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Maurice Broaddus

“ T h e A v e ”

Erik Tomblin

“ H a p p y P l a c e ”

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Table of Contents *Issue 3- Fall 2007*

Maurice Broaddus- “The Ave” **Page 3**

Muffled cries woke Prisoner #935579 from the light slumber that masqueraded as sleep. The deck lights illuminated the upper tier of Cell House C enough for the Correctional Officers to measure their steps, but reduces the cell dwellers to shifting shadows.

Erik Tomblin- “Happy Place” **Page 13**

Every person should have one. And as cliché as it sounded at the time, I took my therapist’s advice and found my own. It’s not some magical wonderland where the clouds are made of cotton candy and the creeks flow with wine.

Muffled cries woke Prisoner #935579 from the light slumber that masqueraded as sleep. The deck lights illuminated the upper tier of Cell House C enough for the Correctional Officers to measure their steps, but reduces the cell dwellers to shifting shadows. The brutish shade in the opposite cell hunched in familiar fashion. Knuckles whitened on the bunk rail as the recent arrival in Derrick Mayfield's cell took an involuntary ass pounding. It was his own fault, really – only a few days in, he failed to grasp any of the rules of survival. He smiled, he chatted, and he trusted--the same get-along/polite maneuverings that served him well on the outside, but marked him as a wounded gazelle to the hyenas that stalked these corridors.

Some men were destined to be punks.

The smothered screams echoed through the night. Prisoner #935579 eyed Officer O'Reilly as he ignored the ruckus although his station was only a few cells away. A bull of a man and former Navy, O'Reilly was renowned for his harshness - another schoolyard bully who found a profession to vent his cruel streak. A scar snaked up from the corner of his mouth along the side of his face, contorting even his mildest grimace into a demonic sneer. An inmate gave him that gift the last time he interrupted a midnight tryst. "Animals rutting in the night" as far as he was concerned.

Prisoner #935579 buried his head in his pillow. That was life on the Ave.

Allisonville Correctional Facility. Level Four. The A-V. The Ave.

Prisoner #935579 remembered the day he walked the forty-three steps of the loading plank in handcuffs and leg irons. Rows of black faces lined up for inspection, like an auction block manned by hostile hacks barking orders. First they took away his name, then told him when to eat, when to sleep, and when to shower; but the chains were the worst.

The Ave allowed few emotions, but Prisoner #935579 knew the hate. He hated through clenched teeth. The kind of hate that scratched, kicked, and lashed out at the world in blind fury, if only to break the tedium. The kind of hate that led to the fight between cells earlier this evening, ending in frustrated men hurling their own excrement at one another, staining the bars and cells yellow and brown, stinking up the whole tier. Officer O'Reilly swore to let them stew in their filth until breakfast.

Sleep without relief eventually claimed him. The incessant jangling of metal cobwebs shattered the night-time tranquility of the forest. Prisoner #935579's tongue traced the bloody bruises in his mouth. He drew his chain-weighted hands close, studying the scars left by the metal cuffs. His back, scarred from the many-tailed whip of a man with a scar reminiscent of O'Reilly.

Steam rose from the chorus of men that marched alongside him. Tribesmen, familiar as brothers, stumbled through the forest not cooled by the still air. Branches of thick underbrush scourged them as they trod along the path that no outsider should know, but the Scar-Mouthed One did. Few chose to come to the sacred forest; a place of mystery to the faithful, peril to the unbelievers. La would not be pleased. A forlorn, gnarled tree grew at the center of a clearing - the Tree of Forgetfulness. The Scar-Mouthed One spoke in the tongue of the Igbo people. The Scar-Mouthed One commanded them to march around the Tree seven times. The men dragged themselves around the tree, their legs robbed of the strength to move. One man wept as he staggered.

The Scar-Mouthed One knew the Igbo well. None walked around the Tree except to sever their memories, or have them stolen. Memories of their family, their village, their motherland—gone. Another man cried out, met by the wail of the many-tailed whip. The man stumbled, tripping Prisoner #935579. On his knees, Prisoner #935579 clutched a handful of dirt from mother La's bosom. He stood, ready to curse mother La and die, then he heard the voice - the voice of his father and all the fathers that had been.

"Listen, son of our sons," the voice whispered, a breeze through tree leaves, a roar only Prisoner #935579 heard. "The leopard and the hyena hated each other. No one remembered why, but the hate was ancient. One day the hyena was about his hunt when he came across the leopard sleeping beneath the shade of a tree. The hyena attacked the leopard from the rear. The hyena proved too much for him. As the leopard lay bloodied and battered, he said 'you can destroy my body, but my spirit will be free.'"

"What would you have me do?"

"Reclaim your name. Never forget who you are."

Prisoner #935579 woke up to the thin cries of the broken fish.

"My name," he whispered, "is Ashanti Tannehill."

"Prisoner #710001. Prisoner #935579," Officer O'Reilly introduced the two, escorting them from the newcomers tier back to Cell House C. He shoved the man to start him along. "You two are now roomies. Ashanti here will help you acclimate to your new home."

Wintabi Freeman.

The hacks obviously thought it amusing to pair up the convicts with African sounding names. *Anything to fuck with us*, Tannehill thought. He studied Wintabi with a cautious glare. Older, at least judging from the gray sideburns and burgeoning bald spot; his eyes flashed with a

warrior's fierceness. Wintabi was different from the other fish Tannehill had seen walk the halls. He wore the prison issue blues--blue pants and blue shirt over a white cotton T-shirt--with the dignity of one noble born. He carried his bedding and toiletries with an easy gait, confident yet threatening--the menace of experience.

"Your house, youngblood, which bunk?" Wintabi deferred when they reached the cell. Even with this gesture, he retained control.

"I'm cool with the top."

"Lettin' you know what's what, I'm a lifer," Wintabi said, setting his things on the bottom bunk. "I'm gonna die up in here; ain't got no illusions about that. Seen the insides of Leavenworth, Marion, and am just up from Angola."

Tannehill would've sighed, if he allowed himself to show any reaction. Lifers had nothing to live for, and worse, nothing to lose.

"Jus' so we clear, I don't wanna be peepin' your ugly loc ass anymore than I got to," Tannehill didn't want to let a lion in winter set the rules, but his bravado rang a little hollow to his ears.

Wintabi smirked. "Just so we clear, I ain't one o' your dawgs, prags, or niggas. We stuck in here together. I'm just lookin' to do my bit in peace."

"Aight then, we understand each other," Tannehill said. "Welcome to the Negro Warehouse. What'chu in here for?"

"What's it to you?" Wintabi folded the corners of his sheets under his mattress with deliberate care. "You lookin' to bond with me? We gonna stay up and do each other's hair later?"

"Just like to know the quality of motherfucka I'm bunkin' wit." Tannehill looked around his house with fresh eyes. The same 10x12 room with a metal toilet attached to a metal sink in the rear. In the first five minutes of his incarceration, he knew every inch of his space. He peered through the metal bars, scoping the activity of the other prisoners.

"They say I killed two white men," Wintabi said finally.

"I heard that they made that shit illegal now."

"Not in this case." Wintabi went about the work of setting out his things among Tannehill's clutter. "These two peckerwoods broke into my house like they had a right to be there ..."

The words touched a memory in him. Tannehill reached back to steady himself. The bare walls of the cell grew dark, as if Tannehill listened to Wintabi from within a tunnel. The cool metal bars felt moldy, scraping his fingers like wooden boards. Though hearing Wintabi's

words, Tannehill found himself imagining (no, remembering) hesitant shadows, imposing only in their presence at such a late hour in the ship's cargo hold. His heart beat with the controlled fury of solemn drums.

An ominous scent pierced the fetid, still air, growing heavier with each step nearer to the partition that separated the men from the women and children within the ship's hold. A woman's voice cried out. Drunken hands groped about in the darkness and hers was not the only one startled and fearful. Children retreated into scared huddles in stifled whimpers.

Tannehill's hand curled into a ball of impotent rage at the sound of the whip crackling. He pounded the hull. Only then did he remember who he was: ozo of this lost Igbo tribe. The maniacal cackle of the Scar-Mouthed One rose above the flogging. He snarled with the savagery of a hyena; the heaving, haggard breaths of fat slaving men pummeled the cries of the despoiled women. The Igbo men wailed to cover any trace of the sounds. Tannehill wanted to cup his hands over his ears, but didn't stir an inch until the men skittered like vermin up the stairs. Sobs filled the night air, like the scent from a fresh kill on a cool night. A familiar voice drew him back.

"... raped my wife and my daughter. Motherfuckers had the nerve to brag about it. Weren't even charged," Wintabi said. "Youngblood? You all right. You look like you faded on me."

"I ... naw, that shit's just fucked up." Tannehill glanced in the mirror. Sweat drenched his forehead. His face, drained and sallow, appeared ashen.

"That was the last time they did that shit. Different time, different era. Today, my ass would be on Oprah, off on temporary insanity, but in 1952 Georgia, I'm lucky I made it to trial. What about you?"

"Down on a trumped up charge for twelve years. Five-o tryin' to get me to roll on my boys." All his life he prepared for to jail. A stretch in prison was like attending the college of the streets, with the Ave being Harvard: You were only sent there after fucking up everywhere else. "I done dirt comin' up, corner work, so I knew shit would catch up to me sometime."

"I seen enough of you corner boys in my day," Wintabi remarked as he studied Tannehill. Then he just exhaled, like he had taken the full measure of the man and decided to relax, though he didn't drop his guard. "Me, I'm just tired of the game."

"What game?"

"All of it. The cycle. The system. The bullshit. No one tells you that you don't have to play."

"I don't get you." Tannehill trusted few people other than his mom. He'd seen niggas shoot each other over dumb shit. His cousin popped some fool simply for laughing at him.

However, the weariness in Wintabi's voice was old, like his father coming home from a long day at work and collapsing into his chair. Old and trusted.

"Well, well, well. Look who we have here," Frank Connoly said, suddenly standing in the open cell. "What's up, Winnie? Winnie the nigger." Tannehill kicked himself for allowing the redneck to get so close to him without noticing. They shared history. Connoly, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, gave him a casual eyefuck, but focused his attention on Wintabi. Connoly's clean-shaven head glistened above his groomed handle bar mustache. Tattoos stippled the side of his neck and coursed over both shoulders. Connoly's diesel body leaned against the guard rails outside of Tannehill's house.

"Fuck you, Connoly," Tannehill said, a little too defensively. A primitive part of his brain reminded him that unless he wanted to be referred to as Mrs. Freeman, Wintabi's prag, or a punk, he'd best leave Wintabi to fight his own battles.

"Let it go, youngblood," Wintabi said, earnest, yet without reproach.

"I heard we had a rat problem."

"You always tryin' to start shit," Tannehill said, despite himself, while glancing at Wintabi. The only thing worse than being a rapist or a child molester was being a snitch.

"Why else you think they transferred him from Angola? How the fuck did he get outta Marion?"

"He ended up here, didn't he?" Tannehill said. "Let me ask you somethin': Do all you Nazi motherfuckas cut off one nut to be like Adolf?"

"Fuck you. You don't hear him denyin' it."

Wintabi stood in silence.

"We got a problem here, Connoly?" Officer O'Reilly approached the cell.

"Naw," Connoly raised his hands, "just jawin."

"Then get your ass gone."

"This ain't over. You can't hide in your cell forever," Connoly stage whispered. "We know how to deal with vermin."

"Bitch ass can't even spell vermin." Tannehill watched Officer O'Reilly encourage Connoly. "What was that about?"

"Don't know, don't care." Wintabi returned back to his bunk.

That night Tannehill tossed in his bunk, not quite inured to the smell of grown men sweating in the night. The wooden sleeping berth scraped against his shoulders and ankles during

his sleep. He dreamt that blood-slicked chains connected his wrists to Wintabi's. Tannehill ached with longing for home. A noisy fly buzzed about his head. He fought the heaviness in his bowels all day, waiting for some measure of privacy to dump his business.

"The funny thing about prisons is that no matter where you go, they always feel the same," Wintabi's voice whispered from the shadows. "Losing everything can have a purifying effect on your soul - stripping you of your freedom, your privacy, your dignity. You learn what you really are."

"So what have you learned?"

"That most men become animals when you chain and cage them, but the true measure of a man comes in how he carries himself despite his chains." Wintabi's voice took on a faraway, dreamy quality; he no longer spoke directly to Tannehill. "Can you hear them?"

"Hear what?"

"The drums. The heartbeat of our people. Our ancestors. Calling out to us." Wintabi's voice no longer sounded like him at all. His voice grew deeper and more ... ancient. "Let me tell you a story: A tiny village sent its children to the fields to gather the harvest. They filled their calabash bowls at the river for the journey home. A young man stepped from the reed and asked them to give him a drink of water. They did and in return, he gave them a pitcher of honey. They invited him to return to the village with them.

"On their journey home, the young man grabbed one of the children and disappeared saying, 'if you tell anyone of me, I will come and kill you all.' When the children arrived at the village, their parents asked what happened and where the missing child was, but the children were too scared to say or do anything.

"Finally, a young boy, whose wounds still bled, told of the man. A great rumbling shook the earth with the man's voice thundering 'why do you expose me?' He sprang from the forests and they realized he was an Iimu, a great devil from across the river. He swelled to the size of an immense serpent. Fire burned in his mouth, flames fell to the ground like spittle. The men grabbed their spears.

"'You cannot kill me,' it taunted, 'for you must use your own bones to grind mine into powder.' The Iimu started to devour some of the men, the children, and the women. It destroyed much of the village while caught in the throes of its lusts. The men realized the riddle of its words: That they must sacrifice themselves to destroy it. And they did. As they and the Iimu lay dying, they saw their family and kinsmen again. All had been restored."

With that, Wintabi's voice faded to silence. Tannehill knew sleep would be long in coming for him.

“Shakedown!” Officer O’Reilly yelled. The prisoners stepped out of their houses as the hacks went in to ransack the cells. The ostensible purpose was to search for contraband--drugs, weapons, or what have you--but the real purpose was to remind the prisoners who was in charge. Officer O’Reilly lined up the prisoners and shouted a series of orders as if narrating a surreal work-out video: “Run your fingers through your hair like your mothers were grooming you for lice.

“Open your mouth. Stick your tongue out. Lift it, move it from side to side.

“Lift your dick and your balls.

“Turn around, bend over and spread your cheeks.”

A beating Tannehill could take—a man took a beating—but the daily heaping servings of pinprick humiliations, the constant reminder that he was owned by another, that reality slowly consumed him.

Navigating the politics of the cafeteria often proved nearly as treacherous as negotiating the yard. Each gang had their own territory, and one had to step wise if one wanted to survive chow. Wintabi and Tannehill respected the color line, but ate at the fringes of it.

“You feel it, youngblood?” Wintabi asked.

“You ain’t gonna start with that drum bullshit again are you?”

“What are you goin’ on about? I’m talkin’ ‘bout the air. It’s got that vibe.”

“I feel you,” Tannehill said, unsure whether the other man remembered his “drums” soliloquy, “like somethin’s ‘bout to jump off.”

“You see your man, Derrick?” Wintabi nodded toward him as he sat among his brothers. “You gonna make a move on ‘im?”

“If there’s gonna be a stickin’, he’s welcome to try,” Tannehill said.

“Just make sure that you remember who you are. You’re still a man; they can’t take that away from you.”

“What was Connolly goin’ on about the other day?”

“Old ghosts. Most times, it’s about who hurt who last. I knew his father when I was at Leavenworth. Me and him got into it pretty bad. Someone dropped a kite to the warden ...”

“Didn’t know anyone up at Leavenworth knew how to even write a letter.”

“The kite detailed a conspiracy to kill a couple of hacks. They took it seriously. Next thing you know, hacks shakedown Connoly’s old man’s house and found a shank. He ended up in Ad-Seg and died there.”

“They thought you dropped the kite?”

“Ask me, he sent the kite himself to get himself away from me. Don’t matter none. Even in ad-seg, you can be reached. Got me moved to Marion.”

Tannehill felt hate like it was his birthright, the bondage of this life passed onto the next, with chains as his legacy.

Connoly approached as the two stood up to dump their trays bearing a scornful eye-fuck that Tannehill couldn’t let pass without reciprocating. He was so intent on his posturing, that he didn’t notice Connoly letting his filed toothbrush slip from his sleeve into his hand. Connoly turned and jammed it into Wintabi’s back. Blood darkened the old man’s prison blues. Connoly handed the shank behind him, and that person passed it along until its final owner was unknown.

“Where’s all your jigaboo prancing now?” Connoly raised his hands as the hacks rushed toward them.

“Get down! Get down!” Officer O’Reilly shouted. Other hacks pinned Connoly against the wall as he smiled.

“Why can’t I feel my legs?” Wintabi asked to no one in particular. He stretched out his bloody hand searching for purchase on Tannehill.

With enough imagination, anything could be turned into a weapon. For Connoly, it was a toothbrush. For Tannehill, it was a bedspring, unwound with its edge sharpened. Tannehill pulled it from the waistband of his pants. The cycle tightened like a noose about his neck. If he had any inkling of hope, he watched it fade with the pool widening about Wintabi. Their eyes locked, the light fading from them even as Tannehill brought the bedspring to bear. The hacks pushed the men along, preparing to escort them to Ad-Seg. No one thought to keep a closer eye on Tannehill, not especially known for being a trouble maker. He buried the shank in Connoly’s chest, right through his cloverleaf tat, before the stunned COs had a chance to react.

“Get the fuck to your cells!” Officer O’Reilly shouted. “Lockdown!”

Administrative-Segregation. Ad-Seg was a prison within a prison. Most of its inmates were snitches in danger of being shanked in the yard, prisoners too dangerous to roam “free”, or incorrigibles waiting a transfer. However, even within Ad-Seg there was a prison, the secure housing unit known as “The Hole”. Twenty-three hours a day solitary lockdown with two hacks

that escorted each bound-in-chains prisoner to the concrete exercise yard during his one hour of recreation time. Hacks cut the lights on or off at their discretion; most leaving them on and forgetting about them.

Ashanti Tannehill sat in the middle of the floor and admired his handiwork. He crafted a mural of misery from the only media at his disposal: His own blood and shit. The buzzing flies didn't bother him. Their company dispelled some of the loneliness. After the first three years, his family, one by one, wearied of doing time with him.

His frayed braids fell into his face. He wanted to brush them out of his face, but he was cognizant of his shit-stained hands. A fly buzzed past his ear and landed on his eyebrow. He fought to ignore the crawling of tiny legs along his body. A sole fly circled his head in its own curious orbit. Soon two engaged in aerial combat chasing each other through the ravines of his body. The flies swirled around him; their wings' hum haunted his ears. More flies gathered, a pooling swarm of wings, legs, and bulging red eyes. They scurried along the walls drawn to the stench and filth. They crawled along Tannehill's body, despite him brushing them aside. A maddening buzz, incessant voices which formed words.

"Ashanti."

He cocked his head to the side, uncertain that he heard the name from his dreams. He pushed aside the gnawing nervousness as if the nesting army of flies swarmed solely in his imagination. The flies gathered around him in a thick cloud, whorls and eddy, blown about by an unfelt breeze. He dared not breathe for fear of inhaling dozens in a careless gasp. Innumerable feet itched his flesh in their passing. Tannehill covered his face. Still more flies settled along the mural, their bodies glistened as light reflected at impossible angles from the black sheen of wings. A figure took form along the mural. From within the head of the figure, red embers burned to life. Its voice, like terrible thunder, echoed through the beating wings of its mouth.

"Do you know what I am?"

"An egwugwu," Tannehill said, not knowing how he knew, "an ancestor spirit."

"Yes," a tremulous voice covered in raffia replied. Tannehill dared not stare into its face. A sickly odor hung in the air about him, cutting through the filth, like the rot of diseased fish left in the sun. "I have come from the underworld. My journey has been long, and my stay will be brief."

"What do you want?" Tannehill asked, sure that this time his mind had finally snapped in the bowels of the Hole. He wouldn't be the first to go mad in solitary.

“Ike di na awaja na awaja’ - Power flows through many channels. As long as your head is not separated from your body, your ancestors will guide your spirit home. Let your body die that your spirit may be free from these chains.”

The flies flew tight circles around his form, each competing for space to claim. They skittered across his eyes and crawled into his mouth. They climbed along his nostrils. Flies crawled along every inch of Tannehill’s body. His flesh glinted in the moonlight like shifting shards of shattered glass. He imagined the flies consuming his body, grinding his bones to dust to float away.

Home.

Every person should have one. And as cliché as it sounded at the time, I took my therapist's advice and found my own. It's not some magical wonderland where the clouds are made of cotton candy and the creeks flow with wine. But there are clouds, visible through the occasional patch of sky here and there between the trees. The creek runs only with water, but it's the clearest, sweetest water to have ever touched my tongue. You can smell it when the breeze picks up, mingled with the tangy scent of pine needles and earth. Whenever I visit there, in my mind or in reality, like now, I'm never alone.

My therapist, Margaret, has been a godsend. When I first saw her I knew she was special. Forget the fact that she's a knockout, or that when she speaks to me it doesn't feel as if she's merely talking *at* me. Never mind that whenever she says my name I get this warm sensation along every inch of my skin; or that the traffic noise coming from her office window suddenly disappears at the sound of her voice. She knows her stuff. If it weren't for her, I'd probably be right back in the hospital.

Instead, I took her advice and found my happy place. When I first described it to Margaret, I could tell by the sliver of a grin on her full lips and the way she tilted her head that she appreciated the image. It's the same here now, this summer. Even among the ruins of the house and the memories of loss, the abundance of life is overwhelming. The incessant grind of grasshoppers and cicadas merges with the chattering of squirrels. A crow occasionally punctuates the drone of the other creatures with a call to his brethren. The trees are heavy and full; their branches sweeping low to sniff about the leavings of last fall. Knee-high grass and weeds surround the old Ford pickup where I sit; its tailgate down and my legs swinging lazily under me. Not thirty feet away, the woods start. Just beyond that I can see the sunlight reflected across the surface of the creek. The chirping of insects and birds swirls around me, muffled by the thick summer air.

I'd like to bring her here someday; maybe after our sessions are over and she can be free about our feelings for each other. I grew up here, and though my family is long gone, leaving only their impressions on this place in my memory, it would feel like bringing her home to meet them. I have so many happy memories here. She would appreciate that.

As peaceful as I feel here, there is also much sadness. I glance at the ruins of my family home off to the left. The only things left now are a crumbling chimney, several bricks scattered on the ground around it after giving up the fight, and some rotting, charred support beams. The house burned down two days after my eighteenth birthday, taking my mother and father with it. If I con-

concentrate, I can remember what it once looked like. I can see my father standing on the porch, leaning against the railing and pointing out toward the driveway at something. My mother stands behind him in the doorway, her hands held together as she dries her hand with a dish towel.

I close my eyes and press my hands against the rusty tailgate to stretch my back and breathe deeply. I can remember the hundreds of loads of firewood my father and I had gathered from the surrounding forest over the years. Sometimes, when the wind subsides and a random pocket of silence opens up, I think I can hear my little brother shuffling around the yard. I do now, and I glance behind me to see his slight form sulking in front of the old truck. Billy's big, sad eyes watch me, and I can recall his tiny voice pleading with father and me to let him come along.

The day he died I was fifteen and had only recently gotten my learner's permit. My father had told me to pull the truck around back so we could unload the wood before sunset. Sometimes I think I heard Billy's bubbly giggle coming from the engine compartment (it's very spacious; an excellent hiding spot he picked up from me years earlier) before I put the truck in gear. It could just be a "manifestation of guilt" as my therapist suggested. I'd like to think so.

As you might imagine, my parents took it pretty bad. My mother wailed and ran across the yard to cradle my brother's broken little body in her arms. My father's face went ten shades paler. It was a long time before they would talk to me, be it out of grief or blame. I seemed to have chosen the latter as their reason, so you can understand why I've been previously hospitalized and now see a therapist.

Through a short stretch of trees I can hear the raucous laughter of my childhood friend, Sean. We spent countless summer days out in the creek, swinging from vines down into the water. He was only a week older than me, but a good four inches taller and built well enough to garner as much attention from the girls that he could ever want. I sometimes wondered why he even hung out with me. I was quiet, homely and content to simply follow rather than lead in anything. He was loud, proud and ready for anything. Sometimes he would try to get that side out of me, but it usually ended up with him being so frustrated that he'd ignore me for a few days. Then he would show up with a towel draped around his neck and smiling like nothing had happened.

He died on the last day of summer, just before our senior year. He hit his head on a rock in the creek. I stood staring at the cloudy trail of blood spilling from his scalp for a few minutes, most likely in shock, until I came to my senses and ran to the house for help. Sean was dead before my father fished him out of the water. The school year started off with a score of puffy-eyed girls shuffling aimlessly down the halls.

Regardless of the sadness that permeates this place, I do have many good memories of my old home. There was always something to do, everything from chasing wild rabbits to wading downstream in the creek for miles. Before Billy died, he and I could play hide and seek for hours and still be within earshot of the house. When it was just me, I would build underground forts deep in the woods where I would sit with a flashlight and a library book. Considering my father thought reading was only for lazy people, it was always a nice escape from his judgment. At night I would lie on my back among the trees and stare up at the stars, imagining that no matter how many worlds were out there, none of them could possibly be as perfect as mine.

I really think once I bring Margaret out here, she'll see a whole different side to me. She knows all of my pain and troubles, sure. But this place will expose her to the foundation that everything else is built upon. She needs to see it, the reality of my past. I love her, and she needs to know that side of me if she's ever to be a part of my life, a part of my family.

The sun is setting and I usually try to avoid being here at night. It gets much colder and the memories always seem to follow suit. I turn to look at Billy, his eyes still sad, almost questioning. Father always looks much angrier in the dark, his stiff finger pointing my way while mother uses the dish rag to dry her tears.

I have to look away. I always look away.

The frogs have started their song and night will be here soon. I always feel sad leaving this place, as if I'm leaving for the last time. I feel the need to take it all in, take it with me because I'll never have another chance. But thanks to Margaret's guidance, I know I can come back anytime I wish. She's done more for me than she may ever know.

With a picture of her in my thoughts, I push up from the tailgate and stand. I wince as my skin slides across the rusty surface. It's dry, rough and reminds me of the jagged, sandy rock that killed Sean. I lift my hands to my face and see the reddish-brown flakes like dried paint staining my skin. When I press my palms to my nose I smell the slightest hint of gasoline.

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