

## **The Waiting Room**

### **I.**

Zadie was nine the second time she entered the hospital. She had been hauled to the emergency room only once before, when she was seven and her father pushed her too hard on the swings and she broke her arm. Her mother was so furious with her father that she brought up the incident eight years later during the divorce. Zadie, on the other hand, was just proud to be the first girl in her class to break a bone.

It is perhaps worth noting, though only in passing, that Zadie was very nearly brought to the hospital again when she was eight. Her father was headed to the city for a week on a business trip, and it so happened that the night before he left, her mother was urgently called four hours away to Pottsville, where a cousin had just overdosed. Zadie's father hurriedly arranged for his daughter to stay a few days with Grand-Dad, but as soon as Zadie heard about the plan, she suddenly began complaining of a severe stomachache. Her father was of the opinion that she should be given an Advil and taken to Grand-Dad's house straight away, but her mother fretted a great deal and insisted that she be taken to the hospital. She had even gotten her daughter into the car before the father intervened and took the girl instead to the retired doctor who lived next door. The doctor examined her, nodded thoughtfully, and pulled the father aside to inform him that the girl appeared to be faking. Apart from some unexplained nervousness, there was nothing wrong with the girl. Zadie's father was quite embarrassed to have woken up an old retiree for such a trivial issue, and so the girl was told in no uncertain terms that she would be grounded for the next two weeks. But when she returned from Grand-Dad's unable to eat for almost three days, her mother shortened her sentence. Zadie was a sensitive girl, she reasoned, and the punishment must have hurt her self-esteem.

When the girl entered the hospital for the second time as a nine-year-old, it was as a visitor instead of as a patient. She had been shaken awake one mid-May Sunday night, an hour before midnight.

"Your uncle just called," her father informed her in a stiff voice. "He's at the hospital with Aunt Savannah. Grand-Dad's taken a turn for the worse. Get dressed as quickly as you can. We're leaving in five minutes."

Zadie didn't get dressed. After five minutes, she came downstairs in her sickly green pajamas and told her father that she had a stomachache. Her father was too busy grabbing pillows to throw in the car to hear her, although perhaps he chose to ignore her. Only when the family was halfway to the hospital would the mother realize that her daughter wasn't dressed.

The first part of the car ride was passed in silence. Zadie stared out the window, trying to make out any familiar shapes in the night. She couldn't. As the car sped past the edge of town and the silhouettes of small houses gradually gave way to endemic, almost-empty fields, Zadie found herself wanting to fall asleep. But she couldn't do that either; the thought of Grand-Dad waiting for her at the hospital lingered in her mind.

"Does Grace know?" the mother eventually whispered to the father, believing Zadie to be asleep.

"I called her before we left." The father's response was curt and choleric, and his eyes, which peered over unflinchingly white knuckles on the wheel, never bothered so much as a flicker in the direction of his wife's face.

"Do you think she'll come?"

"She better. He's her father as much as he is mine, whether or not she wants to admit it."

"I just don't want you to count on it and be let down." The father said nothing, so the mother pushed on after a moment. "You know she hasn't come to anything with him since Julie."

"Alicia, don't."

Alicia ignored the warning. "Julie was still living there when it happened. You know that Grace blames him."

"What do you want me to say?" The father was whispering acidly now, and only the thought of his sleeping daughter in the backseat kept him from shouting. "I can't help it if Grace thinks our sister shot herself because dad somehow made her. But if she can't get over herself enough to visit him before he dies, she better not think about calling herself part of the family."

Alicia snorted. "She hasn't wanted to be part of the family since Julie anyway. Just don't get your hopes up."

This time, the father didn't respond. After a few minutes, Zadie spoke. "Is Grand-Dad going to die?" she asked cautiously.

The mother turned around. "Dear, you're awake!" she exclaimed.

"Is Grand-Dad going to die?" repeated Zadie.

"Don't worry, sweetie," said the father in a suddenly softened voice, glancing at his daughter worriedly through the rearview mirror. "Grand-Dad will be okay. Remember what they said in Sunday school? God's looking out for him."

"Oh." Zadio stared languidly out the window.

"Darling," said the mother, "you aren't even dressed!"

"I said I had a stomachache."

Alicia glared at her husband. "We'll take care of that later," he offered, noting his wife's barbed glance without looking directly at her and instead glancing at his daughter again. "Don't you want to see Grand-Dad again?"

Zadio didn't respond. Her father didn't believe that she had a stomachache, which disappointed the little girl, though of course he was right to think that she was lying. The truth was that she very much wanted to never see Grand-Dad again, though she also knew that it was wrong of her to think that. So instead of saying something, she just kept staring out the window at the passing silhouettes, unable to fall asleep.

## II.

The hospital, which stood out like an ulcer in the middle of miles of darkened cornfields, had been built fifteen years earlier. At the time, there were plans to convert much of the surrounding area into a development, but some of the farmers, being concerned for their children's livelihoods, banded together and refused to sell their land. In response, the developers petitioned the state government to seize the land, arguing that new housing was necessary due to a forecast of economic growth in the region which would lead to rising homelessness if more residential areas weren't built. Incidentally, though he was already retired, Grand-Dad had once been a lawyer for the state attorney general's office, and he happened to get wrapped up in the affair as counsel for the farmers, who asked him to represent them. He even worked pro bono and managed to tie the developers up in legal trouble until they ran out of money, and for the rest of his life, he would brag about single-handedly bankrupting Henderson and Sons Construction, LLC. Though it's not particularly relevant to mention the fact, the projections of growth in the region would never materialize and the hospital would be bulldozed some twenty years later to make way for a wind farm. All of the old farmers' sons would sell their land without protest.

But on the night that Zadie came to visit her Grand-Dad for the last time, the hospital still stood as a pustule of manufactured light in the middle of an otherwise dark and unblemished countryside. The girl and her parents arrived at twelve to midnight.

"We're here, sweetie," Alicia whispered in the darkness. In a moment, Zadie was being whisked out of the car and into a brightly lit waiting room, where she spent a few moments blinking and rubbing her eyes. The waiting room, which was a good deal larger than made sense for such a sparsely populated region, was mostly white—a garish, shocking white, bathed in vengeful fluorescence. Yet here and there were splashes of neon greens and reds and oranges, as though after the room had been finished, someone had realized how off-putting the stark alabaster was, but, unable to actually subdue the eyesore, had compromised by merely spreading its brutality across the color spectrum.

When her vision had finally adjusted, Zadie saw that there were only three other people in the waiting room. There was a middle-aged man, plainly dressed and wearing a pair of heavily worn boots and a red baseball cap, with a woman of about the same age by his side, sitting stiffly with her blond hair falling flatly over a professional blue dress, one which was a little bit wrinkled and a little bit faded. Next to them was a third figure, much younger, who was slouched so far into his chair that it seemed as though he was attempting to be aggressively comfortable, his legs splayed at almost a right angle over the linoleum in front of him. He was wearing a heavy sweatshirt with stained jeans, and in addition to a shaggy, pale head of hair, he was sporting a full but unattractively curly beard, so blonde that at a glance it was impossible to tell where skin ended and hair began. Zadie instantly recognized her aunt and uncle and one of their twin sons. Her uncle rose when he saw the newcomers and walked over to them.

"Thanks for hurrying," he said to Zadie's father.

"How is he?" came the response.

Zadie's uncle shook his head. "I haven't seen him at all today. It was Savannah's turn to look after him after church, and apparently he had a coughing fit. Worse than she'd ever seen, she told me. She called the ambulance and I came as soon as I could, but they aren't letting anyone back to him just yet."

Zadie's father was silent.

"Did you call Grace?" asked the uncle.

"She'll come."

Zadie's uncle nodded. "Let's go sit," he finally said, and Zadie followed her parents over to the rest of the family. Aunt Savannah smiled at Zadie through tired eyes as she walked over, but no one spoke. After a few moments, Alicia addressed the boy, who was really not a boy at all since he and his twin were turning twenty-two that September, though Aunt Savannah still called them her precious boys.

"How's Maddie doing?" asked Zadie's mother.

The boy looked up with evident disinterest. "She's fine," he replied.

"Have you two picked a date yet?"

The boy grunted. "She says it has to be before next June."

Alicia nodded and paused. "And how is work at the warehouse?"

"It's fine too," answered the boy. Then he sighed, and Alicia, offended but nevertheless cowed at his incivility, looked down and became quiet. A few minutes of gaunt silence followed: the boy slouched deeper in his seat until it was impossible to tell whether he was still awake or not, Zadie's father began tapping his fingers impatiently, and the mother suddenly reached over to smooth out Zadie's pajamas with a touch of freneticism in her fingers. "You may as well look as presentable as you can in this," she huffed somewhat noisily, though no one took any notice of what she was doing, including most likely herself.

After a while, a soft chime broke the silence and Zadie spun around to see the automatic door slide open as a second boy walked in, the same height and build as the first but missing the pale, curly beard that spilled over the chin and reached its way down the neck. He strutted in with a laptop bag slung over his shoulder, wearing a button-down tucked into a pair of dark (and, by way of comparison, decidedly un-stained) jeans. As he looked at his watch and tsd-tsd the time, Zadie thought she could almost see a hint of Grand-Dad—who had always been a bit too concerned about his appearance—in his short-cropped hair, too-shiny shoes, and bespectacled glare of disapproval. Zadie instinctively grabbed her mother's arms and made herself as small as possible.

The boy walked over to the family. "Hey Mom, hey Dad," he said curtly, followed by a quick "hey bro," tossed on as an addendum. His brother nodded back silently, signaling that he was, despite all evidence to the contrary, still awake. The new visitor slid into a chair beside his bearded brother without acknowledging Zadie or her parents, and in a moment, he had pulled out his laptop and was typing agitatedly.

"So how was the bus ride?" asked Aunt Savannah after a brief interim in which nothing could be heard in the stifling silence except for the gentle tap of the keyboard.

"It was fine," replied the boy without averting his eyes from the screen.

Aunt Savannah paused for a minute. "You know, you didn't have to bring that thing," she offered weakly.

"Yeah, well, Grand-Dad didn't have to get sick in May," muttered the boy under his breath. "It's not exactly the best time when you have final papers to write."

"I can't believe how strict these college professors are with their deadlines, that they won't even give you more time for this," huffed Aunt Savannah. The boy had not asked for an extension because he had plans in Florida two days after finals ended and did not want to still be working on papers then. Indeed, he had not even informed his parents—neither of whom had been to college—that it would be possible to ask for such a thing. He merely ignored his mother's statement and continued typing. Zadie's father shot him a look of hatred and derision but said nothing, and Aunt Savannah dropped the subject, offended but fatigued by her son's unresponsive condition. Silence once again infected the atmosphere.

After what felt to Zadie like an eternity, a nurse stepped into the waiting room through a large red door. The coloring of the door was surely meant—along with the surrounding splashes of neon—to inject some life into the white that predominantly filled the interior, but bearing an oddly darker, nearly bloody hue, the crimson instead stood out as something ominous, threatening.

"Morris family?" asked the nurse in trepidation, and every head in the waiting room turned in his direction. "He can see visitors now. But, uh, he's asking for immediate children only at the moment."

Zadie's father and her uncle looked at each other before rising. "I thought you said Grace was coming," whispered the uncle, though the father ignored him and walked over to the nurse.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He's, well, he's stable for the moment. But he could turn worse at any moment, and at this stage, there's, uh, there's not much—"

"Bullshit," interrupted the father. "I just read last week that there was a breakthrough."

"Sir, whatever you read, we just, we don't have the resources here, or at this point the time—"

But the father's ears had clotted themselves up. "If it's money, we can take on debt, we can re-mortgage. Dad doesn't deserve this."

"I'm sure he doesn't, sir, but that doesn't change the fact that . . ." The nurse trailed off before speaking again. "Look, can you just follow me? There are other patients for me to look after."

Zadie's father nearly pushed further, but his brother grabbed his arm. "Let's just go," he eked out, and the father fell silent. The two men followed the nurse out of the waiting room, and as their wives leaned back into their chairs once more, Zadie curled up closer to her mother. She wanted to go to sleep, but the knowledge that Grand-Dad was in the building unnerved her too much to drift away. So instead, she just laid there without moving.

Nothing else happened for almost another half hour. Eventually, a different nurse walked out of the same large door beyond which Zadie's father had disappeared. She was heading for the exit while spinning her keys around her forefinger. Zadie saw her cousin—the one who kept reminding her of Grand-Dad—pick his eyes up from his laptop for the first time to watch the young nurse cross the room. Halfway to the exit, the keys slipped off her finger and dropped to the ground, and as she bent down to pick them up, Zadie watched as he softly elbowed his bearded brother, who looked up and, catching sight of the nurse bending down, grinned widely. A moment later, he was slouched down again with his twin's eyes back on his computer screen, and Zadie watched as the nurse walked through the exit. Outside, the girl suddenly noticed, was another middle-aged woman (or perhaps slightly older?) standing by the door and smoking a cigarette. It would have been impossible to say how long she had been standing there, but the instant that Zadie caught sight of her, the woman turned and walked into the waiting room as though aware that she had been spotted.

The newcomer's clothes, in addition to being rather shabby, were quite mismatched: she was wearing a reasonably fancy though jaundiced yellow top paired with old jeans and mutilated tennis shoes. In truth, she had dressed and undressed multiple times before finally deciding to come to the hospital. When she did eventually make her decision, she dressed as smartly as she could before abruptly changing her mind at the last moment and switching out half of her outfit for some intentionally grubby clothing. She walked haltingly across the room, stopping halfway to the Morris family before anyone but Zadie had seen her, at which point she took a deep breath, adopted a clearly forced smile, and covered the rest of the distance with an equally forced

confidence in her stride. Her smile, an observer might have noted, was likely once quite gleaming, though composed in its current state as it was of tar-yellowed teeth peeking out from behind wrinkled lips streaked with a rust-colored hue, it seemed closer to infected than infectious. The woman pulled up at the Morris family.

"Are you . . . Savannah?" she finally asked, and both Savannah and Alicia looked up at her for the first time. The boys glanced in her direction but immediately lost interest in the new curiosity. Zadie, on the other hand, stared intently at the newcomer while keeping one hand tightly squeezed around her mother's arm.

"Sorry, who are you?" asked Savannah. Then, suddenly reminding herself that even a hospital was no place to sweep aside decorum, she followed the question up with a hasty, "yes, I'm Savannah."

The woman sighed. "I guess it's been, what, twenty-two, twenty-three years since we saw each other, hasn't it? It's me, Grace."

Savannah's eyes widened. "Grace? It's, uh, it's wonderful to see you again. You're looking . . . you're looking well."

Grace snorted. "Yeah, I know I went to shit," she said before swiveling to Zadie's mother. "You oughta be Alicia then. I guess we never met at all."

Alicia nodded, stunned. "You came," eventually creaked out of her throat.

"Well, figured I oughta give Pops a proper send-off," shot back the woman. "And nice to meet you too, sis. Where're the boys?"

"They went that way with a nurse." Alicia gestured towards the scarlet door that led to the rest of the hospital. "Immediate children only."

Grace looked at the door, took a deep breath, and nodded. "Alright, well, no sense not going in if we've come this whole way." She turned sharply and started towards the door, but a mere two steps in, Zadie heard a noise bubble up from deep within her throat. She spun around, covering her mouth, and abruptly rushed towards a small bathroom in an alcove on the opposite end of the waiting room. When she emerged, wiping her lips, she practically ran to the exit, where she pulled out another cigarette with trembling hands and lit it, taking two drags before shaking her head, flicking it to the ground, and returning to the waiting room. Without pausing to acknowledge the rest of the family's stares, she made her way to the large door and stepped behind, disappearing from sight.



Alicia and Savannah whispered to one another for a bit after that, but eventually silence returned once more. Zadie wanted to sleep—her cousin, the one with the beard, had undoubtedly nodded off by then—but still she could not manage to put the thought of Grand-Dad out of her mind. So she lay there, still but very much awake, until the first nurse re-emerged and addressed the family.

"He's asking for the whole family now," he pronounced in a numb voice, and as he spoke he cast his eyes downward so that it was apparent to all that there would be no good news that night. Alicia and Savannah looked at one another and quickly rose, and within seconds, Zadie was being pulled past the scarlet door by her mother.

### III.

Grace had left the family the year that Julie committed suicide. She did not attend Savannah's wedding to Zadie's uncle that year, nor did she return for either Grand-Mom's funeral or the wedding of Zadie's parents, both of which came eight years later. One day, when Zadie was a sophomore in college, she would have a very long conversation with her father. In it, he would confess to her that he suspected for a time that God had cursed their family so that for every woman who joined, one would be lost. The twice-repeated incident of a loved one dying in the same year as a wedding had shaken him, making him extremely protective—as he would tell others—of the well-being of the women in his family. (Only years later, when her father fell out of favor with her, would Zadie look back and wonder why he counted only one casualty the year that Julie committed suicide. He must have considered Grace's loss to be irrelevant, she concluded—though perhaps he never thought of her as lost.) During that same conversation, her father told her that her birth was the happiest day of his life: no one died that year, and it proved that God had lifted the curse, if he had ever placed it on them in the first place. That was, incidentally, the conversation that made Zadie take religion seriously, if only for a brief moment. Her mother's God, of whom Alicia spoke frequently, was full of love for everyone and wanted everyone to be happy and at peace. Zadie knew from a young age that no such God could possibly exist. But her father's God, of whom she caught just one brief glance as a sophomore in college, who was perfectly willing to curse those who believed in him most ardently, without any explanation or justification save a distant promise of redemption, a God like that—thought

Zadie—I can believe in, a God like that just might exist yet. But when she gave up on her father two years later, she gave up on any sort of God too.

In any event, Grand-Dad's bedside was the first place in two decades where Grace was present with the family, but when Zadie entered the room, pulled in by her mother's unyielding grip, an observer could easily have been fooled into believing that nothing was amiss amongst the siblings. Her uncle and Grace were holding hands and standing behind her father, who was seated on a chair by Grand-Dad's side. Grand-Dad was lying on the bed, his back propped up, with a plastic tube around his nostrils. The last tufts of his blanched hair had fallen out of his head since the last time that Zadie had seen him, and his face, devoured by parasitical wrinkles, had taken on the shade of ash. His breathing, heavy and ragged, was the only sound that filled the pallid air, and a foul odor emanated from him, a mix of ammonia and rotting flesh.

But Zadie noticed none of this, because Zadie had learned to keep her attention fixed on Grand-Dad's hands whenever she was in the same room as him. The old man's right hand was currently being clenched by both hands of Zadie's father, but his left hand laid limply at his side, bloodless and blotched. Zadie's father was weakly repeating the line he had given the nurse, now directed at his own father—"you don't deserve to die, you don't deserve to die"—as though saying it enough could cure cancer. When Zadie and the rest of the family entered the room, Grand-Dad weakly raised his left hand and attempted to cut off his son's mumbling by clearing his throat. The noise that he emitted, though, sounded less like an *ahem* and more like the guttural failure of a car engine, such a spectacularly wretched retching that Zadie wondered if he might choke on his own bile and die right then and there.

"Others . . . here," coughed out the dying man. Zadie's father turned around and saw the rest of his family in the doorway.

"Zadie, dear, why don't you come and talk to Grand-Dad?" asked the father. Zadie shook her head no and grabbed onto her mother's waist, but her father had already stood up and in a moment he was beside her, grabbing her arm and pulling her over to the old man's side. Grand-Dad slowly reached up his arm and the young girl, restrained by her father, stood helplessly as he gently stroked her face. Grace recoiled at the sight, though Zadie couldn't see.

"Zadie . . ." croaked the blotched body on the bed beside the little girl. "Zadie, I . . . want you to know that I always . . . wanted the best for you. Remember . . . remember that." The old man looked at his granddaughter, seeming not to notice that she was stifling an urge to gag with

all her might. Then he smiled a wicked smile, and it seemed as though his lips creaked as they extended themselves across his sallow face to reveal the rotting teeth below, so chipped over the years that they had taken on a jagged look. "I remember those pajamas," he wheezed out, and it appeared that he may have even been almost laughing at her. "I always thought that they were very pretty."

Zadie puked.

"All the terrible smells in here, they're making her stomach so upset!" cried Alicia, pulling Zadie back from the bedside as her uncle furiously tried to wipe the vomit off of Grand-Dad's arm. "She told us she had a stomachache but we didn't listen to her!" Alicia shot a look at her husband. "*You* didn't listen to her!" she added on for good measure, but the husband didn't respond. Then, leaning down to Zadie, she cooed in a softer voice, "come, darling, let's get you to a bathroom and clean you up."

"No, let me take her," interjected Grace, herself trying to hold down her bile. "You should stay with Grand-Dad."

Alicia tried to protest, but Grace was already heading out of the room, pulling Zadie along behind her, so the mother decided to let it go and remain with her husband. As soon as they were in the hallway, Zadie pulled free of Grace's grip.

"Don't grab me!" she shouted at her aunt, and promptly burst into tears.

Grace looked at the little girl. "Shh, shh, it'll be okay. You're out of that room, aren't you? Let's get you cleaned up."

Zadie followed her aunt reluctantly to the nearest bathroom, where Grace washed the vomit from around her mouth. When she had finished, she leaned against the wall and sank down slowly onto the bathroom floor, letting out a long sigh. A few moments passed with Zadie staring suspiciously at her aunt while her aunt stared at nothing in particular. Then, as though suddenly remembering where she was, Grace fixated her eyes on her niece and patted the floor beside her.

"You can sit down, y'know," she said. Zadie didn't move. Grace shrugged and was silent for a moment, and when she spoke again, her eyes were no longer looking at her niece but well past her. "So he did it to you too?" she asked. Again, Zadie didn't respond, so Grace continued speaking. "Wouldn't've reacted like that if he hadn't." She pulled out another cigarette and tapped it against the inside of her thigh. "Julie told me the week before she did it, you know. All things considered, I got off easy. My gift for not being the pretty one, I s'pose." She sighed and lit the

cigarette, bringing it to her mouth but not yet inhaling. "Wasn't gonna come at first when I got the call tonight, y'know. I didn't come for Mom, 'cause he was still walking around then, but I figured maybe he'd be easier to handle when he was the one in the bed. For half a sec I even got dressed up 'cause I thought, who knows, maybe Pops'll apologize while he has the chance and we can all be a nice family again. Then I woke up and told myself I was just coming to spit on him." She finally took a drag of the cigarette and exhaled, not noticing that she was blowing smoke directly into Zadie's face. Zadie coughed, but Grace didn't notice that either. "Ah shit," she said to not one in particular. "Couldn't even manage that much. Turns out I miss being side by side with the boys. Couldn't've seen that one coming though, now could've I?" She finally looked at Zadie. "But I don't expect that your daddy'n I will be talking much after tonight anyway." She took another drag and looked down, pausing for a moment before speaking again. "Sometimes I wonder what'd've happened if I had said something, raised my voice a bit." She looked up at Zadie and Zadie could see tears beading in her eyes. "Would've prob'bly kept you out of the ringer. How many years I been wondering if he's still been . . ." She trailed off, then abruptly patted the floor next to her. "You can sit down, y'know," she repeated.

This time Zadie did. She could not particularly follow Aunt Grace's ramblings, but she felt as though her aunt was listening to her in a way no one else ever had, even though she had yet to say a word.

"You know," continued Aunt Grace, "one day you're probably gonna wake up and ask yourself why your parents didn't do jack about it. Makes you feel any better, I'm pretty certain they never picked up on anything. They know I blame him for Julie but I never told 'em why either, and they just think I'm a wacko, s'far as I can tell." She took another drag of the cigarette and looked down at her niece. "Alright, kiddo," she said, "we prob'bly oughta make our way back."

"I don't want to go back," said Zadie.

Grace paused for a moment before leaning back against the wall. "Yeah, I'm pretty done with Pops too," she said in a tired voice. "Tell you what. I'll make a deal with you. Old man can't have more'n a few hours left in him. Let's just wait it out in here. I don't think anyone's gonna come looking until it's over in there. And we'll just tell them that I started puking too and you had to stay to take care of me." Grace looked down at Zadie again. "Deal?" she asked. Zadie nodded. "Alright, deal it is," repeated Grace with finality, leaning back against the wall.

Zadie waited a moment, thankful for her aunt's offer of sanctuary. Then, she laid down in Grace's lap, looking up at her. "Can you tell me a story?" she asked timidly, feeling a sudden wave of exhaustion in the comfort of her aunt's protection.

Grace snorted before realizing that Zadie was, in fact, quite serious. "Dunno any stories," she offered weakly.

"What about David and Goliath?" asked the girl.

Grace frowned. "S'been a long since I heard that one." But seeing the look of expectation on the girl's face, she thought better of objecting. "I'll try though," she offered haltingly. "David and Goliath, let's see, I s'psoe it starts like this: there once was an evil man named Goliath, who did whatever he liked to the people of Israel and took advantage of them. And all the Israelites were afraid of him, even though it'd've only taken one person to stand up to him and he'd've been stopped forever. But no one ever did, and no one can blame 'em either, because Goliath had an army that would defend him from anyone who ever tried . . ."

But Zadie was not listening to the words of the story. Instead, she laid on her aunt's lap and looked up at her aunt's mouth, seeing the tar-yellowed teeth beneath those red-streaked lips. And as she looked at the soft, gentle colors and felt the vibrations of her aunt's soothing, rasping voice, Zadie felt herself grow tired. And for the first time since she had heard Grand-Dad's name that evening, Zadie fell asleep.

#### IV.

It was nearly three and a half hours later before Alicia finally left her husband's side to go looking for her daughter. When she found her in the bathroom, leaning up against Grace, who had fallen asleep with her cigarette still in hand, she was furious. She woke them both up and Zadie watched as her mother berated her aunt for letting a child so near a cigarette, but Grace just waved off her sister-in-law's criticisms. When Alicia realized that Grace was quite unconcerned with preserving the health of her daughter's lungs, she grabbed Zadie by the arm and whisked her off, but not without shouting one thing behind her, one single phrase dripping with venom:

"White trash like you should never be in charge of children!"

Zadie looked behind her and locked eyes with Grace for one last time in the moment before she was out of the bathroom. Her aunt's eyes flashed at her mother's back, but in the last

moment, they fixated instead on Zadie and suddenly grew soft. But then, Grace suddenly looked away and looked down.

"You take care now," said Aunt Grace as she reached for another cigarette. It was the last that Zadie ever saw of her.

Outside of the bathroom, Alicia knelt down in front of her daughter, her eyes full of sincere concern. "I'm sorry you had to see that, darling," she said sweetly as she absent-mindedly began to smooth out Zadie's pajamas once more. Zadie said nothing. Her mother looked at her for a moment and suddenly stood. "Well, we have to be going," she stated matter-of-factly. "There's no point sticking around here any longer."

For the first twenty minutes of the car ride back home, no one said a word. Finally, when she could stand it no longer, Zadie spoke up.

"Is Grand-Dad dead?" she asked.

Alicia turned around and looked at her daughter with compassion in her eyes. "Grand-Dad's in a better place, sweetie," she said with as much softness in her voice as she could muster. "And he'll never be dead as long as we remember him. He'll always be up there in heaven, looking down on us with love."

"Oh," said Zadie.

Zadie's father said nothing.

Zadie spent the rest of the ride home staring out the window, trying to fall asleep. She couldn't. She thought of Grand-Dad's old, wrinkled hand touching her face. She thought of her father telling everyone that the old man deserved better, that he didn't deserve to die. And she thought of Grand-Dad, out there somewhere and looking down on her for the rest of her life, for as long as she lived. Zadie felt herself growing anxious, felt the bile rising once more in her stomach, and wondered if she would ever sleep again. But then, ten minutes before the car reached home, a miracle happened. The sun rose, precisely in the same way that it had every day for billions of years and would for billions more, and Zadie looked up at the first ruddy-yellow light of day, breaking forth from beneath the soft reds smeared onto an oh-so-slightly orange background. And Zadie thought of tar-yellowed teeth beneath red-streaked lips. She thought of cigarette ash on the bathroom floor and of mutilated shoes with a jaundiced yellow top. She thought of herself, gently laying down against her aunt Grace's stomach.

And Zadie slept.