

Lake Tomahawk

In the Bullocks' backyard the grass stood nearly knee-high, clumped and heavy with dew, studded with the first leaves to fall from the tulip poplars. The lawn chair at the center of the yard had come into Lester and Dorothy Lee Bullock's possession from her childhood home even before they moved into this house, newlywed, forty years ago, Lester taking on the mortgage and Dorothy the care of his invalid mother when heart attack took down his father at age fifty-two. The house was a simple, solid, two-story brick box, in a short string of similar dwellings, brick, aluminum-sided, or asbestos-shingled, built one after another on small square lots up Overhill Road and out from town in the 50s when the defense plant opened--to assemble missile guidance systems--and work became plentiful in the area, for the first time ever.

The lawn chair's manufacture predated not just the molded resin found everywhere nowadays but even the nylon webbing ubiquitous in 1968 when Lester, enflamed by the free love generation's ignorant disregard for the Communist threat, enlisted and shipped out to Vietnam, leaving his bride on her own with the house he'd grown up in and the woman who'd raised him. The chair's design was somewhat romantic. Dorothy thought it graceful. The seat and back formed from broad, thin aluminum bands welded to two slender aluminum-tubing half-circles, the leg and arm on each side a single unbroken curve. A person seated in the chair

could have seen, beyond the sentinel row of white pines at the property line, two of the Seven Sisters peaks, demarking that side of the Swannanoa Valley. The full ridge line would become visible as more leaves came down; if the house had been for sale, which it wasn't, the advertisement could have claimed "a winter view."

A squirrel paused on its haunches before the chair from which Dorothy had hand fed unnumbered generations of its kin. Dorothy as she used to be: the enormous hams of her thighs straining the seams of daisy-dotted tent dresses she sewed for herself, her pale sacks of arm flesh wagging as she extended a roasted husked peanut toward the fine-wire fingers of that season's favorite, addressed year after year by the same name, in onomatopoeia: *cheep-cheep*. Aluminum is enduring but soft, and over the decades Dorothy dropped into the chair for a moment's peace her weight—a trim 140 when she married; 160, 180, and 195, respectively, post-pregnancies; 215 when high blood pressure set in, in her forties; 227 when she tossed out the scale at menopause—it had sunk slightly into the earth. Because she habitually leaned left to plumb the right hand pocket of her sweater for nuts for the squirrels and sticks of Juicy Fruit gum or Kraft caramels for herself, the chair had developed a structural tilt to left that resisted straightening. Viewed from the house, the empty chair listed like a swamped boat.

Leslee Bullock turned away from the bathroom's small window. She washed her hands thoroughly, soaping for the mandated fifteen seconds and shaking them dry while noting that the sink drained barely faster than the trickle from the faucet filled it. She crossed the hall to what had once been Dorothy's sewing room, where she now lay in a hospital bed. Leslee pulled on latex gloves. The largest of the three tumors, below her mother's ribs on the right side, had

begun to drain again. Tweezing away sodden dressing, Leslee held her breath against the odor. Like pulling a small plug, she tugged her mind off her fingers' activity. It snagged briefly on her secret fear, irrational and ever-present, that cancer could infect her body by proximity to her mother's, then ricocheted off the fact of death to resettle rebelliously on the palm-sized black mass gleaming back insolently, skin as glossy and tight as an eggplant's. Deep in the growth's concave center a tiny blind lesion wept pale fluid. Swiftly Leslee hid both with dry gauze.

Her mother stirred but did not speak, and Leslee picked up her hand, running the pad of her gloved thumb gently over knuckles enlarged from arthritis. The back of the hand and the wrist were blotched purple with the blood blisters that proliferated from the slightest bump or no apparent cause at all. Metastasized colon cancer had rendered Dorothy skeletal, except for the protuberances of the tumors: the first one shrunken post-radiation to a hard dry knot in her armpit; the resistant, draining abdominal mass; and a new one swelling in her groin.

From the room overhead there burst the ratcheting *no-o-o-o-o* of an insulted toddler, tailed instantly by Cissy's voice, swearing and shushing almost in the same breath as her newborn's weedy wail and the two-year-old's siren whine rose in counterpoint to their brother's temper. Cissy had four children—the oldest, Bree, out of the house at kindergarten in the mornings—and now, since Tad's second deployment to Afghanistan, they all five lived upstairs in what had once been Cissy's and Leslee's bedrooms. Their father, cursing and hammering, sometimes hammered, sometimes not, had partitioned the two small rooms out of a single larger attic room nearly twenty years ago.

Leslee removed her thoughts from her sister and her sister's brood and their presence in a house that had been a tranquil sickroom until they moved in, and returned her attention to

her own hands, efficient and skilled, slender and without age spots, working fast to tape the gauze square flat, today's dressing angled differently than yesterday's so that each day one patch of the fragile, papery skin abutting the tumor could rest from the insult of adhesive, just as the hospice nurse had taught her. Larry was his name. An Iraq vet who walked with a prosthetic limb, he'd told her that caring for still-living flesh, however wrecked, was holy work. She'd read that remark as praise; it pleased her as much as it embarrassed her. Later, she wondered if he'd meant to refer only to himself and others in his profession and she became more embarrassed. She could hardly talk to him now. Settling nightgown and sheet over the fresh dressing, she smiled down into Dorothy's exhausted eyes.

"Is that better, Mother?"

"Yes, honey, much better."

This rehearsed exchange was calming, its phrasing varying only slightly and the tone--patient, resigned, loving on both sides—never varying, each morning, early, and morning and evening on the weekends and holidays when a nurse did not come. Dressing wounds and cleaning their mother's body were tasks Cissy did not do. *I wipe my share of the shit around here*, she'd said, when Nurse Larry tried to involve her, in what he called "respite" for Leslee, in her mother's care. Leslee didn't want Cissy's help. Her sister was now and always had been the furthest thing from a respite.

"You always did make it better." Dorothy's voice startled her, bursting routine. "You always tried so hard."

Leslee tucked the box of sterile gauze pads and the roll of tape into a drawer in the bedside table, another ritual never violated: insofar as possible all the accoutrements of illness should be put away, out of sight after use. Was this not what they both wanted?

"Yes," she said, aware of avoiding her mother's eyes. She stripped off the latex gloves and dropped them into the wastebasket. "Yes. I did. I do." She revisited herself at seventeen, pulling fragrant cookies from the oven in the airless kitchen on a boiling midsummer afternoon, her father watching baseball in his basement bunker, her mother chatting to squirrels in the yard, Cissy in the hammock absorbed in the latest issue of *Glamour*, and their baby brother Bradley already, at seven, who knew where.

"What can I do for you now, Mother?"

"Nothing, dear. There's nothing you *can* do." Her bony fingers abruptly trapped Leslee's wrist. The ridged nails dug in. "I can't do any more, either."

"Of course not, Mother. Don't worry."

Dorothy's voice was hoarse from the meds. Her tone was often strained by the effort of speaking but she seemed especially restless just now. Almost imploring. Did she need something more for pain? Dorothy shook her head tersely when Leslee asked, having checked the clock for the time remaining until the next scheduled dose. One hour. She rehearsed the presence in the drawer of the sublingual narcotic, the rescue med prescribed by the hospice doc for breakthrough pain, then she straightened the quilt, cut and blocked by Dorothy before Cissy, six years Leslee's junior, was born. Dorothy had made, and given away, dozens of quilts. Leslee remembered, or told herself she did, the construction of this one, a Hen-and-Chickens pattern, her mother's large hands driving the faintly hissing shears through fabric remnant so

stiff with sizing its weave popped with each stab of the Singer's silver needle. She stood alongside her mother's knee, chin nested against all rules of prudence on Dorothy's ample soft thigh as the sewing machine whirred close by her ear and the needle at her eye-level flashed, the smell of heated machine oil and the scent of her mother's talc-sweetened sweat the essence for Leslee, then, of peace.

Footsteps slewed across the floorboards above like playground pebbles skidding down a slide. Light ones, heavy ones. Squeals and laughter. A guttural command from Cissy. Electronic gunfire burst from Bobby's toy automatic, Tad's parting gift. A door slammed, the sound reverberating inside the brick drum.

Dorothy struggled as if to sit. She could not, usually, even propped at forty-five degrees, without vomiting. The massing of the tumor roots inside her sent not just pain but jets of bile shooting through her whenever she was moved more than slightly and slowly. Leslee worked a second pillow beneath her mother's head and shoulders to raise them slightly. Dorothy's hand sought the glass on the nightstand and Leslee held it to her lips, a little paralysis of distaste souring her tongue as she waited for what came next.

Dorothy sipped and then, gagging, she spit. Anger, a light shock as from a loose wire behind a switch plate, spiked through Leslee. Often her mother could not swallow properly. Not her fault; her gut was tetchy. What Leslee could not stand was that she drank from and spit into the same glass. The single fight they'd had during this terminal phase of Dorothy's illness had been over that point.

Dorothy swatted backhanded toward the glass. "Away," she said in the irritable, winded tone that meant acute suffering. Leslee set the glass of cloudy liquid on the floor. Weakly her mother waved at the window. "Open."

Leslee swept aside dusty sheers and with effort lifted the warped sash.

The front yard, sloping strip of turf bisected to the curb by flagstones, blazed incandescent in late September sun. A humid in-rush of outdoor air brought the scent of damp grass, chrysanthemum in bloom next door, and a slow pulse of cicada buzz--the cusp of autumn. The oaks and maples crowding the tight front lawns and heaving the sidewalk on both sides of the curving humps of Overhill Road had not yet put on their coat of colors. But, oh, when they did! Blood crimson, butter yellow, every gradation of red-brown from russet to sienna with one tree out of a hundred remaining stubbornly lime-green right through October, its leaves yet living, their chlorophyll not dissipated, still pulling nourishment from light.

For all Leslee's growing-up years until she fled home for college like a rabbit sprung from a snare, her mother never let autumn pass without goading the family into whatever too-small car they then owned for a too-long Sunday afternoon of Leaf Peep. The back seat stank always of the Beechnut gum she dispensed medicinally and the motion sickness it never prevented in their sensitive brother Brad. *Crooked as a hog's back*, Lester intoned about the roads they drove, every time, in response to nobody's question, swinging through some section of the Blue Ridge top-line resignedly--gripping the wheel like a cudgel; or explosively--stomping first the accelerator and then the brakes as the slow snake of leaf-peeping tourists undulated; or finally not at all--sitting home in the basement recliner with a case of Bud for company while Dorothy

herded Leslee and Cissy and blackmailed Brad into the car she'd learned to drive by then solely for this purpose: if Lester wouldn't do it, she would.

A two- or three-hours' crawl through S-curves choked with out-of-state cars parked for gawking and photos without bothering to pull off the pavement. Dorothy's enthusiasm for such a pastime no one but tourists enjoyed Leslee only gradually comprehended as forced. Surely it had been real, once; she remembered, she thought she did, sitting close between her parents in the front seat, daddy's girl in the days before she had siblings. She thought she'd sat in his lap sometimes, could see her own plump toddler palms patting the blue Bakelite steering wheel of the Chevy sedan, her mother beside her singing: *the bear went over the mountain, to see what he could see*. She'd been wholly her parents' child, even her name made from parts of theirs. And then memory skipped like a scratched disc to years later, lanky tomboy Leslee with knees like baseballs atop the stick-bats of her shins, reading a map Lester neither needed nor wanted, Dorothy in the backseat, enveloped by then in one of her spreading tent dresses, toddler Bradley mashed against one window whining and Cissy with her head thrust out the other for fresh air. With the bitten-down nail of her pointer finger Leslee traced on the map their progress through the hours and the miles.

What did it mean, to mourn now what had been then a ritual scourging of the familial nerves, their separate silences sealed inside the car a fuse one of them would eventually light?

Footsteps and voices traipsed down the stairs and into the hall outside the sickroom's latched door. Cissy, bringing her brood downstairs to the only bathroom. Cissy bathed her middle two together, in the morning instead of at bedtime. *They wake up pissy no matter when*

I wash 'em, she said, when Dorothy, in better times, questioned this break with her own ironclad rule of bedtime baths.

Three out of Cissy's four children wore diapers, even Bobby, almost four, because he "wasn't reliable."

He's not reliable because he doesn't pay attention, Leslee told her, exactly once.

What the fuck do you know about kids? Cissy shot back.

Dorothy sighed. A long outrush of breath with a rattle at the end. Her left hand lay balled at her throat. The fingers of the right hovered like a bird above her chest, then dropped, to pinch and pinch again the cotton lace at the yoke of her gown as if to pick off a persistent speck of lint.

The hand rose again, and resettled to resume plucking.

"Stop it," Leslee said. She seized the hand with both of hers and forced it down. Pressed it hard into the mattress, felt its soft ligaments separate. In shame, she let go. Tears welled like blisters at the red rims of Dorothy's eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that." Leslee stroked the old face, tears channeling through its delta of creases.

Her mother's eyes squeezed shut. Her lips compressed. "Who's there?" she gasped. "Who?"

"Shhh...," Leslee soothed, watching Dorothy try to still her breath, ride the pain. Seated beside her on the bed, Leslee rummaged in the drawer for the narcotic lozenge. "Here, here," she said, tearing the foil, removing the soft white disc, parting her mother's lips and teeth and lifting her tongue to pop it beneath. Dorothy's eyes remained tight-shut. Leslee wiped her

fingers on the sheet, dissociated resolutely from distaste and fear, and took both her mother's hands in hers again, this time gently, and held them, stroking the thumbs with her thumbs, waiting with her for the rescue to kick in. Three to five minutes, according to the label, with individual variation to be expected, according to the nurse. She heard herself humming raggedly. She made herself stop.

Through the open front window she watched a squirrel hop along the collapsed trench--grassed-over but permanent, a scar on the once smooth lawn--her father had opened nine years ago intending to replace the sewer line. The garage was still jammed with lengths of PVC pipe delivered, coincidentally, the day he died. Dropped as if he'd been shot, an aneurysm exploding in his brain. Her mother's hands cooled, her breathing slowed. From the hallway came fresh commotion. Bobby, just the other side of the door, said, "Lemme see Granny!" and two-year-old Carrie echoed, "Gwanny, Gwanny." Cissy spoke sternly. "Hush, now. Granny's napping. If you don't let her sleep, she can't get well."

Dorothy's eyes opened. She turned her face to the window.

A minivan rolled slowly up the cement driveway. Leslee stood. Charlotte, the volunteer visitor assigned to the Bullocks by hospice, disengaged herself slowly from the driver's seat. She was a big woman who did nothing quickly. Humming audibly between drags on her cigarette, she lumbered down the drive, over the trench, and up the walk, to enter by the front door the way she always did, forever well-mannered in every way except for the smoking. Hospice protocol forbade her to smoke in clients' houses. She habitually ground out the coal with her heel on the doorstep before stepping inside with the butt cupped in one hand. In the

kitchen sink she'd wet it, then dispose of it tactfully in the garbage but still she wore the stink into the sickroom, and it lingered when she left.

"Mother." Kneeling to place her face near Dorothy's on the pillow, Leslee whispered.

"Mother, do you see how the leaves are ready to turn? Can you see the colors coming?"

Dorothy's pupils were dilated dark pools behind cloudy cataracts that should have been removed before the cancer treatment took precedence. Now it was too late.

"I can't see a thing. Not even your face." Her hand shut on Leslee's. "I'll die blind, like your Frenchman."

Leslee twisted away, stumbling to her feet. Her mother's speech did turn voluble, nonsensical sometimes, right before the drug pulled her under and she slept. Rollie's face, his blind-suffering one from the very last days arose in Leslee's mind like a thunderhead and she dismissed it.

From the foyer she heard Cissy greeting Charlotte, her tone brighter than with any other person. Charlotte's growly smoker's voice came closer as they made their way through the house.

"Who's there?" Dorothy asked, dreamy now.

"Charlotte," Leslee replied. *Angel of death*, she added, not intending to and not quite under her breath. She sounded gruff to her own ears. She sounded like Charlotte.

Leaving the room abruptly, she walked right into Charlotte, who slung around her an arm like a tentacle, pulling her into a hug she did not want. Big soft body. The smell of cigarettes and sweat in the folds of her, and something else, sour and earthy, as if she were having her period, or her clothes needed laundering.

Leslee shrugged herself free. Charlotte smiled patiently. She blocked the narrow hallway.

"Been at it since before daylight, ain't you?" she asked.

Her left hand cupped the cigarette butt. Her free arm swung out and captured Cissy in its curve, who beamed and nestled in, baby Paulie in a football hold between them. Carrie wrapped her mother's leg like a vine, thumb sunk second-knuckle deep into her mouth. From the bathroom, they could all hear Bobby singing and the water pipes whining.

Leslee pulled the sickroom door shut. The click of the latch sounded like a small, clear shot. "Is he in the tub? By himself?"

"I'm the one's been at it since before daylight," Cissy said. "These kids..."

Charlotte plucked Paulie out of her arms and slung him like a small sack across her broad shoulder. Settling, he burped, ejecting a dribble of sour milk. She bopped him lightly on the back. Her cigarette butt now lay on the floor. Leslee knelt and plucked it up between thumb and forefinger, lifting it to Charlotte's eye level.

"Oh, shit." Charlotte's free hand clapped her mouth. "Oh, *shoot*," she sputtered. "Sorry."

"Doesn't matter," Cissy soothed. "They've ever one of them heard a lot worse."

Leslee stood her ground, silent.

"Carrie, sweetie." Charlotte dropped her palm to the child's head as she spoke. "Take your mamma to the bathroom now and get in that tub with your brother before he runs out all the hot water." With her hip she nudged Cissy to follow.

Leslee thrust the cigarette butt into her sister's path. "Flush this. It stinks."

A shadow dimmed Charlotte's moon face. "It does, doesn't it?"

She took it from Leslee, tucked it in the pocket of her sweat pants, then turned toward the kitchen. Cissy stopped her. "My sister's got no manners. We're glad you've come.

Leastwise I'm glad. I don't know what I'd do without you. And Mama...."

"s okay," Charlotte said. Her gaze drifted up, addressing space above all their heads.

From the bathroom Bobby called out, "I pooped!"

"I've done this visiting a long time. I don't take personal what's said. People in the fix you folks are in, everybody feels bad, nobody knows how to act."

"Perhaps least of all you," said Leslee.

Cissy's glance snapped onto and off Leslee's face. "She acts like this all the time," Cissy said to Charlotte, her tone a stage whisper. "And she won't lift a finger to help with all these kids."

Charlotte's nicotine-stained fingers brushed Cissy's cheek. Gently. As if Cissy, at twenty-seven, were still a child. "Go on, now," Charlotte said. "Bathe those babies. When you're done we'll sit down with some coffee and visit."

"How long are you staying?" Leslee said.

"I don't know yet." Charlotte smiled frankly into her face. "Not long. Never do, unless I'm asked."

"I want you to stay for lunch," Cissy said. Carrie was hauling hard on her hand, leaning into the job like a draft horse but failing to budge her.

Charlotte nodded and tried to shoo Cissy on down the hall, a little flutter of her fingers.

"How's Dorothy doing today?"

"Mother's sleeping," Leslee answered.

"I can sit with her, give you a break."

"I said she's sleeping. She'll be out for a while. I had to use a rescue."

"You didn't tell me that," Cissy said, turning back, planting her feet.

From the bathroom Bobby called, "Mom-meeeeee. I pooped."

"I don't have to tell you everything. I don't have to tell you anything."

"Why don't you two talk. I'll bathe the children." Charlotte took Carrie's hand, and Paulie still balanced on one shoulder, led the little girl away.

"Leslee treats me like a child," Cissy called after her.

"Catch up on your mom," Charlotte said.

Leslee watched Charlotte rocking stolidly left to right, big as a bear, stiff-legging it down the short hall laden with Cissy's children. "*You act like a child*," she told her sister.

You act like a child around Charlotte was what she wanted to say.

"And you're how old?" Cissy snapped back.

Leslee's teeth sank into her lower lip. More than once since Cissy moved in, four months ago, Paulie still on the inside, stretching Cissy's maternity jeans to their limit, they'd thrashed through the same argument.

Thirty-three years old, Leslee. And you live at home. Unemployed.

You are living at home. You are unemployed.

I have a husband and children. I have a husband gone to war.

That fact was Cissy's flag of martyrdom. She ran it up the pole as necessary to justify her claim to the house.

So you come park on Mother, when you're broke and she's dying.

It's not my fault I'm broke. And she invited me. Mama took me in. She loves me.

She loves me too. I'm caring for her. I'm her caregiver.

And that's noble? Jesus, Leslee, it's what you do. It's all you've ever done. Find yourself a lost cause and wallow in it.

"Grow up." That was all Cissy said, out loud, this time.

Get a job. Get a man. The takedown punch, unspoken this time.

Leslee's breath rushed out of her. She fled up the hall, through the kitchen, and out the back porch, snatching Dorothy's old sweater off its hook on the way. The kiltered screen door, one of its rusted hinges more dysfunctional than the other, slapped behind her. She crossed the deck her father forced Bradley to build the summer before the autumn he disappeared for good—and stepped from it into the yard as if from the end of a pier.

She waded in, kicking leaves and tussocks of wet grass. When she sank her hands into the cardigan's patch pockets, misshapen by time and heavy use into open sacks, she found three very old peanuts, the coarse husks disintegrating. She rolled them between her palms to free the nuts inside, blue-black and acrid with mold. Brushing leaves from her mother's chair, she sat in it. A half-dozen squirrels kept wary distance from her, traversing the yard in staccato hops on their way to a neighbor's birdfeeder. Sunlight settled warm like a shawl on her shoulders. Damp from the chair seat seeped slowly through her pants, chilling her thighs.

In the cramped bathroom, backside mashed hard against the lavatory door while she knelt at the tub, Charlotte waited for the fouled bathwater to sink slowly through the drain.

She'd never bathed children in this house but her past experience using its facilities suggested a huge repair bill was not far away; her marriage, long ended, had been to a plumber so she knew the signs. The pipes in the walls would be choked with lime and the old clay sewer line to the street riddled with tree roots. She disinfected the tub with a sluice of Lysol while Bobby, crew-cut and freckled, sat naked on the rim alongside her, drumming his heels on the nicked porcelain. She'd not been able to talk him out of open carry; his plastic machine gun still hung by its strap across his back.

She'd placed baby Paulie on the floor in a nest of clean towels between a toiletries rack and the tub, for safekeeping from too many feet and elbows unpredictably mobile in a small space. He gazed at her, a little bald Buddha-face with milky blue eyes. Carrie pressed Charlotte's opposite hip, one hand hooked in the elastic waistband of her pants. Charlotte had just re-opened negotiations with Bobby when his mother came to the door.

"No," he told Charlotte, when she placed her hand on his gun. "Nooooo. Mommy! Mom-mee, no more bath." His rising pitch belied the fact he now stood in the replenishing water, one elbow propped companionably against Charlotte's. He smiled at her, broadly, between peals of temper.

Cissy, face flushed and upper lip beaded, shucked the weapon off him in one smooth motion. "If you get that wet, mister, it won't shoot and then we'll all be stuck with the fit you throw."

The gun, held aloft, dribbled on Charlotte's head but all the same she had to admire Cissy's agility; the disarming had required a long reach and good balance.

Carrie's little arms rose straight up, reaching for her mama in place of the temporary comforts of Charlotte and her own prune-skinned thumb. One-armed, Cissy hefted the two-year-old up and over Charlotte. At exactly the same moment both women registered that the child's diaper was loaded.

"Lord God," said Cissy. She leaned the toy gun up in the corner and tugged open the narrow linen closet where bales of diapers in three different sizes were stacked. She snatched a midsize one and had Carrie prone on the floor with her pants off before Charlotte saw how she managed it.

Charlotte tried talking Bobby into lowering his soiled bottom into the water. "Come on, little man, squat just long enough for me to wash that tush."

"I washed already *before* I pooped."

His will was clear in the square of his small male chin even if his reasons for preferring shit to soap remained a mystery. Charlotte swallowed sorrow, shut off the wheezing taps, and in the space of their silence looked to Cissy for help.

"Bubble bath," she said. "The Sponge Bob stuff."

Some part of some child's breakfast splattered Cissy's maternity tee. She was adding, not subtracting weight post-partum. Charlotte squirted bubble bath, frothed it up, and caught herself wondering how much Tad cared about Cissy's weight, or if he'd even seen his wife recently enough to notice. She knew, because Cissy told her, that he was harder and harder to corral by Skype. Carrie, her brow wearing its usual squint of worry, rode her mother's hip. Cissy gestured toward the toilet with the loaded diaper pinched in her free hand. "We gotta switch spots."

With a gasp she couldn't quite hide, Charlotte got up, her knees punishing her. It shamed her to have noticed and judged another woman's weight. Cissy elbowed past in the twenty-four inches separating tub from lavatory, accidentally driving Charlotte's hip hard into the door handle. She shook off the sting from what would become just one more black-and-blue bruise flowering on pale cellulite fields she avoided seeing--the bathroom in the extended stay motel she now called home had no mirror, and the wall-sized one above the vanity she'd papered over completely with pictures of beaches and waterfalls torn surreptitiously from the magazines her church collected for shut-ins. "Watch for Paulie," she said.

"Where?"

"Stowed yonder." Charlotte pointed, and Cissy burst out laughing.

"You are something else."

"That's been said about me plenty. Not always in a nice way."

Cissy emptied the diaper it into the toilet. "For me, you're the nicest thing that's happened in a real long time."

The watery swirl of the flush half-hid what she'd said. Her hair, straggling from its elastic, partly veiled her face. She set Carrie in the tub, whipped her pajama top over her head and jerked Bobby up off his feet and down into the bubbly water in the same motion, ignoring the squall those actions detonated. The reverb in the tiny bathroom covered everything she said next, her back to her children and her face close by Charlotte's: "What'm I gonna do if he doesn't come home--or if he does, with his legs blown off or his head fucked up?"

Charlotte knew firsthand what IEDs did to limbs, brains, and relationships. She pulled Cissy's face to her chest and held it there firmly.

"What a mercy it'd be if Mama could just go on and *go*. Her suffering, it makes me crazy. And Leslee acts like she owns her. She won't hardly even let me go in there."

Charlotte stroked Cissy's unwashed hair and heard herself humming. She quit it as Cissy pulled away. "What about Leslee?" Charlotte asked. "Will she stay a while to help you, after your mom...?" The children had stopped fussing and she didn't want to say "dies" in front of them.

Cissy dropped to her knees to soap Bobby with one hand while holding him down with the other. "She can't stay here."

Charlotte plucked a towel from the rack above Paulie, mewling now that he could smell his mother. She opened the towel for Bobby, who jumped from the tub into her arms, nearly knocking her backwards with exuberant affection. Most of the water streaming off him hit the floor. Doing her best to snug him in the towel, Charlotte said softly, "I think your sister might be pretty lost when...you know."

"She's got to go somewhere else. *Do* something else." Cissy dumped a two-cup measure of water over Carrie's head and followed that with a dollop of shampoo. "I need this house," she said, scrubbing vigorously. Carrie held her little face in her hands, her sucking thumb pale and shriveled against her pearly cheek. "I deserve it. I have a family to raise." She rinsed Carrie's hair and handed her out, shivering, to Charlotte, who wrapped her up in a towel. Bobby and Carrie, one on each side, sat on her thighs, snuggling.

"Mama already said this house is mine."

Charlotte had heard plenty about Cissy's finances. Her life and her kids' lives--and her husband's life too, if he came home, if he could stay home--would be easier with the paid-off

mortgage and the tiny inheritance Dorothy's life insurance promised. Cissy didn't just need this house, she needed her mother's death.

"Does Leslee know that?"

"She does. I made Mama tell her."

Cissy sat down on the toilet lid to pick up Paulie, crying now, and nurse him. Charlotte suddenly recalled the cigarette butt stashed in her pocket. Setting the children on their feet, she stood painfully and lifted the lid of the diaper pail—enameled tin, a veteran, probably, of Cissy's infancy if not Leslee's, too; it grated open on its corroded hinge and banged shut like a metal jaw.

Cissy said, "Leslee needs a *job*."

From the tail of her eye, Charlotte caught Bobby repossessing his gun. He shouldered it and drew a bead on his sister, who squealed.

"She's got to grow up. Take some responsibility." Cissy's voice rose. "She's her own worst enemy. You *know* what I mean."

Charlotte did. Weeks ago, still new to this family, she'd asked Cissy in confidence if she thought Leslee might be depressed. Cissy seized her by the arm, marched her outdoors away from the kids, and spilled beans Charlotte did not want.

The mess she's in, it's her own fault. She had a job, a good one at the university, but she had to quit. She got in big trouble for shacking up with her advisor. He left his wife for her, and then he died.

With no inkling she was about to, Charlotte seized the barrel of Bobby's gun and pointed it straight up. As if it might fire real bullets. As if those might now rip the sky instead of

someone's flesh. Carrie sank her teeth into her brother's arm. He howled. Charlotte closed her eyes and prayed to Jesus.

Cissy's shouting jerked her back. "You're in Time Out, both of you. Bobby, go to your room. No television until after lunch. Carrie, sit down right where you are or I'll make you wish you had."

They complied. Or, at least, Bobby sauntered out and Carrie plopped down, snuffing and pulling so hard on her thumb her cheeks hollowed. They all heard the television in the living room pop on. Carrie's eyes widened in mute outrage. Cissy got to her feet, Paulie still attached to her breast, and squeezed past Charlotte. Carrie ran behind on short legs.

The crumbling green linoleum floor was soupy wet and littered with plastic bath toys. *So much sin*, Charlotte said, finally, to herself. *So much suffering*.

One by one, she picked up bath toys--the turtles, the speed boat, the whales--and, unnecessarily, dried them. She wiped up the spilled bath water and hung up soggy towels. She sat down on the edge of the tub to catch her breath. Lodged in an uncaulked gap between tub and the buckling linoleum she spied a wad of gum, a dull glint in old foil. That puzzled her. So far as she knew, nobody in this house chewed gum. Maybe the older girl did; she'd not met Bree but once, the morning she started school.

Footsteps came down the hall, too subtle for Cissy. Charlotte drew breath, to face again Leslee's hostility and her own guilty helplessness in the face of it, but the steps stopped well short of the bathroom. The sickroom door opened and seconds later quietly shut, a single distinct click. Leslee's footsteps receded up the hall. The thwap of the screen door behind her was barely audible.

Slowly Charlotte got to her feet, sore knees protesting. The need, a keen one, for a cigarette had hold of her. Hanging a last towel on the rack beneath the room's one small window, glazed with moisture on the inside and grime on the outside, she saw Leslee standing in the backyard. At its center stood a lawn chair, empty and tilted. Beyond it, the two Sisters, veiled in blue-gray haze. In Leslee's hand was what appeared to be a small glass. She upended it, dumping liquid into the tall grass. In a long, shapeless sweater the color of dirt, Leslee looked slovenly. She looked homeless.

From her side of the clouded glass Charlotte felt herself the dumpy mound others judged her to be: her necklessness, her unattractively round face and, just now, her theatrically pursed lips, sucking a cigarette she only imagined. Leslee must have sensed her gaze; she half-turned and their eyes met. Charlotte's fingers of their own accord formed a V and rose up to the height of the sill to hang alongside her face. She felt herself being *something else*, in the not-nice way. She morphed the stupid peace sign into a finger wave but Leslee had already turned away.

Leslee's canvas sneakers were soaked from the dew-laden grass; they made a squeezed-sponge sound as she crossed the deck. Before the screen door slapped shut behind her she heard, from the kitchen, Cissy's secret-sharing voice and Charlotte's smoke-coarsened one punctuating it. Call and response. She caught the timbre, not the content, of what was said but because talk ceased at the sound of her entry, she knew they'd been discussing, in code because of the children, the problem of Tad's distancing ways, and, without benefit of code, the problem of her. She knew Charlotte to be endlessly sympathetic about Tad; Cissy had shared

freely the one personal fact Charlotte gave her: she'd lost her son, and the mobile home his wages helped her pay on, to mental illness after traumatic brain injury in the war.

The kitchen Leslee stepped into was quiet except for the second hand on the plastic teapot clock above the stove, thucking dully, and Bobby, foxholed beneath the table, muttering to his toy troops. Charlotte and Cissy sat side by side at the table, bright red mugs of coffee before them, Charlotte loading hers from a can of the sweetened condensed milk Cissy kept on hand especially for her. In the crook of Charlotte's free arm Carrie lounged, thumb tip resting pensively against her lip. Paulie was not there; he must have gone down for his morning nap.

Cissy shot at Leslee a look she could not read. Charlotte's glance settled on Dorothy's glass pinched in two fingers of Leslee's left hand.

"You look like her," Cissy burst out. "You look like Mama in that godawful sweater."

Leslee felt how the shoulder seams drooped toward her elbows. The extra-large garment hung almost to her knees. Her sister might have said, her tone did say, *You look like hell.*

Might there have been more? More she wished to say, or could not bring herself to say, for good or for ill? Cissy would not look at her now.

"Thanks," Leslee said, turning her back. She soaped Dorothy's glass thoroughly at the sink and, as she did every morning, scalded it with boiling water from the tea kettle before inverting it on the rack to dry.

She sat down at the table uninvited. No one spoke; her presence curdled conversation. The clock ticked, dragging time from hash mark to hash mark behind a face smeared with cooking grease. The straight chairs they sat in were every one of them uncomfortable. On

purpose. Dorothy had never been willing to cushion them despite the family's complaints and despite all the time she spent at the sewing machine because—she spat out the words the one time Leslee ever remembered hearing her curse—*I got no time to sit in them and nobody else who lives in this goddamn house will stay in the kitchen any longer than it takes to eat what I've slaved to cook.* That outburst occurred more than two decades ago. Every single thing in the kitchen had stayed exactly the same for more years than that. The scarred wooden countertops. The squat white appliances. Every surface and each cavity anywhere in the room stuffed with mismatched pots and plates; stacks of cookbooks and clipped recipes; bowls of twist-ties and bins of rinsed-out plastic bread wrappers. In the fridge foil-wrapped leftovers mounded several layers deep.

Charlotte's spoon rang against her mug as she stirred in more sweet milk.

Leslee spoke. "I'm taking Mother out. To see the leaves. One last time."

The sound of Carrie suctioning her thumb filled the gap that swallowed her words. Then Cissy spoke. "You can't do that. *She* can't do that."

Torture, the oncologist had said, the final time, weeks ago, Leslee had accompanied Dorothy to the hospital in downtown Asheville for radiation treatment. Agony on Dorothy's face and misery on the EMT's, struggling to stabilize her blood pressure after thirty minutes of vomiting in the Mountain Mobility van. *Pointless*, the doctor had said under his breath, and referred them to hospice.

Shrugging, Leslee watched Cissy bite back whatever else she almost said in front of her children. Beneath the table Bobby's hand snaked up the bell of Leslee's pants leg to set his

little thumb and forefinger into the flesh of her calf. He pinched. She cried out, and shook him off. Upstairs Paulie wailed, his nap over early.

Cissy stumped cursing toward the stairs. Bobby pattered after her. Charlotte pulled Carrie to her lap. The little girl's blond head lolled back against Charlotte's broad bosom. Her thumb popped free as she giggled and pointed. On the screen outside the window over the sink a squirrel hung upside down as if peering in at them. Leslee mouthed to the child a word that made no sound. *Cheep-cheep.*

She felt Charlotte's attention settle on her several seconds before she could bear to acknowledge it. When she did, she saw pity in the gaze, and knowing. She did not want either. A breath left her, a long sigh.

It took less than twenty minutes to move Dorothy from her bed to the back seat of the big-as-a-boat Buick Lester bought the year he got lucky with the lottery. Leslee worked swiftly, against the clock. Cissy had set out to meet Bree at school and walk her home, with Paulie in the stroller and Bobby "helping" push; their round trip down hill and back up on broken sidewalks took three-quarters of an hour at the very least. With Carrie upstairs for her nap, supervised by Charlotte, Leslee pulled the car right into the front yard, aligning the passenger side with the front door. She lined the back seat with large garbage bags, covered with towels and a colorful sheet. Dorothy was thirty minutes into a fresh dose of extended-release morphine, mellow in response to it when Leslee maneuvered her from the bed into her wheelchair. She did not vomit during the effort. When she reached the front door, Charlotte

was there. She stood with her big hands parked on Dorothy's shoulders, patting them, while Leslee opened the car door and arranged a nest of pillows.

It was Charlotte who transferred Dorothy from wheelchair into the car, using a squat-and-pivot technique she said she'd learned from nurses' aides when her son convalesced at home. She spoke as if they still had that home, as if he had recovered and found work instead of taking to the streets. Only when she had Dorothy inserted into the backseat lengthwise and head first did Charlotte mention she'd just broken hospice policy by getting involved in moving a patient. "Liability," she said, when Leslee didn't ask why. She finger-waved at Dorothy, then headed back into the house without saying more. Her big butt strained the seat of her turquoise sweatpants. Swollen ankles spilled over the sides of her cheap track shoes. For the first time Leslee wondered what medications Charlotte took or should be taking, and what all those cigarettes might be doing to her blood pressure.

Leslee crawled into the backseat alongside her mother to strap her in with the center seatbelt applied at a tilt. Dorothy looked peaked, and when Leslee spread over her the Hen-and-Chickens quilt from her bed, for comfort, Dorothy's bruise-blotched hands clutched it to either side of her throat. Her sagging cheeks were glossed with light sweat but she smiled, and her smile was not grim.

"I'm doing it," she said. "Leaf Peep."

Leslee nodded. On her mother's shrunken abdomen she set a plastic basin, for vomit or spitting. The mound of the tumor below her ribs shelved it neatly in place. She climbed into the driver's seat, reversed across the yard, bumping as gently as possible over the trench into the driveway, and pointed the car downhill.

Forearms tense, her heart rollicking, a stopwatch running in her head, Leslee drove three winding blocks down Overhill Road to the state highway that was also Main Street. The short distance, at the legal limit of twenty miles an hour, with careful attention to entering and exiting each curve smoothly, seemed to take hours rather than minutes. She sensed from the quality of the silence emanating from the backseat that her mother was in incident pain from the car's motion.

The Seven Sisters, clearly visible beyond downtown's single-story skyline, were green. It was too early for Leaf Peep, by two weeks or more. Here and there toward the ridge line a sycamore or tulip tree had goldened, and the dogwoods gracing the savings bank and funeral home lawns were olive green, presaging a turn toward iron-red that would finally, perhaps a month from now, go blood bright. Not even the sky was quite right; instead of the hard fathomless blue dome of autumn it was low and silvery, soft with humidity that would coalesce to rain by tomorrow. Just short of the town's single stoplight a parked car pulled into traffic without signaling, and Leslee stepped hard on the brake. A choked sound from the backseat made her glance into the rearview. Her mother's eyes were shut and her jaw clamped.

Regret reverberated up Leslee's arms. She should have headed home but she turned instead onto a winding residential track leading down to the municipal park with a small manmade lake where, as a child, she'd lusted for the chance to rent a paddleboat. *Waste of hard-earned money*, her father said, more than once. One really bad day when she was nine and he was probably drunk, he shoved her off the dock fully clothed. *You wanna paddle, use the arms God gave you.*

She pulled the Buick into a diagonal space facing Lake Tomahawk--shallow, choked with algae, and populated with migrating geese on stopover. Early afternoon midweek, the school day just ended, the grounds and the parking lot were empty. The paddleboats were gone, given up years ago like seesaws and swings to the mean-spirited god Charlotte had invoked, liability.

She would not stay here more than a minute. She could not. She powered down all four windows and inhaled. The cusp. Autumn coming but not come yet. The air smelled of lake, sour and green. And cut grass, and creosote from the railroad tie the front tires pressed. Across the water a single spire of a single maple burned flame orange. An anomaly. A mnemonic. In waning light on a different shore, the other side of this ridge, later in the day, deeper in the season, the oak leaves scarlet and the maple butter-yellow, the scent from the shadowed cove of seedy Lake Lure had been winey with decomposing leaves and latent hard frost. Seated very close in a pair of decomposing deck chairs inside two blankets stolen, temporarily, from the down-at-the-heel hotel behind them and wrapping them for those few larcenous hours into a single safe package, Rollie's hand sank between her thighs, his thumb pressed her sex, and her hand nested empty in the bowl of his wasted belly, holding on to the dear life of him. Her cheek on his bony chest, never mind the arrhythmic thumping of his heart and the pained catch in his every breath. She had been happy. She had.

The sound of her own exiting breath brought her back. She unclipped her seatbelt and twisted to her knees to face the back seat. Her mother was crying, soundlessly, copiously. Suffering blacked her eyes. Her hands gripped the sides of the basin and dragged it from her stomach toward her jaw. She vomited. The tar-colored bile erupted in a narrow stream that

arced clear of the basin and struck the back of the driver's seat. The sizzle of its impact was audible, and its stench, of shit and sulfur mixed, nearly tangible.

"Oh, Mother," Leslee said, reaching for her. "I have been such an idiot." The clip in her voice hurt the inside of her mouth.

Dorothy's eyes opened very wide. She shook her head, barely. "I saw leaves, Leslee. Colors. I saw them. I did."

Leslee wiped her mother's face and hands with a towel. There was no telling what she saw. Or thought she saw. The morphine. The memories. Such pain. When her mother's fingers rose as if to touch Leslee's face but settled short of it, on her own chest, to pluck, Leslee did not stop her. *They all do it*, a hospice nurse told her quietly the first time it happened with Rollie. A phantom itch perhaps. Or anxiety, or—the woman's tone shifted, became a church whisper—*maybe a sign*: the spirit holding on while the body worked to free it, stubborn ties between the two gradually unbinding as knowing fingers picked apart the strands.

On the drive back, Dorothy lying quiescent in the backseat, the cloud cover lifted and sun flooded through, turning the day summer-bright. Ascending Overhill Road, steering the Buick through the final curves, Leslee overtook Cissy and her children. The steep grade and kiltered planes of the tree-mined sidewalk made the last hundred yards home especially arduous. Cissy, pushing Paulie's stroller around exposed roots and over burst joints in the cement, leaned into the job, her gaze fixed on her feet, her face closed, her thoughts a slide show of hope, grudge, and fear. Bree and Bobby gamboled out front in a skipping, shouting game involving the swinging of large sticks at imaginary animals and the imagined forms of the

people who made their father leave and their mother scared. Bree's school bag and Bobby's weapon were both slung on Cissy's back.

That neither Cissy nor the children noticed her felt to Leslee like a gift. She could have stopped to offer them a ride. They could all have piled into the Buick's huge front seat with the stroller folded into the trunk. But they'd have refused, because the car and Dorothy and Leslee all stank of vomit. Leslee accepted that first truth and the judgment it laid on her but denied the second, so that guilt cancelled the gift she'd barely registered, and her mind snagged on something sunken and sullen.

She drove on, carefully, steadily, her knuckles pale on the wheel. Dorothy expelled a sigh. She mumbled. She might have said, *Who's there?* Approaching the house--so solid on the outside, falling to pieces inside, always a finger in the eye of Leslee's dreams and no longer hers anyway--she saw Charlotte. She'd dragged the lawn chair from the backyard to the front, and alongside the trench, she sat in it, listing left, a cigarette on the way to her lips.

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