

County Lines and Wire Fences: A Texas Journey Through Time and Place

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Little Miss Lenora May

At the ripe old age of twenty-three, Gus Morgan was unremarkable. He was a good enough sheriff's deputy to get by and had the capability to make the odd arrest for rambunctiousness or thievery. He never drank so much as to cause a hassle nor was he a practitioner of sobriety. While seldom seen feeding the mouth of a beggar, he never did anything to disrupt the common good. Had he not been the center of the town scandal just shy of eight years back, his name would hardly have even been known.

Gus was fifteen when he got eyes for young Adelaide Prior. His house was along her route to the post office where she would go each Thursday morning, returning twenty minutes later with a single letter in hand. She would walk by with bright eyes and a bounce in her step, stopping to talk to anyone who would listen. Sitting at the window of his living room, Gus was infatuated with her every detail, from her long and slender legs to the curls on her head black as the thunderclouds over that March sky. He often wondered who was sending letters so regularly. Who could send her on the thirty-minute walk to and from the post office with such anticipation? It must be a far-away boyfriend or even fiancé. He was probably away in the Confederate army or pushing West. In the eyes of teenage Gus, this was heartbreaking. He was sure it was Adelaide he was destined to marry. A girl of her class and grace would surely have nothing to do with him, a poor boy who never finished the third grade, working his dead daddy's farm day in and day out.

One day Adelaide passed by as usual, and, as usual, Gus was in the window to simply catch a glimpse of her. Then, twenty minutes later, she walked back by his home. This time, she was empty-handed. Again, the next day she returned with no letter, then again and again. Each

day, she walked by, but her bright eyes slowly became dimmer and her step more burdened. The fiancé must have died, for Gus could not imagine a world where someone would intentionally break her heart. In this, Gus saw his opening. For months she had been walking by, but not once had he said a word to her or even made his presence known. He had often considered running out to say hi or conveniently leaving for town just as she did, but fear had always gotten the best of him. Now, he figured the days of her regular passing were numbered, so if he wanted a chance, he best take it now.

The next afternoon, Gus met her outside and introduced himself, offering to walk with her as his mother had sent him to the bakery for a loaf of bread. Each day following, Gus found a new excuse to go into town. Eventually, he stopped making excuses. On these walks, they talked about anything and everything. Gus told Adelaide about his daddy, a Texas Ranger that died in the war against the Mexicans. Adelaide told Gus about her mother, who had run off after the secession to be with a Union soldier. Even though she left fourteen-year-old Adelaide behind, she would send weekly letters. That is, until a month prior.

One thing led to another, and before long Adelaide Prior and Gus Morgan were the talks of the town, not because they were young and in love (which they were), but because Adelaide had fallen pregnant out of wedlock. Gus was sure he would be killed in his sleep, for Adelaide's father was Ambrose Prior, Atascosa County Sheriff. When Sheriff Prior arrived on his doorstep, Gus expected to be met with the barrel of a gun. Instead, he was met with a handshake and a job offer. Nine months and a wedding later, on a cool February morning, Lenora May Morgan was born

Lenora May was a bright young girl and a fiery one too. A flare of wit and defiance that was aged far beyond her short seven years shone through her deep brown eyes, and many a

neighbor found himself victim to her sharp tongue. “Just like her grandmother,” Adelaide always muttered with just a hint of resentment, for Adelaide herself was as mild-mannered as they come. The fact was that (disregarding the scandal some years back) Gus and Adelaide were a truly ordinary couple with an extraordinary child.

As she did every Wednesday, Lenora May downed a breakfast of sausage in just over a bite before leaping out the door and down towards Main Street. It was her favorite day of the week. On Wednesdays, she got to go see Granddaddy Prior at work, or as she liked to think, go work for Granddaddy Prior. Of course, her own daddy was there too, but he was not nearly as much fun. Granddaddy Prior would offer her sweets throughout the day, much to the chagrin of Gus (on the rare occasion that he caught it). He would also let her walk with him as he strolled through the town, greeting each passerby and frequently pausing for conversation. On this particular day, the remarkable weather warranted a couple of extra detours along the way. They walked side by side, Lenora taking slightly bigger steps to keep up with her grandfather. When the walks first started, Granddaddy Prior would try and hold her hand, but Lenora quickly shook it away.

“I know where I’m goin’ Granddaddy. I ain’t no little kid anymore. I can walk perfectly fine by myself.”

Ambrose chuckled. “Yes, I’m sure you can Miss Lenora, but you see, I’m an old man, and I just might need *you* to hold *my* hand.”

“Oh, well then.” Lenora had never thought of her holding an adult’s hand. The adults had always held hers. “I guess I can hold your hand for you.”

Ever since then, Lenora would march out of the Sheriff’s Office ahead of her grandfather, pause at the beginning of the cobblestone road and hold out her hand purposefully. “Here

Granddaddy!” she would say with a sense of duty, and once his hand was in hers, it was time to begin their walk.

It was still early, and the town was just beginning to wake. Nights were quiet in Pleasanton, and days often started late for the townspeople. The mail carrier was just arriving to the post office, bringing letters from those with loved ones far away. Arthur Buxley was returning home, presumably from the well, with a full bucket of water. Ms. Clara stood outside her small home hanging laundry out to dry. Her hair was tied in a frizzed bun, and the circles under her eyes resembled those of Lenora’s daddy when he worked an overnight patrol. The only clothes hanging were the garments of a woman and infant.

“Good morning Clara!” Ambrose called out.

“Good morning,” Clara mumbled back.

“How are you doing today? That little one keeping your hands full?”

“Oh yes, he kept me up all night. Dr. Taylor says he’s got a bad case of colic. I think he just likes to torture me.”

“Well, that’s what children are for, ain’t they?”

Lenora huffed and glared at her grandfather.

“Except for my granddaughter of course,” he added. “But you’ve got the whole town behind you, Clara. If you need help, all you’ve got to do is ask. We all feel something terrible for you.”

Moisture filled Clara’s eyes. “Well, I greatly appreciate that, Sheriff, but I best be getting inside. Can’t leave the baby alone for too long.”

She turned around and hurried back into the confines of her home. Clara was the widow of Jeremiah Young, a herder for a local ranch. He died when Clara was eight months pregnant.

He was taking a herd to the market in San Antonio when Indians attacked. Whether they wanted the cattle, the horses, or money no one knew, but Jeremiah was killed in the process along with two Mexican hands. At least that what Lenora had heard from town gossip a few months prior. Her granddaddy had always told her to ignore the musings of the bored wives in the town square, but when Indians were mentioned, she simply could not close her ears. Later, she had asked Ambrose about it, for she thought the Indians were long beat. Lenora had never even seen one in person.

Granddaddy Prior had reluctantly confirmed the rumor but assured her it was an odd occurrence that was nothing to worry about. The main threat nowadays was Mexican raiders. They had heard rumbles of Union soldiers riding into the South and making a mess of things, but her Daddy said they would never make it this far. Her Granddaddy said the Yankee idiots would die of thirst and starvation long before they found the Nueces. But still, Indians were a novel concept to Lenora, and she had been intrigued ever since.

They passed by Martin, the local baker, and waved a greeting.

“Mornin’ Sheriff!” Martin called, and Ambrose and Lenora made their way across the street to visit. “And good morning Little Deputy Morgan” he waved down to Lenora.

“Mr. Martin,” Lenora looked up at the baker with a disapproving gaze, “why do you call me *Little* Deputy Morgan?”

“Well, your daddy’s Deputy Morgan ain’t he? Wouldn’t it be a bit confusing if there were two of them?”

“But I’m not little Mr. Martin,” Lenora pouted, “I’m actually big for my age. You know, I’m two inches taller than Ernest Cole, and he’s a whole year older than me!”

Martin looked upward and scratched his chin as if in deep thought. “Well, I guess that is a problem then. How about Miss Deputy Morgan? Is that better?” Martin crouched down low and whispered jokingly, “You are a Miss, ain’t ya?”

“Of course I am!” Lenora laughed. “Yes, I think Miss Deputy is much better.”

“Well then Miss Deputy Morgan, I would like to report a crime that occurred last night at this here bakery.”

Lenora leaned toward the baker intently, eyes wide.

“I’m afraid I have a bread thief. You see, I leave my dough out on the back porch to rise. Yesterday, I left it out, only to find it had disappeared into thin air. This morning, I saw a suspicious-looking opossum lurking in the back. I fear he is our main suspect.”

Lenora huffed and crossed her arms. “Well, Mr. Martin, I ain’t sure what you expect me to do about an opossum. He’s so small he could just crawl right on out of the jail.”

Ambrose squeezed Lenora’s hand and then tapped the handmade slingshot his granddaughter always kept in her pocket. “I’m afraid the crime of dough-stealing is very serious ‘round these parts. As Sheriff, I find that death is the only suitable punishment for this here criminal. You think you can handle that?”

Lenora nodded her head dutifully.

“And that’s why you’re my best deputy. I’ll tell you what, I have an important meeting in the courthouse, so I’ll leave you to it. Can you wait here at the bakery with Mr. Martin until I’m finished?”

“What’s your important meeting Granddaddy? I want to come!”

“I’m afraid it’s not suitable for ears as young or as feminine as yours,” Ambrose laughed, “besides, it seems as if your services are needed here.”

The baker Martin shot Ambrose a cautious look, “A meeting, eh? Is this situation something I should be worried about?”

“Just being cautious Martin,” Ambrose said.

Lenora sighed and grabbed her slingshot. She loaded a rock from the ground and crept around the back of the building. After looking briefly underneath the porch, she sat beneath a hackberry, waiting for the opossum to make itself known. After their encounter with Ms. Clara, Indians were on her mind, and Lenora imagined it was not an opossum she was hunting but a Comanche.

The main street was buzzing with activity, horses clopping through and children playing. Yells echoed through the streets, and Lenora wished they would be quiet. She would never be able to hear the Comanche opossum with all this ruckus. The noise grew louder and louder, whoops and hollers that sounded familiar yet unmistakably foreign. Whistles and screams rose and fell, and Lenora sensed something was terribly wrong. She gripped her loaded slingshot tighter and crept through the back door of the bakery. She had to find Mr. Martin. He had much bigger legs. He could go get Granddaddy twice as fast as she could. The smell of burning bread filled her nostrils.

“Mr. Martin?” She called out. Though outside was filled with yelps and wails, inside the bakery was eerily quiet. Hearing the screams, something instinctual inside Lenora told her to stay as low to the ground as possible. She crouched into a squat and shuffled her way behind the counter, intending to reach the kitchen. The moment she rounded the corner, however, she froze. A man she recognized to be Mr. Martin by his apron and straw-colored hair lay face-down on the ground, arrows sticking out of his legs and back. There was a bloody arrow still gripped tightly in his hand and a gaping hole in the side of his neck that still had some red oozing out. A pool of

blood sat stagnant beneath his body, and Lenora, with horror, realized she was in fact crouching in that very same blood. Suddenly, the smell of the burning bread turned her stomach sour, and she leaned over and vomited. Wiping her face, she sat with her back against the counter and her slingshot useless on the ground beside her. The screams outside rose and fell, but the little girl did not take her eyes off the baker.

Lenora sat trembling, her stomach an aching pit. She had heard stories of Indians raiding towns, shooting arrows into anything that moved. Some of the older folks in town told stories of the old days when raids were a constant threat. Whole families were wiped out in just minutes. Anytime they spoke of them, however, sounded like a fairy tale. Even when Jeremiah Young was killed, they didn't seem real. But now they were here, resurrected from the memories of the old men and beckoned in by her imagination.

She said every prayer Mrs. Franklin taught her in Sunday school, the Our Father, her Hail Marys, pleading to not let that door open.

- *Please, Jesus. Please. I'm sorry I ate the last piece of Momma's persimmon pie, I knew she was saving it for Daddy. I'm sorry I called Rufus Buxley a fat armadillo's ass- I didn't mean it, I swear!*
- *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done...*
- *Hail Mary, full of grace...*

A creak echoed through the silence of the empty bakeshop, and sunlight flooded the room as the door swung open. Lenora clenched her eyes tightly shut, waiting for the Indian to grab her by the hair and drag her away to their distant and savage camp. A hand rested on her shoulder gently, yet she refused to open her eyes. She could not bring herself to see her future captor's face. Then, a soft and familiar voice.

“Lenora. Lenora May. It’s okay. You can come out.”

Lenora opened her eyes to see the long, black beard that could only belong to her granddaddy. Behind him, there was a long, slight figure that she recognized to be her daddy staring at her with the same expression she’s seen on a coyote when it got shot at after eating one of Grandma’s chickens.

“Mr. Martin- he’s been hurt. Badly. You have to help him.”

“I know, honey. I’ll take care of it. Why don’t you let your Daddy take you home?”

“But what if the Indians come back?”

“They won’t.”

“But what if they do?”

“Then your Daddy will protect you. Besides, you’re Little Miss Deputy Morgan, remember? Those Indians ain’t got nothing on you.”

Gus stepped forward and picked Lenora up off the ground, “Come on, let’s go get you all cleaned up.”

Lenora looked down at her skirt to realize it was soaked in red. Oh her momma would be having a fit at all those stains. She rested her head on Gus’s shoulder, and as they made their way onto the town street, she looked back just in time to see her granddaddy dragging Mr. Martin out the back door of the bakery by his ankles. Feeling sick again, she turned her head to the right, a scene which was no better. Rufus Buxley and his momma, Mrs. Annie, were sitting on the front steps of their home, staring blankly straight ahead. Mrs. Annie had blood running down her leg, tendons hanging out of her thigh. *Someone should help her*, Lenora thought, *why is no one helping her?* In the doorway of their home, there was a small, stringy, straw-yellow clump. It

was almost the same color as Rufus' hair. Where was Rufus' daddy? Shouldn't he be helping Mrs. Annie?

Gus must have noticed Lenora watching the Buxley home, for he cupped his hand around her face and turned it to look at him. His face was wet with tears, and, to Lenora, he suddenly looked very, very old.

"Daddy, why are you crying?"

"I'm just happy you're okay."

"If you're happy, then why are you crying?"

"Because I was scared for you. Oh God, you must have been so scared," the tears began to fall faster.

Lenora suddenly felt very embarrassed for her father. He was a Sheriff's deputy, and deputies don't cry. If only the bad guys could see him right now. The embarrassment, however, passed quickly over her father and moved to herself. She has not let anyone carry her since she was a kid (five, if you asked her). She was seven now, and no self-respecting seven-year-olds needed any carrying. She remembered her slingshot, laying somewhere in the puddle of Mr. Martin's blood. She remembered getting sick and saying her prayers. She sat down and closed her eyes rather than doing one darn thing about the Indians raiding the town, her town. She should've done something. She was ashamed—she wasn't Miss Deputy Morgan, she was simply Little Lenora May Morgan. She was no better than the runty boy Ernest Cole. *I bet Ernest Cole didn't lose his stomach.* She managed to wriggle out of her father's arms just as they rounded the corner to their house.

"Why are you squirming like that?" Gus asked, hastily wiping the moisture from his cheeks.

“Because I don’t need no carrying, Daddy!” Lenora said, “My two feet work fine and good on their own.”

“Maybe they do, but everyone’s feet could use a break every once in a while, especially after a scare like that.”

“Why should my feet need a break? If anything needs a break, it should be my bottom! That’s what I was on.”

“Well, you best have been on your bottom. We don’t need those damn Indians getting a single pretty hair of yours.”

Lenora felt Gus’s bony fingers run across her scalp, following her coiled strands of hair. Her daddy had always said she had hair just like her momma, but Lenora disagreed. Momma had hair that almost reached her waist while Lenora’s was only to her shoulders. As she thought of her mother, Lenora remembered Mr. Martin's gray skin in the bakery and Mrs. Annie’s torn up leg. A sense of panic churned in her stomach, and she began to run. Startled, Gus called after her.

“Daddy, we’ve got to check on Momma! She was in the house all by her lonesome!” Lenora called breathlessly over her shoulder.

Gus caught up to her in a few short strides and grabbed her by the torso, “Momma’s fine. She didn’t know anything even happened.” His tone became crisp as his upper lip curled, “now let's walk home like civilized people.

The pair entered through the front door to find Adelaide in the same chair she sat in every day, embroidering some crude design on a sheet. It looked like a bluebird...or maybe a thundercloud? Lenora could never tell, and she had learned better than to try and guess. Ever since Lenora could remember, Adelaide rarely left the house. She always said that nothing outside the home served her much purpose, so there was no reason to leave. Gus had always told

her that being outdoors in the sun and dust for too long hurt Momma's sensitive constitution.

Lenora, however, knew better.

On the rare occasions she would go out with her Momma, the church ladies would stare and whisper to one another. Though rarely audible, Lenora once picked up on the word "whore" from the whispers. When she got home, she asked her daddy what the word meant, but he yelled at her to go to her room and to never say that word again. After that, she never asked, but she knew it must be bad.

"Lenora May, what the hell did you get all over your dress? That ain't going away, you know. Better get to asking Grandma Morgan to make you another. Goddamn child can't stay out of a mess for more than five minutes. Gus, can't you control your damn daughter? Letting her run 'round the town like a goddamned bull."

"But Momma, there were Indians. They were all over town. They got Mr. Martin real bad and hurt Mrs. Annie. I think they may have got Rufus's daddy too!"

"Don't you go on one of your stories to me, child. You ain't no sheriff and there ain't no Indians. You are a girl, so act like it. Look where it got me," She waved a wild arm around the room.

Lenora looked up at Gus with wide, pleading eyes. Gus's narrow face had a shadow across it that Lenora had never seen before, and redness filled his pale cheeks. "Adelaide, she's telling the truth. Some stray Indians flew through town and damn near destroyed Main Street. Lenora hid out in the bakery, but not before the savages killed Martin."

Adelaide stared open-mouthed at her young daughter. Wordlessly, she pulled her into a tight hug. In her mother's arms, Lenora struggled to fight the surfacing tears. In her effort, she

ceded a single tear to the emotion before reassuring her mother that she was in fact okay. “Not a scratch, see?”

After Adelaide finally released Lenora from the embrace, Gus encouraged her to go out back and get cleaned up. Dutifully, she grabbed the bucket of water from the kitchen and stepped onto the back porch. She could feel that her face was wet with sweat, so she splashed the warm water. The pale red dripping down her arms revealed that the moisture she felt was not sweat but Mr. Martin’s blood. Or at least she figured it was Mr. Martin’s. She knew she wasn’t bleeding, and she hadn’t noticed any on her daddy. But then again she hadn’t bothered to look to see if he had been hurt. She was only thinking about Mr. Martin and Rufus Buxley. Her daddy said Mr. Martin was dead. Who would they buy bread from now? Would Momma have to make her own? Hopefully not, for the last time her mother baked, it resembled the coyote scat near the front porch just a bit too much.

The water splashing over her body did nothing to break the sweltering heat. From her short time in town, dust had been caked to her skin by sweat and blood. She continued to wash away the filth until the water was all but gone. Knowing her momma would have a fit if she had to go fetch water, Lenora began to drag the bucket around to the well that was only a little ways down the road. As she went around the side of the house, she could hear voices through an open window. Granddaddy Prior had always taught her it was rude to eavesdrop on adults, but Lenora’s curiosity frequently got the best of her. Taking care to set the bucket down quietly, she crouched beneath the window to listen.

“I thought the Rangers ran those things away years ago.” Lenora recognized her mother’s mild voice. Mild, that is, when she isn’t griping at her daughter.

“I thought they did too until this morning,” Gus said.

The deep, tonal voice of Granddaddy Prior floated easily out the window. “They did too good a job of it. All these tribes are starved and dying, so they’re going anywhere and everywhere trying to escape sickness and find food.”

Gus huffed. “Someone should tell them they ain’t going to find no buffalo ‘round these parts.”

“There’ve been rumors that a couple of stray Tonkawa bands were moving south. I had a meeting with sheriffs from Karnes, Wilson, and Bexar to figure out if there was anything to worry about.”

“Well Ambrose, I think you’ve got your answer.”

“Are they going to come back?” Adelaide asked, “You already had the other sheriffs here, can’t they stick around for a while?”

“With a band of Tonkawa in the area, they’re all going back to their own counties. A county without a sheriff is a sitting duck,” Ambrose said.

A knock sounded against the door, and all three adults jumped. After the initial scare settled, Gus sighed. “It’s probably my mother checking on us. Word surely made it out to the farms by now. I’ll let her in.”

He turned and walked towards the door. Adelaide glanced fearfully at her father.

“You know he could have died out there today.”

“I could have too,” Ambrose answered.

“No, Dad. You’re the sheriff and you’ve been such for twenty years. You know what you’re doing. Gus ain’t got no business out there waving a gun around. He was born to be farm boy and you know it.”

“He’s a decent deputy. He’s not going to be stopping any bank robber, but he gets by. Besides, you know as well as I do that farm couldn’t give you and Lenora no life, could it?”

“And what’s our life going to be like if he’s dead? We’re not dealing with bank robbers here, they’re *Indians*. The same ones that ripped Jeremiah Young to shreds. Just admit it, the only thing a Morgan is good for killing is a pig, and not even a slick one at that. They ain’t no deputies.”

Hearing her mother’s words, Lenora started and stumbled backward right into the bucket. It toppled over with an echoing clang, then rolled back toward the rear of the house. The adults inside fell quiet, and Lenora sprinted away. She reached the safety of the back porch just in time to see Gus and Ambrose burst out the back door with their six-shooters raised.

“Sorry Granddaddy, I tripped over the bucket and it just rolled away.”

Ambrose shot her a look of disbelief as he holstered his gun, but he didn’t question her. The girl had been through enough today. Instead, he pulled her slingshot out of his pocket.

“Here you go darling, I got it all cleaned up. Good as new.”

Lenora spent the remainder of the day hiding away in her bed, slingshot gripped tight and always loaded. If those Indians came back, she’d be ready this time. No one would find her hiding on her bottom. Her Momma said no one with the Morgan name could be a good deputy. Well, her name was Lenora May Morgan and she was a perfectly fine deputy. Yet, this morning the only thing she was fighting was her stomach. Maybe her momma was right. No, she’d show her *and* Ernest Cole *and* Rufus Buxley. Poor Rufus Buxley. Daddy said that Arthur, Rufus’ daddy, got scalped. Lenora wasn’t quite sure what that meant, but it didn’t sound very good at all.

As the sun set and the coyotes started to howl, Lenora found herself fighting sleep. Her vision shifted from wooden walls to horses galloping with faceless men on their backs, arrows whistling through the air. The men were seven feet tall and as stocky as bulls. They wore armadillo shells on their heads and wielded saguaros as swords. Their horses were foaming at the mouth, though some had no heads, only skulls. They yelped and screamed, but one of them sounded like a woman. She heard a baby cry and a gun load, and her eyes slowly drifted open when she realized she was hearing these things from outside.

She glanced over to see her daddy loading his revolver and her mother wide-eyed and frozen in bed. He kissed Adelaide then Lenora on the forehead.

“Stay here with Momma, don’t move. I’m going to get one of them boys from town over here as soon as I can.”

She watched as her father ran out the door, then, out of instinct, she pushed a chair in front of it. Glancing out a window, she saw Ms. Clara crouched in the street cradling her new baby boy. *Why is she in the street? She shouldn’t have left her house*, Lenora thought. Her question was immediately answered as an orange hue shone around the corners of the window. Ms. Clara’s house, just a bit down from their own, was in flames. The Indians were back. Lenora looked back at her momma, still in bed with silent tears running down her face, then quickly moved the chair and opened the door.

“Ms. Clara,” she whispered sharply out, “In here!”

Clara started then turned to see the little girl inviting her in.

“Lenora! What are you doing? Close that goddamned door, they’ve forgotten about us. Don’t go reminding them!” The open door had jerked Adelaide out of her trance.

“Just wait, Momma.”

The stranded woman crouched low over her infant and ran into the house. Lenora slammed the door behind her and promptly moved the chair back to its place in front of it. Ms. Clara was sobbing and cradling Lenora's face with one hand. "Oh, bless you child. Bless you."

Adelaide moved out of bed and over to the woman. "Are you hurt? Is that little one okay?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. We're fine thanks to your little girl. That's an angel you've got there. A brave one too."

Lenora didn't feel very brave. Her granddaddy was the brave one, he was out there fighting Indians. Her daddy too, but Momma was right. He was a fine deputy, but there was no way he could fight the giants from her dreams. He could barely catch a horse thief. He was probably like Mr. Martin right now, shot full of arrows and dying. She wouldn't sit on her bottom for this one.

While her Momma was still fussing over Mrs. Clara, Lenora gripped her slingshot and crept towards the back door. The creak of its opening drew Adelaide's attention, and she tried to run across the room to her. By the time she reached the door, however, Lenora was already halfway down the back porch. Lenora eyed the toppled bucket from earlier and picked it up, looking back just in time to see her mother's fearful face staring out the window.

Running towards the town center, Lenora picked up every good-sized rock she could find and placed it in the bucket. The side streets were eerily quiet, the crackle of burning houses the only thing to break the silence. Those who escaped the burning homes must have been long gone to shelter. Mentally, she took note of whose homes were in flames. Ms. Porter's, her reading teacher. Josefa Soto's. Ernest Cole's. If there was a pattern behind the carnage, Lenora couldn't

see it. The Indians seemed to be picking houses at random. She suddenly very much regretted leaving Momma and Ms. Clara at home.

Beside one of the still intact homes, a bee bush rustled, disturbed dust drifting around its edge. Lenora froze and then slowly placed the now-full bucket at her side, taking care that it did not so much as creak. Gripping her slingshot with white knuckles, she reached down for the biggest rock she could find. Her hands were shaking so badly that it knocked against the side of the bucket. Lenora jumped and then loaded her slingshot as quickly as she could. She pointed it at the house, or at least tried to. She just couldn't seem to hold steady.

A coyote emerged from behind the bee bush, slinking down the row of houses. Lenora sighed in relief and then sent a rock flying a few feet away to scare it off. It was rare to see coyotes in town, even at night. He must have heard there was tasty food here ripe for the picking. The Indians must have told him, for Lenora had always heard Indians could talk to animals.

Other than the lone coyote, the streets were empty. With slightly less caution, Lenora continued, for she knew everyone was locked up in their homes. Besides, the Indians of her dreams stood seven feet tall, she'd see them far before they would see her. But something told her she was moving in the wrong direction. There were no more Indians inside the town. They had their fun. With a huff and a small bit of relief, Lenora turned to walk back toward her home.

Just as her home came into distant view, it occurred to Lenora that she had not seen her daddy or granddaddy. They'd have to walk down that street to return home, yet there was no trace of them. She knew her granddaddy, and the first thing he would do was come check to make sure she and her momma were alive and well. Lenora decided the Indians must have gotten him, and if they got a man as tough as Granddaddy Prior, they must have gotten her daddy too. They

snatched them up and carried them away to some far away plain. Already, Lenora began to mourn her loss. She didn't even have a horse to try and catch these Indians.

The silence in the street caused her ears to ring, and she wondered how many others were taken by these fierce raiders, both in the morning and that night. *That's it!* Lenora thought, for they attacked the town two separate times, almost a whole day apart. They had to have been waiting somewhere.

When Lenora was five, she decided she wanted a horse, and not just any old nag. She wanted an Appaloosa. No matter how much she begged her momma, daddy, and even her granddaddy. No one would budge. "You don't got a need for no horse," her momma told her, "We live in town. Anywhere worth going to is worth walking to." So, when she saw the sixteen-hand white and black spotted Appaloosa that Elijah Zimmerman had just added to his remuda, she decided it must be hers. In the early hours of the morning, she had crept out of her home and walked the half mile to the Zimmerman ranch. Goading the horse with a bushel of grain, she had led it another mile away to a clearing tucked away beside the creek that Lenora was sure only she knew about. Her hiding spot worked for a good four hours before her granddaddy and the Zimmerman boy found her. Though the usual punishment for horse thieves was a hanging, Lenora's punishment was far less severe. Thus began her weekly trips to the sheriff's office.

Though it had been a couple of years, Lenora was able to retrace her steps to the clearing with relative accuracy. There was a small mishap involving a prickly pear, but only a single needle had gotten her. The entire trek, she held her slingshot at the ready, and by the time she began following the creek eastward, where she knew the clearing was only a hundred or so feet down, the first glimpse of sunlight was already beginning to peak through the looming Spanish Oaks and Desert Willows.

As she approached the clearing, there were muffled voices speaking in a strange tongue, and she knew that she had come to the right place. Moving slowly, she slid into the cover of the trees and approached the edge. Staying just far enough away to remain in the cover of the shadows, she carefully placed her bucket down and peered at the Indians.

There were no seven-foot-tall men or horses foaming at the mouths. No armadillo hats or saguaro swords, no Daddy or Granddaddy Prior. Instead, there was a group of twenty or so men huddled in a circle, two of whom couldn't have been more than thirteen or fourteen years of age. In the back of the camp were horses, some of which looked half-dead, wheezing and spitting the grass they were trying to eat. On the other, healthier ones, Lenora recognized the Zimmerman brand.

The men looked like skeletons, tan skin clinging to their bones. In the circle, they were tearing into some sort of raw meat in addition to bread and various pastries. Seeing no evidence of a fire nor any cooking utensils, Lenora realized the food must have come from Mr. Martin's bakery. Despite their weak frames, traces of the warriors they used to be remained. The rising sun reflected their hair, darker than even Lenora's, tied back into plaits. Red and black paint covered their faces and chests, and from the older men's belts hung rings of skin and hair.

The images of Mr. Martin speckled with arrows, the one gripped tightly in his hand, flashed before her eyes, and that sick feeling in her stomach again returned. Every muscle in her body fought to turn around and run back to the safety of her home. But she was a deputy, and deputies don't sit on their bottoms. Even if Daddy and Granddaddy weren't here, she had to make sure the Indians didn't come back into the town. What if next time they set her home on fire?

Slowly she loaded her slingshot, and before she had time to think better of it, she fired a rock. Her hands were shaking so badly that it landed with a thud about five feet to the left of the Indians. The horses whinnied and the men turned around to look in her direction. Lenora held her breath then fired another rock, this time hitting the man with the most hair on his belt square in the eye. The man, tallest yet most frail, went reeling, holding both hands over his eye. Strange sounds came from him that Lenora could not understand, though she suspected they were curses. A group of Indians came rushing towards the trees where she was hiding, with various blades and sticks in hand.

Lenora reached down to grab another rock, but in her panic, she knocked the bucket over. The clang of the bucket hitting the hard ground alerted the Indians of her exact location, and she almost immediately felt a hand wrap around her arm. Holding her eyes tightly shut, she let a small whimper escape as the Indians dragged her over the sticks and rocks to the center of the clearing.

As the hand pulled her to her feet, the voices grew louder with excitement, curiosity, anger— Lenora could not tell. Bony fingers ran down her cheeks and fondled her hair, roughly jerking on her coils. Fingernails ran across her scalp, and Lenora pictured the rings of hair hanging from their belts. Though she could not understand the language, it sounded like a raspy voice was goading her, probably to open her eyes. Her suspicion was confirmed when a hand grabbed her face and forced her eyelids open. It was the man she had hit. His left eye was bright red and already beginning to swell, and Lenora felt a moment of satisfaction. The feeling quickly faded, however, as he leaned close to her face, smiling with the four teeth he had left.

His breath stunk of rotten meat, and his face was pockmarked with brown, circular scars. Lenora desperately wanted to close her eyes again, but she figured doing so was no better than

sitting on her bottom. So, she instead stared into the Indian's eyes, refusing to so much as blink. He spoke in his strange language, and Lenora could sense he was making fun of her. So, Lenora did what she had done when Helen Byrne called her ugly. She spat in his face. The man jumped backward. A couple of the Indians holding her in place made noises that almost sounded like laughs, and this seemed to infuriate the older man. He pulled a blade from his side and held the flat edge against her face.

The metal was ice cold against her skin, and Lenora's stomach sunk to her feet. She couldn't give up now, she thought. She had to do something, tell them to go away, leave her and everyone else alone. She remembered her daddy's words from earlier.

"You ain't going to find no buffalo here!" She said, "you might as well move on and look somewhere else!"

If the man understood what she was saying, he did not show it. He pressed the blade harder into her face then moved it to her hairline, allowing the sharp edge to run lightly along her forehead. A slow trickle of hot blood ran down Lenora's face and into her eyes, forcing them to close. Strangely enough, she did not feel any pain. She wasn't all that scared anymore either. She was stuck there, and they would do with her as they pleased. At least she tried. Her momma would know that you could make a deputy out of a Morgan after all. Besides, she didn't figure there was much of a town to return to, especially with Daddy and Granddaddy nowhere to be found. Lenora had heard stories of Indians taking white children and raising them as their own. She loved to explore; it might not be so bad. Maybe they would even let her have one of Zimmerman's Appaloosas.

A bang echoed through the clearing and the Indians yelped. One of the hands holding her loosened, and another bumped into her so she fell face first on the ground. More bangs echoed,

but Lenora didn't really feel like getting up to see what was going on. She lay on the ground, breathing in the dust until someone pulled her to her feet, a little too roughly if you asked her. Figuring it was one of the Indians, she did not turn around until the hands forced her to. Instead of a face painted with red and black, she was met with the face of her father. He pulled her into a tight hug, one which Lenora did not resist. She closed her eyes, pulling him closer. He smelled of cottonwood sap, and it eased her stinging nostrils.

Once she opened her eyes, she let out a yelp. The two younger Indian boys were standing wide-eyed and crazed behind her father. At his daughter's scream, Gus turned around and raised his rifle. Upon seeing their youth, he lowered his weapon and gestured his head, giving them leave. The boys looked at each other and sprinted into the woods.

"Daddy, I thought you were in trouble! I came to help you!" Lenora said.

"Yeah, well look where that got you."

"But I was brave, Daddy, I did like a good deputy. I tried to stop them."

"You know, sometimes it's okay not to be a deputy. For me, I want you to just be little Lenora May Morgan," Gus told her, crouching down to meet her eyes, "Someday you'll make a damn fine deputy, but today you're my little girl."

Lenora looked around the clearing. Along with her father, there was Ernest Cole's daddy George, one of the Zimmerman boys, and Assistant Deputy Taylor.

"Where's Granddaddy Prior?" Lenora asked. It was strange that he had let her daddy and Mr. Taylor come without him.

"Let's focus on getting you home. You've got your momma sick with worry."

The four men collected the horses from Zimmerman's remuda, and her father allowed her to ride on the back of one of the Appaloosas all the way home. As they rode, the sun crested over

the trees, illuminating the tears on her face for everyone to see. But just this once, Lenora May Morgan didn't care all that much.

Quitaque, 1903

The Caprock Comanchero

A burst of wind danced across the canyon edge, stirring dust as red as the blood Walter had spilled the day before. The sun was almost set, casting a purple hue across the land. He had been riding for almost eight hours straight, and his rear ached. He was sure he would have been past the Caprocks by now, but he must have gotten turned around at one point...or at three. A coyote howled in the distance, though not nearly distant enough for Walter. He shifted nervously in his saddle. Yet, the horse continued steady.

He knew he would have to find a place to sleep too. His mount, Lady, showed no signs of exhaustion, but he found himself nodding off. Anyways, he was not all that fond of the idea of navigating the canyons at night. Who knew what may be lurking in the shadows? Suddenly, Walter dearly missed the comfort of his lodging back at the ranch. It was nothing special, a makeshift cot with a chest for his belongings, but it was better than the hard ground where a rattler may come slithering up on him at any moment.

What little light remained cast a shadow a few feet away, and Walter could have sworn it was that of a large man. Nervously, he gripped his rifle, prepared to raise it at any moment. He only had two bullets left. Two chances to make a shot. As Lady continued at a walk, he realized it was nothing more than a Saguaro just to his left. He had to find somewhere to rest.

For as long as he could remember, the Lazy F Ranch had been his home. His father, John Gavit, had lived and died on the ranch, and Walter always figured he would do the same. Any such fate was now out of the question. It was a damn shame, things had just begun to look up after his father had died the previous year.

Charles Goodnight, the proprietor of Lazy F, rarely concerned himself with the daily workings. In the process of turning ownership over to his business partner, L.R. Moore, Mr. Goodnight kept his distance from the lowly ranch hands and other day laborers, inviting only a select few into the parlor of his lavish home on the corner of the property. Though he never figured he did anything to warrant such an invitation, Walter had found his way into the parlor the previous month. The hours of cigar smoking passed slowly, and he felt glaringly out of place among the collection of head hands, all decades his senior. Though not a man known for a bleeding heart, Walter couldn't help but notice the invitations from Mr. Goodnight came in the wake of his father's death. It appeared that Mr. Goodnight had taken a special interest in the son of John Gavit.

It was beneath a patch of sagebrush that Walter found rest. Or tried to do so. The moon was nearly full, and shadows abounded. Even the movements of Lady, tied to a cottonwood, startled him. Desperately, he tried to fall into the safety of sleep, yet he could not seem to do so. For most of his life, he had been cursed with what the town doctor called a nervous disposition. Of course, his father had always denied such a claim. However, one look at the horse side-stepping upon Walter's mount, his fingers tip-tip-tapping on the pommel, or his eyes shifting from side to side would quickly prove John's fierce objections to be in vain.

Walter watched the moon cross the sky, shivering in his britches and vest that were suddenly all too thin. With each howl of a coyote or rustle of a bush, he gripped his rifle tighter. He had no doubt, he would die out here. When he was a boy, he heard a story about a ranch hand who took off into the Caprocks after being caught selling ranch-owned cattle on the side. Two days later, they say a coyote brought his skull to the doorstep of the bunkhouse. His would surely

be next. Just before the moon receded to the west, Walter's eyes drifted shut, though it could hardly be described as a restful sleep.

When the sun had almost reached high noon, Walter was woken by a strange tingling on his face. It was almost as if a warm breeze was blowing but miraculously missing his body. It wasn't constant either, it had a rhythm almost like... Walter opened his eyes and yelped. Breath. A man with a matted gray beard and wild eyes was hovering just inches above his face.

"Whatcha doin' there?" he said.

Walter was trying unsuccessfully to scramble backwards while still on his back. He frantically reached for his rifle, only to find he must have tossed it to the side in his sleep. On the other side of the wild man. He glanced the man up and down, looking for any weapon. There appeared to be none besides a small knife on his hip. It occurred to Walter that if he wanted to hurt him, he wouldn't have waited for him to wake up.

"Ain't it obvious?" Walter stopped his writhing but remained on his bottom. "I'm trying to sleep here!"

"Well, I see that now, don't I? I'm askin' what a tender young man like yourself is doin' out here in these here canyons?"

He squinted at the man suspiciously. He suspected the old man knew more than he let on, and he was suddenly wary of a trap sent out for him by the sheriff. "Well, I just needed a nap. Can't a man nap in peace?"

"Not out here he can't," the man held out a hand to help him up. "Trust me, I'm the best damn thing you coulda woke up to."

Walter rose slowly, never taking his eyes off the man. His beard was down past his chest, and his eyes were a blue so light they were almost indistinguishable from the whites. With

deeply tanned skin that was dried like leather, it was clear he had been in the canyons for a long while. His left eye had the slightest twitch, a fact that unnerved Walter greatly.

“What’s your name son?” the man asked.

“Um John. John Gavit.” He was fairly sure the odd man wasn’t sent by the sheriff, nor did he know any dealings of the small town of Quitaque, but he could never be too safe. Despite the urge to give a false name, the only one that could come to mind was that of his father. Better than nothing, he supposed.

“Well, John,” The man eyed him with a hint of disbelief, “Why don’t you follow me? I got a pretty good camp set up just down a ways, and you look like you could use some water. I’d offer you some from my pouch, but I’m afraid it sprung a leak a few miles back.”

Walter’s dry, swollen mouth ached at the thought. Though he had only been on the run for just under a day, the dry heat and desert wind had a way of taking all the moisture out of your body and then some. What kind of man runs off without a clue as to where he’s going and don’t even bring a drop of water?

Wordlessly, he untied Lady, picked up his rifle, and followed the man. It couldn’t do no harm. If something were to happen, a rifle will beat a knife any day. Then again, he only had two shots left. A knife’s damage could be endless. He made sure to stay behind the man, keep him in sight. Fidgeting with his gun, he fought the urge to mount Lady. He might not be able to out-fight a knife, but he sure as hell could outrun it.

Something in him felt guilty however, for it was altogether possible that the man was truly acting out of kindness. He walked with a limp favoring his left side, and it appeared that his ankle was bowed inward. Walter considered offering him Lady to ride, but he had heard stories of outlaws in the canyons feigning injury or illness only to rob good Samaritans of everything

they had on their persons and then some. If that were the case, Walter would surely be dead. Even if the man didn't kill him, he'd be left with no food, no water, and no way out. Perhaps death was what Walter was bound for anyways. *Eye for an eye*, is what Pastor Louis would always say. *If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee*. What happens when it's his mind that caused him sin?

Pastor Louis would visit the Lazy F every Saturday, delivering sermons to all the hands that would listen and then some. As far as Walter knew, it wasn't all too common for a pastor to make weekly house calls, but maybe Pastor Louis thought those at the Lazy F just needed a little extra God in their lives. Walter had never paid much attention to religion himself. That is, until the Pastor would start going on about Revelations, how the world would end in a fiery blaze and God would handpick his people just as Mr. Goodnight handpicked which cattle to keep and which to cull. He had always pictured God as a rancher, and Walter was sure he was destined to be culled.

When the strange man had told Walter his camp was "down a ways," he surely meant it. Walter found himself navigating the steep canyon trails with the grace of a newborn calf while the man, despite the bum leg, appeared to have no trouble at all. Tall patches of Indiangrass scraped against his legs, causing a terrible itching. He resisted the urge to scratch, however, for to lean over would be to take his eyes off the man. They were no longer on the canyon's edge; they were deep in its belly, slowly being swallowed. Shadows from the canyon walls loomed, yet Walter didn't mind the reprieve from the deadly Texas sun. They had crossed some ledges that were a tighter fit than what he might have found comfortable, and he knew that if the man truly

meant to kill him, he would have done so already. If not with the knife, he could have easily just shoved him off the ledge.

About an hour later, they had finally reached the bottom. If he wasn't so dehydrated, he was sure he would have been dripping with sweat. His breath was labored and heavy, and his stomach was turning. Despite his determination to keep a watch on the old man, he bent over to retch. His stomach heaved, but there was nothing to expel. At the noise, the old man turned and began to pat him on the back.

"Now, there's a sight. You know, boy, your hands tell me you're a workin' man, but your fitness says otherwise."

After he was quite sure the retching was over with, Walter stood. "I ride and tie up cattle, that don't require no walking."

He cringed. Walter had intended to give no hint as to his identity, and he had just given away that he worked on a ranch. Depending on how long the man had been in the canyons, it would be no time until he made the connection to the Lazy F.

"Well, we're almost there ain't we? You think you can keep your stomach on the proper side of your body 'til then?" The man looked almost amused.

"How far is this damn camp anyways?"

"Oh just down a ways."

"That's what you said two hours ago," Walter said flatly.

"Well a ways means different things to different people, and the Caprock goes on for miles."

The old man turned around and continued walking east. Walter noted with more than a bit of annoyance that the old man had not broken a sweat nor did he show any sign of fatigue.

Neither did Lady for that matter. He had only ever ridden her to and from town, but apparently, she was a workhorse through and through.

He had ridden Lady to town just the previous morning. Mr. Goodnight's newfound interest in him led to Walter being asked personally to retrieve Mr. Goodnight's saddle from Jago's in town where it was sent for repairs. He hung his rifle from the pommel and slid his hunting knife into its sheath at his hip. Though the Indians had long been tamed, the three miles to Quitaque were teeming with rattlers and bobcats. Walter could never be prepared for such possibilities. After tacking Lady, he loped across the plains towards town. She was a purebred bay carefully kept by Charles Goodnight himself, and only the inner circle had the luxury of riding her even once. Only Walter could ride her as he pleased.

She had quickly become his favorite, if not only mount. Most horses can sense and reflect the disposition of a rider. A cool and confident cowboy would yield a steadfast and obedient mount. An angry rider would result in a fight, the horse often being the victor. Scared, and the horse would buck at the rustle of the wind. For Walter and Lady, the opposite was true. She never faltered in a step; every movement made with surety. So, Walter felt the same when mounted atop her. Despite her calming nature, however, he could not help but take a second sideways look at the suspicious shadow cast by the twisted branch of a desert willow or give the looming saguaro an extra wide breadth, just in case. When Walter decided he would run, he never gave taking Lady a second thought. In his mind, she was his horse. It didn't occur to him that the crime of horse thievery would be sure to result in a hanging. The same could not be said for the murder of a Mexican.

To Walter's surprise, the old man was right. Just over fifteen minutes later, the canyon floor began to narrow, and a crude tent fashioned out of sack cloth and a low hanging rock came into view. A string led from one wall to the other, though it almost glistened and was far smoother than twine. Worn and tattered clothing was hung over it. A pile of ashes laid, still smoldering, in the center of the campsite, and heaps of twigs and brush were neatly stacked to the side.

Reaching the shade cast from the wall, Walter almost collapsed, not even bothering to tie Lady to a nearby juniper. Though it was mid-fall, the sun blaring over and past high noon had taken its toll, and the canyon floor was cool against his burned skin. As he let the heat be pulled from the body, the man had gotten right to work. He piled a fresh layer of kindling atop the ashes, and using a piece of flint, he lit a small fire. He reached to his waistband, and Walter tensed preparing for him to pull the knife. The worry was to no fruition, for he instead grabbed his busted pouch. With skeletal fingers, he nimbly fingered for the hole. He held it over the fire, burning the hole shut with what appeared to be some sort of wax.

"How'd you know to do that?" Walter asked. He had seen women mend leather with thick yarn, but never burn it.

"A Comanche trick."

"But..." he looked at the man's light blue eyes. "You're not Indian. Are you?"

"No, an old medicine man taught it to me," the man chuckled, "though I suppose he wasn't much older than myself now."

It occurred to Walter that he had no clue who this man was that he had followed into the depths of the canyon.

"Who are you?"

“Well that’s quite a question there, *John*, but if you’re askin’ my name, that would be Elijah Ritter, though no one’s called me that for some while.”

“What do they call you then?”

“The Comanches called me Little Grasshopper. They said I walked funny, like a bug. No regard for a cripple, those Indians.”

Walter looked at him confused. The Comanches had been all but wiped out for over twenty years. Did Elijah know this? What else had he missed— or forgotten? Great, he had not only followed a strange man into the canyon, he had followed a senile one.

Elijah patted him a bit too roughly on the shoulder. “I’m goin’ to get to gettin’ some water. You stay here, I gotta climb a bit and I ain’t sure your tender constitution could handle it.”

Walter watched the canyon swallow him as he limped away. Elijah Ritter. Why did that name sound familiar? Could he be from town? There was no way. From the looks of the campsite, he had been hiding out in the canyons for years. Perhaps he was a criminal. No one would make a living here by choice. This idea filled Walter with fear. He had likely just gotten himself lost with a murderer. Then again, he supposed he was now a murderer too.

The ride to Quitaque the previous day had been quiet, and by the time the collection of sheds crested into view, the sun was almost directly above him. Dust sat in an orange haze just above the ground, permanently displaced by trodding hooves. While not a busy town by any stretch, the most direct path to the cattle market found it right in the way, though that never seemed to stop much of anything. Between the whooping cowboys and the wandering cattle, it was not uncommon to find the town all but impossible to navigate.

Clearly the cowboys from the most recent drive were less than adept, for just outside the town's wooden sign were two lowing heifers. Evidence of a cattle drive nearby caused Walter to shift nervously. By the strictest definition, he too was a cowboy. He was half decent with a rope, an acceptable rider depending on the mount, and adequate with a branding iron. However, the Lazy F held a certain prestige among West Texas ranchers. Charles had not organized a cattle drive in over a decade, much less performed one himself; if he needed to sell stock, buyers would come to him. On the Lazy F, cattle drivers were heathens who only added value to society by means of population control. Rarely did a drive pass where a local saloon-goer or unnamed cowboy didn't end up in the dirt.

Apparently, the drive that left the two heifers was a rowdy one, worse than the town had seen in years. Just inside the gates were five freshly turned mounds of dirt, and Walter knew there were bloated bodies just a few feet beneath, still recognizable if someone decided to dig a bit. In a few days, the skin would begin to slip away, the eyes and organs turning to slop. In a few months, there would be little left but bones for stray dogs to dig up. Walter shivered at the thought and quickly rode past. It occurred to him that the drivers were likely still nearby, and he figured the ones not dead or in jail awaiting a hanging would return for another night of terror. He had better get in and out quick.

First he rode by the saloon, eerily quiet even for this time of day. There was Dr. Kingston's office and home, a couple homes of town families (the names of whom he had never taken much interest in), and a bit further down, Jago's store. The church to the left must have recently ended service, for there were patches of people dressed in their finest ripped jeans or faded dresses milling about the town. Among them, Walter spotted Jaime Rojas, Clyde Carpenter, and *Quenah-evah*, Eagle Drink, who was the reformed Christian son of one of the last

Comanche chiefs in the Llano Estacado. All three were employed at Lazy F alongside Walter, though Jaime had only arrived half a year prior. He suspected a degree of resentment at his newly updated status with Mr. Goodnight despite his aptitude for cowboying that could best be described as passable. This especially irked Clyde, for he was almost as good of a roper as Walter's father and had been employed just as long. The sight of Walter waltzing through the town atop the favored mount of the proprietor likely only rubbed salt in the open wound. He attempted a mild wave at them, only for them to turn the other way.

The snubbing from his three comrades stung, but they were quickly forgotten. A cloud of dust shoved its way through the town gates, a hazy image peeking through. What must have been five or six cowboys mounted on the meanest paints Walter had ever seen came whooping and hollering through the entrance and onto the brick road. As they drew near, he could tell from the brands on their horses that they were from the Matador Ranch out east. Walter's heart sank. Matador cowboys had a reputation that preceded them. They had not passed through the town in over a decade, likely only coming back to try their luck at the Amarillo market since stock prices had fallen. Last time they had passed, they left a body count of fifteen in their wake. His father had forbidden him to leave the safety of Lazy F for over a week until he was sure the Matadors were long gone. Rumor had it that Britton and Nichols had since cleaned up their crew, but Walter never put much stock in rumors— the scene in front of him did nothing to help establish their merit.

Elijah returned about an hour later with a full pouch of water in hand. He handed Walter the pouch, telling him to drink. Walter lapped up the water generously, letting it wash over his burning mouth. As he drank, Elijah pulled two rabbits out from his coat and began to skin them.

“So, I told you my name, now it’s time to tell me yours.” Elijah eyed him knowingly.

“I already told you,” Walter said, not moving his gaze from the knife. “My name is John Gavit.”

“See, I’d believe you son, but from my memory, John Gavit was quite a bit older than yourself, and might I say quite a bit uglier too.”

Walter started. “You know my father?”

“Your father? Well, I’ll be damned. I suppose it’s William? Winston?”

“Walter.”

“You said you’re a rancher. I suppose that’s on the Lazy F now, ain’t it?”

Shit. Not only had he blown his plan of secrecy, he had managed to blow it with someone who knew his father and the ranch.

“How’s old John doing nowadays anyways?” Elijah asked.

“Dead. Passed of Tuberculosis a while back.”

“Tube what now?”

“Nevermind. He’s dead.”

“Well, I’m damn sorry to hear that now, how about Mr. Goodnight?”

“Getting ready to sell it off to L.R. Moore.”

“Shit’s changed. So, how’d a Lazy F rancher end up at the bottom of a canyon with the finest bay I ever did see?”

“You sure are asking quite a bit of questions,” Walter said hesitantly. “I got myself into a bit of trouble, and that’s all I’m goin’ to say on that.”

The Matador horses appeared to Walter to be foaming at the mouth. The cowboys led them in circles through the town center, horseshoes stomping on the brick path throwing a clanging echo through the blocks. Between the stunned churchgoers, frozen in the street, mothers running to the safety of home with their children in hand, and Lady, who for the first time was letting out nervous whinnies, Walter couldn't seem to get a good look at the Matador cowboys. Then again, he wasn't sure he wanted to. In his mind, their faces were grotesque parodies of real, God-fearing men; teeth rotted down to nubs, eyes barely hanging to their sockets, if at all, faces torn to tatters from bar fights and gun fights and Lord knows what else. Walter's hand went to the rifle hanging from his saddle, and he gripped it tightly.

Once they had their fun, at least for the time being, they tied their still-riled horses and made their way into the saloon. The spectacle was finished, but Walter couldn't help but feel the excitement was far from over. Keeping his head low, he spurred Lady on. Jago's was safe. He just had to get the saddle and get out of town, far from where the Matadors would be of concern. Gripping his rifle, he hastened to the store. Barely bothering to tie the horse, he made his way up the steps. He knew the Matadors could emerge from the saloon at any moment, and he could be the next one in the ground. Hearing a rustle behind him, he was scared to turn around. Surely the Matadors wouldn't kill him with a gun. They would use their own bare hands, biting and punching and kicking at him to make for a slow painful death.

A hand touched Walter's shoulder, and he jumped. Without thinking, he turned, raised his rifle, and pulled the trigger. A bang echoed through the streets, and they fell silent. Once the townspeople realized the shot did not come from the Matadors, a small circle began to form around Jago's. At the bottom of the steps, Jaime Rojas lay groaning with blood spurting from his

chest with every heartbeat, pooling in a gruesome puddle around his body. Walter lurched, almost falling down the steps.

“He shot him! Walter Gavit shot him!” The silence was broken by Clyde Carpenter.

“Someone get the doctor! Hurry!”

“Where’s that damned sheriff?”

With shaking hands, Walter hastily untied Lady and rode past the town gates, not stopping until he reached the Caprocks.

Having taken Walter’s hint to quit the questions for a while, Elijah made them both rabbit stew silently, waiting for Walter to strike up conversation again. Walter was hesitant to do such, not wanting to admit to a friend of his father’s that he had killed a man. They slurped on their stew, and the setting sun cast a red glow over the dust hanging in the air. Finally, Walter’s curiosity got the best of him.

“So, you navigate these canyons like an Indian, you know all their tricks, but you also knew my father and Mr. Goodnight. How the hell did all that happen?”

“You see, an old man has got a lifetime to get around.” Elijah picked rabbit bits out of his beard.

“That don’t answer my question.”

“An impatient one, ain’t you? I was a Comanchero in another life. You know what that is, don’t you?”

Walter nodded. An Indian trader. They would take tools, tobacco, livestock, the works, and sell them to the Indians in exchange for money or horses.

“One day, John caught me tryin’ to steal some Lazy F cattle to trade. He all but kilt me haulin’ me off to old Charles Goodnight, broke my ankle in the process.” Elijah gestured to his bum leg. “I was sure Mr. Goodnight would have my head at best, other, more valuable parts at worst. Instead, he cracked me a deal. He’d give me any old equipment or stock that was too weak to sell or breed. In exchange, I would give him the Indian horses. I got to keep the money. It was a mighty good deal for me, after all, I had no use for a hoard of half-broke bays. As a matter, of fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if that one you got over there is kin to them. After that, I was a common sight at the ranch, and John and I almost became friends over the years.”

“How did you end up out here then?”

“Well, tradin’ gets old after a while, and there’s only so much you can do with money. The Comanches taught me about the land, how to work with it rather’n against it. I figured a while back that a man like me has got his days numbered, and I best finish them out the way God intended it. You must’ve been but three.”

The moon was beginning to rise, and the bottom of the canyon seemed to get dark far quicker. The firelight cast strange, foreign, shadows against the canyon wall. A red hue danced around them, giving them a bloodied appearance. From farther back in the canyon came an odd chirping sound that seemed to surround them, and Walter shifted nervously. Suddenly, a hoard of bats rushed directly over their heads. There must have been thousands. Walter yelled loudly, covering his head and swatting.

Elijah laughed, “Why, they’re only bats ain’t they? They gotta eat just like you and me.”

“I just wasn’t expecting them is all,” Walter huffed as he regained composure.

“I guess it makes sense. Your father always had the fearful streak.”

Walter looked at him confused. John Gavit was a lot of things, but fearful was not one of them. This was the man who would face a charging bull head on, jump in the middle of fights among hands, and once even killed a rattler with nothing but a leather strap and a loose spur. In fact, he had always been quite ashamed of Walter's nervous disposition, passing it off as a poor sense of humor or a particular bad experience with the rabbit that once jumped out at him from a bush.

“What do you mean? He would always say the Gavits ain't got no fear in their blood.”

“Gavits?” Elijah's eyebrows furrowed, casting strange shadows over his face. “You mean to tell me you don't know?”

“How the hell am I supposed to tell you what I don't know?”

“Shit, John never told you, did he? Suppose the man went soft with age.”

“What are you talking about?”

The old man took a deep breath, taking time to think before answering. “You're right that the Gavits have got no fear in their blood. But the Goodnights do.”

“What-”

Elijah held up a hand to stop Walter. “I figure you know that Charles Goodnight bought the Lazy F from Jim Baker some twenty odd years back.”

“Everyone knows that,” Walter said. He wished the old man would just get to the point already.

“What you might not know is that Jim Baker had a daughter. You see, Ms. Maude Baker was attached to the ranch herself, and she couldn't bear to see it go. So, she made a deal with Mr. Goodnight. She'd cook and clean for the main house on the condition she had a place to sleep and would never have to leave. I figure Mr. Goodnight took quite the likin' to pretty young

Maude, and she fell pregnant within the year. She died in childbirth, leavin' poor Molly Goodnight with a baby that ain't even hers. That was twenty years ago."

"Twenty years ago..." Walter's hands were suddenly very moist, and he began to shake his leg. "You're not saying-"

"I'll tell you exactly what I'm sayin' if you let me finish my damn story," Elijah said gently. "Molly wasn't too happy with the idea, and Mr. Goodnight sure as hell wasn't goin' to care for no baby on his own. So, he gave it to his most trusted hand to raise as his own. From the sounds of it, John did exactly as he was asked and then some."

Walter took a deep breath and laid on his back. Walter Goodnight, son of the most famous rancher in Texas, maybe even the south. He looked up at the stars, the streaks of purple and blue dancing overhead. If heaven was real, and for now he was assuming it was, was his father...no, was John...watching him? Was he sorry for hiding the truth all these years? How could he be so stupid? He had asked John many times before about his mother, and John would only say she died in birth. Nothing more. Somehow, Walter had never questioned it.

"You okay, son?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm truly sorry, I figured your father would've told you."

"Which one? The one who gave me away or the one who up and died?"

"Or at least L.R., of course he knew too."

Mr. Goodnight's interest in him suddenly made sense. He was trying to see if he had his ranching affinity. The Goodnight affinity. He had talked about retiring, handing off the ranch and wiping his hands of it to enjoy his elder years. Was it Walter who he was preparing to take over? L.R. Moore had no children, and Walter was kin to not one but two previous owners. Mr.

Goodnight had always seemed to put a lot of stock in lineage, talking about blood rights and such in the parlor evenings. Was he trying to tell Walter something?

“Listen, I don’t know what kind of trouble you got yourself into but—” Elijah began.

“I killed a hand. Jaime Rojas. I didn’t know it was him. I thought...I don’t know what I thought but I didn’t mean nothing,” Walter blurted out. He no longer cared what he thought of him. Apparently, Elijah knew more about Walter than he himself did. What did it matter now?

“Now I don’t know if things’ve changed since my day, but ranch business is normally handled by the ranch, not the law, especially if it’s a Mexican that was kilt.”

“But it happened in town, right smack near the sheriff’s office.”

“That don’t matter. Is the sheriff still Dawson?”

Walter thought for a minute. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Good. Dawson normally gives Goodnight first pick on what to do with a rowdy hand. I’d bet you my good leg that Mr. Goodnight would let his own son off fairly light, if that. He owes you that much.”

“But I took his horse!”

“It’s your father’s horse. If Mr. Goodnight cares about blood as much as I recall, then it’s all yours. If you wanted to, you could go back. It would be a risk, I can’t promise anythin’, but you have a fightin’ chance.”

Walter thought for a moment. Before the previous day, the prospect of leaving had never crossed his mind. Beyond the ranch’s fence line was the saloon to satisfy the need for a strong drink or a whore and Jago’s to patch boots or purchase a new pair of pants every few years. What else did a man need? Walter never figured there was much else waiting for him in the town of Quitaque nor beyond its borders from which he had never ventured far. But the Lazy F was no

longer his home. When he thought of the ranch, now all he could see was the hazy picture of Mr. Goodnight from his childhood and the bed where his father died.

“I hear Fort Worth is nice this time of year.”

Theon, 1943

Cotton Season

A time to be born and a time to die

A soft and gentle hand rested just below her navel. There was not yet a bump to rest it on, but she knew it would be coming soon; by her best guess, she was just over eight weeks along. Too early to begin preparing— or at least that’s what she had told her husband. Together, they had already picked out names. Virginia Jane Korec for a girl; Frank Raymond Korec if it was a boy. Jane was for the grandmother of her husband, Paul. Raymond was for her father.

Up until two weeks prior, Edie and Paul had only talked about children briefly, something to be concerned about only in the distant future. Now was not the time to bring a child into the world. Edie’s father passed of what was believed to be stroke last year. Paul’s brother, Charles, had been drafted to fight in the war only a few months prior, leaving behind a wife and two girls. Though there were only 30 people in town, the surrounding rural families and neighboring towns numbered almost 500. Of these, Edie knew of at least ten men who had gone off to serve. Two of them were not coming back. She was sure they were cruelly picking people from small towns by hand. There were no large factories here, agriculture was primarily self or community sustaining. They had nothing to contribute to the war effort besides their bodies.

Every relatively young man in their community was at risk of being the next to go, and it was hot on the mind of each family. The next round would result in someone’s son, father, or brother being hauled overseas. Of course, a draft could be deferred through work in agriculture among other things, but support for the war effort was high. To defer a draft would make you the talk of the town, especially in Theon, where more than half the population came from some

German heritage. Many were the children of immigrants themselves. If you deferred the draft, you must be a Nazi yourself.

A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal

A wooden door creaked, and Paul stepped into the living room. His dark brown hair was caked to his forehead with sweat, and his boots were covered in dust and weeds. Edie gently admonished him for not removing them outside, then placed a supper of bread, tomatoes, and chicken in front of him. Knowing there was a baby on the way had been hard on poor Paul. Financially, they were just beginning to recover from the Depression, but the living was far from comfortable. He had always grown grain and cabbage primarily, but demand was down. Cotton was the new commodity, and Paul followed the trend. His grandfather had grown cotton when Paul was a boy, but Paul himself did not know the crop. He had far from perfected the growing. The cotton was for profit— you couldn't put it on the table. So, Edie kept a small garden of vegetables along with a few pigs and chickens. It wasn't enough to sell, but it gave them three meals a day and sometimes food for the neighbors down the road.

Paul watched Edie nibble on some bread. "Is there not enough chicken? Here, you can have some of mine. You can't be giving me all the good stuff no more, you know."

"No, I've been sicker than a dog all day. I figure bread is the only thing I can keep down right now."

"Well, you need to at least eat some chicken."

"I told you, I ain't hungry," she said. "Leave it alone, will you? I've told you for a week now, I'll eat more when I can. There's no point in putting something in my stomach if it's going to come right back out."

Paul fixed his eyes down to his supper, and Edie felt a twinge of guilt for her harsh tone. In the previous weeks, her temper had become shorter and her tongue sharper, and she knew Paul was feeling the brunt of it.

“Did you manage to get the tractor fixed?” she asked kindly.

“Barely. The piece of shit had a loose bearing. The third one this month, too.”

“I had Freddy, the Bauer boy, over today to work on some reading. Mary said they might have to sell the tractor. It’s no use to them with George overseas.” Edie did not have a job; maintaining the house, garden, and animals was work enough, and going somewhere for a full day would make it all but impossible. To make some form of income, Edie gave piano lessons to anyone who could afford it, or, in the Bauer’s case, for some who could not. The Bauers were old family friends, and Edie taught their son Freddy as a favor.

“I’m not taking George’s tractor,” Paul grunted.

“They could use the money.”

“Money that we don’t have, Edie. It’s money we don’t have.”

A time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh

Edie had never been one to miss a dance at Moravian, and they knew the town would be rife with speculation when she was too tired to attend one Friday night. Her running out of church to be sick the previous Sunday did not help matters, either. When Paul and Edie first got wind of the talk, they figured they better tell their parents before someone else did at the post-church gossip session that would happen the next week. Of course, it was only parents and a handful of close friends that knew for sure. For everyone else, it was just guesswork. Paul’s parents were overjoyed. Charles’ wife never got on with Paul’s mother, Margaret, so they didn’t see much of their two granddaughters. Once Charles was drafted, they didn’t see them at all.

Eddie, on the other hand, was close with Margaret and Jim. They knew they would get as much grandchild time as they pleased, and then some. Eddie's mother was told, of course, but the conversation was brief and curt as usual. She didn't expect much excitement from that end, and the announcement came with no surprises.

The next day, Paul had risen before dawn to go back out to the fields. Eddie wasn't sure what he did all day out there; sometimes, she was sure he just watched the cotton to see if it would grow. After all, no cotton means no money. She had no lessons scheduled for that day, so she knew she would be alone until at least suppertime. Normally the solitude didn't bother her that much. Since she had become pregnant, however, every second alone felt like an hour, especially when it was Paul she was apart from. The empty house gave her imagination room to fill it with their baby. The nursery would go in the one spare room— they needed a crib. Paul had a worktable full of odd household tools in the breakfast room— the baby could get a hold of them. Would she be a good mom?

Her whole life, she has been determined to not make the same mistakes her mother did. So far, she had done a decent job of avoiding them. She lives according to her means, not above them. She married for love, not for a name. She tells her husband she loves him and cooks him supper and lays his clothes out fresh for the morning. Motherhood, however, is completely different. Would she know if she was ruining her child before it was too late or would it take an explosive argument and over a year of silence to see how deeply her actions hurt her child? Eddie knew better than anyone that a mother's love can be a cruel thing.

In the afternoon, Mary Bauer saved Eddie's sanity with a knock on the door and a loaf of buttered bread in hand.

“I heard bread and butter is one of the only things the little one will let you eat as of late. I figured you make my life a whole lot easier by taking Freddy for a couple hours,” Mary said as Edie opened the door.

“Mary, you know I won’t take a dime for the lessons, and you should know better than to argue with me about it.”

Mary looked with wide eyes at Edie, the bread, then Edie again. “Well, I suppose you can see this ain’t a dime. It’s bread.”

The women laughed, and Edie gestured for Mary to come inside, taking the bread and giving her a brief hug. They sat back on the couch. Mary spoke about getting a letter from George; the first in two months. Freddy’s received his first F in mathematics. Her aunt on her mother’s side has a nasty case of TB.

“Well, enough about me, how have you been feeling?” Mary asked

“I’ve been all but bed-bound this week, but today is better, actually.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s the strangest thing. I woke up and was halfway to the toilet before I realized I wasn’t sick,” Edie shifted on the couch, “Except, I have this terrible pain in my back. It’s just all over.”

Mary frowned. “That’s strange. My back didn’t start hurting until I was about six months with Freddy. Well, I guess everyone’s different. How are you and Paul feeling? A lot of big changes coming.”

“I was sure Paul was going to have a heart attack at first, but he’s warming up to the idea. He wants a little boy to help on the farm, but I know he’d spoil a little girl rotten.”

“And how about you?”

“I’m excited,” Edie answered hesitantly. “I’m scared. With Pete, did you feel it immediately?”

“Feel what?”

“Like a mother. When you realized you were pregnant, did it feel like your baby? Did you love it?”

“I loved my baby. I still do. But the idea takes some getting used to, and it’s still early.”

Tears filled Edie’s eyes. She had affection for her baby. She knew, somewhere, she had love for it. Each night when she fell asleep, her hand would be on her still-flat belly. But every morning she would look in the mirror for any hint of growth, anything to make her baby feel like something more than a concept. She was afraid to feel love for the child, afraid that it wasn’t real. She was afraid to love it too much, that she would hurt it with friendly fire. She was afraid what these feelings said about her.

Mary grabbed Edie’s hand and met her eyes. “Edie, listen to me. You will be a great mother. You are a caring friend and a faithful wife. There’s no reason to think you’d be anything else to a child.”

A time to mourn and a time to dance

By the time Paul arrived home that evening, supper was not on the table, and Edie was lying on her back in bed. When the smell of cooking food did not greet Paul, he tiptoed into the bedroom to look for her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, just dizzy,” Edie mumbled. Ever since Mary left, Edie had a strange but familiar feeling. It was as if she had drunk too much the night before. Her head felt like it was full of

brackish water and focusing on anything for too long left her vision swimming. For a moment or two, she almost felt as if she would pass out.

“Dizzy? Is that normal?”

“I know just about as well as you do. I suppose it is, I just needed to lay down for a moment. And take those damn boots off, will you? Tracking dust all over the floors.”

Supper that Tuesday evening was Mary’s bread, and both Paul and Edie retired to bed early. In a blue, cotton nightdress, Edie stood in front of the mirror, tying her pin straight hair into a braid over her shoulder. Paul, having just finished bathing, wrapped his arms around her shoulders from behind. He kissed the top of her head, trailing down to her cheek and then her collarbone. Edie smiled.

“You’re going to have a big belly, you know. It’ll be no time ‘til you’re waddling around the house like one of those dairy cows next door,” Paul said.

Edie feigned seriousness. “You better be careful comparing me to a cow. Next time, I just might turn you into a steer, Paul Arthur Korec.”

“Honey, you’ll be the most beautiful dairy cow I ever did see.”

Paul pulled Edie into a tighter embrace as she gazed into the mirror and sighed. A silent tear began to roll down her cheek. He started and turned her around.

“I was only joking. No need to cry,” he said.

“No,” Edie wiped the tear away. “It’s not that. It’s just— what if I don’t even make it that far. What if something’s wrong?”

“Why would you think like that? Nothing’s going to happen.”

“I haven’t felt right all day, Paul. Something feels— I don’t know— *off*.” Edie did her best to hold in the tears, but they came pouring out regardless, cool against her hot and flushed face.

Paul pulled her into a tighter embrace. “You’re being ridiculous. You’re young and you’re healthy. The baby is fine. Besides, every mother worries about their child. Look at my mom. I’m 23 years old and she still thinks I’m dead in a field somewhere if I’m not there for lunch right at noon.”

Eddie would have liked to be comforted by his words, but at that moment she didn’t feel ridiculous, and she definitely didn’t feel like a mother.

When Paul woke up before dawn, he woke Eddie up and gently kissed her on the forehead, letting her know he would be in the north field if she needed anything. She acknowledged his words with a grunt then rolled over to go back to sleep. She dreamed of holding her baby to her chest, dancing in the kitchen with Gene Autry on the radio. *Stars may come and stars may go, way up in the heavenly blue.* The baby on her chest had the brightest blue eyes, just like his daddy. *But of all the stars that shine tonight, none shine as bright as you.* The rest of the baby’s face was a blur, she couldn’t pick out a single other feature. Desperately, she wanted to see his face, but it seemed that the harder she tried, the less clear it became. Suddenly, the baby turned to ash and scattered over the floor. Eddie turned and grabbed a broom, sweeping the ashes into the dustpan. Oh what a mess.

Eddie awoke violently and in a cool sweat. Her stomach lurched and it seemed as if her sickness had returned but only for a moment. The dizzy feeling was still present, though she could not tell whether it was simply from the cloud of sleepiness still hanging over her or not. She went to use the bathroom, but when she saw a streak of red, she did vomit. Blood. That was blood. There was something wrong. She was going to lose the baby.

Panicked, she grabbed some slippers and ran out the front door still in her nightdress. If they had neighbors within eyesight of the farm, they surely would have thought she was crazy.

Eddie ran through the canopies of cotton, leaves and buds catching on her dress. Once she reached the north field, she looked around frantically for Paul. She saw the John Deere parked a bit to the left, but her husband was nowhere to be found. What time was it? Could he have gone to Margaret's for lunch? The canopy rustled beside the tractor, and Paul emerged cursing.

"Goddamn piece of shit. Can't even hold a goddamn bearing," Paul looked up. "Eddie? What are you doing? Why aren't you dressed?"

Eddie's eyes were red and bloodshot. She had cried the whole way there. "Something's wrong. I know it."

Paul sighed, "We're not doing this again. I told you last night. There ain't nothing to worry about. You are *fine*."

"It's not me I'm worried about. I'm bleeding, Paul."

"You're what?"

"Bleeding."

"How much? Are you okay?"

"Not a lot, but it's definitely there."

"I'll tell you what, let's go home. You'll lay down and get some rest, I'll see if we can get Dr. Frederick over."

"No, no Frederick," Eddie said, "I don't have the flu, and there's nothing Frederick can do for this."

"He can give you peace of mind."

"How can I have peace of mind when we are losing our baby?"

"You don't know we're losing it."

But Eddie did know, and she had known for a while now.

A time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing

By the time they got back to the house, the bleeding had increased. Cramping had come as well, but not terribly. Edie wished it would hurt more, maybe it would take away some of the pain deep in her chest. Paul placed a towel on the bed for Edie to lay on, and he then laid beside her. She wanted nothing more than to scream until her voice was gone and her throat was raw. She wanted to throw her wedding band and the oil lamp on her bedside table. She wanted to break the window that was letting in the rays of sun that were all too bright and all too happy. She wanted to hit the bed in which her baby was conceived and now in which it was dying. She wanted to die.

Instead of doing any of this, she stared straight ahead at the beige wall, her eyes flooding but not a single sound made. Paul held her tight for a while, then silently got out of bed and left the room. At first, he had not believed there was anything wrong. Once Edie showed him the amount of blood, however, his face grew pale. He tried to reassure her, saying they don't know for sure, that it could be something else, but Edie saw it in his eyes that he did not believe a single word he was saying. When he left the room, she assumed it was to inform their families of what was happening.

How long Paul was gone, Edie could not tell. All she knew was she had not moved since he left. He returned wordlessly and crawled back into bed with her. The cramping came in waves, each round more intense than the last. She refused to make any sound of pain, however. She would not give her body the satisfaction, the body that was not even strong enough to hold its own baby. The body that was forcing it out of her. She got up to use the bathroom again, but

when she did, she collapsed on the floor in tears. There was more blood, more than she had ever seen before. Paul ran in and found her against the tub clutching her stomach not out of pain but longing. He looked to see what had happened, then tears filled his eyes. Any hope of their child surviving was all but gone. He squatted in front of her and cupped both hands around her face, but her sobs were so intense that she didn't even notice.

“Edie, look at me. Edie. Edith!”

Edie looked up through her tears.

“You have to calm down,” Paul said, yet Edie didn't show any sign of hearing him. So, he picked her up off the floor and carried her to the bed, pulling the blanket up to her chest. He turned off the light and held her until she fell asleep.

The next morning, Edie woke before Paul, though it was already light outside. She went to the bathroom to check, hoping and praying that the day before was nothing more than a bad dream. That the bleeding would be gone, and the baby would be okay. However, she found the opposite, and she knew it was over.

All she had done for the last day was cry, and she wanted to do so now more than ever, but no tears came. Completely dry-eyed, she crawled back into bed and pulled Paul close. Her limbs were aching and heavy, and she was so very tired. She fell back asleep with the hope that this time, she would not wake.

A time to seek and a time to lose

Edie's wish was not granted that morning. Worse, she found herself alone. It wasn't Paul's fault. Growth doesn't pause for loss, and the cotton needed tending to. So did the pigs and the chickens. She took a bucket of dried corn for the chickens and slop for the pigs, hauling them out to the pens. She still had the horrible tightness in her chest and emptiness in her stomach, and

evidence of the loss was still on her body. Walking across the yard, a thin, dry film wrapped around her leg. A shed snakeskin, looked like a rattler, was tangled in the tall grass. Edie found herself jealous of the snake.

The silence of the house was deafening, so she turned on the radio. Gene Autry was playing, and she turned it up as loud as it would go. Normally, she would sit down and read her Bible for a while— she left off on Ecclesiastes. The thought sitting, of stillness, caused her arms and legs to ache, and she wasn't sure she could even touch a Bible right now. So, she started with her sewing table. Pulling out every loose needle, every spool of thread, she threw out the old, put the new in their places. After the sewing table was the closet, then the dressers, then the cabinets with all the dishes. Under her breath, she was singing softly to herself through tears.

You're the only star in my blue heaven

And you're shining just for me

You're the only star in my blue heaven

And in dreams your face I see

In the early afternoon, Paul returned to find every single dish they ever owned laid out on the kitchen floor with Edie standing on a step stool, stacking the bowls neatly on the top shelf.

“Mom wanted to come by and bring a casserole, is that okay?” He asked.

Edie began stacking the plates beside the bowls.

“Edie?”

She grabbed some wine glasses and placed them in the cabinet.

“Edie, I know you can hear me.”

A wine glass slipped in her hand and shattered on the hardwood floor, shards hitting her bare feet. Paul jumped and grabbed her by the arm. Without expression, she moved away from

the glass and grabbed a broom. She picked a few pieces out of her feet but did not bother with the seeping blood. What was a bit more? Reaching over the pile, she swept it into the dustpan.

“You’re bleeding. Do you need a bandage?”

Eddie didn’t want to ignore Paul. He did nothing wrong. Yet she knew that if she were to speak to him or even look at the face that her child could have had, she would burst into tears, and she was quite sick of crying. So, she continued on. A defeated Paul walked back through the living room. Before walking out the front door, he turned to look back at her, and Eddie heard a snuffle. Her heart ached for his tears, but one heartache seemed to blend into another. She ached for Paul and for her baby. She ached for the mother in her that was now gone, if there ever was one. Her mind couldn’t grasp the idea of a child, and her body couldn’t sustain it. Both had failed her and Paul. She was just like her mother, only worse. At least her mother failed her after giving her life. Eddie couldn’t even do that.

A time to keep and a time to throw away; a time to tear and a time to sew

About half an hour later, she had thoroughly reorganized the kitchen cabinets and moved on to the pantry. Eddie had just begun to pull out cans when the door opened. She figured it was Paul, so she refused to turn around. The footsteps moved closer to her, and a light touch brushed against her side, an arm wrapping around her chest and shoulder. The hand was too soft to be Paul’s; his calloused hands reflected his occupation. Gentle but firm, the arm pushed her from the kitchen and to the living room, where she sat on the couch. She turned to face her mother-in-law, Margaret, who immediately pulled her into a tight embrace. Eddie hugged her back and, despite her best efforts, began to cry. Margaret cried with her.

After the tears had come and gone, Margaret and Eddie sat on the couch together, Margaret doing most of the talking. She had made them a casserole. Jim had asked Paul for help

figuring out a problem with his car, and it was good for Paul to have something he can fix. They would be back soon. She'd be going to church in the morning if Edie wanted to join—no pressure. The Jenkins' boy had been drafted. Patrick and Sue Ellen down the road had a pig break loose, watching them try to catch it was a sight. It was mostly just small talk, but Edie didn't care. It quieted her mind, and she even let out a small laugh at the image of Sue Ellen's large figure running after a squealing pig.

Soon after, Paul and Jim came in through the front door. Though he didn't say anything, Edie saw some relief in his eyes that she was sitting and talking. He made his way to the couch next to her and gently put his arm around her shoulders. She rested her head on his chest and closed her eyes. Jim, sitting in the chair across from her, silently placed his hand on her knee while Margaret patted her back. A deep wave of sorrow washed over Edie, but not the same as before. It was sadness and it was pain, but there was no darkness to it. She felt it radiating like a beam of sun from her chest through her body and into the arms of Paul, Margaret, and Jim. It was the pain of love, the kind that was unconditional. The kind that Edie had never known before.

A time to keep silent and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate

The day following was brighter, the one after even more so. Margaret and Bill were daily house guests; Bill helping with the farm work so Paul could be home earlier, Margaret doing odd jobs around the house. As Edie was ready, Margaret told her that Sue Ellen had a miscarriage before their first daughter came. Freida down at the church had three, one for each of her healthy children. Mary had stopped by a few times, telling Edie she had one when Freddy was two. Edie had always believed miscarriages were a rarity, something that happened only to women who were not fit to be mothers. The opposite was clearly true. Miscarriage seemed to be one of those

things that no one talked about until it happened, like some sad yet united club that one hoped to never join. Other than Mary, the women never said anything to Edie. But extended hugs and pats on the hand at church or at Moravian Hall told her that they knew. To her surprise, Edie didn't mind it at all. When she got word two months later that Ilse Wagner lost her baby, she found herself to be the one giving the long hugs and hand pats.

Sue Ellen had her quirks, but her daughter was a good girl. Freida's three children were well-behaved and well-loved. Mary was the best mother Edie had ever met. Perhaps a miscarriage was one of those steps that made someone a great mother. One day, when they were ready, Edie may be able to love a child even more with the knowledge of what she had already lost. She might be able to surpass the fear that so consumed her, loving her baby for however long she had with it. If it happened again, it would be tragic and it would painful. But it wouldn't end her. It didn't end Mary or Freida or Sue Ellen or Ilse.

Almost three months had passed when Margaret came rushing through their door crying. Charles had finally sent a letter. Things were getting rougher in the Pacific Theater. Half of his platoon had been slaughtered in a particularly rough battle. Morale was low. Charles wasn't sure he would make it home.

Four months later, near Christmastime, Paul and Edie had decided to try again for a baby. The week after they decided such, however, a letter came in the mail. Paul had been drafted. Margaret and Edie cried, Paul and Bill began to pack what little he could bring.

"You're a farmer! Just tell them you're a farmer!" Margaret cried. "You're not even German, Korec is a Czech name. This isn't our war to fight."

"I know good and well what I do. I know I can be exempt. But should I be? Jenkins, Bauer, and Müller are over there. Mom, Charles is over there."

Margaret looked desperately at Edie. “But you have responsibilities here. Are you going to leave your wife here to run everything? After everything that’s happened?”

“Margaret, Charles is there,” Bill said stoically. “I heard they let family members be together, to help with morale. They can be together. Our boys will be together.”

Paul squeezed the hand of Edie, who had remained silent through the conversation. With determined eyes, she let go of her husband’s hand. “You should go. You’ll never forgive yourself if you don’t. I’ll be okay here. I heard Mary and Ella Jenkins have gotten together with some other wives of the draft to hold things down at the houses and farms. I’ll join them. Of course, Margaret, that may mean you coming around here more, maybe even staying for a while with Bill. I suppose you wouldn’t mind?”

“Oh!” Margaret lunged across the room to pull Edie into the tightest hug she had ever felt. “Of course, honey, of course. I would love that.”

The next day, Paul was shipped away. Hugs were exchanged and tears were spilled. For the first time, Edie felt a sorrow close to what she had so many months before. But, she knew it was not the end of her and Paul. She knew that for everything she felt, there were a dozen other women surrounding that were feeling the same.

A time for war and a time for peace

While stationed in the Pacific Theater, Paul kept regular contact with Edie. Once, she had gone a whole month without hearing from him, and she was worried sick the whole time. She found herself at Mary’s house more often than not. When she wasn’t there, Margaret was at hers. About a year into his duty, Paul got a brief leave. Six months later, the war ended. Paul came home to a glowing wife with the round belly of a woman six months pregnant and a nursery that

was almost finished. With Paul in the backyard building a crib, Edie sat in a rocking chair in the nursery, singing to her stomach.

It seems that when I'm lonely

I always knew you're near

You're the only star in my blue heaven

And you're shining for me here.

Palestine, 1990

The Funeral

A slightly stolen Ford Escort sat idling in the gravel driveway of an old farmhouse. At least that's what Call's family had called it when he was a child. There wasn't much of a farm to go along with it; only six or so acres of dogwoods and pines with a few weeded-up fields in between. It wasn't much of a house either. It had a roof to stop the rain and walls to block the wind, but it had clearly not been well-kept. Faded blue paint peeled from the wooden paneling, and shutters that were once maroon hung by only a bolt or two. Call could have sworn the house was nicer when he left, though he supposed fifteen years could do that to a place. He tried to remember whether the house had always been blue, but he just couldn't seem to picture it before. If the woman in the passenger seat beside him would just shut up, maybe he could focus.

"Are we goin' in or what?" Betty said.

"Just give me a second, will you?" He answered.

"I gave you ten minutes at the front gate."

"And I need a few more, goddamn it!"

Call snatched a pack of reds from the dash and lit one from between his lips while glaring at Betty. Her hair was pulled back into a red bandana, and she wore a white ribbed tank top that made her lack of a bra all too clear. His momma would have heart attack. She was trash if he had ever seen it, but she would have him and she was a good time... sometimes.

"What's the big deal anyways?" Betty grabbed a cigarette for herself and held her hand out for the lighter. "I thought we were just getting the gun and being on our way."

“I ain’t seen any of them for fifteen years, and my dad is dead. That’s the big deal.” Call handed her the lighter.

“I thought you didn’t care.”

“I don’t. The old man can rot in hell for all I care. Let’s just go.”

“About damn time. It smells like cow shit.”

“The neighbors have got cows. That’s what happens when they eat. They shit.”

Betty exited the car with a slammed door, which Call ignored. He hadn’t even really wanted to bring her along, but she had been itching to get out of Lubbock for a while. That is, until she realized the previous day that weed was a lot harder to find and snakes a lot easier in deep East Texas.

“You don’t got to be a smartass about it,” Betty huffed

“And you don’t got to be a bitch. Now let’s go make nice.”

“Do we have to?”

“We have to get the gun somehow, don’t we?”

Call approached the door and gave it two gentle knocks. A bustling could be heard from inside, then a young woman opened it. Call’s breath was lost for a moment. He had not seen Catherine since he left on his eighteenth birthday; she had been nine. His baby sister was all grown now, nearly as tall as him. She wore thick jeans and red t-shirt, her blonde hair falling pin-straight just past her collarbone. Her eyes grew wide as she looked Call up and down, and her mouth was agape. From behind her, a man appeared in the door. He had grown a dark beard since Call had left, but the bright green eyes were unmistakable.

“Well, I’ll be damned if it ain’t old Call Bradshaw!” He stepped past Catherine to give Call a hug.

“Danny, what are you doing here?” Call said. While locked in a hug, he could see past the doorway into the kitchen where an old lady who must have been his grandmother and a priest sat.

“Just giving Catherine and Grandma Gertie some company. Can’t be letting the father over here be having all the fun, can I?”

Danny beckoned for Call and Betty to enter. He had not set foot in his childhood home for over a decade, and it was remarkably different from what he remembered. The smell of baking cookies was replaced by mildew, and the walls that his Momma had painted yellow when he was just five were beginning to peel. Perhaps it had always been this way. Perhaps he couldn’t trust his own memories. The room he expected to be so warm was steely cold– or maybe it was just Grandma Gertie’s eyes and thin, curled lips turning him to ice. He had never seen such a face on a sweet old lady. Well, old lady at least. She was a lot of things, but she had never been sweet.

The father stood from the kitchen table. “Well, on that note, I think I’ll get to going. Gertrude, Catherine, my condolences. I’ll see you at the funeral tomorrow.” He seemed to look right past Call as he let himself out.

The silence in the kitchen was painful, and Call desperately tried to think of something to break the tension. His eyes wandered from Danny to Catherine to Grandma Gertie and back to his sister, whose mouth was still wide open.

“Catherine, you’re all grown up,” Call sputtered awkwardly.

“That’s what happens when you don’t see a kid for fifteen years.” Catherine’s tone was sharp, yet she couldn’t seem to look her brother in the face. “They grow up.”

Call's stomach sank. His baby sister always had a sharp tongue, but it was rare in childhood that her wrath was directed toward him. Danny shifted where he stood, then jumped into the conversation.

"Don't be rude, Call. Who's this fine lady?" He gestured at Betty.

"Oh," Call looked beside him at the woman smacking her gum with crossed arms. He had forgotten she was even there. "This is my girlfriend, Betty."

"Nice to meet you, Betty. This over here is Catherine, Call's sister. That beautiful woman back there is Grandma Gertie, and I'm Danny. I was Call's neighbor growing up. We were thick as thieves. I don't suppose you've heard about me?" Danny extended his hand to the woman, but she only glared at it with disgust. He awkwardly slid his hand back and said, "Why don't I take y'all to the guest room?"

Betty huffed and turned around to follow Danny. Call started to step towards his sister, hoping to catch up without someone smacking gum right in his ear, but Betty grabbed his arm and put it around her waist. As they walked down the hall, she grabbed his hand and moved it to her rear end that was all but spilling from her jeans.

The home looked starkly different than when Call had left. Some pictures were still hanging; Call playing with Catherine in the yard when she was only two, he fourteen. Most of the pictures, however, had either been stored or thrown away. New ones were in their place. Catherine at a school dance, her high school graduation, her and Danny in a bar that looked like Taylor's down the road. It hit Call how much he had truly missed of his sister's life. His parents had never been too fond of him, and he them. Ever since Catherine was a baby, however, she was attached to him at the hip. Leaving her behind was the hardest thing he had ever done. At least Danny stuck around. From the sheer number of pictures with him, it seemed they had

become close in recent years. He didn't, however, see many pictures of his mother. He hadn't seen his mother at all for that matter.

"Grandma Gertie didn't seem all too pleased at me dropping in. Did she know I was coming?" Call asked Danny.

"Well..."

"Where's Momma? I can't imagine she'll react any better."

Danny stopped in the hall and turned to face Call. The expression on his face was the same as when he was twelve and shattered his kitchen window with a baseball.

"About that...when your old man got sick, Janice lost it and ran off with some banker man from Dallas. Haven't seen her since."

"Wait, so Catherine's been running the cafe all on her own?" Call's parents owned the most popular lunch spot in town and had for the past 25 years. His father was the face of it, but his mother had done all the grunt work. His father's death wouldn't have hurt the operation, but his mother, gone—

"I mean, I've been helping where I can, but I have my own work to do down at the feed store."

For a moment, Call was speechless. He whispered, "She's just a kid."

"She's twenty-four years old," Danny said without acknowledging Betty. "Hardly a child. But she did have to grow up real fast."

"Shit. If I had known—"

"You would've stayed right where you were. Don't lie to yourself, and don't lie to me. You never were much good at it. Here's your room. Supper's at six." Danny opened the door to the guest room and promptly closed it behind them just before Betty's ass crossed the doorway.

Call and Betty spent the next two hours hiding away in the bedroom. Betty was leaned against the dresser, filing her nails. Call was rolling a joint. He figured he would need it that night after the day he had. He promised himself he would never return home. Hell, he probably wouldn't have if he could've avoided it. The night before his eighteenth birthday, Call, Danny, and a few other friends decided to have a party down at the lake. Whether it was the stupidity of a teenage boy or the confidence that twelve Budweiser's gave him, he decided he would drive his father's brand new K10 the ten miles home. He made it a mile before wrapping it around a telephone pole. The day Call got home from the hospital, he found his father sitting on a suitcase in the front yard, telling him to leave. That was Call's third time being arrested, and it was his parents' breaking point.

He glanced up to see it was twenty 'til. "Get dressed," he told Betty. "We have supper downstairs soon."

"Do we have to?" She whined, "I thought we were just getting gun and leaving. I wouldn't have come otherwise."

"Sorry to inconvenience you, but this is my family."

"Yeah, and they don't even want you. You wouldn't have come back here if you didn't need that Colt."

Call sighed. "Fine. But they're not letting us anywhere near that garage while they're awake. So let's just grit our teeth, go downstairs, and stick it out until nighttime."

"If they don't know about it, why do we need to wait?" Betty was leaning towards the mirror applying yet another layer of lipstick.

“My dad showed me the .36 when I was fifteen, and I showed Danny. That’s at least one person in this house. There’s no telling if he told Catherine at some point too. So, dinner. No complaints.” He opened the door for her. “And Betty? Please pretend to be a decent person.”

“Remind me why we need to pawn the damn gun in the first place?”

Call huffed and walked down the stairs ahead of her. When he entered the kitchen, the family was just beginning to gather around the table. He moved to sit at his usual seat beside Catherine but found Danny already there. So, he moved to the head of the table opposite Grandma Gertie. He shifted uncomfortably. Something about being in his dead father’s seat felt terribly sinful. As they began to eat, it was as if Call and Betty were not present. Danny and Catherine were talking to each other and laughing, something about a customer at the feed store. Grandma Gertie was staring down at her plate and poking at her food. Call tried complimenting his grandmother’s cooking but was answered with only a grunt.

Danny placed a hand on Catherine’s shoulder, smiling. “Actually, it was Catherine. She’s become quite the cook lately. I envy the man who marries her.”

Call could’ve sworn he saw Danny wink, and color began to fill Catherine’s cheeks. She shocked Call by trying to say it was nothing special.

“Nothing special! It just like....” Call paused. “like...”

“Good Lord, spit it out already, will you?” Betty interjected.

Call finished sheepishly. “Like Momma’s.”

“Jesus, Danny. You told him?” Catherine dropped her fork with a clang.

“I’m sorry, but he was bound to notice,” Danny said.

Call stood up. “Wait, you weren’t going to tell me? Why not?”

“Figured you didn’t have a right to know. After all, she did the same damn thing as you,” Catherine said.

“Same thing as me? I didn’t leave, I was kicked out!”

“And it took a fucking funeral to bring you back to town.” A glint appeared in Catherine’s eyes.

Call felt a twinge in his chest. She didn’t know. He didn’t come back to town because of a funeral. If you asked him, he couldn’t give less of a shit about it. He came back because he needed something, and when he got the call that his father had died, he saw it as nothing more than convenient timing. He still assumed he and Danny were the only ones who knew about the .36, much less that it was a relic from the 1870s. A funeral would be a perfect distraction. His father told him it would be his when he was older anyways. Of course, that was before.

“I wasn’t welcome,” Call answered quietly.

For the first time that day, Grandma Gertie spoke sharply. “No wonder you weren’t. You were a fuck-up, only brought us grief and heartache. Apparently, nothing’s changed.”

“I was a kid!” Call’s face was hot. “Kids mess up! Danny over there got into just as much shit as I did, he was just a hell of a lot better at hiding it.”

“Hey now-”

At this point, every person at the table was standing besides Betty. She leaned back in her chair and looked around uninterestedly.

“Can y’all just get over it all ready? Y’all are *so* whiny.”

Catherine turned to look at the woman, and Call could have sworn there was smoke coming from her ears. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, just get the fuck over it! It’s miserable enough here as it is.”

“I don’t need some whore my brother picked up off the street telling me what to do under my own roof. Back off.” She curled her hands into fists.

“God, you are such a bitch! No wonder Call never came back.”

Catherine lunged across the table, punching Betty square in the jaw.

“That’s my girl!” Danny called gleefully.

Betty grabbed Catherine by the hair and pulled her head down to the bowl of mashed potatoes that luckily had just cooled. The two women were cursing at each other as they fumbled around the kitchen. Betty bit Catherine on the arm, and Catherine kneed her in the stomach. Grandma Gertie was cheering Catherine on in the background, and Call and Danny were enjoying the scene a little too much. Each time Catherine landed a solid hit, Call found himself smiling. As he watched her give his girlfriend what he couldn’t deny was a well-deserved ass-kicking, pride welled in his chest. His sister may have had it rough these past few years, but goddamn did she turn out scrappy. As the women chased each other through the kitchen, they were coming closer and closer to the knife block, and Call decided that he best intervene. He grabbed Betty by the waist, pulling her away from his sister, and Danny did the same to Catherine.

“Babe! She hit me! Your bitch of a sister hit me.”

Call looked over at Catherine. “It was a damn good one at that.”

“That’s it. You, get out. Right now,” Grandma Gertie said while pointing a crooked finger at Betty. Apparently, she had enough of the excitement.

“What?” Betty said.

“You heard her,” Catherine was picking potatoes out of her hair. “Out of my house. Don’t you dare come back.”

“Well goddamn, don’t this sound familiar, huh Call? I guess some things never change. Let’s go.” Betty grabbed Call’s hand, but he remained motionless. “I said, let’s go.”

“You should leave, Betty. Take the car, I don’t give a shit. I think I’m going to stay, if it’s alright with my sister, that is.”

Catherine froze, a chunk of potato hanging from her hair. “Uh, yeah. I...I suppose that would be fine.”

Betty stomped her foot like a child who was just grounded. Marching down the hall and up the stairs, she returned just moments later with her bags in one hand and the keys in the other.

“Don’t you come crawling back to me when they figure out the real reason you’re here and kick your useless ass to the curb. Tell them about the Colt, why don’t you?”

Call glared at Betty’s hooked nose and beady eyes, and he was suddenly beyond glad to be rid of her.

“Oh trust me, I’d rather take barbed wire up the ass than deal with you for one more second.”

With a frustrated scream, Betty stormed out the front door, leaving it wide open behind her. The car sputtered in the driveway, and while it was clear Betty was trying to peel out, she managed to leave at no more than a crawl. As he watched the woman disappear from the driveway, Call felt as if he could breathe again. That is, until he felt arms wrap tightly around his chest. He turned to find his sister pulling him into a deep hug, tears in her eyes.

“You stayed,” she said.

Grandma Gertie chimed in from the back, “For now.”

For the first time in a while, Call allowed a genuine smile to creep across his face.

“Believe it or not, I find y’all to be far more pleasant company. Nice punch by the way.”

“Learned it from you,” Catherine said. “What was that bitch saying about a Colt?”

Danny looked at Call, and he knew that his friend remembered what he had shown him so many years before. Silently, he was begging Danny not to say anything. He had just gotten his family back, or at least started to. If Danny had figured it out, it was only a matter of time until the rest of them caught on. Danny took a breath and opened his mouth to speak, and Call’s heart began to sink.

“Shit, I need a beer. Anyone want a beer?”

That night, Danny and Catherine had planned to go to Taylor’s, the local dancehall. Grandma Gertie found going to a bar the night before the funeral an odd choice, but Call figured his sister needed to get her mind off things. It was a hell of a lot better than sitting around waiting to bury her dead father. As Catherine went upstairs to shower, Call planned to sneak outside for the joint he had rolled earlier. For old time’s sake, he invited Danny outside with him. His friend agreed on the condition that Catherine would never hear of it. Call hadn’t planned on her knowing anyways. As they were hiding off behind the garage, Call could tell Danny wanted to ask about the Colt, but he knew Danny would wait for him to offer the information. He didn’t plan to. Since neither wanted to be the first to speak, they smoked in silence. Eventually, however, such silence became too painful, and Danny invited Call out to Taylor’s with them. Call wasn’t sure it was the best idea, especially considering Catherine’s up and down attitude about him, but Danny insisted.

They went inside, and Danny loaned Call one of his shirts, for the only decent one he brought was one for the funeral the following the day. Compared to Call’s slight frame, Danny was tall and stocky. His red and white striped pearl snap fit Call like a child wearing his father’s clothes. He tried tucking it in, leaving it out, and even folding it under, but nothing worked. He

dug his best brown felt hat out from the bottom of his bag, though it had a crooked brim and a crushed crown from being sat on one too many times. Looking in the mirror, he sighed. He looked like a Yankee playing dress up on Halloween. It would be fine, though. It wasn't like he had anyone to impress.

As he greeted Danny and Catherine downstairs, he suddenly felt far worse about his attire. Danny wore a blue paisley button down that hugged his shoulders and a gray Stetson, his beard neatly combed. Only his boots were dirty, but that was intentional. If a man showed up to Taylor's with clean, shiny boots, he'd be laughed right on out the door. Catherine had on loose fitting blue jeans with a yellow knit tank. Her hair was loose in curls. She looked exactly like their mother.

The awkward silence on the ride to Taylor's made it clear that Catherine was not aware Call would be joining them. Or perhaps she just smelled the pot. As they arrived, Call was relieved to find the red doors and faded, lopsided sign to be unchanged from when he was sixteen and getting thrown out once a month for sneaking in. It was a Friday night, and the bar was packed. It smelled of cigarette smoke and sweat, and for the first time that day, Call felt right at home. In the middle, there was a slick wooden dancefloor where couples two-stepped to Clint Black. Coors Banquet and Budweiser signs hung from the walls, and a hog's head named Patty sat above the bar. It was named after Mr. Taylor's wife back in the 60s, a woman who bore a striking resemblance to the animal.

Walking behind Danny and Catherine, Call kept an eye out for anyone who may recognize him. Luckily, the familiar faces were few and far between. Danny approached the bar, ordering a Miller Lite for himself and a Coors for the lady. The bartender looked at Call expectantly.

“What can I get you, hun?”

“Uh, I’ll just take your cheapest whiskey.”

“Oh, a real cowboy, ain’t ya?” She looked Call’s ridiculous outfit up and down, and Call tried to tuck his shirt in more. “I haven’t seen you ‘round here before, you new to town?”

“You could say that.”

Danny put his hand on Call’s shoulder. “Tracy, this is Call Bradshaw, Catherine’s brother!”

“Oh, you’re the Bradshaw’s boy.” Tracy had disgust written on her face as she finished her sentence with a grunt. She turned to speak to Catherine instead. “By the way honey, so sorry about your daddy. It’s terrible all around, especially with your momma away like she is. If there’s anything I can do-“

Catherine turned quickly to Danny. “Hey! Do you want to dance, I think we should dance.”

Catherine dragged him away to the dance floor, leaving Call sitting awkwardly on a stool pretending that he didn’t notice the dirty looks he was getting from behind the bar. He watched as his sister and his childhood best friend spun around the dancefloor and it struck him how much he had truly missed. He felt guilt rise all the way to his throat, guilt that only deepened when he remembered what he had to do. Danny had become what could have been, an older brother, a friend. Or so Call thought. As they turned from him, Call saw a hand resting on Catherine’s bottom with his thumb hooked through the belt loop. The neon red lights suddenly became redder. The song ended, and they returned to Call laughing. He glared at his friend.

“Y’all two seem to be getting on well.”

Danny looked hesitantly at Catherine. “Well, I’ve been meaning to-“

“Why do you care who I’m getting on with?” She interrupted.

“Wow, okay. Just saying.” Call did not want to revamp his sister’s hostility.

“Well next time, just don’t.”

Danny took a longer-than-usual sip of his beer. “So! Joe Clemens knocked up Jenny Coats, y’all hear that? You know, we’ll see them tomorrow at the...at the...okay bad change of subject.

“It’s okay, you can say it,” Catherine touched his arm lightly. “At the funeral.”

“I can’t believe it’s tomorrow,” Call said.

“It came so fast. I barely finished the eulogy.”

“You’re doing the eulogy?” He asked her.

“Not like he had anyone else,” Catherine said with a hint of bitterness.

There was a brief silence as the song changed. George Jones’s “When the Grass Grows Over Me” blared through the bar’s speakers. The whole group froze, and tears filled Catherine’s eyes. She looked downwards to hide them, but both men knew her well enough to notice.

“This song...” She started

Call grabbed Catherine’s hand and led her to the dancefloor. She followed limply. As they stepped onto the hardwood, Call wrapped his hand around his sister’s waist and she put hers around his neck. The pair started to slowly two-step around the floor.

“Daddy taught me to dance to this song,” she said.

“I remember.”

“We were in the living room, and he put it on that old record player of his. I must’ve been no more than six.”

“You were four, almost five. Daddy put you onto his feet because you kept stepping on them anyways.”

“Every single time it played, he would dance with me. Every single time. Until he got sick, that is. I haven’t danced to this in over a year.”

Call found himself the one fighting tears now as looked down at his sister. He squeezed her waist. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when he was sick. I’m sorry I didn’t dance with you when he couldn’t.”

“But you are now. So just dance. Please.”

Catherine rested her head on her brother’s shoulder, arm draped over his neck. As the song rose, Call grabbed her hand and began to spin her, moving in circles around her as she swung. At the end of the song, Call dipped her low. He remembered what their father used to do when she was young, so he pretended to drop her, catching his sister at the last moment. Catherine began to laugh, and he joined in. Sliding his arm around her shoulders, they walked off the dancefloor and returned to their original spot. He noticed Danny step to the side while smiling, giving the siblings space to talk. Call reminded himself to thank him later.

“I hate to speak ill of the dead, but Dad was a mean bastard.”

“Call!” She exclaimed.

“It’s shitty that Momma left you, but I don’t blame her for walking away. They hated each other.”

Catherine shifted uncomfortably where she stood. “I know. Trust me, I saw it. Especially after you left. I heard them screaming horrible things at each other every night. I heard the slamming doors and the breaking glasses. I miss Dad something terrible, don’t get me wrong. It

feels awful to say, but a part of me is relieved he's gone. Not happy, but I feel like I can breathe again. After all, it brought you back didn't it?"

Call winced. If only she knew the truth. "I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner, and it's not all Dad's fault. I was worthless, in and out of jail. You were just a kid, you didn't know. But all those nights I was gone, I was sleeping off a high or a fight in a cell. Dad got tired of it. So did Momma. I gave them hell.

"Well, the two of them sure did leave me with a mess to deal with."

"I know, the funeral stuff seems like a pain."

"No it's not just that. Call, they're taking the café and the house with it. The bank, they're taking all of it," Catherine said sadly.

Call took a step back. The home he grew up in. The restaurant that served as his first only real job. Gone. "What? They can't do that!"

"But they can. Times are tough. I've been trying to keep up the restaurant on my own, but I got behind on things. I haven't paid. Even I could afford a payment, I wouldn't know how to make it. Dad always did that stuff."

"But where will you go? When the house is gone, where will you live?"

Clearly, Danny had been listening from the sidelines. He stepped in and grabbed Catherine's hand. "Her and Grandma Gertie will be living with me and Dad. We have a spare bedroom."

"That's too much. Y'all shouldn't have to take that on. Y'all ain't family. Besides, Catherine, you and Grandma will kill each other if y'all have to share a room." Call paused for a second. "Wait a minute. You're not saying-"

Danny wrapped his arm around Catherine. “We’re getting married.”

Call slammed his whiskey glass on the table in front of him. He had suspected something was going on, but married! “You’re what?”

“Danny kind of disappeared once you left, but when Dad got sick, he started coming around more to help out. One thing led to another, and when Momma left, he practically moved in. We’re getting married in the fall. He proposed two months ago, here actually.”

“No, this isn’t happening! I won’t allow it.” Call shook his head furiously.

“Excuse me?” Catherine said in a shrill voice, “You won’t *allow* it?”

“Over my dead body,” Call said.

“That may happen sooner than you think.”

“Don’t start with me, Catherine. You don’t know Danny like I do,” Call turned to look at him. “You’re like my brother, but you’re no good for marrying a girl in her 20s!” He’s eight years older than you, Catherine. *Eight years.*”

“And what about that whore of yours? Betty was her name? She couldn’t have been more than a year older than me,” Catherine said.

“Well... that’s different.”

“And how is it different? Oh, because it’s you. Call ‘I do whatever the fuck I want no matter who it hurts’ Bradshaw.”

“That’s it, I’m leaving. And before you go on celebrating, I’ll be back at the house that you lost. I ain’t leaving town. Not yet anyways.”

“Yes, leave.” Catherine now slammed her beer down, splashing foam onto her shirt. “We all know it’s what you do best.”

Call turned around and stormed out without a word. As he reached the doors, he turned around for just a moment to see Catherine hugging Danny and crying.

If he remembered right, Taylor's was only a two mile walk from the house as long as he crossed through the cemetery. The March wind was cool against his hot face, and the tall pines loomed over him, casting shadows of things he would rather not have seen. In the darkness, he saw his parents in the kitchen, a broken wine glass on the floor. He saw Catherine in her room, hiding behind the doll house. He saw himself, trying to put her to sleep as he was coming down from some pill the older boy at school had sold him for twenty bucks. A car passed behind him, and the headlights caused the shadows to dance like Catherine and their dad did in the living room.

Danny couldn't be marrying Catherine; she was his baby sister. She was a child. Call sighed. When he was her age, he was passed out on the edge of Barton Springs in Austin. He was in jail, and then he sobered up and met a girl. Pauline. He cleaned up his act; they almost married. That is, until he got cold feet and ran off to Lubbock. He wasn't ready to marry anyone at that time. He wasn't even ready now. It dawned that Catherine wasn't him. She had a point that Betty was only slightly older than her, but it was because he knew no woman in her thirties would go for a man like Call. In the same manner, Catherine was far too old for men her age. Danny was a good man. He'll treat her right. Hell, look at how much he had done for their family so far. Things that should've been Call's job. That he didn't have to do.

By the time Call had reached the house, all the lights were off, and Danny's yellow truck was parked in the driveway. He passed by the garage and paused for a moment. It would be so easy. Everyone was asleep. He could go in, take the Colt. Hotwiring a truck wouldn't be hard, he had done it plenty before. No one would ask questions or wonder why he was gone. It would be

a clean break. Even as he thought about leaving, however, he was walking to the front porch. He opened the door, which he was relieved to find unlocked, and fell asleep the moment his head touched his bed.

The next morning, Call skipped breakfast. An hour before the funeral, Call was struggling to tie his tie when there was knock on the door. The door slowly creaked open, and he saw Danny in the hall.

“Can I come in or are you going to bite my head off?” He said as he was already entering.

“No it’s fine.”

“You need to know that I love Catherine. I get that you’re her big brother, and you’re worried about me being her husband. But Call, I haven’t seen you for fifteen years. Times change and people change along with it. No offense, but you haven’t been around to see. She’s grown up. She’s not the baby sister you left behind. Besides, I used to be your best friend. I thought a part of you would be happy that we’re about to be brothers.”

“Practice that speech in the mirror, did you?” Call fastened his belt. “No, I get it. It’s just...I should’ve been there for her. She shouldn’t have had to grow up as fast as she did.”

“Well, that’s not entirely your fault. Your parents kicked you out, remember? It’s not like you just up and left her.”

“Yeah, and I swore I’d never come back. I would send my new phone number every time I moved, but I wasn’t sure why. I wanted nothing to do with them.”

“Why did you?” Danny asked. “Come back, that is. Why did you come back? Catherine called you about your dad because she felt you had the right to know, but I don’t think any of us thought you would actually show.”

Call closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was now or never, but the decision was made. He had to tell Danny. “Honestly, I didn’t come back for y’all. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad I did, but this whole situation was not my intention.”

Danny looked at him carefully. “So why did you come back? Does this have to do with that gun that Betty was talking about?”

“I figured you remembered. Dad kept that .36 Long Colt hidden in the garage. Well, turns out it’s worth a pretty penny, and I owe a bookie back in Lubbock a lot of money. I started getting threats. They were showing up at my door, following me to the store. I had to do something.”

Danny took a deep breath and sat on the bed. Call continued, “I’m happy I saw you and Catherine. I’m happy that things are getting better between us. Please don’t let this ruin that.”

“If you don’t want me to say anything I won’t. I’m the last person to judge on that kind of thing, and I’m glad to have your company. For now, anyways.”

“Well, I appreciate that Danny, I really do. But talking aside, I believe we have a funeral to get to.”

Catherine had opted for a graveside service, a decision that Call thought was risky for March. His thoughts were confirmed when a light drizzle began to fall. The green pines stood tall over the cemetery, dwarfing Catherine and Father Tabor standing at the front. The cemetery overlooked the lake, which made for gorgeous view but was ironic considering the situation. Their father hated water. He wasn’t no fish, and he wasn’t no sailor either, is what he would say. Call had waited for the crowd to fill the seats, and once the service began, Call slipped quietly into the back row. Catherine was already delivering her eulogy, but Calls attention drifted in out.

“Beloved father, son, and friend. He came from little but fought for more...”

In the front row was Grandma Gertie and Danny, with an empty seat for Catherine between them. The rows were filled with faces, both familiar and not. He saw JoAnn Price, a waitress at the café since he was just a boy. Mike Lytle, their next-door neighbor. Vernon Welch, the owner of the restaurant down the road who his father strongly disliked. He shifted uncomfortably, hoping no one would notice him. He tried to focus on his sister’s speech.

“Robert Bradshaw was by no means a perfect man. As I’m sure you all know, he was short-tempered and headstrong and took orders from no one but himself. If you told him to wipe his own ass, he’d probably refuse out of pure stubbornness. But he was my daddy and I’ll miss him dearly. I’ll miss the days spent with him in the café, I’ll miss two-stepping in the living room. I’ll miss the times we were a family. Dad, Momma, my brother Call.”

Call’s heart sank, and he shrunk in his seat. Catherine made eye contact with him, and his eyes pleaded with her to just be quiet, to leave his name out of it. He had hoped no one would notice he was even there. All chance of that was slipping away.

Despite his silent pleas, Catherine continued. “It’s not right for it to be just me up here talking. Robert had another child. Call, would come up here and say a few words?”

The crowd began to murmur and looked around. He tried to follow suit, looking around and hopefully avoiding attention. It didn’t work, however. Slowly but surely, all eyes were upon him. He cleared his throat, then slowly walked to the front while fighting the urge to run and keep running until he fell in the lake.

Suddenly, Grandma Gertie stood up. In her shrill voice, she called, “What? No, I won’t allow it. He has no right!”

Catherine glared at the woman. “Grandma, respectfully, sit your ass down. I’ve heard enough of it.”

Grandma Gertie stood and stormed away from the service. One by one, about ten people followed suit. The rest remained. Call figured most were just curious to see how this went. How could the Bradshaw’s fuck-up son embarrass them even in death? He was sure this would be the talk of the town for the next month at least.

“Now Call,” Catherine said, determined, “get up here before I drag you myself.”

In what felt like the longest walk of his life, Call reached the front.

“Umm... Well.... I suppose most of you ain’t happy to see me here at all, much less speaking. I’m not sure how much I have to say about my father. He was a hard worker, a great businessman. I...uh...I haven’t known him for a while now. Um...like my sister said, Dad wasn’t perfect. He loved his restaurant more than anything, and his daughter was right up there too. I think that’s all I have to say about him.”

He struggled to catch his breath, much less find words. His neck was hot, and he could have sworn his collar had grown tighter. He looked over at his sister, then at the crowd, then back at his sister. He decided his eyes would not leave her. “Catherine, I wanted to say I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was gone for so long. I wish I could have protected you from the hatred of our parents. I wish I had something to offer you other than drugs and liquor and heartbreak. When we were kids, there was no hope for me. I couldn’t escape the the yelling and the name-calling and the broken glasses and plates. You didn’t have to be doomed to the same fate. You could’ve ended up like me. I was so terrified of being alone that I ended with a trashy whore—sorry Father—when what I really needed was to be right back here. But you didn’t. You turned out a

beautiful woman with a fiancé who...could be worse. You are on the way to having a life that our parents couldn't. Catherine, I am so proud of you."

Before he even finished his sentence, he was all but tackled in the biggest hug he had received since he was seventeen. His shoulder felt wet, and he realized that Catherine was crying on his shoulder. He pulled her into an embrace, and he almost let a tear fall. She pulled away from the hug, face wet and makeup smeared, to laugh for a moment. "That was a shitty eulogy."

For those who remained at the funeral, the wake was held back at the house. After his eulogy that wasn't, Call decided it would probably be best to steer clear and let everyone have their gossip. At least he would avoid the stares and the whispers. So, he stood in the front yard, flask clearly in hand. He had an image to maintain, after all. When he was sure everyone was good and distracted, he slipped away to the garage to grab the Colt. Wrapping it in an old cloth that was sitting on the shelf, he tucked it into his jacket then made his way to Danny's yellow truck. He probably could have just asked for the keys, but he figured hotwiring it would get the job done just as good. For old times sake. Just as he got it started, he saw Catherine's face in the window, red and teary. As Call threw the truck into reverse, she stormed away from the window and to the doorway.

"Call! What the hell are you doing? Call! Call!"

He turned the truck and sputtered down the driveway and to the road. In the rearview, he could see his sister storm inside. He made his way through the streets of the familiar town and pulled into the lot of a brick building with a large yellow sign on the front.

PAWN SHOP

WE'LL BUY YOUR GOLD

CASH IN YOUR POCKET

A while later, Call left the shop with just shy of ten grand in his pocket. Getting the truck started again, he turned onto the main road and back the way he came. Bookie be damned, that was a problem for later, if ever. For now, he knew one thing. His sister would not be losing her home. He would not lose his. Not again.

Annotated Bibliography

Austin, Mary. "Regionalism in American Fiction." *The English Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1932, pp. 97-107.

Type: Journal Article

Summary

In this article, Austin, a writer, makes the distinction between regional literature and literature set in a region. She outlines two defining characteristics of regional literature: the setting of the region cannot merely be used as a backdrop for a story that could be told anywhere else, and the region must become a character within the story (if the story would be moved to another location it would have been vitally altered if not incomprehensible). For the most part, Austin advocates what she calls a "genuine regionalism" as opposed to playing on the presuppositions many have about the region in question.

Application

This article is useful in achieving the primary goal of my project. I want to write *for* Texas, not *about* Texas. Many Texas-set stories I see play on the stereotypes of Texas, and while I plan to approach Texas pretty traditionally, I want to provide a deeper perspective. One thing that especially stood out to me in Austin's article is the assertion that a piece is not regional unless the people of that region can identify with it. This identification will be very important to me as I move into writing my stories. In order for my stories to qualify as regional, I need to make sure that people with Texas roots can identify with it in some way or another, no matter the subject matter or time period. Part of the process of making sure my work is regional could include researching prominent landmarks

and locations within the towns I am writing about and weaving them into my stories.

Bandy, Mary Lea., and Kevin Stoehr. *Ride, Boldly Ride the Evolution of the American Western*. University of California Press, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520953475>.

Type: Book

Summary

While focusing on both literature and film, this article, written by an author and a film preservationist, heavily focuses on the role of landscape in Westerns and how the characters interact with it. It makes it clear that depending on the type of Western one is writing, the landscape can either work with or against the characters. On one hand, the characters can aim to settle the West. They come in conquest and they succeed in taming what was otherwise wild. On the other hand, the landscape serves as an antagonist, and instead of attempting to settle the land, they are simply trying to survive it.

Application

This article helps me to configure the different ways I can use settings in my stories that follow the Western tradition. Just as Austin says setting cannot simply be a backdrop, Bandy and Stoehr show me the different ways I can weave setting into the grain of a story. I'm especially interested in the idea of using the setting as an antagonist, especially since I want to focus so heavily on landscape and the natural world within my stories. Using it as an antagonist could help me in maintaining this focus without writing a slow-moving or even stagnant narrative that is more focused on details than plot (something I was initially concerned

with). Another source talks about the landscape becoming a character, and I think the idea of the landscape working for or against characters can help me to paint the landscape as having a dynamic personality as either a protagonist or antagonist.

Brinkmeyer, Robert H. *Remapping Southern Literature : Contemporary Southern Writers and the West.*

University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Type: Book

Summary

Brinkmeyer, an author and the director of Southern studies at the University of South Carolina, writes about the themes and issues present across Southern literature and analyzes how it interacts with the West. He claims that Southern literature is focused on staying in place. Instead of going out and exploring unknown territories, it focuses on provinciality and community. Conflicts tend to come from individuals finding ways to remain individual within the constraints of a tight-knit, established community. If and when these individuals break away from these communities, they face hardship and loss. This is put in conversation with the Western, where individuals who break away from their communities find some form of success, whether it be spiritual or economic. He describes the South as analogous to settlement and the West as analogous to expansion.

Application

This source helps me find concrete distinctions between the Southern and Western genres. Part of the inspiration for this project was the fact that Texas seems to be considered both Southern and Western in literary works, and I wanted to find out why that is and how to incorporate both literary traditions. This seems to answer both of these questions. In one section of the article, Brinkmeyer issues a warning that I will also keep in mind: worshipping place leads to a one-sided, uncritical perspective. I think I am in danger of falling into this unilateral view and need to make sure that I am not worshipping the locations I am writing about. Finding this balance may still be difficult for me, but I am at least conscious of it. As long I don't make the location out to be perfectly good and highlight some negative aspects, I think I can manage this. On the same note, I need to make sure the landscape isn't a perfectly evil force. Balance is going to be key in this.

Cullar, Carol. "12 Variations on a Theme or Why I Live in Southwest Texas." *Pride of Place: A Contemporary Anthology of Texas Nature Writing*, edited by David Taylor. University of North Texas Press, 2006, pp. 41-48.

Type: Anthology (Essay)

Summary

Cullar, the Executive Director of the Rio Bravo Nature Foundation, writes about her deep ties to the location where she grew up. In doing so, she reflects on the experiences of "country kids" and how their connection to nature and place is stronger than others. They were raised to work with nature and are accustomed to

being in harmony with it and finely attuned to the benefits and the dangers. She writes both fondly and critically of the land surrounding her, describing its almost dangerous beauty and comparing it to biblical stories.

Application

I am especially fond of the way in which Cullar writes about nature. She is aware of its beauty but does not fall into Brinkmeyer's trap of uncritical worship. She is fully aware of its darkness and danger, comparing it to Gethsemane and Gomorrha. These biblical allegories also stood out to me. I tend to infuse religion into my writing, and the way she used biblical locations to paint a picture was absolutely beautiful. She also describes the deep ties to the location where someone grew up as "stitched up in the fiber of our beings, locked up in our molecular synapses." This puts words to something I have always thought but never knew how to describe. Looking at the way she approached it will help me put words to the way I view it.

Graves, John. "Kindred Spirits." *Pride of Place: A Contemporary Anthology of Texas Nature Writing*, edited by David Taylor. University of North Texas Press, 2006, pp. 31-40.

Type: Anthology (Essay)

Summary

Graves, a writer, writes about the unique experience of owning old property and coming to the realization that generations before him have put their imprint on it, reflected by the work done and care given. He describes working on an old tractor

that has had a hydraulic replaced by the previous owner, replacing a fence that the old worker had done a bit too good of a job on, and remodeling a house once cherished by a young couple.

Application

The theme of continuity within this essay really stood out to me. I have shared many of the same experiences containing the idea of generations of compiled work and care, and really enjoyed the way he put it to writing. As with Cullar's description of landscape, this will help me to find ways to put thoughts and experiences to words (though Graves does it far more eloquently than I ever could). I'm toying with the idea of finding some sort of continuity between the stories. I know my first story is going to end with the main character fleeing to Fort Worth, so I might place the following story in Fort Worth and imply some relation.

Harrigan, Stephen. "What Texas Means to Me." *Pride of Place: A Contemporary Anthology of Texas Nature Writing*, edited by David Taylor. University of North Texas Press, 2006, pp. 189-203.

Type: Anthology (Essay)

Summary

A writer and journalist, Harrigan described in his essay his love-hate relationship with Texas from the time he moved there as a child to his adult life. He views the past of Texas as legendary and mythical. This is put in contrast with the Texas of the modern-day where Wal-marts and McDonald's' are just as, if not more,

common than ranches and open frontier. Reconciling these two caused a form of an identity crisis for Harrigan with wondering as to whether Texas was really worth living in. He finds his peace with Texas in places like Enchanted Rock which hold years of history and mythology and have found their place within the modern world.

Application

My short stories will span from the 19th century to the end of the 21st, a time of extreme change for Texas. Reconciling the old vs. the new Texas will be important through the progression of these stories, and I will need to reference the idea of the mythology of Texas in conversation with actual Texas and its prominent locations. A specific thing that stood out to me within this essay was Harrigan's description of the myth of the creation of the High Plains hung in a McDonald's lobby. First, the irony of this being a novelty decoration. However, I also really enjoyed the myth that said God made the plains then said He would come back the next day to make it beautiful like the rest of the world. When He returned, he found it to be all cracked and dried up. Instead of starting over, He decided to create people who liked it that way. I would love to incorporate this myth somewhere in my writing.

Kelton, Elmer. "I Love a Good Western." *Notes From Texas: On Writing in the Lone Star State*, edited by W.C.

Jameson. TCU Press, 2013, pp. 92-105

Type: Anthology (Essay)

Summary

Kelton discusses the genre of Westerns. He claims that he writes in the genre because it's what he knows, and he only tends to write about those things he has knowledge of. He also describes the way that the Western genre was perceived. It was seen as inferior. Stories of French villas or the English countryside were real literature. Stories of rural America were not. He then validates the genre and talks about different writing techniques and styles that he uses that make Westerns as serious of a literary genre as any other. He discusses using places and people you know to craft the characters and settings, creating character-centered stories, and making sure the plot keeps moving in a simple but complex fashion.

Application

The element of this essay that really stood out to me was Kelton's process of using people and places he knows to craft his stories. I've always done this in my writing to an extent but reading that an author such as Kelton does the same really validated the process. This essay also argues how Westerns can be a serious literary genre, not just a gimmicky form. One quote from Kelton says a good novel can be good regardless of where it is set "so long as it deals honestly with the human condition and shows respect for the subject matter." This reminds me

that while I need to focus on setting for the purposes of my project, it is not the most important part of my writing. Above setting, I need to focus on authenticity and honesty above a manufactured setting to set the stage for my Texas-centered stories.

MacKethan, Lucinda. "Genres of Southern Literature." *Southern Spaces*, 16 Feb. 2004,

<https://southernspaces.org/2004/genres-southern->

[literature/#:~:text=The%20claim%20to%20order%20that,%20C%20even%20%22grit%20lit.](https://southernspaces.org/2004/genres-southern-literature/#:~:text=The%20claim%20to%20order%20that,%20C%20even%20%22grit%20lit.)

[%](https://southernspaces.org/2004/genres-southern-literature/#:~:text=The%20claim%20to%20order%20that,%20C%20even%20%22grit%20lit.)22. Accessed 7 Feb. 2022.

Type: Web journal

Summary

Author Lucinda MacKethan outlines the various genres of Southern Literature, describing the defining literary and cultural characteristics of race-based, pastoral, gothic, etc. Southern writings. She also shows how Southern literature is distinct from other literary traditions, and how certain aspects transcend the boundaries of subgenres. She lists identifiers of most Southern literature such as geography, cultural, social, and political norms, and historical and linguistic contingencies. She also reaffirms what other sources have claimed in that the South always seems to view itself as separate from the rest of America, whether it be through tradition and values, economic practices, or history.

Application

Getting an in-depth view of the various genres and subgenres helped me to narrow down what kind of southern stories I want to write. My initial focus on

Southern literature as a whole was definitely too broad, and I now am able to zero in my focus. Through reading this, I am especially interested in pastoral literature and specifically, the southern agrarians. It carries this idea of a mythological south and the gentle farmer, and it is often criticized for being idyllic and uncritical. I want to see if I can write some pastoral stories while reconciling the subgenre's inherent issues.

Stowers, Carlton. "Universal Truths In Your Own Backyard." *Notes From Texas: On Writing in the Lone Star State*, edited by W.C. Jameson. TCU Press, 2013, pp. 218-231.

Type: Anthology (Essay)

Summary

A true-crime writer, Stowers, like Kelton, discusses the practice of writing the places he knows. He makes it clear that he *can* write about other places such as New York, but he always makes his way back to Texas. Like the previous writers, he faced pushback from outside publishers claiming that he needed to write about places other than Texas to get any real success, but he too remained firm in his view that Texas writing was just as valid as any other writing. In fact, it could even be better than any other setting if the writer has an intimate knowledge of the place he is writing about.

Application

Like the previous sources, this essay serves to validate the regionalist characteristic of my writings. However, Stowers also provides insights into certain facets of Texas that many from the outside don't see. Texas is huge, and its landscape is highly varied between the east, west, north, and south. Completely

different types of people can live directly next door to each other, and the way these people are perceived can be vastly different from person to person. I tend to choose a type of person to write about and stick with it, so considering outside perspectives of the character will be beneficial. His focus lies in the different people and their perceptions rather than the landscape, and I could definitely use some more material to flesh out my characters to balance my settings.

Woodward, C. Vann. "The search for southern identity." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1958, pp. 321-338.

Type: Journal Article

Summary

Woodward, a historian, describes the essential characteristics of uniquely southern identity and how they differ from the rest of America. Southerners face a unique and turbulent history. They are focused on stasis rather than movement, staying in place and making something out of it. This focus was interrupted by the onslaught of industrialization, and the decades-long battle between city and country. Industrialization caused many southerners to feel uprooted, and it broke apart many traditionally southern values such as individualism, localism, and rural folk culture. He also describes the differences between this southern identity and the broadly American identity. For one, American culture is centered around progress. Also, America is generally characterized by wealth and abundance. Southerners, especially those alive post-Civil War, lead lives governed by scarcity and want in a nation where the North hung them out to dry. This isn't to say there

were no rich southerners, simply that wealth did not characterize the broadly southern population.

Application

This source provides insight into the southern culture and what makes it unique from that of greater America. It is well recognized that the south has a very separate history from the rest of the nation, but I think the impact this has had on southern life and outlook is often overlooked. Looking at the south in comparison to America helps me to understand how to have full-bodied characters that are deeply enmeshed in the southern identity but are also their own individual people that are not only southerners but Americans.

Reflection Essay

The most basic goal I laid out for myself was to complete four regional short stories set in Texas (I originally wanted to do six, but I had to curb my expectations a bit). I wanted to perform an in-depth examination on Texas, not only as it relates to writing but culture, geography, and history as well. In taking a multi-disciplinary approach to my project, I hoped that it would have a broad reach and connection to people outside of the creative writing or English disciplines. I felt that the rural South and West are extremely underrepresented in serious academic studies, and that those from these areas who are represented are often presented as having shunned that former identity. In completing a project such as this, I hoped to fill part of that gap not only artistically, but in a scholarly aspect as well.

The question I asked throughout this project is what makes regional Texan literature Texan? How does regionalism present in a state with a multitude of different cultures and influences? How can one encompass the history and unique characteristics of each Texan region? Again, I felt this question is important due to a serious underrepresentation in academic discourse. This question was especially important to me as I identify heavily with my background as a seventh generation Texan. In recent years, representation has become increasingly important in all aspects of art. However, it is easy to overlook areas such as the South when discussing representation, and many depictions are stereotyped and tokenized. In writing classes, I have learned how to blend elements of truth with literary elements to create a story that is accurate yet entertaining and meaningful. Such lessons gave me the perfect tool to write valuable regional stories.

One specific experience that stands out to me is the Shakespeare play rewrite in Professor Braun's Playwriting class. Exercises such as that taught me that is okay to draw off other stories

to inspire your own, something I had previously avoided. This allowed me to use elements such as Texan country and western songs and traditional Texan history and lore to inspire my stories and establish a greater connection with my audience. In this class, we spent the final months of the semester working on a One-Act play. Mine was inspired by a song written by country band Turnpike Troubadours. Now feeling comfortable drawing on other creative sources, this play ended up being one of my favorite pieces. Therefore, I ultimately ended up adapting it into the final story in my collection, “The Funeral.”

In my time participating in various writing workshops, I noticed I got a form of a reputation for writing Southern stories. Some were serious and addressed issues such as religion, family, and stigma. Others were plays about a stripper, a prostitute, a soldier, a meth cooker, and two little boys with fireworks in a trailer park. Even the ones that were intended to be comical or satirical had elements of truth to my experiences as a Southerner, however. I found that this reputation caused some of my stories to be overlooked by my peers. After all, what is serious about a region that is so often depicted as a caricature? In this thesis, the added research to back the basis of my stories helped me to defend the validity of the stories that I have always written, even the ones with some humor to them.

Many of my classes at St. Edward’s helped to give me the tools to perform the research necessary for this project. Throughout my time here, I have learned how to effectively locate and synthesize information. The class that was most useful, however, was the Southwest Regional Literature course taught by Professor Lock. This class provided some sources that I ultimately used in my research such as Mary Austin and Robert Brinkmeyer. It also turned me on to Katherine Anne Porter, who I wrote my final research paper on and ended up being a major piece of stylistic inspiration for me.

In a project composed of four separate pieces, there are aspects that I am prouder of than others. One point that stands out is in “The Caprock Comanchero.” In this story, Walter suffers from a nervous disposition. This idea of a nervous disposition that was common at the time actually led to the writing of one of the first Westerns, *The Virginian*. In doing this, I was able to achieve my goal of incorporating historical aspects into these fiction stories but not in an excessively obvious, forced way. Walter’s nervous disposition comes naturally within the story and serves a plot device that sends him into the Caprocks in the first place.

Another part of these stories that is very important to me is tying in my personal experiences as a Texan and a person. “Little Miss Lenora May” is about a young girl who just wants to be like her granddaddy and thinks she’s a little more grown up than she is. This story, while set in the 19th century, was written about my childhood and one that I am proud of. Another personal piece of this story is the setting. My grandfather has a ranch in Atascosa County about eight miles Southeast of Pleasanton that was deeded to our family in the early 1900s after a Texas Ranger in our family died in the line of duty. My great-great grandfather was the sheriff of neighboring Wilson County. Little details such as this that only I and my family would catch are important to me and make the stories even more personal to many of those in the audience.

By relating stories to my personal experiences, I am not only establishing a personal connection to the stories but writing for others from the same background as I. Elmer Kelton and Katherine Anne Porter were successful because they wrote about what they knew authentically, Cotton Season is set in a small town that no longer exists. The remains of the town are a mile from my grandparent’s house where I grew up, and one of my close friends lives in what used to be the main restaurant/inn for the town. As a kid, my friends and I would go back into the woods

where the condemned cotton gin, fire station, and general store are and explore them. This story is one of the closest to me, and it is written about some of my personal experiences. In writing it about places and experiences that I knew, my hope is that it allows other people to connect with it the same way that I do, seeing Southern culture and community within it.

As I mentioned before, my experience at St. Edward's has been defined by my coming to terms with an identity that is markedly different than my peers and learning how to reflect it in my writing but also my person. St. Edward's has a clearly defined type of student that attends it, one that I am not. Learning how to be part of the St. Edward's community while maintaining my identity has been a multi-year process, and the opportunity to pursue a project such as this allowed me to validate my place in this academic community not only as a St. Edward's student but a rural Texan. Moving forward, I have a stronger sense of how my identity fits within settings outside of rural Texas. The Southwest Literature class I took was one of the first times that I felt my background was useful and valued in a classroom setting. This class was a special topics class, only offered every couple of years. In terms of St. Edward's, I think they can encourage students like myself to be comfortable with their identity as well through offering more classes like this on a regular basis rather than only every so often. In doing this, more students such as I will be able to see the value of their experiences in academia and the greater community.

