head again. But, she couldn’t exactly run away, so she walked through the door he was holding open for her. She was looking for a place away from the dancing to lead them when she saw her father standing by the windows with a small group of people.

The group consisted of her father, two men, and one woman. She walked towards him, very aware of the fact the Dalton was following her. She watched them closely, as she made her way across the floor, they all looked content in their conversation, even her father. She couldn't remember the last time she saw him with other people, the funeral didn't count in her mind, since he spent almost the entire time sitting quietly, while her grandmother greeted everyone. It had to have been his birthday, her mother had thrown him a surprise party and all his friends had been at the house. That was the last time she saw him be at ease around other people. He still wasn't laughing like he had at his birthday, but, Marie was relieved to see a slight smile on his lips.

She reached the group, during a conversation lull, and he reached out his hand, directing the other's attention towards her. "This is my daughter, Marie, Marie, this is Mr. and Mrs. Gruff and Mr. Alton," he said pointing towards each person as he said their name.

"It's nice to meet you, Marie," Mrs. Gruff said, extending her hand.

Marie took it and said, "Nice to meet you too."

"We heard Dalton showed you the stream earlier today," Mr. Alton said, also shaking her hand, "It's pretty neat how fast that water is moving isn't it."

"Yes, I liked sitting by the spring and listening to it rush by," Marie answered.

"She even convinced me to put my hand in the water," Dalton added.

"I bet that was pretty cold," Mr. Alton said.

"Freezing," Dalton responded, at the same time Marie said, "It wasn't that bad."

Everyone laughed. "Tough girl you have here," Mr. Alton said to Marie's father.

“Yes, she is,” Marie’s father said, looking at his daughter with sad eyes.

Marie looked away, she hated it when he looked at her like that.

“Anyway,” Dalton said after clearing his throat, “I was hoping to talk Marie into a dance. What do you think?” He asked looking at her.

“I don’t know...” Marie hesitated.

“Just one dance...” Dalton asked.

Marie looked at all the faces smiling at her, “Okay, one dance.”

Dalton smiled and grabbed her hand. The music was slow, but, Marie’s mother had taught her all the ballroom dances, so she wasn’t worried about the steps. She was, however, very aware of Dalton’s hand on her back, as they glided across the floor. He spun her around a few times, which made her laugh. When the song ended, they walked back to the group. They all clapped, when Marie and Dalton rejoined them and Dalton gave a joking bow.

“Now, I want to see Marie and her father...” Mrs. Gruff said.

“Oh, no.” Marie’s father shook his head, “I don’t dance very well.”

“You’re not that bad, dad,” Marie said shuffling her feet.

“But, I’m not good either. I’d rather see Marie and Dalton dance again...”

Silence fell, no one sure what to say next. Then, the pianist, picked up the beat and Marie turned towards Dalton and asked tentatively. “Do you know swing?”

He nodded, and the two walked back out towards the dance floor. it was hard to swing dance to just a piano, but, they figured out to modify the moves to work, and their one danced turned into another, and then another. After the third dance, they both needed

a break. She looked for her father, but, he had left the room while she was dancing. Mrs. Gruff was still there with a few new ladies, she learned that he had gone to play cards with Mr. Gruff and Mr. Alton. Dalton asked her if she wanted to dance again, but, she was exhausted, so they followed her father to the game room and played a few games of billiards, before he had to leave to go back home. It wasn't until Marie was in bed that she realized, she had danced in a castle, with someone she could see as her 'prince charming.'

She woke up the next morning, smiling, today Mrs. Evans had agreed to teach her how to make pie crust. And, on top of that she had made plans with Dalton. He was going to show her the other buildings on the property – the stables, the water tower, the carriage house, it even had its own post office. So, she got out of bed and almost instantly regretted it. The fire had gone out during the night and the wood floors were cold, her father was in the process of relighting it, but, it would take a minute to warm the room. She ran to the bathroom and quickly dressed. At breakfast, her father asked if she wanted to join him for a few games of billiards since it was too cold to go outside, but Marie told him about her plans with Dalton. She felt back as she told him, but she really wanted to see the rest of the property, so, Marie met Dalton in the entryway and her father went off to the West Parlor.

When the post office was in sight, they started to run, knowing that a fire would be burning inside, the wind made it feel a lot colder than it was. Once they were warm again, they were brave enough to go back outside, and headed for the stables. They decided to forgo the water tower, because it was cold, and well, because it was a *water*

tower, not nearly as exciting as the stables. At the stables, Dalton introduced her to all the horses, calling each one by name. He even pulled his favorite horse out of her stall and let Marie brush her. She also, briefly, met Dalton's father, who was busy working so, couldn't stop to talk for very long. It was getting close to lunch time so they decided to walk back to the hotel.

Marie saw it first, an orange glow on the roof of mansion, but, it was Dalton who realized what it was. He took off at a run and all Marie could do was start running after him. He ran for the front door, almost colliding with one of the bellhops, "FIRE! The roof is on FIRE!" he shouted, putting everything in motion. Marie stood in the entryway, unsure what to do, as Dalton ran to tell Mrs. Evans and the bellhop ran to inform the other staff members and the woman at the desk called down to Camdenton for help. When she saw Dalton, Mrs. Evans, and the rest of the kitchen staff come through the kitchen doors, she finally moved, running to the West Parlor to tell her father. A staff member was right behind her, informing the guests that the hotel was on fire, but, to remain calm. A few guests ran outside as fast as they could, while some ran to their rooms to get their belongings. Marie's father grabbed her hand and pulled her outside.

"Stay here Marie, I'm going to go see what I can do to help."

She held his hand tighter.

"Marie, I need to go help them."

"...but dad."

He looked at his daughter's face recognizing her fear for the first time.

"I promise that I will be fine."

“You promise?” She asked, feeling like she nine, instead of thirteen.

“I promise,” he reached out and hugged her tightly, “I won’t let anything bad happen.”

When he pulled back from the hug, he kissed her on the forehead.

“Be safe,” was all she could say before letting go of his hand.

She watched as he ran back inside the burning building, just as cars full of people came up the hill. She lost track of him after that in all the chaos. People were running in and out of the hotel, carrying anything and everything that wasn’t attached to the walls. Marie heard a few people complain about not having the water pressure needed to put the fire out, so, there wasn’t much anyone could do. Soon, the chaos slowed and people littered the lawn, watching the beautiful castle burn. It wasn’t long before the wind picked up again, and people started running to the stables, that were now burning also. Marie ran towards it too, worried about the horses. She caught a glimpse of Dalton and his father running in and then there was a stampede of horses running out. She held her breath until she saw Dalton coming out, with a handful of lumber. But, the feeling of relief didn’t last long, as someone yelled and pointed towards the water tower. She saw Dalton rush towards it. She followed. When she reached the tower, he was already climbing the stairs to top. She watched as he and a few other boys, ripped off a few shingles and began passing buckets of water to put out the fire. When he came down, he was covered in soot and ash, but she didn’t care. She ran towards him and gave him a hug, but she stopped when he flinched. She looked down to see a large burn on his left arm.

“You’re hurt.”

“It’s fine, just a little burn,” he said pulling her into the hug she had started. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

They returned to the hotel lawn, and found her father looking for her. When he caught sight of her, he ran and pulled Marie into his arms. “I told you I’d be okay.” She hugged him back, tighter, than she had in years. When they let go, he stood up, but kept hold of her hand. The hotel was still burning, in front of them. Marie looked around and saw everyone watching the fire. They were all bathed in the orange glow from the flames. If the source of it wasn’t so horrible, she might’ve said the glow looked, well, magical.

THE LAUGHING SPIRIT

Lila watched her children playing with their cousins, as she made dinner. Justin and Mitch tossed the football around, while Melody and Nicole searched for Roly Polys under the rocks. She loved camping with her family. With the reassurance that all was well, she returned her attention to the pan cooking over the open fire, just as her husband, Robert, came through the trees with more wood for the fire.

“I found some nice sticks for roasting marshmallows later.”

“Good, Melody’s already asked three times if we brought stuff to make s’mores later.” Lila said.

“Of course, she has, she got *your* sweet tooth,” Robert responded kissing his wife on the cheek. Lila smiled at her husband, then turned the fish the boys caught earlier over in the pan.

After dinner, Melody begged to make s’mores, but Robert made her wait until after the sun went down. When the fire was the main source of light, Melody grabbed the sticks and began passing them out without asking again. Lila shrugged her shoulders and gave her husband a smile, motioning for him to grab the marshmallows out of the pack with all the food.

“Who wants to hear a ghost story?” Robert asked, passing the bag of marshmallows to Justin who was sitting next to him. All four children raised their hands,

“Me!” “I do!” So, Robert pulled out his flashlight and held it under his chin, and began his tale. Within seconds he had the children shaking with laughing, instead of fear. Lila loved listening to Robert’s stories, they always made her laugh, but tonight she was preoccupied with the story she was planning to tell after him. Her mother had first told it to her when she was Melody’s age, and she was so excited to share it with her daughter.



When Ha Ha Tonka Castle was being built, there was a worker who moved to the area for the work. He became entranced by the beauty of his surroundings. There were many times he would stop working just to look at the glistening water below. He was the first to arrive every morning and the last to leave. The other men would’ve said he was a happy man, always smiling and laughing, especially whenever he returned from his lunch break. Every lunch was spent on a ledge not too far from the construction site; from there he could look down at the winding stream and listen to the water rushing over the rocks. He loved the sound, it always calmed him.

One day when he was eating his lunch and enjoying the sounds of nature, he heard a laugh. The worker looked around believing that the others were playing a trick on him. He got off the rock and looked behind the closest trees, but saw no one. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts, and sat back down to finish his lunch. He finished his sandwich and took a bite of his apple, again, he heard the laugh. This time it was louder, clearer, it was high in pitch and sounded happy. He looked around, again, but again, he saw no one. He shook his head, not believing his ears, and got up again, this time heading back to the construction site.

“Okay, who was it?” he asked, when he got back to the site, looking at his friends accusatorially.

Everyone looked at him confused.

“Seriously, who was it?” he asked again.

“Who was what?” one man finally asked.

“Who was the one laughing in the woods?”

The other workers looked around waiting for someone to step up and make sense of his words, but after no one answered, the same man who spoke up laughed, “Those woods making you a nut.” The others joined in, laughing, “Yea, all that silence is making you hear things.” “Hearin’ things are ya?” “Careful, sounds like somethin’s out to get ya.”

Soon the worker was laughing along with them. Everyone was laughing, except one. He was one of the few workers who had grown up in the area, so they called him “Native.” He worked hard and kept to himself. The worker made eye contact with Native, but Native quickly looked away. The next couple of days whenever the worker came back from lunch someone would make a joke about the laughter, but the worker would just laugh and shake his head, joking back about his sanity still being intact.

The next week, when he was eating lunch, he heard the laugh again. It was towards the end of his lunch break and it unnerved him so much that he decided he was finished eating and headed back to the construction site. This time when he got back he wasn’t smiling, and he didn’t joke with the others, he kept his head down as he walked by everyone. When he passed Native they briefly made eye contact before the worker

quickly looked away. Native quietly worked next to him. They worked in silence for about an hour before Native asked, “You heard the laughter again, didn’t you?”

The worker looked at Native to see if he was making fun of him, but all he saw was sincerity, so he nodded his head in confirmation. Native looked away and began working again.

“You know what it is?” the worker asked.

Native nodded his head, “Do you know where the name Ha Ha Tonka comes from?”

“It has something to do with the Osage tribe, right.”

Native nodded, again. “The Osage called this area Ha Ha Tonka, meaning ‘laughing water.’ Most will tell you they called it that because of the sound the stream makes as it rushes over the rocks. But some say the name comes from the spirit of the water.”

The worker stopped and turned towards Native, “The spirit of the water?”

“Yes, the spirit of the water. They say she laughs to make her presence known to a select few. Some hear it and live happy lives, excited in having heard something so magical. But others...” Native paused. “But others hear it and can’t get the sound out of their heads, they have to know who and where the laughter is coming from.”

“What... what happens to those?” the worker asked, turning away.

Native turned towards the worker, forcing him to look him square in the face, “They disappear.” The worker flinched, but Native continued. “No one knows for sure what happens to them. Some say the spirit takes them and they become part of the river

like she is, spending eternity playing and laughing together. Others say the spirit traps them there, in her world for her own amusement and that the laughter is a ruse the spirit uses to trick her victims. No one really knows, but one thing is certain: they're never seen again. I've always been warned to beware the spring because you can never know how the laughter will affect you." Native paused, both men returned to work. "You shouldn't go back. It's the only way to ensure you'll be safe."

The worker nodded, knowing Native was right. He stayed away for the rest of the week, but the toll it took on him was noticeable. The other workers noticed the change in his demeanor; where he used to always be smiling and laughing, now he was sad and somber. He barely talked, let alone joke with anyone. On Monday, the following week he couldn't stay away any longer. So, when the time came to break for lunch he grabbed his lunch pail and headed to his spot in the woods, keeping his head down as he passed Native. When everyone went back to work the others realized the worker wasn't among them. After an hour, they started to worry about him. They walked to the spot where they knew he liked to eat lunch, but there was nothing but his lunch pail and half a sandwich, laying his rock. They searched the woods for hours but saw no sign of him. The authorities were notified and they kept a look out for his body at the end of the stream, but no body turned up. He disappeared without any trace. Some say he grew tired of his work and so ran away, others that he became so depressed he threw himself off the cliff into the spring below. Still others believed, as Native did, that the laughing spirit took him.

The other workers denied it later, but as they turned to leave the worker's lunch spot on that day they heard a high-pitched laugh followed by a deep, throaty one, that instantly reminded them of the worker's laugh. So distinct was the second laugh that many of them turned around expecting to find their friend behind them, having played a trick, but, he wasn't there. It wasn't long before they convinced themselves that they had never heard it to begin with, all except Native. He maintained until the day he died that the spirit took the worker. The truth is, no one knows for sure what happened to the worker, but some say that if you listen closely by the spring you'll sometimes hear laughter and piercing through all the other voices is the deep, throaty laugh of a man.



Lila could still hear her mother's voice, so she channeled her as she took the flashlight from her husband. She clicked it off and put it beside her.

“Have any of you heard about the laughing worker?”

All four children shook their heads.

“Well, it takes place right here at Ha Ha Tonka...”

Lila watched the faces of her audience carefully. The two boys quickly lost interest, more concerned with roasting a perfectly, golden brown, marshmallow. Melody and Nicole, however, were loving it. Nicole sat listening intently, but Melody, Lila was happy to see, was captivated. She had hoped Melody would love this story as much as she had as a child. Lila watched as Melody's marshmallow turned black, caught fire, and fell off her stick. She heard her mother's voice echoing in her head, pushing her towards

the end of her tale. When she had finished Melody asked the same question Lila had so many years ago.

“Have you ever heard the laugh?”

Lila laughed, “No,” she smiled at her husband and then turned her attention back to Melody, “but, I listen for it every time I’m by the spring.”

“I’ve heard it,” Justin piped up from his side of the fire.

“Yeah, so have I,” Mitch tried to add around a gooey, chocolate mess in his mouth.

“You have?” Melody asked, amazed, while Nicole just stared at the boys and rolled her eyes. Lila and Robert glanced at each other, smirking.

“Yep, heard it just today when we were fishing,” Justin said, but couldn’t hold his straight face after seeing the look of worry and fear on Melody’s face and broke into a fit of laughter. Mitch quickly followed.

“You’re lying,” Melody whined and threw a marshmallow at him.

“Hey, hey, hey don’t waste the mallows,” Justin said, catching the marshmallow, and popping it into his mouth. That made everyone laugh, including Melody, who finally realized her marshmallow was a charred mess in the ashes of the fire. Lila handed her another one, then sat back leaning into her husband’s side.

The next morning Lila woke to the sounds of Justin walking around outside the tent, stepping on every twig he could find. Robert always joked that Melody was just like Lila in every way, except her sleeping habits. Justin was a morning person, just like Lila, but Melody would sleep all day if she could. Lila nudged Robert, starting his wake-up

process, Lila always got out of bed the moment her eyes opened, but Robert preferred to lay in bed, slowly waking up. After she nudged her husband, Lila crawled out of her tent and told Justin to start collecting logs for the fire. Lila smiled to herself as Justin focused on the area around his tent where Mitch was sleeping, “accidentally” hitting the tent every few seconds. A few minutes later Mitch crawled out of the tent and Justin told him to start building up the fire pit. Lila began cutting sausage for breakfast. Robert soon crawled out of the tent and helped the boys start the fire. Lila took out the pancake mixture she and Melody had prepared at home yesterday morning. Melody and Nicole unzipped their tent the moment the first pancake hit the frying pan.

While the family ate breakfast, they discussed the plan for the day. Lila preferred to go to the castle ruins in the morning before all the boats traveled up the Niangua Arm to float in Ha Ha Tonka cove. In the afternoon, the ruins would be populated by swimsuit clad hikers. When the first group arrived Lila always took that as her cue to leave. So, they cleaned up their breakfast and changed into their hiking clothes. It was an easy hike, after all, people in swimsuits and flip flops did it on the other side.

The land was beautiful, the trees provided the perfect amount of shade from the rising sun. They hiked in silence for a few minutes before the children started running around trying to scare each other, as well as Lila and Robert, who feigned fear every time they jumped out. When they reached the ruins, the family stood together and admired the remaining stone structure. The ruins were the main reason Lila loved this place so much. When she was a child she would talk whomever, she could into hiking up to the ruins with her and as she got older she began making the hike on her own as often as she could.

She loved to sit on the stone walls and imagine what the castle had once looked like, what the room she was standing in had been and how it would've been decorated. Nature had both accepted and denied the ruins as part of itself: grass and gravel occupied what had at one time been wood flooring, bushes grew out of the ground, but the stones, besides being discolored from both the fire and the elements, were well maintained and the trees had yet to encroach on their land. The feeling of peace Lila got from sitting among the ruins and listening to the wind travel through the empty windows is what kept her coming back year after year.

Justin was the first to move; he ran up the short steps and climbed into one of the stone windows, taunting Mitch that he was faster. Justin and Mitch ran around, starting a game of tag, which Melody and Nicole quickly joined. Lila took a seat in the closest window and pulled out her sketch book. Robert was walking around taking pictures, so Lila started sketching, drawing life back into the rooms in front of her. She had barely begun the ballroom when Melody's voice startled her.

“Do you know where the laughing worker used to eat lunch?”

Lila was surprised to see her right in front of her, “No, I don't, but I'm sure it's close by. We can go try and find it,” she responded, closing her sketch book.

“I'll take her, you stay and keep sketching,” Robert said, seeing her reluctance to leave her drawing. Lila nodded her head in thanks and watched as her husband led Melody and Nicole into the woods. She checked on Justin and Mitch, who has stopped running around and were now tossing the football back and forth, so she returned to her

drawing. She had almost completed the drawing when she glanced up to see Melody running towards her.

“Mommy, I heard the laughter!”

“You did?” Lila asked excitedly.

“Yeah, daddy and Nicole didn’t hear it though.”

“Better be careful then, you might disappear” Justin added, walking over with a smile on his face, closely followed by Mitch.

Lila gave him her patented ‘really, Justin’ look when Melody’s face turned from excitement to worry and Nicole, again, rolled her eyes.

“That’s enough Justin” Robert said.

Lila put her arms around her daughter and her niece and said, “Come on I’m getting hungry. Let’s go make lunch.”

They hiked back to their campsite and heated up beans and hot dogs for lunch; the laughing spirit momentarily forgotten. They changed into their swimsuits and walked to the spring, the boys went to catch fish for dinner and the girls headed down a little further so they could wade in the water when it got too hot. Lila sat on a rock finishing her drawing of the ballroom and then began a sketch of the spring for the 100th time. She looked up every few minutes to check on the girls who were sitting by the stream watching small fish swim around, every few seconds one of them would thrust a hand into the water trying to catch one.

Lila smiled, “If you let your hand rest in the water the fish will eventually come to you and you can catch one.”

“The water’s cold” Melody responded.

Soon Nicole came up to where she was sitting, “What are you drawing, Auntie Lila?”

“The stream,” she responded showing Nicole the drawing.

“Can I try?”

Lila handed her the second sketchpad she always kept with her and Nicole watched and tried to mimic Lila’s lines. Lila smiled as she watched her niece’s picture starting to take shape. Nicole had a real talent, and Lila was excited about her future. She was already planning to get Nicole an easel and paints for her next birthday. Neither of her children had the talent for art the Nicole seemed to have. Lila used to wish that Melody had been the one gifted with the artistic ability, but she had come to terms with that long ago. Besides, Melody had inherited Lila’s imagination, as we evident by the way she had reacted to the ‘Laughing Spirit’ story the night before.

When Lila looked up to check on Melody, she was about to plunge her hand back into the water, but stopped right before it sliced through. She pulled her hand back and stared intently at the water, before jumping up and running over to Lila and Nicole.

“Mommy, Cole, I just saw a face in the water.”

“Really!” Nicole said, dropping her pad and pencil, and running over to the water’s edge.

“Was she pretty?” Lila asked her daughter.

“She was beautiful, mommy,” Melody said in awe, staring back at the water. “She had grey eyes and pretty pink lips and she was smiling at me. Come and see.” Melody

grabbed her mother's hand and pulled her over to Nicole was staring, hoping to see the face too. Lila stared into the water, humoring her daughter. All three were staring into the water when the boys walked up behind them.

"What are you three looking at?" Robert asked.

"I saw a face in the water," Melody sang to her father.

"You did?"

"She did, and we've been sitting her for ten minutes waiting to see if it'll come back" Lila smiled at her husband.

"Well we have enough fish to make dinner. Hope all this staring has made you hungry," Robert joked, holding up the string of fish they had caught.

"But if you'd rather sit by the water all night, we can go back to the camp and eat the fish ourselves. Maybe if you stay long enough you'll actually get to *talk* to the spirit." Justin said.

"Can we stay for a little while longer?" Melody asked, looking at her mother.

Lila gave her son the same look she had at the ruins and he just laughed. "No sweetie, you need to eat. We can come back to the spring tomorrow."

"But, moooooommm," Melody whined.

"Listen to you mother, Melody," Robert said using his 'stern' voice, that Lila was always jealous of.

"Ok, but you promise we can come back tomorrow."

"Yes honey, we're here for another couple of days, remember" Lila told her.

"Ok. Let's go eat." Melody said and marched back to the campsite.

They ate dinner and spent the rest of the night at their campsite. The kids played football while Lila sketched and Robert read, taking turns refereeing the football game. When the sun went completely down and they couldn't see the football any longer or their papers they sat around the fire, eating a nighttime snack of trail mix. About an hour later, Melody yawned and Lila sent her and Nicole to bed, followed shortly by Justin and Mitch.

“Early night for the kids,” Robert said after Justin zipped up their tent.

“Well, it was a busy day.”

Robert nodded, putting his arm around Lila, “It definitely was, what with the laughing spirit making its appearance.”

Lila laughed, “Melody does have a really good imagination.”

“Yeah, she definitely got that from you.”

“I won't deny that. I used to pretend to hear the laugh, too. I would tease Arty and tell him that he didn't hear it because he wasn't as special as me.”

Robert laughed, “I'm sure that went over really well.”

“He would get so mad. He usually made up for it, though, by throwing me into the water when we got back to the lake house.”

“Now that sounds like your brother.”

Lila laughed, “I am glad that Melody liked the story so much, it was always my favorite.”

“I know, you told it to me the first time we came here, I believe we'd been dating for about three months. Your dad wasn't too happy about us coming up here alone.”

“Yeah, that didn’t last long. You’re like his best friend now.”

Robert laughed, “It wasn’t too hard, just had to show him how much I loved you.”

“Yeah, and those fishing trips he took you on had nothing to do with it, did they?”

“Those may have helped,” Robert smirked.

“Helped. I’m pretty sure after those he liked you more than he liked me. I’m still not sure if you married me or my dad,” Lila joked.

“Your dad, definitely your dad.” Lila gasped and lightly slapped her husband’s chest. “What, he made it perfectly clear only family members get to know his secret fishing spots.”

Lila shook her head, “You’re unbelievable.”

Robert laughed and kissed Lila on the forehead. They sat in silence for a while, just looking at the stars, before Lila yawned.

“I think it might be time to head to bed too, Justin’s going to be up with the sun,” Robert said.

“Yeah, you’re probably right, you put out the fire and I’ll make sure all the food is put away.”

A few minutes later, Lila and Robert crawled into their tent knowing their children were safely zipped up in their own tents on either side of them.

Lila was the first one up the next morning, so she got the fire going and started a pot of coffee. Robert crawled out of the tent when the coffee was ready and it wasn’t too long before Justin and Mitch joined them, wanting breakfast. Lila handed them both pop tarts and some fruit. It wasn’t long before Nicole joined them.

“Where’s Melody?” Nicole asked, looking around the campsite.

“What are you talking honey, Melody isn’t awake yet,” Lila responded with confusion.

“Yes, she is. She’s not in her sleeping bag.”

“What do you mean she’s not in her sleeping bag?” Robert asked, worried.

“I woke up and she wasn’t next to me, I thought she had woken up and had breakfast without me.”

Lila ran to the tent to check for herself, “She’s not in here, Robert.”

“Nicole, are you and Melody playing a trick on us, because if you are it’s not funny and you need to stop it now” Robert said.

“I just woke up, I swear,” Nicole whined, not wanting to get into trouble.

Lila ran to the backside of the tent, checking to see if Melody was hiding there, Justin and

Mitch checked behind all the trees, but there was no sign of Melody. Lila started screaming her name, hoping she was hiding a little further in the woods and would come back laughing at her parents, but there was no response. Robert grabbed her by the shoulders, calming her down a little. “You and the kids go check the spring, I’m going to go to the Ranger’s station and get some help.” Lila nodded, and she and the kids started walking towards the spring, looking for any sign that Melody was close by. When they got to the spring, Justin instantly found the flashlight that was kept outside Melody’s tent, laying by the water. Lila looked at the rushing water pushing its way towards the lake below and started to panic. She yelled Melody’s name, silently praying for a response.

She yelled until her throat was dry and rough and it hurt to make another noise and then she yelled even louder. It wasn't long before her voice broke and she couldn't yell anymore. That was when she realized the kids were yelling also, but none of them got a response, either.

Lila didn't notice when Robert and the rangers broke through the woods. She didn't notice when Robert continually called her name. She didn't even notice that she had fallen to the ground, until Robert was crouched down in front of her, lifting her back up. She was numb, something inside of her was telling her Melody was gone, and she didn't want to hear it. She latched on to the ranger's idea for a search party, refusing to listen to the voice.

Lila watched as people from other campsites, joined the search. She kept a close eye on the remaining three children, as they spread out and searched the woods for any sign of Melody. She listened to the chorus of voices yelling out Melody's name. When the sun had started to descend, the head ranger told everyone it was time to call it a night. They had been searching for hours and had found nothing but the flashlight from the spring's edge.

When they arrived back at the campsite, Lila's brother Arthur and his wife Janet were waiting, along with her parents, Marie and Dalton. Lila watched as Nicole and Justin ran to their parents. She felt a stabbing pain in her gut when Janet lifted Nicole into her arms and hugged her close.

"Nicole," Lila said, drawing everyone's attention to her. Janet put Nicole back on the ground and Lila moved towards her. "Did Melody say anything to you last night?"

Nicole shook her head.

“Did she say where she was going?”

Nicole shook her head again, holding tight to Janet’s hand.

“You’re sure you didn’t hear her wake up in the night. She didn’t say she was stepping out to go to the bathroom? Nothing?”

Lila hadn’t even felt her hands move to Nicole’s shoulders until Janet was prying them loose.

Nicole was in tears.

“I didn’t hear her, I swear Aunt Lila. I didn’t.”

Nicole just kept shaking her head, tears running down her cheeks.

Robert walked over and put his arms around his wife, folding her into a hug. He moved her over a chair and gently set her in it. Lila heard her mother offer to take the children to the lake house, while the others remained behind, so they could continue the search bright and early. No one was willing to give up just yet. Before he left, Justin walked up to his mother and gave her a hug and she latched onto him. She held him longer than normal, before releasing him and giving him a kiss. When he walked away with his cousins and grandma she had to fight the urge to run after him. The only thing that kept her sitting was that her mother had a hold of Justin’s hand. Lila knew she wouldn’t let anything happen to her son.

That night, Lila pulled her sleeping bag out of the tent, opting to sleep out in the open. Robert joined her. They both laid there, awake, but not talking. All Lila could think about were reasons Melody might leave her tent in the middle of the night, reasons she

would've gone to the spring. Only one reason stuck in her mind – the laughing spirit. She *knew* that was why Melody had gone to the spring. Lila never expected Melody's imagination to lead to something as horrible as this.

Lila laid there, staring up at the stars, repeating in her head, *Melody is okay, Melody is okay*, until the words blended together and became nothing. She wanted to believe that they would find Melody alive and well, but laying in the dark she just couldn't be convinced. She knew that the next day the rangers would talk about water currents and dredging the lake floor. That there would be less volunteers to search. That the likelihood of finding Melody alive was becoming thinner and thinner.

She couldn't ignore the voice inside her, anymore.

Melody was gone.

THE DRAWING

Nicole stayed in the car while her mom and dad, Arthur and Janet, put Justin's bag in the back. She didn't want Mitch to steal her seat in the back row. The seat they constantly fought over, and today she had won. Not that it mattered now. They were about to turn on the highway, when her uncle had called, asking them to pick up Justin and take him to the lake with them. Now one of the boys would have to join her in the back, hopefully it would be Liam, he was smaller.

Justin walked out of the house, followed by Mitch and Liam, who had both jumped out of the car and ran inside the second it stopped. Justin gave his father a hug and then climbed into the car, heading directly for the back seat, next to Nicole. Mitch was about to protest and try to make Nicole move, but Justin pulled his CD player out of the bag he was carrying and put on his headphones. Nicole smiled at Mitch and followed Justin's lead. The three-hour car ride past quickly for Nicole as she changed CDs. Justin never changed his CD.

When they reached the lake, it was just after noon. Liam was the first one out of the car, he grabbed his bag out of the back and ran inside to change into his swimsuit. Mitch, Justin, and Nicole each grabbed their own bags and followed him inside. When they dropped their bags in the bunk room, a weight seemed to be lifted off Justin and he pulled Mitch outside to fish. Janet asked her to watch Liam while she put away the few

groceries they brought and got the house in order, so she put on her swimsuit and headed down to the dock with Liam.

Nicole walked onto the dock and grabbed Liam's lifejacket out of the cabinet. She handed it to him and he put it on quickly and jumped into the water. Nicole turned on the dock radio and spread her towel out on a lounge chair and was about to sit down, when she felt a few drops of water land on her back. She turned around to see a prideful Liam laughing.

“Come swim, Cole.”

“Later, jump off the platform for a while.” Nicole lay down on the lounge chair and used the music to time her flips.

After four songs, one flip, Liam was done playing by himself and he stood over Nicole's chair dripping water on her.

“It's later...”

Nicole huffed, knowing that he wouldn't leave her alone until she played with him. She walked over to the cabinet and pulled out a float and the football. She threw the float into the water and jumped onto it. Liam threw her the football and then climbed up the platform. Nicole would throw the football and Liam would try to catch it midair. A few times, Nicole would throw it too low for him to catch and it would hit the dock. Liam would try to complain midair, but he always hit the water mid-whine, which made Nicole laugh. She was relieved when Mitch and Justin walked onto the dock. She threw the football at Mitch, hoping to catch him off guard, but he caught it and threw it back

harder. Nicole ducked under the water, sliding off her float. She felt the football skip above her.

“Missed,” she said when she came back up, but Mitch wasn’t on the dock. He had jumped in the water, when she had gone under and was swimming towards her. When Mitch was close, she went under, again. She swam under water and came up behind Mitch. She could hear Liam and Justin laughing on the dock, as she surprised Mitch and pushed him under. Mitch grabbed her legs and pulled her under too. When they came back up, Justin was on the platform.

“One of you go get the football before it ends up at the end of the cove,” Justin said before flipping off the platform into the water.

Mitch looked at Nicole, but she shook her head, “You threw it, you go get it.”

“You didn’t catch it, you get it.”

“Mitch go get the football,” Justin said swimming up to them.

“Liam, go get the football,” Mitch said when Liam joined the group.

“Yea, Liam go get the football,” Nicole seconded.

Liam huffed and then swam off to get the football.

Justin shook his head.

They played catch in the water for a while, before Nicole’s parents came down. Her mom had a tray of sandwiches and chips in hand, so they got out and ate. When they had finished, her dad lowered the boat and they went for a ride to get gas and live bait. The rest of the day passed peacefully, the boys fished, Nicole sketched and helped her mom make dinner.

When the sun went down, Liam begged them to play hide-and-go-seek with him. Nicole was first to be “it.” She chose the back door of the house to be base. Nicole closed her eyes, counted to one hundred, and yelled, “Ready or not here I come!” and started her search. She walked towards the garage, expecting Mitch to jump out from behind a tree and run towards the base, but nothing moved. She searched the garage, only to come out and find both Mitch and Justin standing by the back door.

“Better hope you find Liam, or else you’re going to be it again.”

She looked for Liam for what felt like ten minutes and couldn’t find him. He usually wasn’t this good at hiding, so Mitch and Justin joined in the search. They researched the garage, they checked the bushes, behind the trees, under the cars, they even checked the “out of bounds” areas, but still couldn’t find him. They started yelling his name, and were starting to really worry when they heard a giggle coming from a tree. All three looked up and saw Liam, sitting on a branch looking down at them.

“Get down right now!” Justin and Nicole both yelled together.

“Not until you yell *Olly Olly Oxen Free*, I’m not going to let you tag me,” Liam responded.

“Get down,” Nicole said again, “you’re not going to be it, just get out of that tree.”

“Say it!”

“Get down!” Nicole yelled again.

Justin stood staring up at the tree.

“You can’t get me!” Liam taunted.

“Just say it, Cole. He’s not going to come down until you do,” Mitch said, putting his

hand on Nicole’s shoulder.

“Olly Olly Oxen Free,” Nicole said and Liam started to climb down.

“I don’t want to play anymore,” Nicole said, when Liam was on the ground. “I’m going inside.”

Nicole walked away and into the house. She couldn’t believe Liam had hidden in the tree. That was *Melody’s* tree. No one had climbed it in two years... since Melody’s disappearance. Justin followed her inside and went to into the bunk room. Melody was his sister. Nicole almost followed him into the bunk room, but decided not to. She sat down on the couch and grabbed her sketchpad off the side table. She opened it up to the drawing she was working on earlier, but her pencil wouldn’t move. She turned to a new page and started a new drawing. She was almost finished with the outline of the face when Mitch and Liam finally came inside. Liam walked over to Nicole.

“I’m sorry, Cole. I won’t hide in the tree again.”

Nicole looked at Mitch, who gestured to the bunk room, “Justin in there?”

Nicole nodded her head and then turned back to Liam. Sometimes she forgot how much younger he was, he was only seven, and he had only been five when Melody disappeared.

“It’s okay.”

“Where’s mom and dad?” Mitch asked.

“I think they’re down on the dock,” Nicole answered.

Mitch nodded and joined Nicole on the couch. Liam took the chair and turned on the rarely used TV. Mitch looked towards the bunk room door again, but when he stood up he walked towards the TV and grabbed two game controllers, handing one to Liam and keeping one himself. Nicole watched them race jet skis on the TV for a minute before returning to her drawing.

She closed her eyes, calling to mind the face she wanted to sketch. It took longer than she wanted to admit for it to appear before her mind's eye. When she opened her eyes, she looked at the outline and decided it was too round, she tore out the paper and started again, this time going for a more oval shape. She had to erase the lines a couple of times before finding the right shape, as she started on the eyes, the bunk room door opened and Justin walked out. Mitch paused the game and was about to say something, but Justin cut him off.

“I've got winner.”

Mitch nodded and resumed the race. Nicole watched Justin, but he seemed to be back to himself. Cheering on Liam when started to overtake Mitch. She wondered what Justin had done in the bunk room, she knew she should've followed him in, maybe talked to him. But, the one time she had tried, Justin had asked her to leave, said he needed a little time alone.

When she tried to focus back on her drawing, the image wouldn't come. She became frustrated and threw her sketchpad onto the floor. The boys turned around and looked at her, but she just made up an excuse about not being able to get the shading just right. She picked it up and set on the side table, again and walked into the kitchen to get

water. When she went to open the fridge, she was stopped by a picture hanging by a flower magnet. It was the family photo from three years ago, they were all standing outside the ruins at Ha Ha Tonka, and smiling in the front row was Melody. She forgot about her water and went back to her sketchpad, with photo in hand and resumed her work on the eyes. By the time her parents came up from the dock and told them all to go to bed, she had finished both eyes and was working on the nose.

After breakfast, Liam begged to go tubing, so they all piled into the boat with their two triangular tubes, that had two holes cut out in each. First Liam and Nicole went, laying in the middle of each tube. Arthur drove the boat, while Janet spotted and worked the flag. The tubes glided smoothly over the water, staying together instead of knocking into each other, Arthur kept the ride smooth, not whipping them too hard. When Mitch and Justin got on the tubes, though, it was a different story. Arthur whipped them back and forth, causing the tubes to knock into each other and the riders to brace for the impact. When Arthur swung them from one side to the other they pulled their knees up trying to jump completely over the wake. When he drove in a straight line, keeping the tubes behind the boat, Mitch and Justin each, held onto the other tube, preparing to switch. As Mitch was preparing to jump onto Justin's tube, Arthur turned the wheel, whipping the tubes outside of the wake and causing both boys to lose their balance and fall in the water. When the boat pulled up alongside them Nicole made Mitch get in the boat so she could tube with Justin, getting a more exciting ride than she had with Liam.

Nicole and Justin achieved the tube switch that Mitch and Justin had attempted, mostly because Arthur didn't turn the wheel this time. Arthur turned the boat in a circle,

creating large waves in the middle before heading straight for them. Nicole was on the outside of the protection of the wake, getting the highest air of the day when she jumped the first wave. He finally managed to knock one of them off when he allowed the rope to gain a small amount of slack before speeding up, causing the tube to shoot forward and Justin lost his grip, making Nicole the reigning champ.

For the last ride, all four kids got on the tube and Arthur glided them back and forth over the wake. Nicole let her hand drag in the smooth water as she glided over it. It was like sliding her fingers on smooth glass, it was her favorite feeling in the world. Her fingers barely piercing the surface, as the momentum from the boat pulled her from one side to the other. When the boat entered their cove, it slowed down, allowing Nicole and the boys to slide off the tube and drag behind it.

Janet saw what they were doing and yelled, "If you let go you have to swim to the dock!"

At which point both Justin and Mitch let go. Liam shortly followed. Nicole just shook her head and held on.

When they reached the dock, Nicole was surprised to see her grandpa and uncle waiting to help tie the boat up. She jumped off the tube, and climbed up the ladder, dropping her lifejacket on the dock. She walked over the boat slip, hoping to overhear something. Her father handed her the rope to one of the tubes and she began winding it around her arm.

"Marie's up at the house with Lila," her grandpa said. He looked at her Uncle Robert, "She thought it might be good for Lila to come and be around everyone."

Nicole was forced to turn her attention to the tube when her father reminded her not to let it hit the dock. The boys were getting closer, but they were too busy messing around to see that there were extra people on the dock. Nicole knew the moment they saw them though, because Justin stopped trying to dunk Mitch and swam right towards the ladder.

“Dad, I thought you guys were coming down this weekend.” Justin asked Robert, after he dropped his lifejacket next to Nicole’s.

“We decided to come after all,” Robert said, moving to help Nicole pull the tube up onto the dock without dragging it.

“So, mom’s here too?” Justin asked, looking towards the house.

“Yep, she’s helping your grandma put together something for lunch.”

“Well, I hope it’s almost ready because knocking you kids around really works up and appetite,” Arthur said, pulling the other tube up onto the dock.

The group walked up to the house together. Nicole’s grandma Marie was in the kitchen putting the last of lunch on the breakfast bar, while her Aunt Lila was sitting a chair off to the side watching her. Her grandma greeted everyone when they walked in the door, but her aunt said nothing. Nicole watched as Justin greeted his mother with a hesitant hug. Lunch was hot dogs, salad, and chips. Nicole and the boys made their plate and then went out patio to eat. Mitch tried to engage Justin in a conversation about fishing, but he seemed to hear only every other word. Nicole watched through the window as her parents and grandparents tried to coax her aunt to join their conversation, without much success.

So much had changed these last two years.

After lunch, all the men piled into the small fishing boat and took off. Nicole took her sketchpad down to the dock to sit with her mom, grandma, and aunt. She listened for a while as her mom and grandma talked about a few upgrades they wanted to do to the house, but soon she opened her sketchpad. The family photo sat on top of the sketch she had started the night before. Again, she studied it and resumed her work on the nose. When she had shading just right on that, she moved to mouth. Her hand formed the upper lip, and then the lower lip, connecting in a closed mouth smile. Nicole could hear her grandma telling Melody to *really* smile, but Melody refused to show her teeth. They were slightly crooked, but she was still too young for braces. Nicole's teeth were straight, something she used to be immensely proud of. In every picture of the two they stood side by side, Nicole beaming, showing off her perfect teeth, while Melody kept hers hidden. When they looked at their old photos, Melody would always complain about her smile.

Nicole erased the mouth she had just drawn, starting over.

She had just decided to draw the hair in a braid, Melody's favorite hairdo, when her grandma asked what she was drawing. Nicole pulled the sketchbook to her chest.

"Nothing. It's... it's not finished yet."

Marie and Janet smiled, they knew Nicole hated showing her work before it was done. Nicole looked at her aunt, but she was gazing out towards the head of the cove and didn't seem to be paying attention to anything around her.

"What if we just took a peek..." Janet urged.

Nicole shook her head.

“Can we see when you’re done then?” Marie asked.

“Maybe...” Nicole said.

Not completely trusting her grandma and mom, Nicole gathered her things and move a little further away, which caused the two to laugh, drawing Lila’s attention back to the group.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Nicole, she just moved away so we wouldn’t look at her drawing. Reminds me of you when you first started sketching...” Marie answered.

Nicole looked at her aunt and remembered how she use to stand over her shoulder and watch the lines become images. It was what made her want to start drawing to begin with. Her aunt had even bought Nicole her first sketchpad.

“And you used to sneak peaks of my drawings after I went to bed. I had to start hiding my book under my pillow.” Lila said, giving a slight smile. “Take my advice, Nicole, never leave you sketchpad where your grandma can find it.”

Marie and Janet laughed.

Nicole smiled, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

When the boys came back from fishing, all the adults, except her grandpa and aunt went to get dinner ready. It was decided that they would have a jumping competition off the platform and their grandpa would be the judge. Liam went first being the youngest and jumped off, spinning twice before entering the water. Nicole went next, diving into the water with the smallest splash she could manage. Mitch followed, with a cannon ball and splash the reached all the way back up to the platform. Justin was last, flipping in the

air, before landing feet first in the water. When he came up his eyes went straight towards his mother, but she didn't seem to be watching any of it. Nicole floated in the water next to him, desperately wanting to reach out and grab his hand, but too unsure to move.

Her grandpa declared it a four-way tie, which resulted in all four of them splashing him. Liam turned towards Aunt Lila and asked her to declare a winner. She turned away from the cove entrance and without thinking said, "Nicole."

"You weren't even watching." Justin said, climbing out of the water, and wrapped himself in a towel.

Nicole watched as he made his way up to the house, before finally getting out of the water herself. She wrapped herself in her towel and opened her sketchpad. She added the finishing touches to the hair and put her pencil down. She stared down at her work and smiled. She carefully ripped it out of the book.

She waited until after dinner, when everyone was in the same room, before pulling out the picture.

"I finished my drawing," she declared, holding it close to her chest.

"Do we get to see?" Her grandma asked.

Nicole nodded her head and handed the image to her grandma. Her reaction was instant, her eyes started to water and her hand move to her mouth. Nicole's mother, quickly came up behind her and had the same reaction.

"Nicole, this is so good..." her mother said.

The image was passed around the room, when it reached Lila's hands she looked at it, then turned it over.

“That’s not her smile.”

Lila stared at the back of the paper, while the rest of the family stared at her.

THE LIST

Marie watched the children run around the park, across the street where she sat with two of her closest friends. Marie, at twenty-four, was the oldest, Karen was just a year younger, and Helen was the youngest, being only twenty. They had met, about two years prior, volunteering at the library. Helen's mother had been providing the three of them entertainment, for the last few months. She was intent on finding Helen a husband, within the year. The men she chose, however, weren't exactly the cream of the crop. Helen's mother wanted grandchildren before she was 'too old to enjoy them.' This was why, Marie believed, she tended to favor widowers who already had kids. Marie figured Helen played up certain aspects of the dates for entertainment value, but, she didn't mind, she enjoyed a good story, no matter where it came from.

When the laughter from the end of Helen's story died down, Karen said she had an announcement.

Karen took a deep breath, Helen and Marie stared up Karen with expectant eyes, "We're expecting!"

"What another one!?" Helen shouted, causing a people sitting closest to them to turn and stare.

"Shhh, no need to yell," Karen laughed, before she turned to the other tables, "I'm sorry, my friend gets excited easily."

Marie sat quietly and smiled at the other patrons. When they had turned back to their own lunches, she spoke. “That’s exciting, Edward must be thrilled.”

“He is. The doctor called last night to let us know, he’s already talking about needing a bigger house.”

“Have you thought about names?” Helen asked.

“We just found out last night, I’m still trying to wrap me head around it,” Karen put her hand on her stomach. “The doctor said I need to start resting more, so I think this might be my last lunch for a while.”

Helen frowned, “We hardly see you as it is, since you had baby number one. Now, we’re never going to see you.”

“That’s not true. I’ve met you for lunch every week this month.”

“And what about last month?” Helen challenged.

Marie ended the argument by placing her hand on Helen’s arm, “This just means we’ll have to bring lunch to you.”

Karen smiled, “Thanks, Marie.” She paused taking a bite of her food, “Hey when are you and Dalton going to start a family? You know... our kids could be best friends...” She looked at Marie, wiggling her eyebrows.

Marie took a bite of her food and gave her a faint smile.

“No...” Helen whined, “Then, I’ll be left all alone...”

“And we can’t have that can we...” Marie swallowed before she smiled at Helen. “Who knows what trouble you would get into on your own.”

“Well, if you married, what was his name? The one you went out with last night?”

Karen asked.

“Absolutely not!” Helen said, shaking her head.

“What’s wrong, he sounded like a nice fellow...” Marie said, smirking, “And he did ask if you liked children...”

“Because he already has two!”

Marie and Karen laughed.

“I wish I knew where my mom found these men, so, I could stop her from going there ever again...” Helen checked her watch.

“Is it time to get back?” Marie asked.

“Almost, but we have a few more minutes before we need to leave.”

“I should get going too, I want to be back before Elizabeth wakes up from her nap.” She moved to stand up, but stopped. “I just realized soon I’m going to have two babies. I’ll be the one who needs the nap.”

Helen laughed, but Marie just smiled.

Later, that night, as Marie prepared dinner for Dalton, she thought about Karen’s suggestion. She wanted nothing more than to be a mom. When she was a young girl, her dolls were her babies, and the living room was the nursery. After she lost her mother, when she was twelve, she started a list of things her mother had taught her that she wanted to teach her own daughter. She still had the list, she kept it in the locked drawer of her vanity. Sometimes, after Dalton went to work, she would pull it out and look at it. When she read through the list, it reminded her of her own mother, of all the events she

had missed, in Marie's life. She wasn't there to talk her through her first date. She wasn't there to help her plan her wedding, her mother never even met Dalton. But, the worst was, she wasn't there to comfort her when her first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. She had never missed her mother more than, when she was in bed, crying over her lost child.

"Marie, I'm home," Dalton said, breaking through her reverie.

"In the kitchen," she answered.

"Something smells good," he touched her shoulder and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"It's chicken, it should be about done. I just need to finish up this salad then dinner will be ready. Why don't you go change out of your work clothes."

Marie quickly finished the salad and pulled the chicken out of the oven. Dalton walked back in as she pulled down two plates. He made two drinks and set them on the table, before sitting down himself. Marie made their plates and then joined him at the table.

"How was work, today?"

"Busy, one of the part machines went down again and we had to call in a mechanic. Which of course cut down on productivity."

"Sounds like a hectic day."

"It was, how was your day? You were at the library, today weren't you?" He took a drink and looked at her.

She chewed the food in her mouth and answered, “I was, and I had lunch with Helen and Karen.”

“How are those two? Helen’s mother still trying to set her up?” Dalton smiled.

“She is, last night was another widower with kids.”

“You know we just hired a new guy at work, he’s about Helen’s age, single, and he seems like a decent fellow...”

“Oh no,” Marie pointed her fork at him, “we’re not interfering in Helen’s love life, her mother does that enough.”

“Yeah, but, she’s not exactly doing it good job...”

“Still, if it goes bad, that comes back on us, and I don’t think I want that responsibility.”

“What if we just introduced them...”

“Dalton...” she warned.

“It doesn’t have to be anything formal, we could do a dinner party over here. We could invite Karen and Edward... and then Joe, that’s his name, we could say it’s because he’s new in town and doesn’t know many people. She could hardly blame us for that...”

Dalton shrugged.

“She’d see right through that. She’s not stupid,” Marie took a drink. Setting Helen up was the last thing she wanted to do. With her mother pushing her for grandkids, Helen would likely end up pregnant *before* they said, ‘I do.’

“I never said she was,” Dalton said he swallowed, “but, she could hardly *blame* us if it went south. After all, we were introducing him to *everyone* not just her...”

Marie gave him a skeptical look, “Everyone...?”

“Edward and Karen would be here too, we can’t be held responsible just because she decided to start dating someone she met at our house...”

“Well, there’s just one problem with your plan?”

“Oh, and what’s that?”

Marie looked down at her plate, “Karen and Edward are expecting baby number two, so, I doubt they’ll be up to doing much partying. The doctor recommended she take it easy and rest.”

“Really? That’s great. I’m sure they’re excited.”

“She said Edward’s already thinking about moving.” She still hadn’t looked her husband in the eye.

“That sounds like him.”

“You finished or do you want more?” She finally looked up and pointed to his empty plate.

“No, I’m finished.” She reached for his plate, but, he grabbed her hand, forcing her to look him in the eye. “One day, *soon*, they’ll be having this same conversation about us. I *know* it.”

Marie just nodded her head, she wasn’t so sure, but she gave him a smile, anyway. He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it, before letting go.

Marie and Dalton had been talking about children since, before they were married. They met shortly after Marie’s mom died, but, they didn’t start dating until a few years later. After he proposed, children, were a weekly topic. They would picture

their future – the house they would live in, the friends they would have, and the kids they would raise. Some nights it was three, others two, the most they ever pictured was five, never did they settle for one. Baby names became a “heated” discussion, Dalton liked older, stranger, uncommon names, like Zadie or Mirabella, but, Marie preferred more classic names, like Elizabeth or Ann. Then, there was the nights their parent’s names were thrown into the mix, Jonathan and Louise from Marie, and Arthur and Ruth from Dalton.

“We should name our daughter after your mother,” Dalton said one night.

Marie laughed, “My mother hated her name, she made everyone call her Lou or Lulu, she would be the first to veto Louise. What about your mother’s name?”

“Ruth,” Dalton said scrunching his nose and shaking his head, “What was her middle name then?”

“Margarette,” Marie paused, “You know, I don’t think she’d mind Louise as a middle name...”

That was how they decided on a girl’s middle name, before they had even said ‘I do.’ A month later, they were at a picture show and saw the name Lila scroll across the screen. Dalton leaned over and whispered, “Lila Louise” into Marie’s ear. That night, Marie, went home and wrote ‘Lila Louise’ at the top of her mother/daughter list.

When Marie became pregnant, baby names, again were talked over, only this time the focus was on a boy’s names. Again, their father’s names were discussed. Marie loved her father, but, Jonathon wasn’t at the top of her list of preferred names. Arthur, her father-in-law’s name, however, had a certain ring to it, it made Marie think of King

Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. She had heard the story in school, and had always liked it. Dalton suggested they use Jonathon as the middle name, but, Arthur Jonathon, lacked a certain ring. Bradley, however, Marie's father's middle name, had the just the sound she wanted. So, Arthur Bradley, became their chosen boy name.

They had a lovely house, Dalton had a good job, and soon they would have the beginning of their family. Marie felt more prepared for this adventure, than, anything else she had done previously. Marie was the happiest she had ever been. Then, one morning she woke up to a searing pain in her abdomen, Dalton rushed her the hospital, but, it was too late. They lost the baby. The only thing that kept Marie going, was Dalton. He held her hand through it all. He even took a couple of days off work, calling in sick, to stay with her. She grieved in bed, while he provided her with breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

On the third day, she got out of bed, made him breakfast and made him go to work. When he was gone, she pulled out the list and thought of her mother, when she had called her father to tell him the sad news, he had confided in Marie, that her mother had suffered a miscarriage, as well. Her mother, though, had wanted a child so much that she wanted to try again. When they had Marie, they both decided that one child was enough. She decided, then, looking at the list of everything she wanted to teach her daughter, that she wasn't ready to give up.

That had been two years ago, and they still hadn't conceived, again. Marie didn't want to, but, she was starting to lose hope. It was hard for her to watch Karen's first pregnancy, to walk into the nursery and see the newborn baby laying in the crib. She had wanted to be happy for Karen, as she listened to her talk about the baby's movements and

what it was like to feel a baby grow inside you. But, it was hard, Marie was terrified that she may never experience it herself.

Two months, after Karen had announced her pregnancy, Dalton managed to talk Marie into hosting his dinner party. He couldn't take all the credit, since he had used his time helping Edward with the remodel, Edward had decided to stay in their home, to get Karen on board. He had also invited Joe to dinner one evening so, Marie could meet him. She had agreed with him that he did seem like a decent fellow.

After everyone finished eating, the women cleaned the table, while the men turned on music and made another batch of martinis. When the table was clear, Joe set the pitcher of martinis on the table, and Dalton brought out a deck of cards. Marie had to admit that Joe and Helen did seem to be having a good time, and they made a cute couple. Marie could already picture the wedding, and the babies that would follow. And, to her dismay, the solo lunches she would be having when both her friends were busy being mothers.

“So,” Helen asked drawing Marie back into the present, “thought about names yet?”

Marie tensed, slightly, but, she knew conversation would eventually, come around to Karen's pregnancy. Dalton took a sip of his drink with hand and reached under the table for Marie with his other.

She squeezed Dalton's hand to show him she was alright, before she let go to pick up her cards.

“Well, if it’s a boy, we’re thinking Edward Jr.,” Karen said, picking up her own cards.

“And if it’s a girl?” Karen asked.

“We haven’t decided on a girl name just yet” Edward said.

“You know, I hear Helen’s a pretty nice name...”

“You know I know a few Helen’s and I have to say, they’re not exactly...” Helen threw a peanut at Karen, cutting her off, causing the other to laugh.

They played a few more rounds, before Karen and Edward decided it was time to leave. Not long after, Joe and Helen also decided to leave. When Helen gave Marie a hug, she whispered in her ear that they were going to get drinks. Marie forced a smile and made Helen promise to tell her all about it the following day, and then kissed her goodbye. Marie *did* want her friends to be happy and she could see that John was going to make Helen very happy. But, it was hard not to picture how their happiness would affect her.

When she got ready for bed that night, she opened her vanity drawer and saw the list staring back at her. She grabbed it and crumbled it in her fist. She stood over the trash can but, her fist refused to release the paper. She turned her wrist and opened her hand, looking at the piece of paper in it. She sighed and then sat back down at her vanity. She laid the list on the surface and smoothed it out, before gently setting it back inside her drawer. Before she could close the drawer, however, she caught sight of her calendar. She opened it and flipped back to the previous months, before returning to the current one. She looked at the day’s date. She should’ve started her period. Three days ago.

GOODBYE

Lila woke up to the sound of her alarm, immediately turning it off and getting out of bed. She needed to start breakfast so everyone could eat before school and work. She started her morning routine – turn on coffee pot, turn on stove, put frying pan on stove, get out eggs, get out bread... She was putting the bread in the toaster when Robert came into the kitchen. He walked over to Lila and wrapped his arms around her. This was not part of her morning routine.

“How are you today?”

Lila stepped out of his arms and turned to face him, “I’m fine. Are you feeling okay?” She asked taking his temperature with her hand. It wasn’t the hug per se that had Lila worried, it was the fact that he had done it so early in the morning. He usually didn’t even get up for another twenty minutes.

Robert’s face scrunched up and he reached out to grab his wife’s hand. “Honey, do you know what day it is?”

“Thursday,” Lila responded without hesitation.

“Not the day of the week, the date...” his voice caught.

Lila’s eyes narrowed and then opened wide. She pulled her hand out of Robert’s to cover the gasp that had just left her lips. “August 30th... Melody’s birthday.”

Robert led her to the chair behind him.

“How... how did this sneak up on me?”

“I don’t know,” Robert shook his head. “I tried talking to you about it, but...” his voice trailed off.

Lila knew what he was going to say next ‘but every time I mention her name you change the subject.’ Lila knew it was true. She hadn’t been ready to face it, so she would pretend that Melody was just visiting a friend or at camp, anything to avoid the truth. Melody was just gone, she’d be back. But Melody wasn’t coming back; the search had ended, and the officers had moved onto the next file in their pile.

She looked at her husband, unable to pretend anymore.

Robert pulled her into his arms again, “I’ve been talking with everyone and we think a dinner at your parent’s house would be nice.”

Lila nodded her head, “Yeah, Melody would’ve liked that. She always loved going over there.”

The sound of the toaster popping brought Lila’s attention back to the room.

“Will you finish up breakfast for Justin, I’m going to go lie back down for a bit. I don’t think I can go to work today.”

When Robert came to get her later that day to go to her parent’s house for dinner, she didn’t want to go. She said she needed to be alone for a while and he understood. She didn’t go to work the next day either, or the week after. She tried going on Monday the following week, but couldn’t concentrate on her job. So, she decided to take a leave of absence. With nothing left to distract her, the loss of Melody was everywhere.

She tried to distract herself by being a mother to Justin. She woke up and made gourmet breakfasts, completely with everything a growing boy needed. Before, she would send lunch money with him, now she packed his lunch every day. She spent hours in the kitchen preparing three course meals for dinner, but every night Melody's chair was still empty. Every morning she had to walk by Melody's closed door.

A month into her leave of absence, she went into Melody's room. Everything was untouched – her bed was still made, her dollhouse still in the corner. She picked up the picture of Melody and her cousin Nicole that stood on the dresser. They stood in front of the Ha Ha Tonka ruins with their arms around each other. Lila had taken it the year before. Before she told Melody the story... before Melody left her tent in the middle of the night... before she lost her... Lila collapsed onto the edge of Melody's bed, gripping the frame. She cried for the first time since Melody's birthday. She laid down in the bed and cried herself to sleep.

She woke up to Justin calling her name from the doorway. He was asking what she was doing, he was asking what was wrong. Didn't he know? *Everything* was wrong. He took a step inside the room and Lila jumped off the bed. She told him to go start his homework. He hesitated, looking around the room. She walked over and gently guided him out and shut the door behind them. She told him to go start his homework again and this time he did. She looked down to see that the picture was still in her hand. She turned towards the closed door, but didn't have the strength to open it again. She took the picture to her room and locked it away in her vanity drawer. That night, she didn't have the strength to make dinner, so, she ordered pizza.

She started waking up to late to make anything but cereal for breakfast, she went back to giving Justin money for lunch, and dinner became a revolving wheel of take out or else Robert made something when her got home from work. She spent her days in Melody's room, just lying on the bed, picturing her playing with her dolls or sitting at her desk doing homework. She made sure to close the door, now. She knew that when she heard Justin come home from school, she had another two hours until her husband got home. She didn't want him to catch her in Melody's room. He already looked at her like a porcelain doll. He kept talking about therapy, as if, a stranger could understand what she was going through.

"Your mom called me at work today," Robert said, one night as they were getting ready for bed.

"Oh yeah..." Lila responded, not looking at her husband.

"She wants us to come over for dinner tomorrow night. She said she tried to call you, but you didn't pick up..."

"I took a nap today, that must've been when she called, and I don't think I want to drive *all the way* to their place tomorrow," Lila lied. She remembered the phone ringing, but she had ignored it. She had learned a few weeks ago, that answering the phone made it harder to pretend.

"Is that what you've been doing during the day?" Robert asked, keeping the accusation out of his voice.

"Sometimes..." Lila said.

"What do you do when you're not napping?" Robert asked.

“Different things...”

“Like?”

“Sometimes I read,” Lila shrugged.

“What about drawing? Do you ever draw?”

“Not really...” Lila pulled back the comforter.

“Why not? You used to love to draw. And now you have the time...” Robert said, climbing into bed and leaning against the head board.

“I don’t know. I guess I just don’t have anything I want to draw,” Lila shrugged. She crawled under the covers and turned away from Robert.

“What book have you been reading then? Is it any good?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Couldn’t he see that she was trying to sleep?

“I’ve been looking for a good one to read, what is it?”

She sighed, he wasn’t going to stop talking so, she sat up in bed. “You probably wouldn’t like it.”

“I’ve always liked the books you choose in the past.”

“This one is romance novel. You hate those...”

“So do you...” Robert said, eyeing his wife.

“I decided to give them another try. There not so bad.” She kept her eyes trained on the bottom of the bed.

“Why are you lying to me?”

“I’m not!”

“Lila I’ve known you long enough to tell when you’re lying. And since when do you think your parent’s house is *too far*?”

“It’s a thirty-minute drive, both ways, that’s an hour of drive time. I think that’s pretty far,” Lila said, looking at her husband.

“I think the drive would be good. When was the last time you left the house?”

“I don’t know...” She looked away.

“It’s been over a month, I know that,” Robert said. “Lila what do you do at home all day?”

“Nothing, I told you,” she folded her hands, refusing to look at him.

“Lila...” Robert pushed.

Lila threw her hands into the air, “I think about Melody, okay! Is that what you want to hear, that I spend most days in her room, remembering *our* daughter...”

“Honey, I think it’s time you saw someone...”

“Unless that someone is going to tell me what happened to my daughter, there’s no one who can help me.”

“Talking to someone about it helps.”

Lila looked at him from the corner of her eyes.

“It does, at least, it’s helped me...”

“You’ve... you’ve been seeing someone?” She whispered.

“Where do you think I go Saturdays at three?”

She didn't answer, if she was being honest with herself, she hadn't even noticed that Robert was gone every Saturday at three. She normally spent her Saturdays in the family room, looking out the back window, picturing Melody playing on the swing set.

"Talking about it, with someone... it's helped me confront the pain and confusion and well learn to keep moving. It's helped me learn to focus on what I have and not just what I've lost."

"You mean it's helped you forget about her?" Lila was angry.

"No," Robert said, "Do you really think I could just forget about her? Come on Lila, she was our daughter, she was as much a part of me as she is of you. How could you even think that?"

"I know... I'm sorry. It's just..." Lila stopped, she didn't know what it was. He was right, she knew he loved Melody as much as she did.

"Just try it. One session. For me? Or if not for me, then for Justin..."

Justin... he was still there. She still had her son. "Okay," she whispered.

Nicole went to one therapy session, and then another. She agreed to two sessions a week, one on her own and one with Robert. She stopped spending her days in Melody's room, but she refused to let anyone else in there. That was still Melody's room. She wouldn't give up on the hope that Melody would be found. Lila was doing better. She was helping around the house again, she developed hobbies outside the house, and she was interacting with her family again. Thanksgiving and Christmas were more somber than previous years, since the family was missing a member, but there were still held. And, Lila was a participating member.

In January, the therapist, feeling confident in the progression they had made, recommended closure. A funeral for Melody. The family needed a place to go to remember her. They could bury some of Melody's favorite things, the items that most represented Melody. Lila was dead set against this. Melody wasn't dead, she kept telling everyone. But, they won't listen. Lila stopped showing up to therapy, and started spending time in Melody's room again. Justin would come home from school and crack open the door to find his mother asleep on Melody's bed. Once she was awake and she yelled at him to get out, fearful that he was there to collect items for the casket. When Robert came home, he saw Justin hiding in his room. He decided, after that, that it was better for Justin to go home with his cousin's after school. Robert would pick him up on his way home from work.

Robert didn't know what to do anymore, so in March, he called Lila's mother, Marie. Lila was taking inventory of Melody's room, when he mom opened the door. Lila turned around, ready to tell whoever it was to go away. But, when she saw her mom, she couldn't.

“What are you doing Lila?”

“Nothing, just cleaning,” Lila led her mom out of the room and shut the door.

“You want coffee or anything?”

“Coffee would be nice,” Marie said, following Lila to the kitchen.

Lila moved around the kitchen, preparing the coffee pot, while her mom sat at the table.

“So what brings you over?” Lila asked, pouring her mom a cup of coffee.

“Robert called, asked me to stop by,” her mom got right to the point.

“Why...”

“Don’t pretend, Lila,” her mom interrupted. “You know why he called. He’s worried about you.”

“I’m fine...” Lila lied, sipping her coffee

“You’re not fine, Lila... And, that’s okay.”

“Apparently, it’s not, since my husband is calling my mother on me.”

“He... we... all of us, we all miss Melody...”

Lila stiffened in her seat.

“... but, pretending that she’s coming back... it’s not good for anyone.”

“She could come back...” Lila whispered.

“Honey, she isn’t coming back,” her mother reached out to grab Lila’s hand, but Lila pulled back.

You don’t know that...”

“She’s gone, Lila, thinking that she’s coming back... it’s keeping you from moving on. It’s keeping you from the rest of your family.”

Lila stood up, “No, she’s *coming* back...”

Her mother stood too, “She’s not, Lila. I hate having to say that to you. I hate that, that’s the case. But, it is. Melody is gone... but, Justin and Robert are still here. I’m still here. Your father is still here. Your brother is still here....”

Lila collapsed into the chair and put her head in her hands... “She can’t be gone...”

Her mother knelt beside her, “she is...”

Lila lifted her head and stared into her mother’s eyes, “You don’t understand... If she’s gone, then it’s my fault.”

“How is it your fault?”

“She went to the spring that night, because of the story...”

“What story?”

“The Laughing Spirit story. The one you told me when I was her age. She had been pretending to see and hear the spirit. If she really did walk into the spring it had to be because of that story.”

“What?” her mother asked.

Lila had kept that from the rest of her family. And, Robert had never made the connection. Nicole, Melody’s younger cousin, was the only one who seemed to think about it, but, past telling the cops she hadn’t said anything else. That was what made the cops believe Melody had drowned.

“I had just told her the story. It was all she had talked about all day long. If she is really gone... if she did drown... then it’s my fault,” Lila refused to look at her mother now.

“Oh, honey, no... it was an accident. It wasn’t anyone’s fault.” Her mother reached out and put her arms around Lila.

Lila reached out and started to play with cup in front of her. She really wanted to believe her mother.

“The therapist suggested a funeral...”

“I don’t think that’s a bad idea. I think we could all use a little closure.”

Lila didn’t say anything.

“It would give everyone a chance to say goodbye,” her mother continued.

Why did everyone want to say goodbye?

Lila agreed to have a funeral, but she couldn’t bring herself to plan it. She left that to Robert and her mother. The ceremony was beautiful. Each member of the family picked one item that reminded them of Melody most. One by one, they placed that item in a box and then buried it beneath a headstone that read:

MELODY MORGAN

AUGUST 30, 1981 – JUNE 5, 1990

FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS

Afterwards, everyone went back to Lila’s parent’s house for lunch. The house was full of friends and family, but Lila didn’t see any of them. She sat on the couch, giving those who approached her a mournful smile and a nod. Some tried to hold conversations with her by telling her how sorry they were and trying to share their favorite memories of Melody, but Lila didn’t want to hear them. When the evening was over, she looked into the faces of her family and agreed to go back to therapy.

In April, Lila decided to go back to work. She needed something to do during the day, something to keep her mind occupied. She contacted her old boss, who was more than happy to welcome her back. She became one of their best employees, throwing everything he had into her job. Work was her best distraction, she started putting in extra hours, not getting home until late. Robert was just a passing figure in the mornings and

evenings. If they talked it was about whatever Lila was doing at work. Justin's twelfth birthday was in May and they celebrated with a quiet family dinner at her parent's house. None of them were ready yet for a large event. She still went to therapy, but because of her work schedule, had limited her sessions to twice a month.

The first anniversary of Melody's disappearance was met with anxiety, by the rest of the family, because they were unsure how it would affect Lila's progress. But, she pulled through it without faltering. They visited the empty grave and then had a dinner of all of Melody's favorite foods. Lila was quiet, not participating much, as the rest of the family told stories and comforted each other. Lila would have preferred to spend the day alone, but she knew that would've caused the rest of her to worry, so she sat in the corner, offering slight smiles and nods whenever they looked at her.

The rest of the year passed in much the same way, except that Lila stopped going to therapy in September. She said she didn't need anymore, she had nothing left to talk about. So, Lila worked, Robert tried to get her to open up and be a present member of the family again, and Justin stayed away from the house as much as possible. Weeks turned into months. The only thing that seemed to break through Lila's shell was watching Justin play with his cousins. She was thankful to her brother for providing Justin with an escape.

Even though Lila couldn't seem to shake her melancholy, she was glad to see her son start smiling again. When they gathered at her parent's house for the occasional family dinner and holidays, she would watch Justin playing with his cousins. At first, it had been painful, because she knew that Melody should be among them. How could they

be smiling and laughing without her? Then she realized, that as much as she missed her daughter, she didn't really want her son to be miserable. She was glad when he started playing sports again, and going over to friend's houses. She even tried to go to one of his games, but watching the other mother's sitting in the stands, trying to cheer on their sons while keeping track of their daughters, had been too much. She started using work as an excuse to not attend. Eventually, he stopped telling her about games and school events. Now, she only heard about them after the fact, from Robert, or her mother, who made it a point to call once a week to "just talk."

Lila was surprised when she looked at the calendar and saw that it was already May, again. Justin's thirteenth birthday was only a few weeks away. She walked in the door, just as Justin and Robert were sitting down for dinner.

"Something smells good," Lila said, surprising Robert and Justin.

"Um... yeah, grandma sent over a lasagna," Justin said, glancing towards his father.

"Is she still here?" Lila asked looking for her mother.

"No, she made it earlier today and took it to Art and Janet's for us to bring home, when I picked up Justin." Robert explained, pulling out a third plate.

"Well it smells delicious," Lila said, taking the plate from him and serving herself.

They ate in silence for a while, before Justin spoke.

"I'm glad you're home tonight, mom. I wanted to ask you both a question."

Lila looked up, "Okay..."

“I want to have a birthday party... at the house.”

Lila looked down at her plate, it had been a long time since anyone, other than her parents, were at the house.

“Why not at your grandma’s? They have a bigger backyard,” Lila said.

“Because most of my friend’s live around here...” Justin said, “and all my stuff is here.”

“What stuff?” Lila asked.

“My video games, my football, you know everything we would be playing with...”

“We can take all that stuff to your grandparent’s, and you don’t want to be playing video games during a party.”

“Yeah we do...” Justin said.

“I think it would be nice to have it here,” Robert chimed in, “we have all those games in the basement, we could clean it up a bit and you can have it down there.”

Melody’s old playhouse was in the basement...

“That’s a lot of work for one party. And, I’m sure your grandma would be sad if she didn’t get to plan your thirteenth birthday party.”

“I can clean it up,” Justin volunteered.

“That’s a lot of work for one boy...” Lila started.

“I’ll get Mitch to help and Nicole...” Justin interrupted

“I doubt your cousins want to help you clean the basement,” Lila said

“They owe me for helping them clean the garage last week,” Justin said.

“I wouldn’t mind getting the basement cleaned up, we bought all those games for a reason,” Robert offered.

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea,” Lila said getting up from the table and taking her still full plate to the sink.

“Why not?” Justin shouted at her back.

Robert touched Justin’s shoulder, calming him down.

“I don’t think it’s such a bad idea, Lila. I think the kids would have a good time…” Robert said. “It makes more sense to do the party here, than at your parent’s. Plus I think it would be nice to give your mom a break, you know let her come to a party that she didn’t have to throw herself.”

“She likes throwing parties,” Lila said turning around.

“Yes, but everyone needs a break,” Robert said.

Lila sighed, “You’re right, what if we rented a place, we could do a party at the batting cages, or a pizza party, you used to love those and they have all the same games we have in the basement. And you wouldn’t even have to clean them.”

“Why don’t you want to do it here?” Robert asked.

“I just don’t want a lot of kids running around the house…”

“Like you’d even notice,” Justin whispered under his breath.

“What was that?” Lila said, narrowing her eyes.

Robert put his hand back on Justin’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” Justin said, looking down.

“No, what did you say?” Lila pressed.

“He didn’t say anything,” Robert answered for him.

“Yes, he did. Say it again, Justin.”

Justin looked at his mother and Lila took a step back in surprise at the look she saw there.

“I said,” Justin started, “that it’s not like you would even notice.” When Lila didn’t say anything, Justin continued, “You’re never home, and when you are, you’re in your room or reading or still working.” He shrugged off Robert’s hand and stood up. “You don’t come to my games, anymore. You don’t eat dinner with us. You don’t ask about school or my friends or anything in my life. So why should you get a say in my birthday party?”

Justin finished and both Lila and Robert were too stunned to talk.

When Lila found her voice all she could think to say was, “because I’m your mother...”

“You haven’t been my mother all year, so, please don’t start acting like it now,” Justin said and walked out of the kitchen.

“He... he can’t talk to me like that...” Lila said, starting to follow him, but Robert grabbed her arm.

“Give him time to cool down.”

Lila pulled her arm out of his grasp, “How could you just sit there and let him talk to me like that?”

“Because he need to say that, and I think you needed to hear it.”

“What?” Lila asked confused.

“Lila, you’ve been ignoring our son for over a year. Did you know that he won second place in the science fair? Or, that his baseball team is in the playoffs?”

Lila shook her head, how had she not known that?

Robert stroked her cheek, before letting his hand rest on the back of her neck. Lila couldn’t remember the last time he had touched her with such tenderness. “We lost our daughter, and it was painful and horrible and no one should ever have to go through that. But, we still have our son. It’s time you opened your eyes and remembered that…” He kissed her lightly on the temple and then walked out of the room.

Lila sat down in the closest kitchen chair. Had she really been ignoring Justin? She tried to think of the last time they had done anything together, the last time they had an actual conversation, and she couldn’t think of anything. Her face fell into her hands. She had been so wrapped up in avoiding her grief, that she had ignored her son. She needed to really try to let it go, to move past her pain. If not for her own sake, then for Justin’s. He was still her son.

Lila resumed her therapy sessions, with new determination. She held Justin’s birthday party at the house. She even tried to be cheerful and welcoming to her guests. Soon, she really was starting to move on. The second anniversary of Melody’s disappearance was marked with another family dinner, only this time Lila participating. Sharing stories and photos of Melody, with the rest of her family. In August, she packed up Melody’s room, moving all her belongings into storage. She wasn’t ready to throw anything away. In October, she decided it was time to really say goodbye to Melody. She knew she couldn’t do that at the cemetery, Melody wasn’t really there. So, she planned a

trip to the family lake house, which was a short drive from Ha Ha Tonka State Park, and the spring that was Melody's true gravesite. Robert and her mother accompanied her to the house, but Lila needed to go to the spring on her own.

Lila stopped walking the second the spring came into view. She stared down the path she knew by heart. Now that she was here, she didn't know if she could go through with it. After all, wasn't getting this far a victory? She thought about Justin, about the way he had looked at five months ago... She needed to do this. For him.

Lila took a deep breath and then a step, followed by another and then another. Soon she found herself jogging down the path. She stopped right at the edge of the water and glared down at her enemy. The was where it had happened; this was where she had lost Melody. She fell onto the bank, not feeling the jagged rocks digging into her flesh. The tears started to fall as she listened to the rush of water that had taken her daughter from her. She reached her hand towards the water, but couldn't bring herself to touch it. Instead she wanted to yell at it, hit it, destroy it. It had taken her only daughter. She picked up the biggest rock in sight and threw it into the water. But, when it disappeared below the waves, nothing had changed.

The water was still there.

Her daughter was still gone.

And Lila still felt responsible.

It didn't matter what her therapist, or even her mother said, Lila knew it was her fault. Melody would've never enter the water if Lila hadn't told her that story. That was Lila's biggest regret. She should never have let Melody believe in it. She should have

never encouraged Melody's imagination. If she had just told Melody to stop pretending, maybe she would still be alive.

No.

She couldn't think like that. She had been working *so* hard to move past thoughts like those. She needed to find closure; needed to forgive herself. She needed to work past her guilt so she could be the mother Justin deserved.

She reached her hand out towards the water again, this time making contact.

"Goodbye, Melody," she whispered, "I hope you're somewhere beautiful and bright." She paused, "...I love you."

She pulled her hand out of the water and wiped it on her shirt. She stood up and took one last look around. She turned to leave and then stopped. She has heard something. She looked around, but saw nothing that could've made a sound. She turned to leave, again, and again heard a sound. This time it was more clear and she knew exactly what it was. It had been a long time since she heard it, but she'd recognize that sound anywhere. It was Melody's laugh. She whipped around and stared at the water. It couldn't be... It was just a story. The laughing spirit wasn't real... but she had heard it... She had heard Melody laugh. She stared into the water, until she saw an image appear in the ripples.

It was Melody!

She had seen her daughter in the water.

That could only mean one thing. The story was true. Melody hadn't drowned. She had been taken... by the laughing spirit.

Lila ran to her car and rushed back to the lake house, bursting through the door, yelling Robert's name. She told him everything that had happened at the spring, but he kept trying to make her sit down. "Settle down," he kept saying and "Lila, that's not possible." Lila's mother joined Robert in trying to convince her that she was mistaken. "It's just a story, Lila. It's not real." But, she knew what she had seen. She grabbed both their hands, trying to drag them to the car. She would show them, she said. And, eventually, they gave in.

When they got to the spring, Lila knelt down, her face inches from the water, but nothing happened. She yelled Melody's name, asking her to laugh. Telling her to show her father that she was still there. But, still nothing happened. After twenty minutes of this, Robert pulled Lila to her feet and convinced her to go back to the car. He told her that he believed her and that Melody must be playing with the spirit elsewhere, she couldn't hear Lila, that's why she wasn't responding. Lila believed him, and made him promise that they would try again the next day. But, the next day they drove back to the city, Lila begged to go back to the spring a few times, but soon she realized no one believed her. Melody *was* there, whether her husband and mother believed her or not, she knew what she had seen.

Robert still had some of Lila's sleeping pills the first therapist had prescribed to her, so when they arrived at the house he gave her one. While she slept, Robert and her mother decided it was best if Lila wasn't left alone for a while. Robert called Lila's therapist on Monday and told him what had happened. But, by the time Lila's next appointment rolled around, she was already agreeing with everyone that it had just been

her head playing a trick on her. They started to relax around her again, and she was given more freedom. She started taking days off of work, without their knowledge, and driving the three hours to the spring, just to sit beside it. She would talk to Melody, and then get back to the city, in time for dinner with her family. Whenever she started to doubt herself, she would hear the laughter again.

Robert didn't catch on until five months later. He was looking at their credit card statements, while preparing their taxes when he noticed the many gas charges in Camdenton, the county that housed Ha Ha Tonka. When he confronted Lila, she tried to deny it, but soon realized she couldn't. He tried to make her promise to stop going, telling her it wasn't good for her, that she needed to let it go, but she wouldn't listen. She tried to jump in the car, and drive away, but he stopped her. He locked her in the basement and called her mother and brother. He wanted to get Justin out of the house before he saw Lila in that state. They both came right over. Lila's mom tried to talk sense into her daughter, while Robert and Arthur told Justin he was going to stay with his cousins.

Lila wouldn't listen to anyone. She kept accusing them of keeping her from her daughter. They called the therapist, but all he could do was recommend a nice hospital, that could help her. Robert and Marie talked it over, but, Marie thought it might be better if they tried, as her family, to reason with her. Robert agreed to try. Arthur and Janet agreed to keep Justin at their house until Lila was better. Marie moved into Lila's home, and all day talking to her in the basement. Soon, Lila stopped accusing them and started agreeing with them again. But, neither Robert nor Marie were fooled, so while Lila was

no longer locked in the basement, she wasn't ever left alone either. Until one day in early April, when she got her hands on one of the sleeping pills.

Lila slipped the sleeping pill into her mother's drink and snuck out. She got in the car and drove to the spring. When she sat down by the water, Melody was waiting for her. She reached out and touched her daughter's image in the water. She couldn't stand the thought of being separated from her again. She stepped into the water and Melody's face lit up. Her eyes brightened with each step Lila took. Soon, she was neck deep and Melody's face disappeared. Lila went under the water, trying to follow her daughter. She opened her eyes under water and saw all of Melody floating before her, smiling. Lila smiled at her daughter and reached her hand out towards her. When Melody reached back, everything went black.

When Marie woke up, she realized what Lila had done. She called Robert who immediately came home and picked her up. They drove to the spring, but were too late. A few yards down, an old man fishing caught Lila's floating body and pulled it to the shore.

WEATHERED STONE

Marie walked through the door and couldn't help but jump at the bang it made when it closed behind her. She hadn't seen her grandson in over a year, and this was not the place she had pictured for their reunion. The room was hot and ugly. All Marie had to look at were gray walls, a metal table, and a few folding chairs. Dalton offered her one of them, but she didn't sit down. Dalton sat down, next to his son-in-law, Robert, while Marie remained standing against the wall. She kept shifting her weight from foot to foot and folding and unfolding her arms.

When they brought Justin into the room, Marie didn't recognize him. His hair had grown long and looked like it hadn't been washed in a month, his beard was unkempt and he looked like he might break if someone breathed on him wrong. He clothes were stained with, God only knew what, and his hands wouldn't stop shaking. Gone was the sweet little boy, who used to go fishing with his grandpa and help her plant the garden, and in his place, was this frail, shadow of a man. Marie couldn't bring herself to look at his eyes, until he was seated across from her husband and Robert. Justin kept his eyes trained on the table in front of him, but Marie saw them clearly enough. They were sad, empty eyes. They had once been bright and full of life, but, they had changed long before the rest of him had.

Marie cleared her throat and was the first to speak, “Justin...” She stopped, not know what else to say.

Justin kept his eyes on the table when he spoke to his father, “Why did you bring them?”

“I asked them to come talk to you, since you won’t listen to me,” Robert said.

“We’re worried about you Justin,” Marie said.

“It’s time to get your act together, son,” Dalton continued.

“I will, when I get out of here. I promise.” Justin said, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“You’ve said that to me before...” Robert said, “why should I believe you this time?”

“You shouldn’t,” Justin deflated in his chair, “I know I’ve said it before, I didn’t mean it those times, but, I mean it now.”

Marie wanted to reach out and grab his hand, but something was holding her back.

“What’s changed?” Dalton asked.

“I woke up in jail...”

“So, you’re willing to go to rehab and actually participate this time?” Robert asked.

“Yes,” Justin whispered.

“You’re not just saying this so your father will bail you out of jail, are you?” Dalton asked, “because, if you are...”

“I’m not,” Justin sound louder, interrupting him. “I *want* to get clean. I know, now, that I need help.”

They called the lawyer, and struck a deal with the DA. Since this was Justin’s first arrest they agreed to rehab and parole upon his release from rehab. It wasn’t until they had left the prison that Marie realized Justin hadn’t looked at her once. He had rarely looked at anyone, but, she realized, he had actively avoided looking at her.

Justin went straight from prison, into a sixty-day rehab program. During the program, Justin had asked them not to visit and, after discussing it with his doctor, they had agreed. When the sixty days were done, Marie and Dalton picked him up and drove him back to their house. He looked much better than the last time Marie had seen him. He had gained some weight, his hair was cut short, and his clothes were clean. His eyes still lacked the life they once had, and he still didn’t seem to want to make eye contact with either of them, but, at least he was healthy again.

When they arrived at the house, the three of them sat at the kitchen table to discuss the rules Justin would be expected to follow.

“The first rule,” Marie started, “is that you’re not allowed to leave the house on your own, if you need to go somewhere your grandfather or I will take you. The parole officer said you needed to find a job, so, we talked to our friend Edward and he’s willing to set you up with a job on one of his construction crews. Your grandfather will drive you to work in the morning, and the supervisor will bring you back home.”

“That’s nice of him...” Justin whispered sarcastically under his breath.

“What was that?” Dalton asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes, it is nice of him,” Marie stated to Justin’s surprise, she leaned towards him, “my hearing is just fine, you know.”

Justin slouched in his seat.

“Your supervisor is Edward’s son, EJ, you probably don’t remember them, but they have been close friends of this family since before you were born. So, if you think that’ll you’ll be able to get away with anything at work, you’re wrong,” Dalton explained.

“You won’t have a cell phone, until we feel you’ve earned one,” Marie continued with the rules. “If you need to make a call, you can use one of our cell phones.”

“What if you’re not home?” Justin asked.

“Then you won’t be either...” Dalton stated, shrugging his shoulders, “problem solved.”

Marie looked at her husband out of the corner of her eye, he just shrugged his shoulders again as if to say ‘what, it’s the truth’ so she ignored him and continued. ““You and your father are going to start going to family therapy. He will pick you up for those appointments and bring you back. You’ll also be continuing the therapy you started in rehab, and I or your grandfather will drive you to those. We’ll also drive you to your parole meetings.”

“Think you can handle that?” Dalton asked

“Yea,” Justin said, picking at a scratch on the table.

“We set you up in the basement...”

“The basement,” Justin interrupted, looking at Marie for the first time, “why not the guest room?”

“The basement has its own bathroom...” Marie said looking away.

“And no windows...” Dalton added, the real reason they had chosen the basement.

“We only got the basics,” Marie added quickly, “so, you can choose how you want to decorate it. We can go shopping later...”

“Thanks...” Justin said, “I’m kinda tired, is it alright if I go lay down for a bit.”

“Of course,” Marie answered before her husband could.

The first few weeks passed by, quietly. Justin went to work, came home, and went to this room. The most Marie or Dalton saw of him was at dinner. At first this worried Marie, so she would find excuses to go downstairs and check on him, but, she only ever found him reading. He had loved reading as a kid, so, she took this as a good sign and left him to it. EJ only had good things to say about him at work – Justin worked hard, he didn’t complain, and he knew what he was doing. All of this, made Marie happy, but Dalton still worried. He said that Justin was spending too much time alone. He got EJ to confess that Justin did keep to himself at work, he didn’t interact much with the other workers, and all he did at home was read. Even at dinner, he only responded when he was directly asked a question. A few days after Dalton voiced his concerns Marie started to see the problem, too.

Dalton was at his annual check-up, so Marie went down to Justin's room, pretending to find out what he wanted for dinner, he answered without even looking up from his book.

"You know, I was thinking... what if we invited the family over for dinner?"

"The family?" Justin looked up.

"Yea, Arty and Janet, and the kids. When was the last time you saw your cousins?"

"I'm not sure. But..."

"Well, then we need to change that. I'll go call them now." Marie started towards the stairs.

Justin got off his bed, "I'd rather you didn't."

Marie turned around, "What? Why not?"

"I don't think I'm ready to see them yet."

"Not ready to see them yet? They're family..."

"Yes, but, well it's been a while and..." his voice trailed off.

"And..." Marie pushed.

"And I just don't want to."

"That's not a good reason, Justin."

"Why isn't it? I'm the one who's going to be on display..."

"On display?" Marie interrupted.

“That’s why you want to invite them over isn’t it? To show everyone how *well* I’m doing. To show them that ‘Justin is now *drug-free*. Aren’t we all *so proud*...”

Justin’s voice started to rise.

“What?” Marie gasped, “of course not, I wanted to invite them over so you all could catch up.”

“Really, that’s all...” Justin was unconvinced.

“Yes, that’s all,” Marie stated.

“So, if they came over, no one would stare, or talk to me like I’m about to break or worry that something they say might cause me to relapse?”

“Justin, we’re your family.”

“That wasn’t an answer...”

“Do you want me to say that they won’t worry about you?” Marie’s voice was rising now, “Is that what you want to hear? Because I won’t say it. Of course they worry, of course they’re going to be on edge, it’s been *years* since anyone has been able to talk to you without worrying that something they said might send you running out the door looking for a *quick fix*.” She paused, lowering her voice, “We worry because we *care* about you...”

He wore the same defeated look she had seen that day in the prison. “Why?” he asked, nothing held her back this time, she reached out and touched his shoulder, but he flinched away.

“Why what, honey?”

“Why do you care?” he paused for a second. The next thing he said was so low, Marie almost didn’t hear him, “She didn’t.”

“Who didn’t?” Marie asked, “your mother?”

Justin nodded.

Marie reached out and put an arm around him, “Your mother loved you, Justin. She just... she just couldn’t handle her grief. She was lost, Justin.”

Justin wrenched himself out of her hold, “STOP IT! Stop making excuses for her. And stop caring about me! I’m not going back to drugs, okay. I’m done with that. So, just let me live my life how I want.”

“Being alone, sitting in your room, refusing to let anyone in, is not living your life, Justin.”

“But, spending all my free time with my *grandparents* and not being able to leave the house without someone else, is?” Justin countered.

“At least you’re not in prison,” Marie argued.

“I’d rather be in prison than stuck here with you.”

“You don’t mean that...”

“Yes, I DO!” Justin yelled.

Marie was stunned, “We can talk about this again when you’ve cooled down,” she turned and started up the stairs.

“Why won’t you just leave it alone, leave me alone?” Justin yelled.

Marie turned around on the top step and yelled back, “Because you’re my grandson!”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to be your grandson, anymore!”

Marie couldn’t believe he had just said that, she didn’t know what to say, so she just shut the basement door, and paced. She couldn’t sit down, she had to keep moving. She called Dalton and told him he had better get home, soon, because she needed out of the house. He arrived a few minutes later. She managed to tell him that she needed a break and would be back later, before jumping into the car and driving away.

She just drove, without any destination in mind. It wasn’t until she was a few miles outside the city, that she realized where her subconscious was taking her. It was a long drive to the lake, but that was where she was headed. Dalton called her an hour into the drive and she told him that she and Justin had a fight. She told him that she had subconsciously started driving to the lake. He told her to just turn around, but she said she wanted to continue. She would spend the night at the lake house and be back tomorrow afternoon.

Before Marie went home, the next day, she decided to make a pit stop at Ha Ha Tonka State Park. This was where she and Dalton had first met, when the hotel was still standing. She had been a guest and he was a member of the staff, helping wherever he was needed. She had fallen in love with the area, so when the state turned it into a park, it became their go to camp site. She hiked to the ruins left behind, when the castle-esque hotel had burned down. There was so much history here. She had watched her children run around this place, and then her grandchildren, and someday, she hoped, her great-grandchildren. There were so many good memories, here. But, it had been years, since she last came here. Just a few miles away, was the location of the ghost story Marie had

told Lila when she was a little. The same story she had told Melody. That spring, was where she had lost both her daughter and her granddaughter.

She felt as much part of this place, as the weathered stone in front of her. She saw her family etched in each stone building block still standing. She saw the good times, and the bad. She saw the love they had created here, and the pain they had endured. She was still standing... her family was still standing, just like the ruins. And, they would continue to stand, continue to endure all that nature threw their way.

When she arrived back home, Dalton told her Justin was in his room. He wouldn't talk to anyone. Marie opened that door and walked down the steps. He was laying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. When he saw that it was her who was coming down the steps, he jumped out of bed and walked towards her.

“Grandma, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean what I said.”

“I know. You were angry, I understand that, but, what you said, that hurt.”

“I know. I said it to hurt you. And I’m sorry for that,” his head dropped.

“I’m not talking about you saying you didn’t want to be my grandson. I knew that was the anger talking the second you said it.”

“Then what...” Justin asked confused.

“I’m talking about what you said about your mother. Do you really believe she didn’t care about you?”

Justin shrugged, “I don’t know. I guess not.” He walked towards the bed.

“Justin your mother loved you. I know that last few years weren’t the best. And she didn’t always show it, but, you’re the reason she held on as long as she did.”

“It didn’t feel like it,” Justin said sitting down on the bed.

Marie followed and put her arm around him, “Your mother, she wasn’t well...”

“She was insane, just say it. I heard her you know.”

“Heard her?” Marie asked.

“Rambling about the water spirit, the one from that ghost story she told us about the Ha Ha Tonka spring. She believed it took Melody, and she wanted to be with her... I know all this, it’s just sometimes... sometimes it’s hard not to see it as my mom choosing to be with Melody over me.”

Marie hugged Justin, “I’m so sorry, honey.”

“What are you sorry for?” Justin asked, “You didn’t kill her, she did that on her own... they both did.”

“I made it up,” Marie whispered.

“Made what up?”

“The ghost story about the laughing spirit... I made it up one night when your mother and Uncle Arty were young. They wanted to hear a ghost story, so... I made one up. I never thought...” Marie’s words stuck in her throat.

LETTING GO

Nicole took a step back and stared at her progress. This was her third attempt at painting the Castle at Ha Ha Tonka for her grandparent's anniversary. She wanted it to be perfect. She smiled and dipped her brush in the paint and went back to work. She was so focus on the task at hand that she didn't hear her husband calling her name.

Owen popped his head into the studio, "Hey."

Nicole jumped, pulling her brush back from the painting. "Don't do that."

"Do what?" Owen asked coming fully into the room.

"Startle me when I'm painting. I could've ruined everything."

"I didn't realize I was startling you. I've been calling your name since I walked in the door. Didn't you hear me?"

"Well I didn't hear you."

"Sorry." Owen studied the painting, "It looks good. Marie is going love it."

"Thanks. It's taken three tries but I think it's getting there."

"This is where they met, right?"

"Yea," Nicole looked at the brushstrokes that were just starting to take shape. "I can remember when we were really young and grandma would take us to the ruins and tell us what it used to look like. She would describe each room, pointing out where they

were and tell us stories about her stay. I think half of them were made up, but they were always fun to listen to.”

Owen smiled, “She does know how to tell a really good story. We should get her to write some of them down.”

“Why?” Nicole turned to look at him.

Owen shrugged, “Just to have, you know for the future...”

Nicole looked at him, confused.

“You know to share with the next generation...”

“You mean with *our* kids...” Nicole’s eyes narrowed.

Owen hesitated, but decided to continue, “And your brothers’ kids. I hope your grandmother is around for many more years but the future isn’t set...”

“How can you even think something like that. Grandma is healthy as a horse. She isn’t going anywhere anytime soon.” Nicole turned back to the painting, raising her brush.

“I know, but I don’t think it’s a bad idea. In fact, knowing Marie I’m sure she would love to write her stories down.”

Nicole turned back around, “Don’t you dare ask her...”

“Why not?” Owen straightened his back.

“Because, I don’t want them thinking we’re trying to have kids. And that is exactly what everyone is going to think if you ask her to start writing down her stories for the *future*.” Nicole used her fingers to make quotations around the word future.

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing...”

“What? How can that not be a bad thing?” Nicole tossed her brush onto the table next to the canvas, keeping her eyes locked on Owen.

“Because, if everyone starts thinking that you’ll be forced to actually start talking about it.”

“We have talked about it.”

“No, we haven’t. Every time I bring it up, you find some way to change the subject and avoid it. Or you say you’re too *tired* to have such a *big* conversation...”

“It is a big conversation...” Nicole said throwing her hands in the air, “And one I don’t want to have standing in my studio covered in paint.”

“Fine. Go shower and then we’ll talk...” Owen stepped aside, leaving the pathway to the door open.

“Owen...” Nicole started, taking off her paint-covered smock.

Owen raised his hand, “No, I’m done letting you avoid it. We are talking about this tonight.”

“Fine. I don’t want kids. There we talked.” Nicole walked out the door and towards her bedroom. Owen followed her.

“We’re not done talking. Why don’t you want kids?”

Nicole stopped in the bedroom doorway, “Because I don’t. Now if you don’t mind I’m going to shower.” She walked into the bedroom.

“No!” Owen stopped her before she reached the bathroom. “That’s not an answer. I know you like kids and I’ve seen you with Lulu, you love her...”

“Of course, I love her, she’s my niece,” Nicole interrupted.

“I’ve seen you around other kids, that aren’t related to you. You love kids. So why don’t you want any?”

“I just don’t, okay. Now will you please move.”

“Cole, that’s not an answer...”

“Yes it is...” She moved to go around him.

“What are you scared of?”

She flipped around, “I’m not scared.”

“Then what is it?” Owen took a step towards her.

“I. Don’t. Want. Kids.” She punctuated each word with her hands.

“Why. Not.” He followed her example.

“I just don’t and I’m done with this conversation.”

“Well I’m not...”

“Fine.”

Nicole started walking towards the bedroom door and walked out of the room.

She made her way down the hallway, towards the front door.

“What are you doing?”

She picked up her keys, “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“You’re seriously going to leave in the middle of a conversation.”

“No. I’m going to leave at the end of a conversation.”

Owen reached out and grabbed her arm that held the keys.

“Let. Me. Go.”

Nicole's voice was hard, but it was the look in her eyes that made Owen release her.

She walked out the front door and got into her car. She backed out of the driveway and just drove. She had no idea where she was going, just that she had to get away.

As Nicole drove she thought about last Thanksgiving, that was when Owen had started pushing her to talk about kids. Her brother, Mitch, and his wife, Clara, were pregnant with their second kid. While they discussed names for the new baby, Owen and Mitch sat on the floor playing with Lulu, Mitch's first-born. It had been enough to make Owen want kids. When they got home that night, he brought up the idea to Nicole. She quickly stopped the conversation before it begun by going to bed. Every time she thought about kids, she saw her Aunt Lila's face the day her cousin, Melody, disappeared. She was not ready to have that conversation.

She stopped to get gas and saw that she had been driving for an hour. Owen had texted her.

Where are you? Call me.

She still wasn't ready to go home.

I'm going to the lake house. I'll call you tomorrow.

She got out of the car and filled up her tank. When she got back in she saw that she had a missed call from Owen, but she wasn't ready to return it. She tossed her phone onto the passenger seat and drove the three hours to the lake house.

When Nicole arrived at the house, the lights were on but there wasn't a car in the driveway. She hadn't expected anyone to be there, it was February. She tried to peer in through the kitchen window but she couldn't see who was inside. She got out of her car and walked towards the back of the car, before remembering that she didn't have a bag. She walked to the front door and pulled the key out its hiding place under the grill. She went to unlock the door but discovered that it was already open. She walked in and called out.

"Nicole?" Her grandma, Marie, sat on the couch with a book in hand.

"Grandma. Where's your car?" Nicole asked looking back at the driveway.

"Your grandpa and cousin went on a fishing trip so I had them drop me off on the way." Marie stood up, "Close the door. It's cold out there."

Nicole closed the door and walked towards her grandma, giving her a hug.

"Where's Owen? Is he bringing in the bags?" Marie glanced around Nicole, expecting the door to open again.

"Um, no. He's not coming. It was kinda an impromptu visit. I have some clothes in my drawer that I was just planning on using."

Marie looked at Nicole's face, but Nicole quickly looked away.

"So, grandpa and Justin went fishing?"

They talked for a little about the fishing trip, before Nicole excused herself to take a shower. She still had paint on her hands and all she wanted in that moment was to wash it all away.

Nicole stepped into the steaming shower. She liked her showers to be hot, it had caused a lot of problems growing up, because there was very little hot water left after she was finished. Even in the middle of summer, when the temperatures were in the ninety's, Nicole still took hot showers. It was the only way she felt clean. She stood under the stream of water and thought about her cousin Melody. When they were girls their parent's use to shove them into this same shower together.

Melody had only been a year older than Nicole, so they were very close. She tried not to think about Melody too much, but every once in a while, Nicole would wonder if Melody and her would've remained close as they got older. Especially, lately, working on the painting of the castle for her grandparent's anniversary and all of Owen's attempts to talk about children had brought Melody to the forefront of Nicole's mind.

Nicole and Mitch were camping with their aunt and uncle and cousins, in Ha Ha Tonka State Park. It was their annual summer trip. Nicole's parents couldn't make it that year because her younger brother Liam was sick. They sent Nicole and Mitch with their aunt and uncle and planned on joining them later, when Liam felt better. They had only been there a couple of days, when Nicole woke up one morning and Melody was gone. Her Uncle Robert had gone to the Ranger's Station to get help, while her Aunt Lila took Nicole, Mitch, and Justin to the spring. Melody loved the spring, she believed a spirit lived there. Aunt Lila had told them the ghost story the night before, about the laughing spirit. The gist of the story was that a spirit lived in the spring and lured people in with laughter, supposedly, after you heard the laughter you disappeared. Melody became obsessed with the story, she told everyone she heard the laugh, and even that she had seen

a face in the water. Nicole had even pretended to hear the laugh, too, she always wanted to be just like Melody. When they arrived at the spring, they found Melody's flashlight. It was the only clue they would ever find. They stood there, yelling Melody's name, until her uncle and the rangers arrived.

Nicole would never forget the look on her aunt's face that day. It still haunted her dreams. When the rangers arrived, her aunt wasn't yelling, anymore, she was just staring at the water like it was a best friend who had just betrayed her. Uncle Robert called her name three times before she finally looked at him. She had Melody's flashlight in her hand, and Nicole watched her uncle's muscles bulge as he pried it from her fingers. It wasn't until the flashlight was out of her hands that she seemed to come back to life. Aunt Lila looked at Uncle Robert and whispered, "She's gone," and then Nicole, Justin, and Mitch watched as she crumbled into the rocks. Nicole reached out for her brother's hand, but, discovered it was Justin's that was reaching back. The three of them stood there, hand in hand in hand, as her uncle quietly comforted her aunt.

None of them were ever the same after that. Her aunt, though, changed the most. She went from being Nicole's funny, playful aunt who took Nicole to get her first sketch pad and pencils, to a quiet, solemn figure that occupied a chair at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Her depression, eventually led her to take her own life, in the same spring everyone believed Melody had drowned in. Nicole tried to remember her aunt before the disappearance, but she couldn't. Every time she pictured her Aunt Lila, she saw that day at the spring and face of a woman who had just lost everything. It was that face that had

stuck in her mind her Junior year of college, when she and Owen had, had a pregnancy scare.

They had been together a year, and she missed her period. She took a pregnancy test and it came back positive. They didn't know what to do. Thankfully, she they didn't have to think about it too long, when she went to the doctors for the initial check-up, the test came back negative. It had been a false positive, and Nicole and Owen were extremely relieved. They had a conversation about kids, and learned that neither of them knew if they wanted kids in the future but they were sure they did not want kids, in that moment.

Nicole had always pictured her adult self with kids, but, when that pregnancy test read positive, she was terrified. At the time, she had told herself it was because of the timing, but, it didn't take long for that lie to fade away. All she could think about was Melody and her Aunt Lila. What if her child went missing like Melody? Kids went missing a lot more now, than, then... If it could happen to her cousin... How would she react if it did happen? Like her aunt? She just couldn't handle that thought, so she pushed it aside.

Now it was back.

Nicole shivered.

The water was starting to turn cold, so Nicole stepped out and wrapped herself in a towel. Most of the clothes she left here were for summer, but she did keep a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt, for colder nights. She changed into those now. When she went back into the living room her grandma was still sitting on the couch reading. Nicole

walked to the bookshelf, choosing one of her favorites and sitting in the chair opposite. Her grandma spoke before she could even open her book.

“So, what brought on this impromptu visit?”

Nicole looked down at her book, “Just needed a break from the city.”

“Owen didn’t want to join?”

Nicole kept her head down, “He had to work.” She opened her book.

Nicole was relieved when Marie opened back up her book and resumed reading.

They sat in comfortable silence, reading a while before both headed to bed.

In the morning, Nicole woke to the smell of bacon frying in the kitchen. She walked into the kitchen and was instantly taken back to her childhood. Her grandma stood at the stove cooking breakfast and singing along to the radio. The only difference now, was she poured herself a cup of coffee instead of milk. Her grandma even put her breakfast on the same *Little Mermaid* plate she had used when she was kid. Nicole used to complain about this, but now it just made her smile.

“So, are you planning on going back to the city early or sticking around here for a while?” Marie took a bite of bacon.

“I didn’t really have any set plans yet.”

“Oh good. I was hoping you were going to say that. I wanted to take a little trip today, and I was hoping if I could borrow your car?”

“Sure grandma, go right ahead.”

“Actually, you should come with me. It’s been so long since we’ve done something just us two.”

Nicole looked down at her plate. She always loved spending time with her grandma, but her grandma had a way of seeing through her lies. She looked up and saw Marie smiling back at her.

“Sure, grandma. Sounds like fun.”

Marie drove since she refused to tell Nicole where they were going. It didn't take long, however, for Nicole to realize where they were going. She could drive to Ha Ha Tonka State Park in her sleep. Nicole thought about the painting sitting on her easel at home, this was where the castle ruins stood, reminding everyone of the once beautiful house that stood on the cliff. Their family had a tumultuous relationship with this park. It was where her grandparents had met, where they had taken their children and later their grandchildren. Generations of her family had grown up here, spending summers running around the ruins of the castle, laughing at stories told. It had been one of Nicole's favorite places, until Melody's disappearance. This was where it had happened. This was where her Aunt Lila took her own life. When she was young, Nicole broke the park up into sections. The ruins were the safe section, the part of the park where the happy memories outweighed the tragic ones. The spring was the danger zone, that was where both her cousin and her aunt had died.

Her grandma pulled into the parking spot closest to the trailhead that led to the ruins. The hike up was easy and quiet. They walked in silence not wanting to break nature's spell. When they broke through the trees, the ruins were laid out before them. No one else was there. Silently, they approached the weathered walls and Nicole let her hand slide across the stone as she walked from one side to the other. Nicole walked close to the

edge and looked out at the sprawling lake below her. She remembered the first time she brought Owen up here, it had been crawling with people. She remembered thinking about how much her Aunt Lila would've hated it. Aunt Lila preferred to have the ruins to herself, that was one of the few things Nicole disagreed with her about. She liked to see all the people walking around, exploring the grounds. It reminded her of what it must've been like when it had been a hotel. Nicole and Melody used to imagine they were hotel guests meeting for the first time, it was their favorite game to play.

Her grandma came up beside her, "It's beautiful up here."

Nicole just nodded her head.

"You know I've always found this a good place to clear my head and think about things that are bothering me..."

Nicole looked at her grandma, "Who said anything is bothering me?"

Marie laughed, "You never were very good at hiding your emotions, dear. The second you walked in the door I knew something was wrong."

Nicole turned back towards the view. *Why did she have to have such an observant grandmother?*

"It's always better to face problems head on. If you try to run from them, they turn into a wall and plop right down in front of you."

Nicole kept her eyes trained on the water below. Marie touched her shoulder and then turned to walk away.

"Owen wants kids," Nicole whispered "but, I'm afraid."

It was the first-time Nicole had ever said those words, even to herself. The truth just kept coming out, she was too tired to stop it anymore.

“I’m afraid of something bad happening, something like what happened to Melody.” She paused, before continuing in a whisper, “I’m afraid of becoming Aunt Lila.”

“What do you mean?” Marie asked, taking a step closer.

“Everyone always said I was just like her. We’re both artist, we both talk with our hands. We even look alike.”

“Actually, you look like your father,” Marie said.

Nicole finally turned towards her grandma, “They were twins...”

Marie smiled, causing Nicole’s mouth to twitch upwards. They stood looking at each other for a moment, before Nicole turned and walked towards a stone window and sat down.

“I don’t think I can handle being a mother. Whenever I think about kids, all I can picture is Aunt Lila’s face that day by the stream. I don’t want to *ever* see that face in the mirror.”

“I think you would be an amazing mother.” Marie leaned against the stone beside Nicole. “You’re forgetting something.”

“What’s that?”

“Where Lila’s traits come from.” Marie gestured to herself. “You are like your aunt in many ways, in the same ways that she was like me. But, you differ in one large way. Something you were probably too young, then, to realize.”

Nicole looked at her grandma, urging her to continue.

“Lila wasn’t exactly a people person. All her life, she preferred her sketchpad and books to socializing. She had friends, of course, but not nearly as many as your father did. In the end, this hurt her more than any of us realized.”

“What do you mean? Aunt Lila was the life of the party, she was always telling us jokes and drawing funny pictures.”

“The family party, sure. But, when it came to people outside the family, she was a lot more reserved. And after Melody disappeared, she became that way even around family. You are like your aunt in many ways. Your talent for art, your sarcasm,” Marie smiled, looking at Nicole, “your ability to see beauty in pretty much anything. But, you have something she never had,” Marie paused putting her finger under Nicole’s chin and lifting Nicole’s eyes to hers. “You have an openness that draws people to you. You have a remarkable ability to make friends anywhere. You let people in, instead of pushing them away.” She let her chin go, and Nicole’s eyes fell to the floor. The remained silent for a while, listening to the wind weave through the other windows.

“I wish I could tell you that nothing bad would ever happen, but we can’t know the future. That’s one of the most unnerving things about being a mother. But, I do believe you have the strength *and support* to handle anything life throws at you.”

Nicole watched as Marie looked around the ruins, she watched as a sadness filled her eyes.

Marie sighed, “I think it’s time the women in this family stopped letting our ghosts run our lives.”

They left the ruins soon after and returned to the lake house. Nicole knew it was time she headed back to the city. As she drove home, she thought about everything her grandma had said. She knew she was right. The ghost of her aunt had been haunting her, since her Junior year of college. It was time to let her go; time she stopped letting fear control her.

When she walked in the front door, Owen was sitting on the couch. He looked up at her as she entered the room, relief flooding his eyes. Nicole smiled, she didn't know what the future held, but she did know she didn't have to face it alone.

“I think we have a conversation we need to finish.”

BIOGRAPHY

Kelly Hanson graduated from Bishop Ward High School in Kansas City, KS in 2008. She attended Northwest Missouri State University and graduated in 2012 with a Bachelor of Science in English. In 2014, she left the Midwest and moved to Virginia to attend George Mason University.