

The storm ripped through the soft Arkansas evening as easily as cotton candy dissolves in the mouth. One moment, the sky was gentle and pink with the setting sun; the next, the clouds roiled red tinged with black, and before the wide plains of the state, the wind raced across with reckless force. The newscasters called for tornado watches, then warnings as new winds met and joined force, tearing with hellish abandon from southeast Arkansas across Little Rock, heading for the Northwest.

The town of Foyle, Arkansas had seen these storms before, though not in living memory. Every child of the 1950s could remember their grandpas telling of the time the river flooded and swept away the old dock house, along with Yeager's boat and the Millers' barn. Armed with history, the residents simply put more cans in the basement and carried on the way they always had while the sky turned red and black and they felt the wrath as though God had grown angry with them.

The storm carried on into the night, and then left, taking their electricity and dry ground with it. When the townspeople emerged from their houses the next morning, the landscape was as strange and bizarre as a Surrealist painting; items that did not belong together forced into harmony. The rocky soil of Foyle was pooled with remnants from the stormwater; cows wandered aimlessly across the paved roads, and a single pink tricycle lay on its side in the fields of Kay and Danny Orleans. R.C.'s corn crop, his only source of income for the year, was ripped at the roots or pounded into the ground; fields of vine tomatoes and watermelon, squash and okra, just beginning to ripen, were devastated. A giant had stomped through, uprooted everything in his path just for spite.

On the south end of town, Bill and Maryanne Somers had listened through the night of the storm to the steady pummeling of the rain and the rattling of the windows, punctuated by the deep-throated, rising call of their cows.

Just before dawn, the stillness fell, absent the hum of the generator or the refrigerator or the buzz of a fan. Bill got up out of their warm bed, careful not to wake Maryanne, and looked out the window. The sun had not yet risen; the world was still dark and shadowy, save for the lightest yellow tinge on the horizon, beginning to define new shapes on the landscape. Bill looked towards the cornfield and saw instead the main road, a view he had only seen in winter from that window. "Corn's gone," he murmured to himself. In the bed behind him, Maryanne stirred.

Quickly, determinedly, he slipped on his old workboots, grabbed his thick checkered jacket, and let himself out of the bedroom, down the stairs and out of the house. As he moved, he prayed.

He stomped across the flooded yard through mirrored puddles. Branches, fence pieces, bits of plastic were scattered, some wedged into the soft earth. The barn seemed mostly intact, though the door hung ajar. He approached with some trepidation, but to his great relief, his vision fell upon the cows massed together in the corner farthest from the open door, some lying down, some

standing, shifting from foot to foot, chewing the hay they had found. They were safe, and they were alive, and Bill felt tears leak from his tired eyes. They had survived, thank the Lord.

He took care of the cows as best he could before returning to the farmhouse. As he busied himself making coffee, he thought about the repair work to be done in the garden, with the doors, the clutter in the barn. Who might he ask? The storm must have damaged others' homes, and he knew many of the townspeople would be called into work, repairing the fallen, flailing power lines or reconnecting generators. He anticipated hearing about it that morning at church. He poured a strong cup of coffee for himself and for Maryanne, then carried the two mugs upstairs to where she lay in bed.

He kissed her forehead and set the coffee down beside her. "Good morning," he said gently, and she stirred, sleepy, blinked, and looked at him. "What's the damage?" she asked instantly.

"The yard's a mess," Bill said. "Barn door needs some fixing. But the cows are all okay."

"Thank you, Jesus!" Maryanne said, smiling and sitting up. She was an early, quick riser. "We're not the only ones who need some help, then," she said. "You're going to ask some of the others to help you out, aren't you? I'm sure they will, and you can tell them to bring their families over for dinner, too." She took a sip of coffee, and Bill followed suit, watching her with a smile. She was always two steps ahead of him, and her energy amazed him. "I'll check in on Gary and Mamie today.... They'd pitch in too, I'm sure," she continued. "But Lord knows Brother Harold will announce all the damage at church this morning."

Bill chuckled. "Him? Never."

"Did you take care of the cows?" Maryanne asked.

"Fed and milked," Bill reported.

"You're a good man," Maryanne said with a smile, and she patted Bill's cheek gently. "I'm thankful our home survived this storm."

"Honey, if it's survived your energy for twenty years I'm pretty sure this storm won't hurt it," Bill said wryly.

"I'm amazed you can make comments like that and still think you'll get dinner this evening," Maryanne said without missing a beat. They laughed together as she got out of bed. "Well, get yourself ready for church."

Jenny Lee shook Carl's shoulder gently. "Carl," she said gently. "Carl."

Carl rolled over in the motel bed, pulling the cheap polyester comforter along with him. He groaned.

"Time to get up," Jenny Lee said, leaning down and kissing him gently on the cheek. "We've got to leave in half an hour."

"Where?" Carl grunted, his eyes still closed.

"We gotta go to church," Jenny Lee said quietly. At that, Carl's eyes flew open. Quickly, Jenny Lee touched her hand to his face and stroked her thumb across his cheek soothingly. "Just today," she said. "There's a lot of people who can help us there."

"Help us?" Carl opened his eyes and raised his eyebrows.

"After last night, honey, we need it," Jenny Lee said gently. For a moment, the image of their flooded trailer filled her eyes; water pooling on the floor, staining everything darker, saturating it all.

"What makes you think the church people'll help us? Your grandma's a part of that congregation, isn't she?" Carl said somewhat accusingly, but he was slowly sitting up.

"We have to play along with them, Carl. If we go there, they'll help us, I can guarantee it. Might make my grandmama see how wrong she is to reject us, too." Jenny Lee leaned down close to Carl's face. "Please, baby," she said, kissing him gently, "come with me to church."

Carl turned his head, brought his hands to her head, kissed her, then sat up and got out of the bed. "All right," he said. "Fine."

"Thank you." Jenny Lee sighed, relieved.

"But I ain't dressin' up."

From his window in the church rectory, Brother Harold could see them filing in: car after car pulled into the parking lot whose spaces hadn't been filled to capacity for years. Some walked, others rode the tractor or the ATV, but they came and filled the pews like never before. Brother Harold thought to himself that the Lord works in mysterious ways, and if it took a storm and a healthy curiosity about the plight of their neighbors to bring them into church, then so be it.

As the opening hymn-- "Jordan's Stormy Banks"--slowed to a close, Brother Harold stood and walked slowly to the pulpit. "Brothers and sisters, thank you for being here this morning. I know you could have been a lot of other places this morning, but you chose to be here, so thank you for that." He smiled at them all. There were a few coughs, a rustling, a few smiles back.

"And this morning," he continued, "is a special morning, a good time to come together, because we have been visited by an event last night. An event so large as to have affected each one of us." More nods. "What we're going to do is pray for each one of your needs after this storm. Brothers and sisters, if you have lost anything in this storm, would you just raise--" He was cut off by a loud *slam* from the door in the back. That door was lighter than anyone ever expected, it moved too easily. His startled congregants turned to look down the aisle, leaning towards the center. Framed in the doorway, looking sheepish, were faces Brother Harold recognized: Jenny Lee Impett and Carl Hager.

Jenny Lee, tall, her hair dyed blonde--some of the ladies of the church could remember it's natural, earth-brown color--was wearing muddy jeans and a faded red t-shirt. She shifted her weight between her feet, pulled at the hem of her shirt, her large, grey, strangely light eyes scanning the room--for her grandparents, Brother Harold thought. Kay and Danny Orleans were sitting towards the front, and Brother Harold saw a few glances dart towards their direction. Then, taking the opportunity she'd been handed, Jenny Lee spoke.

"Hi everyone," she said slowly. "I'm sorry for interrupting, Brother Harold. I know we don't come here very often, but our home got destroyed last night in the storm, and we needed some help. And I just thought you people would be the ones to help."

Betty Lloyd stood up suddenly. "Of course we'll help you," she said passionately. "You are God's children, too."

The faces of Carl and Jenny Lee were relieved, suddenly, and the congregation began to shout out. "I have a barn that wasn't hurt too bad--you could stay in it!" "We have a spare couch in the basement, it's real comfy, I swear my son-in-law says its the best place he ever slept--" "My relatives in Missouri are fixin to sell their house, I can give them a call--" "We got an old toolshed out back we could set up with some blankets!"

In the midst of all the shouted offers, Jenny Lee's eye was drawn to a sudden movement by the door. She looked over and saw her grandparents, Kay and Danny, moving furtively towards the door. She caught a glimpse of Kay's red handbag and old black Bible, a pause in the doorway, before she turned and disappeared into the parking lot.

Brother Harold stood at the front and watched with satisfaction as his congregants called out generous offers, until someone broke out into spontaneous applause and the church was joyful with clapping and the occasional whoop. Jenny Lee and Carl looked at each other, and for a moment, Brother Harold thought they looked overwhelmed. Then Jenny Lee smiled, somewhat quietly, and Carl laughed in relief, and then they were tugged down into the pew beside them by Norma and her husband Billy.

Mamie Lane's home was just down the road from theirs. Maryanne usually visited on a Tuesday, but she thought Mamie wouldn't mind her coming a day early, just this once. Mamie lived in a tiny house, a bedroom for herself and her husband, a pullout couch in their living room, a tiny kitchen. Mamie's decorations were simple: a small framed photo of Maryanne and Gary ten years ago, taken at a church picnic, and another framed photo of their two boys, no more than four and six, each holding up a fishing line and a miniature fish in the outer hand and hugging each other with the other arm, faces flushed and glowing with pride.

Mamie was the only black woman in a town of white people; she held the particular distinction of being the only black person some of them had ever seen, besides her two sons when they came along, which some people said didn't count. She had met Gary in Little Rock while he was stationed there in the army; they had married a few months later, and retreated to Foyle as quickly as his service was over. It was not a popular marriage for his family, nor were they popular in the town. Their boys had grown up and moved to the city a few years ago, and rarely came back. They had never said it directly to Mamie, but she knew it was because they, like her, felt the suffocating gaze of the town and the continual weight of singularity that was heavy on her shoulders; what they didn't know was that it was inescapable, no matter where they went.

When Maryanne knocked on her door that Monday afternoon, Mamie opened it wide, dressed in her usual jeans and button-down shirt, bright lipstick on her mouth. "I'm glad you came," she said. "This storm is some business. You seen my car yet?" Maryanne shook her head. "It's round back, I'll show you."

"What happened to it?" Maryanne asked, following her outside.

"My nice old oak tree laid itself right on my car!" Mamie exclaimed. "Just look." They rounded the back corner of the house and there, fit for the junkyard, was Mamie's old blue Chevrolet, flattened roof and buckled metal, glass that had burst from the frames.

"What a wreck." Maryanne shook her head.

"Gary said we've also got some damage to our barn roof," Mamie added. "And our vegetables are ruined for the year." She sent one more sorrowful glance towards the car, then turned and gestured Maryanne inside.

"So're ours," Maryanne nodded. They sat in their usual seats in the living room, Mamie in her chair, Maryanne on the left side of the sofa. "It was a big one."

"Did you ever see a storm like this in Foyle?" Mamie asked. Maryanne was a few years older, and had lived in Foyle all her life.

"Not a real one," Maryanne said dryly. "I've seen plenty of human ones, though."

"Don't I know it," Mamie laughed.

The phone rang suddenly, interrupting their comfort, and Mamie stood and walked to where the phone was cradled in the kitchen. "Just a minute, Maryanne," she said. "Hello?"

Maryanne was studying the painting on the wall of the ocean when Mamie re-entered the room with a grin. "Harrison's coming. He heard about the storm, and he wants to help with the repairs."

"He wants to drive up here?" Maryanne repeated. Mamie nodded happily.

"Well, that's sweet of him. Those boys love you and Gary," Maryanne said. She noticed the light in her friend's eyes and was pleased for her.

Carl and Jenny Lee strode through the local Wal-Mart. They had stayed with the Hendersons in their basement on a fold-out couch, and had escaped to Wal-Mart on the pretext of finding some new clothes for Jenny Lee. The white tile and fluorescent lights were blinding; the exposed concrete and metallic limbs of the store above made Jenny Lee feel small, like a mouse wandering through a maze. She slipped her hand into Carl's warm one for comfort; with the other hand, she pushed the cart, where a plain short sleeved t-shirt, jeans, and a zip-up jacket lay piled at the bottom. They turned the corner and found themselves in an aisle crammed with kitchen goods: pots and pans hanging in rows, placemats and utensils spilling off the shelves. They paused for a moment.

"Carl, let's look at some of this stuff for our new kitchen," Jenny Lee said. "I think those pots are on sale."

"We have pots," Carl said shortly, turning away from the aisle.

“No, we don’t,” Jenny Lee said firmly, “they’re ruined. And our tablecloth is all mildew-y. Come on, let’s just look?”

“For what, Jenny Lee? When do you think we’ll be getting a new kitchen?” Carl asked, and Jenny Lee thought she heard a mocking tone in his voice.

“I don’t know, Carl, but we’re gonna have to get this stuff sooner or later. What’s so bad about getting it while it’s on sale?”

“We don’t have a place to keep it,” Carl said. “Why don’t we just get a couch, too? Just in case. And a full bed! The Hendersons will let us keep it in their basement, I’m sure!”

Jenny Lee hated it when he grew sarcastic. “Well, I know *that*,” she said indignantly. “I’m talking about being practical here. We’re going to find us another trailer soon and I want to be ready when we do.”

Carl looked from side to side, then pulled her into the aisle. “I don’t have enough money to buy us all new stuff *and* get us a trailer,” he said in a lower, more furious tone. “You’re wishing on a star if you think we can buy all these new things. But if you want to use your waitressing money to get this stuff, go right ahead--I’ll just keep working to put a roof over our heads.”

“Carl, that’s not fair,” Jenny Lee exclaimed. “I’m picking up as many shifts as I can right now, and you know it. It’s not fair to make me pay for all this stuff alone when we’d both be using it.”

“You do what you want with your money, Jenny Lee,” Carl said, unmoved. “I’ll just work on buying us a house.”

Jenny Lee removed her hand from Carl’s grip and turned her back to him, perusing the pots and pans on the hooks in front of her. “And I’ll work on buying us some pots and pans so we can eat,” she said to the racks of kitchen supplies.

There was a moment of silence, then Carl leveled his final, worst weapon.

“You could always ask your Grandma Kay.”

“No.” Jenny Lee instantly replied. Her voice was riddled with bitterness, icy and brittle. She still didn’t turn around. “She didn’t help my mama when she got pregnant at sixteen, and you can bet she won’t help me. Don’t count on her, Carl. She doesn’t care anything for me.” She turned to face him as she said it, but took a step back when she saw his narrowed eyes and reddened face.

“Dammit, Jen!” Carl exploded. “I’m doing the best I can to support us here. I’m working all day and I’ve been taking some night shifts too, and you can’t even ask Kay for help? What are you doing to keep us in the bank, huh?”

“I’m picking up extra shifts, remember?” Jenny Lee cried. “It’s not all up to you. I could walk right out and leave you and then see how you’d miss all that work I’m not doing.”

Her grey eyes were alive and practically sparking, her posture upright and furious. For a moment, they remained like animals on their haunches when a friendly “Well hi, you two,” caused them both to look back towards the aisle opening, where R.C. stood in a checkered shirt

and cap, grinning at them. Quickly, Jenny Lee forced a smile to her face while Carl swung his arms easily. "Hey, R.C.," he said, and guided the cart towards the end of the aisle. "How're you doing?"

"Pretty good," R.C. said. "My crops are done for, but I can't complain. I know ya'll lost your home in the flooding. I'm real sorry about that."

"Thank you, thanks for saying that." Carl nodded.

"Listen," R.C. said, "Bill Somers is getting a group of guys together.... He wants to go around and help repair different houses. The idea is, you do the group, they work on your house, too. I think you all could use the help, if you want to repair or to get a new trailer...anyway, it couldn't hurt, could it? I think the families are putting in money to pay us a bit."

Jenny Lee turned to Carl. "There, you see? Another job! I think us going to the church was a good thing after all."

R.C. laughed. "Gotta find some kind of good comin' out of that church."

Carl began working with the group two days later. Bill Somers seemed to be in charge; he assigned each their tasks. Carl found he could talk easily with the other men about their football teams, their opinions on the latest election, their own work, so that Carl didn't notice he was hungry until the Millers called them over for biscuits and chicken.

They finished their repairs at the Millers' in the early afternoon, and Bill suggested they finish for the day. He asked that they meet the following morning at his farm, as they had that morning, and they went their own ways, satisfied.

Carl returned to Jenny Lee that evening in the Henderson's basement. Carl walked in the door carrying a warm MacDonald's bag, grease beginning to thin the paper. He bent over to where she sat on the couch and kissed her cheek. "I brought your chicken nuggets."

"Thanks," Jenny Lee reached in the bag. "How did it go?"

Carl sat next to her, balancing a burger on his knee. "Good work. Funny, most of those men would never've talked to me if it weren't for this storm. Don't matter now if they have a lot of acres and a big farm... we all got the same problems now."

"Are you going again tomorrow?" Jenny Lee asked after a mouthful of chicken nuggets.

"I'm goin til they do something for us," Carl said. "Even if it takes weeks... I'll make sure they get to our stuff soon."

The following morning, they met at Bill and Maryanne's. Maryanne came out to meet them in her faded jean overalls, Bill in his old work boots again, and the cars rolled in their driveway in clouds of dust, spitting out man after man. R.C., first, Craig Yeager, Dalton Lloyd. Danny Orleans came last, just after eight, parking his car at the bottom of the dirt driveway and walking slowly up the drive. Carl stared boldly at him, watching aggressively as he approached, but Danny avoided Carl's eyes, looking at the ground. He greeted the others quietly and uneasily underneath the burning sensation of Carl's gaze.

Bill spoke as soon as Danny joined the circle in front of the house, leaving no time for confrontation. "Morning," he said loudly, and the men settled their low rumbling conversations and turned to face him. "We're going to the neighbor's today--got a messed up barn that needs repairing. I hear we might be getting some fried okra and ham for lunch today--" Maryanne nodded to confirm--"so let's work hard again."

With that, Bill nodded east, and set off along the driveway and down the road. The men and Maryanne followed in the cool morning air, only saying a word or two between them. A few yards down the road, Bill turned into the Lane's driveway, stopping in front of their house, where Gary sat, waiting, on the front porch.

As they drew near, there were mutterings from the group. Gary stood as Bill approached, but the other men lingered farther back, by the road.

Bill patted Gary on the back, Maryanne embraced him. "Morning," she said. "Where's Mamie?"

"Inside," Gary said. "For this exact reason." He nodded to where the rest of the men stood uneasily, and they all three turned to look without surprise.

"They're idiots," Maryanne said tightly. "If they think they are any different--"

"It doesn't matter," Gary said. "They still won't do the work."

"We haven't tried yet," Bill said calmly. "They might be ignorant bastards, but they need the money if nothing else. Maryanne and I will work, Gary. If the rest of them don't come, we can't do a thing about it."

"I might do a thing about it," Maryanne countered. Gary smiled sadly.

"Well, let's get to work, then," he said, and the three of them walked down the steps towards the barn. Bill turned over his shoulder and motioned to the men to join him. No one moved. He kept walking.

At the property line, the other men shifted restlessly before beginning to turn back. "Didn't know we was coming here today," RC muttered under his breath.

"Too scared to do the job?" Carl asked. He shouldered his bag boldly. "I guess they need some young men for this."

He was about to walk when a mocking laugh stopped him. It was then that he heard a word he knew shouldn't be used about Mamie. Then the man said, "We ain't got nothin to do with them."

Carl paused.

"Hell, me either," he said. He stood still a moment longer as the other men turned and walked away. Maryanne glanced back over her shoulder, and her eyes met his briefly before he turned and followed the others.

Mamie was inside. She had refused to come out, despite Gary's insistence, knowing that to emerge would expose herself to their blatant arrogance and derision. What she hadn't realized was that it could be felt even through the windows and walls of her own house; that it could seep

in like a noxious gas and thicken her insides like gravy, slow and sloppy. She heard Gary and Maryanne and Bill's conversation on the porch, even heard Maryanne's exasperated breath as the men walked away. Through it all, she sat stoic in her chair until ten minutes had passed, breathing slowly in and out. Then she stood up, fixed a cap firmly on her head, and joined the others at the barn.

Carl was unsure if the others would go back to Bill's the next morning to continue helping, but he knew he would need help eventually, so he was at their farm at the normal time. To his relief, the others were there; Bill continued as though nothing had happened, lining up the next place for them to repair. They were at a family's trailer home down on Loreen Drive that had been wrecked nearly as badly as Carl's and Jenny Lee's. The back door had been spun off, and was bent and crumpled next to an old tree on the property. A branch had been flung into the left side, rendering a back bedroom unusable, and the kitchen windows had been smashed.

Carl was focused on an area by the foundation of the trailer, picking glass shards from the grass and dirt. The pieces of glass were dirty now, and he could only see them from the way they made the ground unusually sparkling, like a geode stone with hundreds of tiny crystals inside.

Nearby, Bill was crouched at the side of the house, sanding down rough sideboards. Carl watched him as he worked methodically and powerfully, his hands steady and sure. Carl knew Bill was accustomed to this work. He sidled towards Bill.

"How long're you thinking we'll stay here?" he asked. Bill glanced briefly at Carl before looking back at his task.

"I'd like us to clean it up well enough for them," he said. "It might take a few days."

"How do you decide where we're going next?" Carl asked after another pause. He shifted his weight slightly towards Bill and stopped looking through the grass as he waited for the answer.

"I try to see who needs it most," Bill said simply.

"Well, my trailer's 'bout as bad as this is," Carl said quickly. "Me and Jenny, we ain't been living there since the storm. We've been staying at the Hendersons."

"R.C.'s place is about as bad as yours," Bill said shortly. "And he's been working, too." He stood and walked away, leaving Carl feeling frustrated. He threw the pieces of glass into the bin, then walked to where a few others were busy disassembling the branch that had crushed the side of the house. The noise of the buzzing chainsaw, the spray of woodchips, the yellow rain that scattered on the ground below were heady and overwhelming. Carl joined two men lifting a heavy chunk of the branch and carried it with them to a grove of trees farther from the house. "Hey," he said. "I've got a branch like this at my place. Do y'all want to help me move it tomorrow?"

"Is that where we're going tomorrow?" R.C. grunted, wiping his hands on his jeans. "I could do that."

"I don't know if that's what Bill said," Carl said. "But a couple of the other guys said they'd come."

"Sure thing, Carl," R.C. said. "I'll bring my chainsaw."

"Thanks, man," Carl said. They walked back over, slung more branch pieces over their shoulders or cradled them in their arms, and Carl asked a few more men for their help the next morning. He'd been working with them for three days; it was about time they helped him out, too.

The following morning, no one turned up to Bill's. Bill strode out at eight o'clock sharp to an empty yard. "Maryanne?" he called. "What time is it?"

"It's eight," she said, "are they wanting their coffee?"

"No one's here," he said slowly. Maryanne opened the screen door and looked at the yard.

"How are we supposed to get anything fixed if they don't turn up?"

"They turned up," Bill said. "Just not at our house today."

"Someone else told 'em where to go?" Maryanne asked, and Bill nodded slowly.

Maryanne attacked the plate she was washing with vigor before saying anything else. When it was clean, she thrust it into the drying rack. "Well, let's go find those bone-headed idiots," she said as she marched out the door.

Their old Ford kicked up clouds of dust as it bounced along the road to the trailer community where Bill knew Carl and Jenny Lee had shared a trailer. Sure enough, Bill could see a few men around back, dragging branches and turned over equipment from the garden patch. Bill parked the truck in the front. A few of the men glanced up at the late arrival, and their eyes widened as they recognized Bill's Ford. Maryanne emerged first, sturdily, and waited for Bill to clamber out before they calmly walked to the garden and stooped to pick up the smaller branches wordlessly. They entered into the flow of workers without reproach. The other men avoided their gaze. R.C.'s neck was flushed red. Carl inched away from them and began dragging branches in the opposite direction.

After another half hour, the workers paused again at the sound of the gravel rumbling under rubber tires. This time, there were three new workers emerging from the truck: Gary, Mamie, and a young, dark-skinned man: Harrison, dressed in work clothes that looked new. They, too, strode over without a word, picking up debris where they could. The men watched in uneasy silence as they stooped and made their slow, picking progress over to the garden. Maryanne smiled when she caught Mamie's eye, and motioned her over to where she and Bill had begun to hoe out the garden rows.

When it was noon, the sun too hot for comfort, they stopped again for lunch. No one was quite willing to break the silence; in the heat, they walked to the shade of a large sycamore tree and sat down in the damp grass beneath it. They had managed in the course of the morning to clear the debris from the side of the house; Bill could see R.C. watching Carl as though he were

going to bark out the next command. Bill and Maryanne, Mamie and Gary and their son ate together in the midst of them. Eyes gazed at the dirt or the food. The silence grew more and more oppressive. Finally, R.C. cleared his throat, still seated, one arm dangling over his knee. "Well, we've about finished here," he said, looking around without making eye contact. "Who else've we got to do?"

"Brother Harold'll probably need some work done," someone grunted.

"Danny Orleans' place," said another.

A moment of silence.

"Your place, R.C.," said Bill loudly. Carl looked momentarily startled, and looked at the ground as a red blush spread across his face.

"Bill, yours needs some work done too," R.C. said cautiously.

"We didn't finish Gary and Mamie's roof yesterday," Maryanne broke in firmly.

For a moment, there was nothing but tense silence. A few men eyed Mamie and Gary suspiciously; Carl looked at them out of the corner of his eye. R.C. stared straight ahead. Then he said, "Can't go back somewhere until we've finished up all the others we haven't even started yet."

Harrison sprang to his feet. His eyes were livid, his lips trembling in anger. He held his fists clenched at his sides, and when he spoke, his voice was fierce, barely controlled. "You bullshitting racist assholes," he said, pronouncing every word as though he savored them. "My parents helped you all with your repairs, and you haven't lifted a finger to help. They've been married for forty years--that's longer than you have, with your three divorces, R.C. And what about you, Carl? Hell, you've been with your girlfriend for five years and you still haven't married her. Their marriage is better than most of you all have, and that's why you won't help them. You should be ashamed of yourselves, treating your own friends and neighbors like this. It's inhumane! It's evil! It's backwards from what the rest of the world thinks!"

His voice had grown louder and louder as he spoke, and now, with these final, air-rifled exclamations, something stirred among the men. In a flash, Carl stood, enraged, feeling a heavy, defensive anger deep in his stomach. He lurched forward, wanting to do something, anything, to stop the tirade. He swung his fist. It connected with a jaw, a shudder of bone, a surprisingly soft give, cries as the young man fell to the ground. Gary called out, Bill and Maryanne stood, as did the others. Someone grabbed Carl, Maryanne and Bill stood angrily in front of Gary and Mamie, who were kneeling by their son.

"It's not worth it," Mamie was whispering to her son softly. She held back the tears that threatened to erupt; she would not give anyone that satisfaction. "Oh baby, let's go home."

Holding his jaw, he slowly stood with the help of his mother and walked away from the circle of white men, shoulders held stiffly. Gary walked after them as the others watched in silence. Bill and Maryanne were about to leave when Maryanne turned back.

"That young man," she said, "is brave. And those three are your neighbors and friends. It hurts me and it angers me that you are unable to give them the decency to help them when they

have done nothing but been good neighbors to you. Don't let the stories your granddaddies told you change how you treat your own friends and neighbors."

With that, she marched away gravely after Bill.

Carl could feel the simmering anger still barely contained, trapped beneath his bones as he watched them walk away, his arms still held back. It was awful, truly; he was angry and upset and breathing heavily as the adrenaline from the hit flooded his systems. He glanced at the other men; R.C. was standing, dumbfounded, silent, watching the small group retreat to their cars. No one seemed willing to speak into the silence. Carl glanced quickly at each man, none of whom would meet his eye.

"He thought he could talk to us like that?" Carl burst out. "Thought he could tell us who we were, call us assholes? I was the only one brave enough to do anything."

Some of the men nodded, but Carl looked at R.C., who still said nothing, just looked out past him as the first three got into their car, the young man still holding his jaw.

"It ain't right."

The men stayed silent. Some nodded again. Then R.C. turned abruptly with his back to the car backing out of the drive. "He was out of line," R.C. said sharply. "But so were you, Carl. We'll work on Danny Orlean's place this afternoon."

They left, each to their car, driving the short bumpy road to Kay and Danny Orleans place. All except Carl. He would not work on that man's house; not when he'd refused to help him and Jenny Lee. It was unthinkable. He had mumbled an excuse to R.C. about needing to cool off, ice his fist, and then left quickly, not leaving R.C. any time to say something.

The morning sky was clean, soft, when Bill arose to milk the cows. As he rose sideways out of the warm nest of blankets, he noticed the pain in his lower back, the dull ache across his broad shoulders. He rolled them once, impatiently, arched his back and curled it forward in an attempt to stretch the cramping muscles. A side effect of the building work he wasn't used to anymore. After getting dressed, he strode out the screen door and in the semi-darkness towards the barn. The air was cool against his warm body; the hill at the back of their property rose up before him like a slumbering giant. Bill milked the cows quickly, easily, with familiarity and precision as he had for the past forty years. He fed them. By the time he finished, the warmth of the morning sun was spilling through the roof, piercing into the cool dimness. Eager and alive, the morning sun lit the property. Similarly energized, Bill climbed in his truck and drove the few feet to Gary and Mamie's house. He drove the rumbling truck across the fields to Gary and Mamie's barn, unloaded the ladder from its perch in the back, propped it up against the splintered, still-cool planks of the barn. He looked up to the gaping mouth in the roof, the spikes and crystalline juts of shattered wood. He whistled to himself, jiggled the ladder for stability, then began to climb, slowly, a hammer and nails belted at his waist.

Maryanne was hoeing the garden under a wide-brimmed hat and over-large beige gloves, the rich, warm smell of the dirt and the sun's caress on her back feeding her senses. It was silent except for the far-off call of a few crows, squawks in the morning sun. Then she heard the sirens.

When she arrived at the hospital, Gary and Mamie were waiting for her with faces rigid with worry that melted to pity when they saw her. "They just took him in," Mamie said, "he'll be in surgery now."

Maryanne was still in her gardening clothes; she'd left the gloves on as she drove to the hospital. She pushed past them to the desk, consulted the nurse who confirmed they had taken him back for an examination and a procedure, and that they would come get her when it had concluded. She stormed back to Gary and Mamie.

"What happened?" she demanded. "Were you there? Did you see him? I didn't even know he was going to your place this morning, did you?" Covered in dirt amidst the white, sterile halls and plastic chairs, she felt wholly out of place. This white box felt like a prison and she was furious, enraged that they would not let her see her husband. She could not help but imagining the worst, the possible impact a fall from that height could have...

But Mamie simply held out her arms, and Maryanne crumpled into them, the tears finally coming.

"Maryanne, I'm so sorry," Gary said. "I didn't know he was coming today, and then I came out of the barn and found him on the ground under the ladder. He must have climbed up to fix one of the holes and lost his balance. I called the ambulance immediately, you know. I just don't know how long he was there."

"It can't have been long," Mamie broke in. "The sun hasn't been up for more than a few hours." She stroked Maryanne's back soothingly. "But we're here with you." She led Maryanne back to the plastic seats and sat down with her. "However long it takes."

Maryanne sighed deeply, leaned back in her chair. After a moment of silence, she let out another breath. "How is Harrison doing?" she asked. "Has his jaw healed?"

"He's healing fine." Mamie shrugged, met Maryanne's gaze for a brief moment. "I don't want him to stay in town much longer," she added in a lower tone. "I'm not sure if that fight is over or not, and I don't want him to stick around to finish it."

"I don't blame you," Maryanne said. "That boy Carl is a wild card, there's no doubt about it." She fiddled with the gloves in her lap, empty. "You know," she said, looking sideways at Mamie, "I saw him the day they all refused to work on your place. I'm pretty sure he almost came and helped us, but then he walked off with the others."

Mamie listened, shifted in her chair. "Then he's too afraid to do what he knows he should," she said flatly. "It's the worst kind of cowardice."

"I think it means he might have some hope of changing," Maryanne offered. Mamie shook her head.

"People hardly ever change. They might think they do, but especially when it comes to us, black people, there's just too much stopping them and too little good in it for them. That Carl is someone who looks out for himself."

"I'd prefer to hope for it," Maryanne said, "or else what's the point in still living here?"

Mamie didn't answer, and Maryanne shifted her attention back to the cool tiled floor, the clean white walls, the absence of color and emotion and difficulty.

Jenny Lee woke up in the Henderson's basement as she had every day since the storm to the sound of her alarm. She had the opening shift at the Sonic this morning. She rolled over sleepily, turned off the alarm, and rolled back the other way, reaching out for Carl's strong arms. But the bed was empty, his side not even slept in. Confused, she sat up, looked around the small room. No movement.

Jenny Lee got out of bed, and that was when she noticed. His shoes were gone. And it wasn't just his shoes: the room was stripped of his clothes. His flannel shirts hanging off the backs of chairs and his blue jeans piled on the floor, his work boots and his canvas bag: they were all gone.

She tried to tell herself he had just gone to the trailer. After all, they were nearly ready to move in, weren't they? But she couldn't fight the tightening in her chest, the fear rising. She grabbed her phone, frantically checking for any messages--none. She called him, once, twice, three times--no ring.

An idea occurred to her. She reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet, which held all her tips from waitressing that week. It was empty.

She dropped to the ground, legs buckling beneath her.

Bill had a concussion and spinal injuries, a broken arm and bruised tailbone. He was released from the hospital after a few days into Maryanne's care. Mamie and Gary were waiting at the hospital when he was released, too, helping Maryanne place him carefully in the car, folding the wheelchair, and riding along while Maryanne drove. Bill was quieter under the influence of the painkillers, but he was going to be okay.

That night, Maryanne left Bill asleep in the house and went for dinner at Gary and Mamie's. When she turned into the drive, she noticed flattened grass along the lane, as though many cars had recently parked there. Frowning, she got out of the car and walked to the porch, where Mamie was waving.

"You won't believe it," Mamie called, shaking her head. "Someone's been here and fixed our barn roof."

"That's the cars?" Maryanne said, indicating the grass. Mamie nodded.

"They cleared that big tree that fell on my car, too."

"Well." Maryanne reached the porch, stood with her hands on her hips. "I never. Those cowards must have felt bad."

Gary's head appeared in the doorway. "How's Bill?" he said when he saw Maryanne. But before she could answer, a familiar blue pickup truck came into view, bouncing down the drive. Gary tensed. Mamie stood and walked next to him so that she was standing in the doorway. They all watched the truck pull in, park. Then, slowly, R.C. emerged.

"What do you want?" Gary called.

R.C. cleared his throat.

"You won't have no more trouble from us," he said, looking directly at Gary and Mamie. "Or from Carl." He hesitated, as though wanting to say more, then thought the better of it. He nodded, then turned and walked back to his car, leaving Gary and Mamie standing uncertainly in the doorway.

Jenny Lee sat in her car in the driveway, taking deep breaths. She had never wanted to reach this point, but here she was. She wondered if her mother had ever felt this way. Sixteen years old, had she paused in the driveway before telling her parents about the tiny new life inside her? And again, years later, had she sat here and built her courage brick by brick until she could ask again? *You are not your mother*, she thought. Almost out of habit now, she checked her phone. No messages, though she knew that would be the case. It didn't matter if he'd left town or was staying in their trailer--she wasn't going back to him. It hadn't been worth it. She sighed, took a deep breath, opened the car door, and walked up the steps to Kay and Danny Orleans' white house.