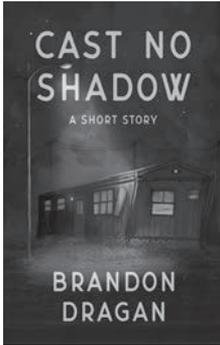


**THE  
WAGES  
OF  
GRACE**

A NOVEL BY

**BRANDON DRAGAN**

**ALSO AVAILABLE FROM BRANDON DRAGAN  
ON AMAZON.COM**



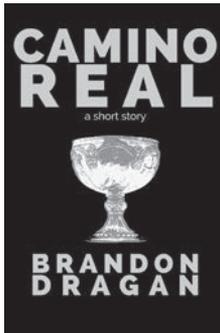
Set deep in the heart of 1980's Texas, *Cast No Shadow* tells the harrowing tale of Vietnam veteran, husband, and father, Beau Moreland. By day he helps his elderly neighbors and watches his son's baseball practice; by night he hunts drug gangs.

In his quest for justice and a more peaceful life for his family, Beau inadvertently sets off an un-stoppable chain of events which will hurtle his family toward a startling and breath-taking conclusion.

*"A really powerful piece by someone clearly in control of their craft."*

**CHAD GRACIA**

WINNER SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL, 2015



Santi attends his father's funeral out of obligation, only to learn that the man who abandoned him as a child has left a trail of debt, both monetary and spiritual, for him to repay.

*Camino Real* is an enthralling fable that follows the pilgrimage of Santi as he encounters thieves, priests, magic potions, brutality, and more to discover if he can not only save his father's soul, but perhaps his own.

*"Shockingly good... My God, so beautiful."*

**BRAD JERSAK**

AUTHOR AND PATRISTIC SCHOLAR

This is a work of fiction. The characters, places and incidents portrayed, and the names used herein are fictitious or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to the name, character, or history of any person, living or dead, is coincidental and unintentional. Product names used herein are not an endorsement of this work by the product name owners.

Copyright © 2020 by Brandon Dragan. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Permission for wider usage of this material can be obtained through Quoir by emailing [permission@quoir.com](mailto:permission@quoir.com).

1st Edition

Cover design and layout by Rafael Polendo ([polendo.net](http://polendo.net))

Cover illustration by Derik Hobbs ([derikhobbsillustration.com](http://derikhobbsillustration.com)) and Kevin Catalan ([kevincatalan.com](http://kevincatalan.com))

Interior illustrations by Derik Hobbs ([derikhobbsillustration.com](http://derikhobbsillustration.com))

ISBN 978-1-938480-71-3

This volume is printed on acid free paper and meets ANSI Z39.48 standards.

Printed in the United States of America



Published by Quoir  
Oak Glen, California

[www.quirrel.com](http://www.quirrel.com)

**THE  
WAGES  
OF  
GRACE**

**A NOVEL BY**

**BRANDON DRAGAN**

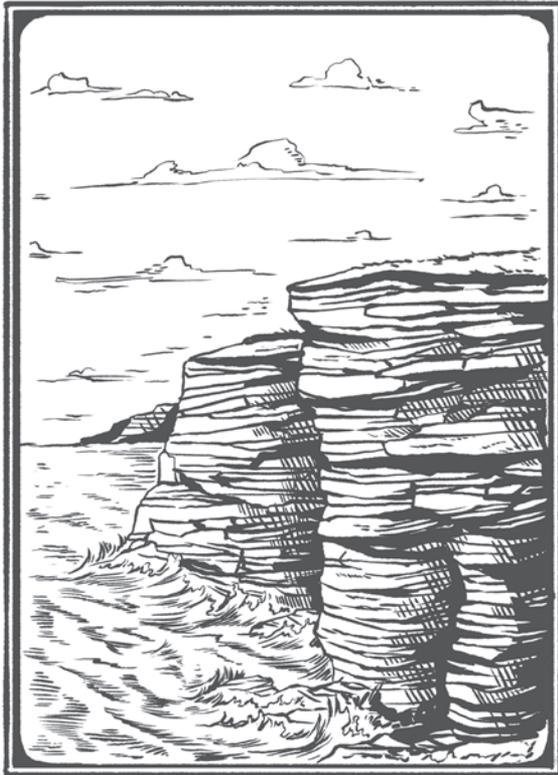
# DEDICATION

For Jami Nicole, Natalie Grace, and Brooklyn Hope.

Dedicated to the memory of Eugene and Lydia Bascharow, Peter and Lydia Dragan, Chris Mastalia, and Brian Busch.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Don and Lydia Dragan, Irene Mastalia, Jamie Jean, Derik Hobbs, Dr. Olsen, Dr. Hutchins, Kevin Catalan, Matthew Distefano, Rafael Polendo, Elliott Davis, Savannah Cottrell, my extended family, and everyone else who helped make this possible.



# ONE

*Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds  
on the heel that has crushed it.*

MARK TWAIN

*He could taste salt on his tongue as the waves broke around him; whether the gentle flavor lingered because of the misty spray, or the tender touch of her lips, he could not be sure. He sat wrapped in a wool blanket, the sun bright through hazy clouds, the ocean pulsing in perfect rhythm. His feet planted in the cold, wet sand, he had never been more happy. She floated effortlessly over the waves—as far as the moon and as close as his heartbeat. Her soft, rosy lips nearly touched his ear as he gently bit his bottom lip. She softly whispered his name. Her beauty was ravishing, and she didn't even know it. Delicate strands of perfect ash brown hair fell smoothly on her bare, freckled shoulders. He would have tied a millstone around his neck and plunged himself into the sea for just one more kiss.*

*In the next instant, there were rocks below, jagged and sharp. He stood forty feet above on the edge of the precipice, while the rough sea crashed spectacularly against the boulders below. Birds picked ruthlessly at the carcasses of dead fish, unwilling to leave them mercifully to their eternal rest. The tips of the rocks gleamed in the gray sunlight—the raging sea roaring against them deafeningly. He closed his eyes and imagined flinging himself toward them, but he knew from previous experience that he would only wake again in his bed, dejected but unharmed.*

*He recoiled in surprise when he heard his name again. He looked up and saw her in the distance, flowing white dress whipping in the wind. She stood erect at sea, his very own Venus, beckoning him. Tears streamed down his wind beaten face as he stretched his arms toward her, but the*

## THE WAGES OF GRACE

*distance between them was impassable. His old muscles cramped with longing—longing for just one more touch, one more embrace, one more tender word. The rain began to fall heavily as it always did, and the wind began to howl as he was certain it would, and he knew that once more he had to say goodbye. Too great, however, was the disquiet of his soul to utter mere words.*

*Slowly, silently, she began to sink. He watched for the thousandth time in horror, unable to intervene. He also knew that she would return the following night, and that the aching in his soul would never dissipate, would never relent. It has been said that time heals all wounds, but this is untrue—some wounds only turn gangrenous with time.*

*There was unremitting sorrow in this subconscious nightly ritual, but there was also the numbing consolation that, at least he had seen her again, in all her glory.*

*His eyelids fluttered rapidly in the dark as his mind's eye watched her calmly submerge in the black, foaming sea. He told her that he loved her, and that was all. She sank to her waist, her breasts, her neck, her nose, and her eyes without panic, without struggle or fear. Then, he could see her no more.*

*Her name was Hope.*

### SEPTEMBER 3, 1990

The sun rose gently through the clearing that our wise sage knew as his home. The trees stood tall and strong, full of foliage and confidence in their old age. The woods were already alive, an endless array of creatures stirring, some waking from a warm night's slumber, some seeking repose after a warm night's hunt. After all, there is nothing quite as comforting as going to bed with a full stomach.

A long, slender cat nimbly abandoned the woods and entered the clearing. He was mostly black, but had white markings on his

underside and some patches of white on his chin and face. He had already eaten. His name was Duke.

Having already eaten, however, would not dissuade him from walking through the tall grass near the tree line, then the freshly mowed grass near the long, winding gravel driveway, up the wooden steps and through the hole in the screen that the old man had cut for him. Duke did this for several reasons. First, the old man would be waking soon and would naturally come to feed the cat on the back porch, as he had done every morning since the cat could remember. His second reason was simply the weather. It was going to be hot and sunny—yet again—and he knew that, aside from the creek down by the old barn, the back porch was the best place to catch a breeze and a nap.

Inside the century-old farm house, on the second floor, a right turn and a brief walk up the hall from the stairway, Thierry Laroque laid awake in bed, mesmerized by the rhythmic pulse of the ceiling fan. If he stared at the white paint on the ceiling through the blades as they silently whirled, it almost appeared that they changed direction. He knew this was an optical illusion, but would try it several times each summer morning, almost as if to reassure himself that the laws of physics and nature were still in effect after another night.

He turned to the analog clock radio on the worn nightstand beside the bed: it was 6:04am. He had slept in.

Retirement, however, affords such simple luxuries as this to those lucky enough to see it. He didn't have anywhere to go, or anything particularly pressing to do that day, aside from lunch with the judge and a quick run to the supermarket, but nevertheless, after all those years of waking up at 5:30 sharp, he couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for wasting part of the daylight in sleep. He rose quietly and sat on the edge of the bed, stretching his arms towards the sky. He stood up and checked on his old friend who slept quietly behind the clock radio, next to an antique copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and thanked God that still another night had passed without cause to

use it. He put on his jeans from the night before, holstered that very handgun to his belt, and simultaneously prayed that this day would too pass without cause to use it.

He walked slowly and wearily to the bathroom at the end of the hall, brushed his teeth, and sprayed his deodorant on. He then got about the business of shaving. Thierry and shaving had never quite had an amicable relationship, but he still did it every morning. He couldn't help but think, that in some ways, the act of shaving his face was a lot like the act of life itself. Every morning, new opportunities would arise, new passions and energies would spring to life, and every morning, for one reason or another, he would shave them back to the skin. And there they were, covered in lather, clinging to the sides of the white porcelain sink as if begging not to be rinsed down and forgotten. They knew as well as the man did that there would be more of them to deal with tomorrow morning, and that the only thing truly gained by the process was sore skin.

Back to the bedroom he went to select a clean shirt from the closet, and down the stairs to start coffee and breakfast. The eggs would be fried in butter, the sausage would be spicy, the berries would be fresh, and the coffee would be black. That was the way it was every morning, and while there were endless other possibilities for breakfast, Thierry preferred this combination to any other.

The man's border collie, shepherd mix, could still be heard snoring contently under the big oak desk in the library, but as soon as the cast iron skillet hit the stove, Useless, who was actually quite the contrary despite his name, sprung to life. He raced into the living room, through the eat-in portion of the kitchen, and slid across the tiled floor until he bumped clumsily into the back of the man's legs as he stood over the stove.

"Well, good morning, there," Thierry laughed, as he regained his balance. "I see you're up and ready to go."

The canine sneezed.

“Bless you,” the man replied. “You were in quite a heavy sleep when I came downstairs, weren’t you?”

The dog tilted his head, his large pink tongue dangling from one corner of his mouth.

“What were you dreaming about so contently, huh?”

Useless straightened his face and snorted. The man chuckled and threw the dog a chunk of sausage which was caught mid-air and consumed in one motion.

Thierry then made his way with his plate and coffee mug to the back door and out onto the porch. Useless was hardly a step behind him. Once they reached the porch, however, the dog immediately began his search for the cat, who, as previously mentioned, was also on the porch at this time every day. The two creatures got along as best they could, and by way of greeting every morning, Useless would quickly and clumsily sniff the cat’s underbelly. It could be counted on that Duke would tolerate this behavior for precisely four seconds, and would then let out a guttural growl that would end up as a low, elongated hiss. Such a simple warning was always good enough for Useless, who would then back off and collapse at the man’s feet.

Thierry rocked back and forth, sipping his coffee and taking in another brilliant sunrise. The rays of the sun were already quite warm. It had been a sweltering summer and there was almost nothing that the old man disliked more than heat and humidity. How, he asked himself, did he end up, then, in Middle Tennessee? It must have been the music.

He loved the area, however. It was, after all, a wonderful place to live. Nashville, a growing and friendly city, was a mere twenty miles to his west, as the crow flies, and the town where he had made a living for many years was also pleasant and rapidly expanding. He lived another five miles or so to the northwest of the town. Thierry was fortunate enough to own a couple hundred acres of woods, streams, and raw, untouched land, some of which gently hugged the Cumberland

River to his north. In the middle of all of this natural beauty and ruggedness, there was the small clearing described earlier, where Thierry's humble home sat. The clearing was no bigger than three or four acres, and housed not only the main farm house, but also a large mechanic's garage, a couple storehouses, an underground storm shelter, and an old, Civil War-era barn, which sat dilapidated, and in much the same condition as it had been when Thierry came into possession of the estate some time earlier. Aside from the weather, he felt that Tennessee offered everything a man could hope for—low taxes, cheap land, and friendly people—and he happened to be a proponent of all three.

He ate breakfast slowly and enjoyed the weather as long as he could. Duke and Useless were both asleep by the time he finished.

After a couple hours of tinkering with his truck and moving some tools around in the garage, Thierry returned to the old farm house, showered in the bathroom on the second floor, and dressed again for his trip to town. He climbed in his old, steady Ford truck and began the slow, winding journey through the woods that surrounded his property. His driveway was almost a half mile long, curling tightly around trees and through the dense summer brush. The gravel was, in some places, completely overtaken by grass and weeds, and in some places closer to the creek, by Spanish moss. After a few moments, he was at the exit of his property, a small opening in the forest that would hardly be recognized as a driveway by someone passing by. Thierry preferred it this way.

In hardly no time, he was in the center of town, past the old brick courthouse with the granite steps and marble columns, and parked conveniently on the street outside of Warren's Restaurant on the town square. The air conditioning in his Ford always ran efficiently and freezing cold, and the old man regretted having to leave the truck at all.

Inside Warren's, he was greeted by the effervescent Nicole Burns, the seventeen year-old daughter of Warren Burns, the restaurant's

proprietor. She practically ran to Thierry and embraced him like a child would her grandfather. Being fifteen minutes before twelve, the restaurant had only a couple other patrons, neither of which Thierry recognized, but he did feel them glance over at him as he was trapped in Nicole's death-grip of a hug. She finally let go.

"Where have you been?" she asked, as if he had at some point suddenly and without warning disappeared.

"Retired, darling," he replied tenderly.

"That's no excuse!" she said loudly, in her perfectly charming Tennessee drawl. She slapped his shoulder playfully.

"I know, I know—But shouldn't you be in school?"

"I was. I'm a senior now, and my last class ends at eleven," she answered proudly.

"I see—" he began to reply, but was cut short by the emergence of her father from the kitchen.

"Hey rascal!" he shouted excitedly. "I thought I heard your voice! It's been forever!"

The two men warmly shook hands and embraced quickly and with strong pats on the back, as men do.

"I know, your sweet waitress was just reminding me that it's been all of, what, three weeks since I've been in for a good meal?"

"Has it only been three weeks?" Warren replied in his own thick accent. "It feels like it's been a lifetime! After all, you were in here practically every day for ten years! I guess when you're used to seeing someone every day, it feels like forever when all of a sudden they're not around as much anymore!"

"Yes, I apologize," Thierry sincerely replied, placing his right hand over his heart for dramatic embellishment. "I promise to visit more often than I have."

"You better," Nicole replied in a good-humored, yet serious tone while pointing her slender finger at him like a mother warning a child of the consequences of his behavior.

“Yes, ma’am,” Thierry quickly replied as his eyebrows shot up. He glanced over at her father who shook his head in a mixture of pride and fascination.

“So what’ll it be?” she asked, reverting back to waitress mode.

“Well, I’m meeting the judge, but drinks would be lovely—sweet tea for the judge; un-sweet for me.”

She rolled her eyes sarcastically.

“You’re such a Yankee,” she muttered playfully as she turned back towards the kitchen. On the way, she stopped by the table of their other guests to check in. The patron and the owner sat at a table for two by the front window, which overlooked the quietly bustling square.

“You did a great job,” Thierry commented.

“Thank you,” he answered with a quick glance toward the heavens, “By the grace of God...”

“Yes, and I must say, having been a hermit for a few months now, it’s refreshing to see her again.”

Warren smiled warmly.

“Welp, I’ve got to get back to the kitchen, but it was so good to see you. Please stop in more often—if not for me, then for Nicole. She misses you a lot.”

“I’ll make certain I do that.”

“Yours is on the house today, by the way.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Just come by and see us more often, ok?”

“Thank you. I sure will.”

At that moment, Nicole returned from the kitchen with the tea. She walked almost silently with innate and inadvertent elegance. The two men looked up at her and smiled.

“What are you two talkin’ about?” she asked accusingly as she put the drinks on the table.

“You,” her father said playfully.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“You’re on the clock, get back to work,” she ordered teasingly.

Warren stood up quickly and saluted. He shook Thierry’s hand firmly and walked off to the kitchen chuckling.

“So, darling, what have you been up to these last few months?”

“Well,” Nicole said slowly and blushed a little, “I’m seeing a boy.”

“You are, are you?”

“Yes, his name’s Kevin.”

She slipped into the seat across from Thierry that her father had recently vacated.

“Kevin, hmm,” Thierry pondered. “Do I know him?”

“Probably not,” she replied slowly.

“Well? Tell me about him.”

The pace of her words picked up eagerly.

“Well, he’s really cute, and really tall, and really strong.”

“Strong in what way, my dear? Strength has a lot of different applications.”

“Well, he’s the star quarterback for the Tigers, and there’s lot of talk about him playing college ball for the Vols, too—he’s that good.”

“Ok, so strong in the athletic sense. That’s wonderful. What’s he like?”

“He’s popular, really funny and outgoing, and he’s really cute,” her sparkling brown eyes beamed with girlish excitement as she raved about her new beau.

“Yes, you mentioned the cute part earlier,” Thierry quipped. “How long have you been seeing this boy?”

“About a month.”

“And how has he treated you so far?”

“Very well, he’s taken me out a few times and I’ve had a lot of fun. He really makes me laugh a lot.”

“And are you being a good girl with this new boy?”

She clicked her tongue against her top row of teeth in censure.

“I can’t believe you would even ask that, Mr. Terry!” she reproached him while mispronouncing his name, as many Southerners did. Thierry was used to it by this point, although he wasn’t particularly fond of the name *Terry*.

“Well, sweetheart, you’re growing up, and I thought it would be unacceptable for me not to ask, given our relationship over these many years.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. And yes, we are very close, and always will be,” she said, taking his hand in hers gently. “And I’ve been very proud of him because he hasn’t tried anything aside from just a peck on the cheek, so far. And believe me, being a star athlete and so cute and all, he’s done a lot of things with a lot of girls. But he knows where I stand, and like I said, he’s been a perfect gentleman so far.”

“Well, good, my dear, I’m glad to hear it,” he said as he placed his other hand on top of hers gently. “You’re very mature.”

“Oh, I know,” she said seriously, and then stuck her tongue out at him.

At that moment, the bell rang as the door opened and the judge walked in suddenly. He was a short, pudgy man, and on this day he wore a short-sleeved white dress shirt with a red tie and black slacks. He was sweating profusely, wiping his nearly bald head with his handkerchief as he entered.

“Hey Judge!” Nicole stood from the table and waved casually.

“Hi, Nicole!” he replied with boisterous robustness.

“And where have you been?” she said accusingly in much the same way she had to Thierry upon his entrance earlier.

“Sweetie, I was here for lunch yesterday!”

“But no breakfast today!”

“Sweetheart, I love your *daddy’s* cooking and all, but do I have to eat here three times-a-day?”

“No!” she half-yelled back, then looked down at Thierry with a quick smile and then replied to the judge in a lower tone of voice, “Just two times... we’re closed for dinner.”

After a quick laugh, the judge greeted Thierry warmly and plopped down heavily in his chair at the table. Nicole greeted another set of patrons entering and seated them in the far corner.

“She’s a piece of work, huh?” the judge joked in his thick Georgia accent.

“Yes, yes she is. And how are you my friend?”

“Oh, I’m great, me and Mabel are busy, busy, but doing great.”

“Busy, that’s good, right?”

“It’s better than bein’ *dey-ed*,” the judge joked loudly.

The newest patrons glanced over quickly from the far corner.

“So what’s been keeping you so busy?”

“The grandkids were in from Atlanta a couple weeks ago, and Mabel’s been keeping me running with helpin’ her *peck* out wallpaper and stain for refinishing the floors, and oh, God, I love her to death, but that woman takes forever to make a decision!”

Just then, Nicole came back to their table and took their lunch orders.

“And how was court this morning?” Thierry inquired of his friend.

“Oh, *Gawd*, don’t get me started,” the judge replied in an exasperated tone. “The old man kicks the bucket, his will been sealed up in a safe behind an old Gifford painting or somethin’ like it. The new wife—the twenty-five year old—wants all of it. The old wife—the sixty-five year old he left for the young one two years ago—wants all of it, too. His four kids want it all, too. So the will gets unsealed and the creditors start pouring in and instead of a couple mil’ sitting in the bank, there’s a hundred grand in some life insurance policy that was taken out by one of his other wives who’s been dead for ten years, and there’s no living beneficiary listed. And so now everyone that’s still alive is clamoring over that. Awful! It’s just awful how kin can treat

each other in such a way! And all over money! Nobody even cares to remember the old man... Well, after all, it's probably for the best—what a pompous asshole he was.”

Thierry laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of it all, and even though he didn't know the family involved, he had known enough human beings to get the picture.

“If I could find a way, I'd make sure nobody got a damned cent, and I wouldn't care if it hair-lipped every one of 'em.”

“I can't say I blame you,” Thierry said quietly. “Who was he anyway?”

“Nobody. A total nobody,” the judge replied seriously. “Just a brat that come from old money. His *daddy* owned a half million acres of farm land that'd been passed down from his great, great *granddaddy* or something like it, I reckon. And his son sold most of it off, for pennies on the dollar just to get rid of it. Lived in that big house on Carter Avenue off Division, you know the one, sat up real high and overlooked the river?”

Thierry nodded in affirmation. “Yeah, I know it.”

“Well, he let it go to hell in a hand-basket. Place looks like shit now.”

“What a shame,” Thierry said in genuine sorrow.

“It's a *damn* shame... But hey, come to think of it, the land you got from old JC, well, he bought from this old man. There's still probably another couple hundred acres that touch your property, if you're interested. You can probably get it cheap from whoever ends up with it if you make 'em a cash offer. It ain't nothin' but fields and woods, but it's awful pretty land.”

“Well, I appreciate the notice, but I don't know if I'm in a position to buy more acreage right now.”

“Well, I understand, completely. Hell, who is now-a-days? I just wanted to make sure you knew about it, that's all.”

“Certainly appreciated, my friend,” Thierry replied sincerely.

“Change your mind and you let me know, okay?”

Thierry nodded thoughtfully.

The two old friends ate, talked about the weather and Mabel’s plans for the renovation of several of the judge’s rooms, and ended their lunch with a warm handshake and the mutual promise to get together again soon. They left Nicole a nice tip and headed out—Thierry to the grocery store, the judge back to the courthouse.

Thierry cruised the aisles of what was still, at that point, a mom and pop grocery store, and ran into several people he knew. There were polite exchanges, smiles and nods, and even several affectionate hugs and handshakes.

At the checkout counter, he ran into Adam Buford, a young man of about thirty with Down syndrome. He had worked at the grocery store for more than ten years as a bag-boy and was also well-liked, well-respected, and well-known by those who habitually shopped there. Adam’s father, Chester Buford, operated a machine shop that Thierry, in his auto repair business, had patronized for more than a decade. The two men had built quite the business relationship over the years and had also developed quite the friendship. Chester and his wife Abigail adopted Adam when he was a toddler, knowing full-well the challenges they would face as a family, and as a result, Thierry had always thought very highly of them.

Thierry paid with cash for his groceries, as people did back in those days, and began to load the last of his bags into his cart with Adam’s help.

“Hi, Mr. Terry!” Adam said excitedly.

“Well, hello, my old friend,” Thierry replied warmly. “How have you been?”

“Good, Mr. Terry—real good!”

“Well that’s good to hear, Adam. Anything in particular that has you in such a good mood? Maybe a new girlfriend?”

Adam laughed nervously and waved his hand at Thierry to dismiss such a silly accusation.

“My dad said he was gonna take me camping next weekend! He said we were gonna go fishing and sleep outside!”

“That’s great, Adam! Have you ever been camping before?”

“Oh, lots, Mr. Terry! But not in a real long time! I think I’m gonna catch the biggest fish I ever caught before!”

“Oh, really! What makes you think that?”

“My dad said he was gonna get me some new lures that were gonna work better than the old ones I got.”

“That’s great Adam,” Thierry replied while quietly reaching in his pocket. “Well, it was good seeing you, and I’ve got to get these home before they rot, but please say hi to your dad for me, okay?”

“I sure will, Mr. Terry!”

With that, Thierry shook the young man’s hand, leaving in it a folded twenty dollar bill.

Adam stared down at the money at first as if he’d had no idea how it got there, but then looked up quickly as Thierry walked away, pushing his grocery cart through the automatic doors at the exit. Adam suddenly ran after him and took him by the arm.

“Is this for me, Mr. Terry?” he asked bewilderedly.

“It sure is, my friend.”

Adam swallowed hard while looking from the money in his hand to Thierry and back quickly. “But... what for?”

“For some extra lures—if you’re gonna catch the biggest fish you’ve ever caught, you’re going to need plenty of good lures.”

“Thanks, Mr. Terry! I promise I’ll bring you a picture of the fish I catch!”

“Do that, Adam—I’ll be excited to see it!”

With that, Adam abruptly hugged Thierry in what can only be described as a bear hug, and didn’t release him for a full ten seconds. The two men said goodbye, again, thanked each other again, shook

hands again, and then parted ways... again—Thierry back to his truck in the parking lot, and Adam back inside to his work. The young man would spend the rest of the day thinking about the lures he would buy with the money Thierry gave him, and needless to say there would be a smile plastered on his face until he went to bed that night.

SEPTEMBER 4, 1990

Adam had inspired him. Thierry was up before the night ended. He poured some coffee into a thermos and left food on the porch for Duke, who had not yet emerged from his hunt. Thierry ate a handful of berries, woke Useless with a quick whistle, grabbed his fishing gear, and began walking through the dense woods which surrounded his home toward the river. The loyal dog followed after him sleepily.

He passed the old barn on his right and followed his usual path toward his favorite fishing spot. The path itself could hardly be considered a path, as it had only been roughly worn through his years of following the same steps through the brush. It was not uncommon for him to come across a herd of deer who would quickly scamper off. Useless had learned not to make a fuss after them. In fact, he hardly ever barked. This was in part because his owner disliked incessant barking. It was also due to the fact that the first few times the dog tried to chase the deer, he returned, panting, to Thierry's heel after about thirty seconds, wearing a look on his face that said, "Wow, they're really fast."

Cracks of low sunlight began to stream through tree limbs as he approached his spot along the river bank. The water, crystal clear, was low for the time of year, but still sparkled. The man poured some coffee and then breathed in the isolation and the beauty around him.

After an hour or so and no luck, a branch snapped close by. Useless shot up at the same time Thierry instinctively put his hand on his pistol. Steps, coming closer and closer from the east. Rhythmic, steady,

heavy—definitely not deer. Thierry squinted in the distance and Useless began to silently bare his upper teeth. The man was able to make out the lower half of a human, which made him half-relieved, half-anxious at the approach. It was not often Thierry ran into another soul in this place. Not willing to give up the element of surprise in the unlikely event that this person wanted trouble, Thierry waited silently, peering intently as the person moved closer. When the person finally cleared through the bush where Thierry could see his face, he instantly recognized Nate Hendricks, the son of Wilson Hendricks, who had purchased Thierry's business upon his retirement.

"Nate!" he called out.

The young man grabbed his chest in surprise, and then squinted to see who had called him.

"Oh, hey, Mr. Terry! You scared the devil outta me," the young man panted as he approached.

"The same could just about be said here," Thierry laughed.

"I know this is kinda close to your place, but I didn't ever expect to see someone out here this early."

"Neither did I," Thierry said, extending his hand as Nate walked toward him. "What are you doing out here?"

The young man paused for a moment. "Just walking, I guess."

Thierry looked at him with slight bewilderment. "Nate, you've got to be six miles from home. How long have you been walking?"

"What time is it now?"

Thierry glanced at his watch. "About six-thirty."

Nate wiped his glistening forehead with the palm of his hand.

"Bout four hours, then."

"Four hours? Nate, were you lost?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't think so," Thierry replied with a smile. "So why are you all the way out here at such a time?"

"Just thinkin', I guess."

“Anything in particular?”

“Well,” he hesitated. “I’ve got a girl on my mind.”

The old man nodded and smiled. “That’s a reason to be walking in the woods all night. I’ve done it myself.” Nate smiled, a bit nervously. “Who is she, if you don’t mind me asking?”

The young man stayed silent for a minute, thinking through his words before he said them. “You know her.”

“I do?”

“It’s Nicole Burns.”

Thierry subconsciously ran his tongue over the scar on his lower lip when he heard her name.

“I see.”

“Well, Mr. Terry... I know this sounds crazy, ‘cos I’m only nineteen n’ all... but I think I love her.”

Thierry thought quickly back to his conversation with Nicole the day before and felt slightly saddened for Nate. Did he have a clue about Kevin?

“Why is that crazy?” Thierry asked.

The young man shrugged. “‘Cos I’ve heard people say you can’t really fall in love so young, but... truth is, I’ve loved her for years now.”

Thierry was a bit surprised to hear such a confident declaration from a young man who wouldn’t normally display such emotion.

“Why are you walking in the woods just now, then?”

“‘Cos I think she might be in trouble.”

“Trouble?” he asked nervously, “What kind of trouble?”

“She’s started seeing this guy named Kevin—”

*So he did have a clue about Kevin.*

“—And, he’s just no good for her,” Nate continued on. “Sure, he’s a jock, and he’s popular and all, and I just... I’m...”

Thierry thought he might probe Nate’s motives: “Jealous?”

Nate looked up sharply and shook his head firmly.

“No, I’m not jealous,” he said with certainty. “I’m worried about her.”

After a moment of silence, Thierry pressed, “Are you going to tell me why you’re worried?”

“You see, Kevin... well, he has a certain reputation around school, but—it’s hard to put into words—it’s more than that. I don’t think he means any good by her. In fact, I’m sure of it.” Thierry watched as the look of concern on Nate’s face morphed into anger. “He’s really only after one thing, and he’ll do anything to get it—lie, cheat, break her heart—”

“Now hold on a minute,” Thierry interrupted with a wave of his hand. “Just how well do you know this Kevin fellow?”

“Not very well,” Nate shrugged. “I’ve watched him play ball a few times—”

“And was there anything in his play on the football field that would indicate that he’s a vile person?”

Nate shook his head. “But I have run into him a few times over the weekends.”

Thierry raised his eyebrows quizzically. “Same question,” he said.

Nate hesitated and was starting to get upset. “No, nothing in particular, but Mr. Terry—I know that kind of guy. Deep down in my gut, there’s just something not right about him.”

Thierry put up both hands to let Nate know that he was backing off that line of interrogation.

“Is he a violent person?”

“He might of been in a fight or two, but nothing more than what jocks get into here and there.”

“Then, your concern is not with Kevin.” Nate gave a quizzical glance; Thierry shrugged his shoulders. “Your concern is with Nicole.”

“Wait a second, what do you mean by that?” Nate blurted in a halfway accusatory tone.

“Logic, my boy, logic,” Thierry answered. “If you’re worried about Nicole, but have no reason to believe Kevin to be the cause of harm, then you must believe that she is capable of harming herself.” The young man shook his head as if the words were echoing around inside it. “Let me ask you this,” Thierry continued, “Is she a virtuous girl?”

“Of course she is,” he answered defensively. “She’s an angel.”

“From what I know of her, I would tend to agree with you.”

After processing for a moment, Nate quickly asked: “So what’s your point?”

“The point is, that if Nicole is virtuous and Kevin is no fiend, you have nothing to fret about.” The young man nodded silently—he looked pitifully unconvinced. “Nate,” Thierry began in a comforting tone, “I know what you’re going through. May I give you a couple pieces of advice, from a friend to a friend? First, don’t worry about her—she’s a big girl with a good head on her shoulders and a good upbringing. Second, and I know this will be hard to hear, but there are other fish in the sea.”

Nate rolled his eyes in despair upon hearing those words. Thierry put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “It’s true,” he said gently. “You’re a young man with a lot going for you, and there are plenty of other young fish with big hair and silly makeup in the sea.”

The young man looked back down at his shoes and laughed under his breath. “And one more thing,” Thierry said as Nate lifted his eyes again, “If you really love her—”

“I do,” Nate interjected passionately. “I really do—”

“Ok, ok,” Thierry said. “If you really love her, you’ll be there for her when she needs a friend—and for no other reason but that she needs a friend.”

Nate sighed loudly and nodded in agreement.

“You’re a pretty good person to know, Mr. Terry. I’m glad I ran into you like this,” he said genuinely, extending his hand, which Thierry warmly shook.

“Well, thank you. And you’re a good kid. Keep your head up, ok?”

Nate nodded and then started to walk home.

Thierry sat and thought for a while. At one point, Useless got up and moved to the bank of the river. He lapped the cool, clean water for what must have been five whole minutes. *It is getting warm*, the man thought to himself.

“Well, my friend,” he said to the dog, “what do you say we pack it up and get something to eat?”

Thierry gathered his fishing gear and thought for a moment how disappointing it was to have not caught anything, but was also thankful for running into Nate in such a way. He thought about how hard it would be to take his own advice. He couldn’t help but feel worried about Nicole and he didn’t even know why. Perhaps it was because he had had such a special bond with her since she was a small girl, but now that he was retired and not in town six days per week, felt like that had faded. Maybe it was because she was growing up and he was nervous about letting her go.

*Letting her go...* he laughed to himself. What control had he ever had over her? He had always tried to be a mentor, tried to be someone she could count on, and he had done well on that account, but she wasn’t his child to raise, nor was she his daughter to set free. She was her own woman and would make her own choices. There was nothing he could do but be there if she ever needed him. Oddly enough, Nate’s inner monologue followed much the same stream of thought.

---

He tossed his keys down on the kitchen table covered in the checkerboard tablecloth, and poured some water in one bowl and dog food in the other for Useless. The man patted his canine friend gently on the head and said, “Good boy.” The dog was patient enough to briefly show that he appreciated the affection, but not patient enough to let it keep him from eating. Thierry glanced up and noticed the light

flashing on his answering machine on the counter. He poured himself a glass of cold water and then strolled over to listen to the message.

At first, the static was so bad that Thierry thought the person calling must have had a bad connection. He was about to erase the message when he heard a distinct voice cursing in the background. Every muscle in his body froze. He hadn't heard that voice in at least fifteen years. Static continued, then the sound of a whistle, then people talking in the background. Then there was that voice again:

"Hello... Hello?" it shouted angrily. "Thierry? Thierry? Pick up the damn phone!"

More static, more commotion. Thierry suddenly felt sick.

"It's your brother, Marty," said the old voice in a thick New York accent. "Listen, I'm gonna be down in your neck of the woods and was hoping—Damn it! Hey, leave that right there! Don't you touch it!"

Feeling as if his knees were about to give out, Thierry collapsed into his chair.

"Sorry," the voice on the answering machine continued, "But look, I'd like to see if," *{inaudible}*, "and that's about it. I'll try to ring you again when I get in—"

More static, more commotion, then the long dial tone.

Finally, there was silence.

Thierry sat stunned, as if he had been punched in the gut. He covered his mouth with both hands and his eyes watered. He then stood up quickly and erased the message. He didn't want to hear that voice again. In fact, he didn't even want to hear the phone ring knowing that Marty would try to call again. He calmly took it off the hook and placed the headset on the counter.

He sat in his library for hours, gently swiveling back and forth behind the desk. He tried to figure out why his brother would want to see him now, after all these years. He couldn't bear the thought of laying eyes on him.

As if snapping out of a trance, he suddenly realized that he was sitting in the dark. He flipped the desk lamp on and checked his watch. 9:22pm. He turned the light back off and went into the kitchen. The old man was hungry, as he hadn't really eaten at all that day, but was more nervous about eating something and immediately throwing it back up. He double checked the locks on the doors and headed up to bed.

The dream that haunted him every night returned, but this time, with a twist. He was not standing on the precipice this time. He was cautiously balanced on jagged rocks. He strained his eyes to the sea to catch a glimpse of his love, but she was not there. He strained his ears for her gentle voice, but only heard the waves savagely crashing against the rocks. He turned to his right to find her, but she was not there. He turned to his left, and far off in the distance, he could see a white dress billowing in the violent wind. He couldn't run to her because of the waves and the rocks, but he began a steady, frantic dash along the slippery surfaces. Several times, he slipped and felt his ribs burn with pain as he crashed down on the hard rocks. He lifted himself up despite the pain—he could not abandon his love in the hour of her need. He trudged on, only to slip again. After what seemed like an eternity, out of breath and staggering from the intense pain, he came upon her.

She was lying across several large boulders, on her back as angry waves crashed all around. He slid across the platform of one rock on his knees and took her hand in his. He kissed it rapturously over and over, her fingers, her palm, her wrist, her forearm. And then, in a moment of clarity, he realized she was cold. He held her beautiful arm, limp and stiff in his hands, and stared at it in shock for a moment. He then turned his eyes to her face and to his horror, saw it badly bruised, blood pooled behind her glassy eyes. His senses racing back to him, he for the first time noticed the unnatural position of

her body upon the rocks. He slid his hand under her head to caress it, only to feel the contents of her skull leaking out in a steady stream.

He recoiled in horror and slipped off the wet surface of the crag. He fell to a rock four feet below and saw stars for a moment, then felt in full force the dull pain where the back of his head hit the surface below. He simply laid there, staring up at the cliffs above—some forty or fifty feet up—his usual vantage point during this dream.

He found himself asking—*Why is this dream so different, so violent?*

As his vision slowly came back into focus, he noticed the figure of a young man, standing on the cliff, peering down below. At first, he thought he might be looking at an apparition of himself. He sat up and strained his eyes. A huge wave suddenly roared over his head, and he awoke, sitting straight up in bed and covered in sweat, but in the split second before the dream was over, he recognized the young man atop the cliff, staring down at the broken, beaten love of his life.

It was his brother Marty.

## SEPTEMBER 6, 1990

Thierry sipped his coffee and stared out over the field that dissolved into black woods to the north. The air was stifling and not a star could be seen above. Crickets and tree frogs chirred their monotonously relentless songs. Even in the oppressive humidity, Thierry shivered under his blanket. He thought he might be getting the flu. He watched Duke trot from the woods blissfully, the success of his hunt obvious in the felicity of his step. The dexterous cat ducked inside the screen and leapt gracefully on the empty chair beside him. Thierry mindlessly stroked his head. Duke's raucous purring nearly drowned out the song of the insects and amphibians.

The man dreaded the idea of speaking with Marty, but as the sun came up, he started to realize that he was under no obligation to speak to his brother. After all, it had already been more than a decade since

he'd heard from him. In fact, if it wasn't for the occasional newspaper article featuring a quote or a photo of his Wall Street super-broker brother, he wouldn't have even known if he was dead or alive. Beams of light began to peek through the dense trees and Thierry began to feel better. He, after all, didn't care if Marty wanted to speak to him; he did not want to speak to Marty.

His spirit revived, Thierry realized how hungry he was—he hadn't eaten in nearly twenty-four hours. He had breakfast, and then walked his beaten driveway to get the daily newspaper. The cracks of sunlight earlier visible were again overtaken by clouds and the sky turned various shades of gray without raining. Once back inside, he grabbed another cup of coffee and sat again on the back porch, newspaper in hand.

Sports first, as usual. *The Yankees won!* A narrow 2–1 victory over the mediocre California Angels would not, however, salvage their dismal season. He shook his head, remembering the glory days and wondering if, in the modern era of free agency, expansion, and financial considerations, his team would ever dominate as they once had. With a disappointed sigh, he flipped back to the front page.

“Saddam Hussein urges Arabs to rise up against Western powers.”

*I don't think that will end well for him,* thought the old man as he continued skimming from article to article.

“Bob Newhart turns 61...”

This brought a smile to his face. It also made him feel old.

“Wall Street firm executive declares bankruptcy... page C5.” Thierry licked his pointer finger and flipped to C5 to begin reading. “Investment firm Graham, Bates, and Leiberman CFO Martin Laroque has been relieved of his position at the firm just one day after filing for bankruptcy in federal court...”

Thierry put the paper down in shock. This was impossible! His brother Marty had an enormous fortune and was lauded as one of

the top financial and investment minds in the world. *How did this happen?*

The article went on without much detail at all, simply stating that Mr. Laroque took a leave of absence back in July for undisclosed “personal reasons.” It went on with a long statement from Collin Graham, Chairman of the Board, that Mr. Laroque’s personal financial instability in no way effected the company’s wellbeing, nor did it effect the security of the company’s many investors. Graham continued, “Our clients and the general public should have no apprehensions about this situation, as it has been appropriately handled internally, and is completely contained to Mr. Laroque’s personal circumstances. We wish Mr. Laroque the best success in all of his future endeavors...”

He put the paper down again and gazed at the tips of gray clouds as they floated by, the low roll of thunder humming in the distance. He couldn’t believe what he had read and was certain that this had something to do with the phone call he’d received out of the blue the previous day. He was selfishly interested to learn what had happened to his brother, but had never been more disinterested to get involved in the situation. He did, however, decide that it was pointless to leave the phone off the hook indefinitely. He walked to the kitchen and picked the handset up. He could hear the dull, “beep beep beep,” tone that was meant to alert him that the phone was off the hook. He gently placed the handset back on the holder, hanging on the wall beside him. At that moment, Thierry was startled by frenzied barking in the front room.

“Useless!” This usually hushed the dog immediately, but he continued barking ferociously. “Useless!” he yelled again as he walked into the living room.

At that moment, he saw a shadow pass over the glass, covered by a sheer white curtain, on the front door. He stood frozen there for a minute as the dog kept barking. The shadow reappeared and grew larger and larger in the window. Then it stopped growing, and a loud

knock make Thierry's heart skip a beat. His innate reaction was to put his hand on his pistol again, but then he calmed himself and barked at Useless to be quiet. The dog listened this time.

As he approached the door, the man outside knocked again loudly and impatiently. Thierry's worst fear was confirmed when he peeled the curtain back to see his brother Marty, much older and weaker than he remembered him, standing outside. He closed his eyes for a moment and then unlocked and opened the door. Useless grew impatient and stood up. He growled ever so slightly and his top teeth became visible again.

"Library!" With a stern snap and point of the man's finger the dog obeyed, albeit only begrudgingly. He would keep a watchful eye on his owner from the library door.

"Well, aren't you going to let me in?" asked Marty impatiently. A screen door, which was also locked, was all that stood between the two men.

"Why should I?" asked Thierry quietly.

"Why should you?" Marty replied incredulously. "Because I'm your brother for God's sake, and I've come all the way to this God-forsaken wilderness to see you," he said in an agitated tone, looking quickly to his left and his right as if to illustrate his point.

Thierry stood stoically.

"And I'm soaking wet," Marty added. "And for the love of God, how long does your driveway have to be? It took my driver almost an hour to even find it and by the time he did, that stinky kebab was too frustrated to even drive me down it, so I walked. I walked, in my condition, in the pouring rain. Look at me," he held up his foot so Thierry could see his shoes, "these are six-hundred dollar shoes—Italian leather—covered in mud! My socks are soaked through. I swear to God I'm gonna catch pneumonia in the middle of the goddamn summer coming to a place like this."

"I didn't ask you to come here," Thierry curtly replied.

“For God’s sake, Thierry, I’m your older brother—you haven’t spoken to me in at least fifteen years!”

“You’re right—and with good reason.”

“With good reason? With what reason?” Marty asked, his tone become more incredulous as he spoke. “You’re gonna let something that happened forty-five years ago—you’re gonna let that invented offense from a bygone era—keep you from inviting your own flesh and blood into your home?”

“You’re right, I don’t want you in my home. In fact, I don’t even want you on my land.”

“Oh, sure, right,” Marty carried on in his thick Manhattan accent, waving his arms around sarcastically, “your precious land. It’s a back-country swamp, Thierry! The only good it’d do would be if you logged it, and I doubt you’ve even thought about your ROI on that.”

Thierry stood silently, his eyes red with malice.

“But, no, of course you hadn’t thought of that,” Marty continued condescendingly. “You were never one for business, you know that? You had a sharp mind, but instead of doing something useful with it, you filled it with delusions of God-knows-what and revenge for an offense that never happened. Daydreams and nightmares about a life gone by. You could have done something for yourself, you know. You could have made some real money and actually accomplished something if you’d just gotten control over your own emotions. You’re not Edmond Dantès for gods sake—whatever Château d’If you’ve been living in is of your own making.”

The two stood in deafening silence for a moment, rain pounding the roof over the front porch, until Thierry flatly said: “Is that all?”

“What do you mean is that all? Aren’t you gonna let me in?”

Thierry laughed out of disbelief and slowly closed the door in his face.

“Oh, come on, Thierry!” Marty yelled from behind the door. “Your own flesh and blood! You’re gonna let your own brother die out here in the elements?”

*In the elements*, thought Thierry, walking back to the kitchen. *He always had a flair for the dramatic.*

Upon seeing Thierry leave the room, Useless returned to his post by the front door and began growling again. Thierry let him be.

“I’m not leaving, Thierry!” hollered Marty, “You can either let me in or carry my stiff corpse off in a body bag!”

The low temperature that night was 76 degrees, cloudy and humid.

Marty slept on the rocker on the porch, stripped out of his wet clothes to his undershirt and shorts. For the first night in years, Thierry didn’t dream.

## SEPTEMBER 7, 1990

He stared up at his ceiling fan, whirling round and round. He went through his usual ritual—brushing his teeth, shaving, and dressing—and then walked slowly downstairs, the bottom landing putting him just two feet from the front door. He thought to himself that if Marty was still out there, he would have to let him in. The old man bit the inside of his cheek at the thought.

He looked down and noticed Useless still standing guard by the door. It was then that he was sure his brother was still on the porch. Thierry calmly ordered the dog to the library with a click of his tongue and then unlocked and opened the wood door and the screen door behind it. Marty was sleeping, halfway hanging out of the wood rocker. It was then that Thierry saw how bad his brother looked. He had always remembered him so strong, fit, and young. Thierry noticed the sun spots all over Marty’s hands, the thin hairs on his wrinkled arms, and the dark, heavy bags beneath his eyes. Marty’s hair was white and thin; his collar bone poked through his gaunt skin.

His breathing was labored and hard. It had been at least a few days since he had shaved.

Thierry made the sound of clearing his throat. When Marty didn't respond, he did it louder. Marty stirred this time and opened one eye. When he saw his younger brother, he sat up and with some effort straightened himself in the chair. He then coughed loudly, and then coughed again from deep in his chest. His whole fragile body shook.

"Jesus, Thierry," Marty said, looking back up at his brother. "Was this some kind of sick joke? Was that some kind of punishment?"

"Do you want some breakfast?" he asked with a degree of kindness he had not hitherto been able to muster.

"Hell yes. It's been a day and half since I've eaten anything at all."

He got to his feet with some effort, a hard cough racking his body as he did.

"Well then, come in," Thierry said, holding the screen door open with his back. Marty collected his coat, pants, shoes, and socks. He grabbed his suitcase and walked toward the door.

"You're not gonna let that dog attack me, are you?"

Thierry shook his head.

"Yeah, well, I gotta take a piss and get a shower," he said as soon as he'd entered in the house.

"Upstairs, hang a right. Soap and a fresh towel in the closet."

"Yeah, thank you," Marty said gruffly. "Can I get a shave, too?"

"Razor and shaving cream in the medicine cabinet."

Marty nodded his head and trudged up the stairs. Thierry heard him cough again when he reached the landing.

A few minutes later, Marty came back downstairs, his hair still damp from the shower, but combed, and found his way into the kitchen. Thierry motioned him to sit at the table, and then brought out a plate of piping hot eggs, sausage, and fresh berries.

"Coffee?" Thierry asked.

"Uh, yeah, thank you."

“Cream? Sugar?”

“Both,” Marty replied, grabbing his fork and plunging right in.

Thierry sat down across the table and watched his brother eat ravenously. He felt complete and total disdain for him, but at the same time, felt sorry for him—for his age, for how bad he looked, and for what was in the paper yesterday.

“So, what happened to the money?” Thierry asked after a couple minutes.

“What kind of sausage is this?”

“Country sausage.”

“Are you trying to kill me or something? It’s hot as hell.”

“Water?” Thierry asked, somewhat sarcastically.

Marty just shook his head quickly.

“You wanna know about the money, huh?” he asked, wiping his lips quickly with his napkin. “You read about it in the paper?”

Thierry nodded.

“Humph,” grunted Marty. “Then that should be all you need to know.”

“That’s not the first time you’ve told me that.”

Marty locked eyes with his younger brother, then quickly glanced away.

“So you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Talk about it? What is there to talk about? It’s gone. It’s all gone—along with the place on the Upper West Side, the yacht, and Carmen.”

“Who is Carmen?”

“Who is Carmen? She was my wife.”

“Your wife? What happened to Susan?”

“Oh, that bitch is long gone.”

“When did that happen?”

Marty closed one eye and looked toward the ceiling with the other, as if doing some sort of mathematical calculation.

“We’ve been divorced about fourteen years.”

“Well I’m sorry to hear that,” replied Thierry.

“Eh, don’t be,” Marty said with a wave of his hand. “She’d been on my nerves for a while. It all worked out, though— she got her money, and I got Mary.”

“Mary?”

“Yeah,” answered Marty. “My third wife.”

Thierry laughed in disbelief.

“How long did she stick around?”

“About eight months.”

“And then came Carmen,” Thierry said dryly.

“Oh, no, there was Monica in between.”

“Monica? My God, Marty, how many times have you been married?”

He leaned towards his plate to shovel some eggs in his mouth.

“Just six,” he answered through his food.

“Oh, just six,” Thierry repeated.

“Yeah, but I tell you what,” Marty continued while swallowing, “losing Carmen’s the one that’s hurt the most—by far.”

“Why, because she got the rest of your money?”

“Money? No, stupid,” Marty replied condescendingly, “That little bitch was dumb enough to sign a pre-nup. Plus, as you read, it’s all gone anyway. Nah, I’m upset about losing her ‘cos she’s only nineteen.”

“Nineteen?”

“Yeah,” said Marty with a loud laugh, “and it’s always been my dream to die in the arms of a nineteen year old.”

He then coughed so hard that some bits of egg flew back out onto the table.

“God, Thierry,” he said, “you should see her—she’s about five-eleven, a buck-twenty-five—”

“I don’t care,” interrupted the younger brother.

“That’s only cause you haven’t seen her!”

“And what about Vivian?”

“What about her?”

“Do you ever hear from her?” Thierry asked.

“No, do you?”

Thierry shook his head. “Are you finished eating?”

“Yeah, I’m done.”

“Then get your things together,” Thierry said abruptly, picking the dishes up off the table and placing them in the sink.

“What do you mean?” asked Marty.

“I said get your things together—we’re going to the airport.”

“Just like that?” he asked scoffingly.

“Yeah,” Thierry answered. “You said you wanted to see me, you wanted to be in my house, well you’ve done both, and now it’s time for you to leave.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be.”

“Well, you can’t be here, that’s for sure. Let’s get you on the first flight back to New York, and then at least I can pretend this never happened.”

“No, Thierry,” said Marty meekly, “I mean I don’t have anywhere to go.”

Thierry turned and looked his older brother in the eyes. Marty’s eyes were weak and almost moist, but Thierry’s hurt and anger were brimming over.

“I don’t care,” he said harshly.

“Your own brother? And you don’t care,” Marty said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“I’m not responsible for you, your wives, your money, or your well-being. I said I’d take you to the airport, and believe me, with the way I feel about you, that’s awfully generous of me.”

“Well then, how do you feel about me?” Marty asked, getting slightly riled up.

“I hate you,” answered Thierry without any hesitation. “I hate you for being the cause of the vast majority of all the pain in my life.

You destroyed whatever chance of happiness there was for me in the world.”

“Oh sure, it’s still my fault? It wasn’t not having a father, or mom dying, it wasn’t the Depression, or the War, or being homeless and poor, or anything *you* might have done, huh? It was all my fault?”

“Don’t change the subject, you know exactly what I’m talking about,” Thierry said, raising his voice for the first time. Useless came trotting into the room upon hearing it.

“Yeah, I do, Thierry—and I wish you could let it go!” yelled Marty, slamming his fist on the table.

Useless barked loudly.

“Out!” Thierry yelled at the dog who quickly turned tail.

“It’s been forty-five years, Thierry,” Marty continued desperately.

“And those have been the worst forty-five years of my life!”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I had nothing to do with it? How many times did you read the police reports? How many hours did you spend combing through the newspapers? Not only was there no evidence of any kind against me, but on top of it, you won’t take your own brother’s word because you’ve got some kind of a sick hunch!”

“The reason there is no evidence,” Thierry replied accusingly, “is that your people—who would cheat, rob, and murder to keep one of their own out of trouble—did *just* that!”

“Damn it, Thierry! You’re accusing people you’ve never even met—good people!—of a serious crime that you have no proof of! How many people would you implicate in your insane conspiracy theory? And for that sick hunch you’re gonna forsake your own brother, who loves you?”

“You’re damn right I will, Marty,” answered Thierry coldly. “And that’s some sick brand of love you pedal.”

Marty shrugged. “There’s no way that I can prove to you that it was an accident, is there, Thierry?” he asked softly.

Thierry bit both his lips and shook his head.

“How are you gonna stand before God one day, with brazen hatred in your heart?”

The two men locked eyes and then looked away—Marty to the floor and Thierry to the ceiling.

“You lost Hope, Thierry,” Marty said softly. “And you made a choice in your heart that you wanted to lose me, too.” After a couple moments of silence and heavy breath, Marty said: “I’m sick, little brother.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got cancer. Lungs, liver, pancreas—you name it. Doc says I’ve only got a few weeks to live.”

“I’m, sorry to hear that,” said Thierry with as much sympathy as he could muster.

“What-a-you gonna do?” he said with a forced laugh.

“Is that why Carmen left you?” Asked Thierry.

“Isn’t that sensitive? But no—she didn’t even know about the cancer. She left ‘cos of the money. She’s Collin Graham’s side job at present, among others.”

“Well, again, I’m sorry about your problems.”

“*Problems?* Losing everything, having the woman of your dreams walk out on you, and cancer—those are just, ‘problems’ to you—kind of like, your car won’t start or you got gum on your shoe? How about, your only brother hates you—does that qualify as a problem?”

Thierry remained silent.

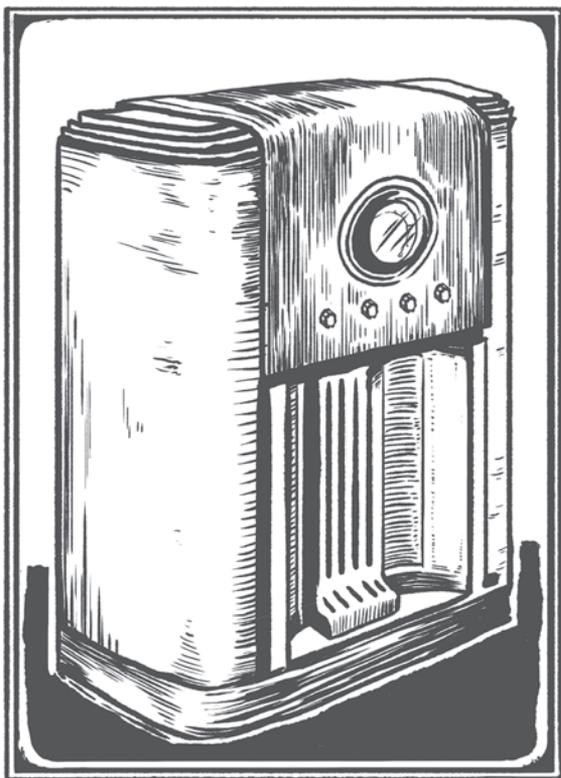
“Well—what are we gonna do? In light of my present condition, are we gonna let bygones be bygones and patch things up?”

The younger one tried to hold back another rush of moisture in his eyes.

“We’re the only family we’ve got, kid. You’re the only person I’ve got to turn to. What do you say?”

Thierry watched his older brother’s eyes for a long moment.

“I said get your things. We’re going to the airport.”



# TWO

*We are all born for love. It is the principle  
of existence, and its only end.*

BENJAMIN DISRAELI

DECEMBER 1927

By this point in her life, Nina Laroque (maiden name unknown) had spectacularly low expectations. She was twenty years old—a daughter, a wife, a mother of two, and a Catholic, although not a particularly observant one. She had been raised in rural France, some fifty miles from Paris, and left home for the city at the tender age of fifteen to find work and a better life for herself. Being free from her father's farm was a bonus. At sixteen, she married the notorious Jacques Laroque, while being three months shy of the delivery of their first child: a boy named Martin. Jacques was a terribly handsome man of twenty-two, of medium build with long, dark hair, and a fiery temperament. Their story began in early 1923, when they met at a small café on Rue des Martyrs: Nina was working as a waitress and Jacques was carousing with several women, which was his usual practice. The young man was immediately thunderstruck by the beauty and charming country manners of the young lady. The next phase of their relationship was a short and rather common history that requires no further exposition.

Four months after their meeting, however, Nina was forced to tell her parents, who were still attempting to support her with what meager means they had, of her condition. One month after that, the couple was at the altar. It may be added here, that Jacques's appearance and commitment to the young Nina were certainly helped along with

the stern guidance and a bit of arm-twisting by the young lady's good father and older brothers, as the young groom was not seen by many in his society as the type of man that would settle down before his fifties, and it was widely assumed that he would most certainly be dead long before then. It may also be assumed that his behavior over the next several years, may in part be attributed, in addition to his utter lack of character, to the fact that his forced marriage to a sixteen year old, however beautiful she might have been, ruined his reputation as one of the premier womanizers in all of Paris, and that over this ruined reputation he was exceedingly bitter. Nina, for her part, spent many nights alone, rocking her young infant and wondering where her husband was and who he was with, although she was certainly not blind to the fact that he was most certainly sharing another woman's bed. Nina was terribly hurt, but unable to curb her husband's "adventurous spirit," as he liked to call it. Being with Jacques was still the pinnacle of happiness for Nina; it just so happened that more often than not, he was utterly absent.

One morning, after another night of loneliness for her and another night of quite the opposite for him, he walked in and asked for his breakfast as usual. She brought over a small plate of freshly cut fruit and two hardboiled eggs. Jacques took her hand tenderly and unexpectedly, and looked in her eyes for the first time in months. Nina was actually startled. A sweet smile dawned on his lips.

"Darling," he said lowly and affectionately, "How would you like to be done with this?"

"Done with what?"

"With this," he motioned with one hand at the room around them, still holding her small hand with the other. "Done with this room, this city? Done with this life, how would you like that?"

"I don't know what you mean," she stuttered. He hadn't been this tender to her since the first day they met, or maybe it was the first

night they slept together. “Done with this city? Are you talking about leaving Paris?”

He laughed gently, his grin growing wider with every bewildered word she spoke. “Yes, to be done with this city, but not just leave Paris. I’m asking you if you want to move somewhere far away from here, and start over with everything, including you and me,” he suddenly got quiet and rather serious. “Darling... I’m asking you to forgive me.”

She almost fainted.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it earnestly, never looking away from her eyes. She had dreamt of her husband saying these words, kissing her hand like that, and looking into her eyes, but she almost couldn’t believe it was actually happening. It was an answer to prayer, a signal from the heavens that, indeed there must be a just and loving God.

Nina burst into tears and crumpled to the floor. Jacques immediately got down from his chair and onto his knees beside his sobbing wife. He wrapped her in his strong arms tightly and held her head against his chest.

“I’ve been a terrible man, Nina. I know this now. I’ve neglected you and our child. I’ve wasted your love and taken advantage of your kindness. Forgive me, my darling.”

She sobbed even more loudly in his arms and nodded her head.

“Let’s leave this city,” he said quietly. “Let’s leave this all behind us.”

She looked up and into his eyes and nodded again.

She asked timidly, “Where should we go? To Spain... or London?” The more she thought of the possibilities, the more excited she got. “Or Rome? Oh, I’ve heard so many wonderful things about Rome!”

He laughed softly while stroking her long, chestnut colored hair.

“I was thinking about somewhere maybe a little farther, where we don’t have to be reminded of our Parisian roots, where we don’t have

to speak French or any one of those damn Latins, and where we certainly don't have to put up with the British!"

She laughed through her tears and her lips broke into an excited smile. "Tell me where, and I'll follow you—straight to the ends of the earth if that's where you lead me."

"Will you follow me to America?"

She burst out laughing. She could have conceived living somewhere in Europe, but didn't even think he could be remotely serious about going to somewhere as far and as foreign as the United States.

"Of course I will! Of course I will go with you!"

"Ah, my darling," he said joyfully, squeezing her tightly to his chest again, "Then to America, to New York it is! We will start afresh! Just you, me, and little Martin! We will make the world our own, we will conquer it and prosper! We will be like the Vanderbilts or the Rockefellers!"

The truth was that although Jacques at this moment truly did desire a fresh start with Nina, he had more practical reasons for suggesting such a dramatic upheaval. He had been in the habit of gambling and had been rather successful at it over the last several years—successful enough to keep food on the table and the rent paid without working. However, as of late, he had slid into a long losing streak that had suddenly become a rather desperate situation when several of his gambling colleagues called in his debts at once. Upon hearing of his utter inability to pay his debts, and then upon hearing of the sheer largess of those amounts and to whom else it was owed, his debtors turned to threats of violence and even preemptory demonstrations thereof. The young husband owed more than he could possibly hope to repay in a lifetime and was firmly convinced that the violence threatened to him would soon become a reality if he stayed in Paris, or anywhere in Europe for that matter.

So in the early spring of 1926, Jacques, the newly pregnant Nina, and their infant son Martin departed France on a steamer boat and

docked at Ellis Island, America. By late April they were settled in a cozy one room apartment in Brooklyn. Jacques managed to find a job on the docks, loading and unloading cargo ships.

On 6 September of that same year, Nina gave birth to their second child, a son they named Thierry.

As time progressed, Nina began to notice that Jacques was picking up night shifts, but didn't seem to be bringing in more pay. Typically, there was also the smell of liquor on his breath when he arrived home in the mornings. When asked about this, he simply stated that the bosses felt so bad about not being able to pay him in cash that they offered him a few shots of good American whisky at the end of his shift as a good-will gesture. This, however, did not explain the smell of ladies' perfume on his neck.

Eventually he not only stopped working altogether, but also stopped keeping up any appearances that he did. His familiar habits took hold of him again, and he again began disappearing for days and nights at a time. When pressed on the subject, he explained that pretty American girls simply could not resist a handsome Frenchman, and that concordantly a handsome Frenchman simply could not resist pretty American girls. Jacques also formed a new habit: beating Nina after such confrontations.

At some point in early 1927, Mr. Clifton Weebles knocked on the young family's door. Mr. Weebles was the landlord of the building in which the Laroques lived, although he might be more appropriately be described as a slumlord. He was a short, greasy man in his late forties—portly, bald, and altogether unappealing. Jacques was away on one of his “adventures” and had not been home for several days. Nina answered the door, and timidly looked towards the floor when Mr. Weebles's stern gaze caught her eyes.

“Do you know why I am here?” he asked condescendingly.

“Yes, sir, I know,” she answered in broken English.

“Well then, why am I here?”

“Because this month’s rent is late, monsieur,” she answered sheepishly.

“Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know monsieur,” she answered, shaking her head and avoiding contact with his eyes. “Why else would you come?”

“Well, either you don’t understand English at all, or you must be flat dumb,” he retorted harshly. “I’m not only here for this month’s rent; I am here for last month’s rent and the rent from the month before that! I am not running a charity house here! I am in business to make a profit, and I cannot make a profit when my tenants do not pay me rent!”

“Monsieur—”

“Stop speaking French, bitch! Don’t know where you are?”

“I’m sorry mon—Mr. Weebles,” she corrected herself before she made him truly angry. “But please, I have two young children, my husband is out of work—”

“Oh I know all about your husband. He’s a whore monger and a gambler!”

“Sir, please, my children—”

“If you can’t pay me what you owe me, you will be out by next week! Do you understand me? Out!”

Upon hearing those words, a desperate thought struck young Nina which had never occurred to her in her entire life.

“Sir,” she said quietly, lifting her head to look into his eyes for the first time, “would it be possible to work out another arrangement between us to settle accounts?”

He got the hint but was apparently intent on torturing her.

“Well, what did you have in mind?”

She glanced down the hallway to make sure it was empty, and then cast a quick look over her shoulder to make sure her children were still sleeping. She unbuttoned the top few buttons of her blouse and checked Mr. Weebles’s face for his reaction.

“Well,” he spoke quietly and slowly, “you are a rather pretty young thing. I’ve always thought your looks were being wasted by that drunkard of a husband.”

The fat man touched her cheek gently with the back of his plump, hairy hand, and slowly ran it down her neck and across her chest. She felt like she would vomit.

“Yes... I think we might be able to work out another arrangement, but first, let me preview the goods before I make a purchase,” he said, pushing her inside and closing the door behind him. Needless to say, Mr. Weebles made the purchase.

For the first time in her life, Nina Laroque slept with a man other than Jacques. She prayed desperately that her husband would never find out. The arrangement she and Mr. Weebles agreed to included the use of her body over the course of several weeks in order to repay back rent that was still owed. The landlord was painstaking in making sure that his wife, the equally grotesque Mrs. Weebles, was unaware of this particular transaction. Over the course of a few weeks, he actually grew quite fond of Nina, her charm being something truly extraordinary, and over the next several months, even began recommending her services to other professionals to which she was indebted, most of whom were happy to enter into such alternative methods of payment with the pretty young girl from the French countryside. Eventually, Mr. Weebles was running quite a lucrative side business out of the Laroque’s apartment, allowing Nina a certain percentage of the profits, although she was never aware of quite how low her percentage was, in goods and services and sometimes in cash.

By this time, Jacques had nearly disappeared completely, and would emerge from New York’s rotting underbelly only once a week or so. Even when he was home he was terribly neglectful of his children, the state of the apartment, and even of Nina, although he did make her fully cognizant that despite his absence she still had wifely duties to perform. She was by this point completely accustomed to

being used, and for the sake of maintaining what had become a rather lush lifestyle by not upsetting him, she submitted without a word of protest. Jacques did not notice the new china, he did not notice the new mattress, or the new bed for the boys; he did not notice the new paintings on the walls, nor did he notice the new and brightly patterned dresses she wore. He did not notice that the rent was always paid, the lights were always on, the boys always had fresh milk, and that there always seemed to be meat on the table. The drunkard simply assumed that American landlords, electric companies, milkmen, and butchers were much more generous and accommodating than their European counterparts. He did, however, notice that her English had improved dramatically, but did not stop to wonder where she might have had the opportunity to practice it much.

He was fairly sober by the time he got home on this particular day, due to the fact that he had woken up in a woman's bed roughly seventy blocks from his family's apartment. He walked all of those blocks in the early morning, mid-December frost—a light dusting of snow crunching under his feet as he went. He began his walk in possession of a terrible headache, but it gradually faded the more he trudged on. The cold air in his lungs in combination with the vigorous exercise was ultimately quite refreshing, and by the time he entered the building owned by Mr. Weebles, he actually felt reasonably alert.

Jacques bounced up the stairs lightly, all ten flights, to his young family's apartment. He fumbled around in his pocket for the key, standing outside the door for a long moment. Suddenly, his ears perked to something inside that he had never heard before in that apartment. There was the sound of what might have been several men and women talking, and then he distinctly picked out the sound of Nina laughing heartily, and then his two young boys giggling along simultaneously. He finally found his key and opened the door slowly. Inside, Jacques saw Nina, Martin, and Thierry, a toddler by this time, sitting on the floor together on a lush Persian (*is that a Persian?*) rug,

crowded around a brand new and fairly expensive looking piece of furniture—a radio in a deep cherry wood finish. He blinked twice just to make sure that what his eyes were taking in was indeed reality. He had never dreamt of being able to afford such an expensive luxury item, and was flabbergasted by its appearance in his humble home.

Nina stood gracefully, although she was a little surprised by his entrance, and approached him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him gently. Jacques did not kiss back. In fact, he stood completely frozen, eyes staring past her straight at the radio. She continued by greeting him warmly, as if everything in the world was completely at peace.

“Where...” he gulped as if he was having trouble formulating the words, “did you get that radio?”

“Oh darling!” she responded cheerfully. “Do you know that radio shop over on Delancey Street that we always used to pass on the way to Monsieur Philippe’s café? You know the one where we used to get that wonderful coffee?”

“Mhmm,” he murmured slowly.

“Well, Mr. Weebles knows the owner of that shop, in fact, they’re good friends from what I hear—in some sort of business club together or something,” she spoke rapidly and excitedly. “Well, Mr. Weebles knows how difficult it is for me to entertain these two young boys all day by myself... with you working most of the time.”

Jacques lowered his eyes and glared at her suspiciously as he heard her emphasize that he had been out working. He sensed she had something up her sleeve but had no idea what it could possibly be.

“And so, he asked Mr. Hermann to keep us in mind if—”

“Who is Mr. Hermann?” he snapped.

“The radio store owner, darling!” she replied, as if he should have known all along. “Mr. Hermann couldn’t sell this radio because of the damage to the finish on the side, so he gave it to Mr. Weebles to give to us! Out of the goodness of his heart! It was delivered a couple days

ago—right after you left! I was so disappointed that you didn't get to see it when it arrived!"

Jacques glanced over at the radio. He could see no signs of damage.

"It looks fine to me. What is wrong with it?" he asked accusingly.

"Oh," she responded, for the first time rather nervously. She wished more than anything else that his questions would cease. He was prying for the first time and she desperately wished that he would stop. She had taken his lack of interest for granted and hadn't really prepared a story for everything in the apartment that she had acquired, nor had she prepared a general explanation for the status of their newly found material success. "Darling," she continued quickly, "it's all scratched on the side. You or I might not notice, but you know how picky Americans are about everything—especially rich ones! There's not a chance that this beaten-up old thing would sell to an American family!"

"I see," he drawled slowly.

"Well, how about some breakfast? You must be famished!"

"Um, sure," he responded, his eyes locked again on the beautiful radio.

There was an uncomfortable silence while she spun toward the stove and began slicing some bread. He was now completely aware that something had been going on behind his back, and his mind was working a mile a minute to try to figure it out. Maybe she had gotten a job; maybe a rich relative that he didn't know about had kicked the can and the estate had sent money. Every possibility he could concoct sounded highly unlikely, but he knew that something just wasn't right. She was wearing a beautiful dress; she almost looked as if she was dressed up. She even appeared to be wearing makeup. He had never seen her in makeup before. Simply put, she looked stunning. However, he recognized her dress—he had seen it in an expensive department store window on his trudge home that very morning.

He sat down at what appeared to be a new kitchen table. He propped his elbows on his knees and leaned forward in her direction.

“Nina?”

“Yes, darling?” she called back over her shoulder, still facing the stove, also wracking her brain as to how to explain all of this to Jacques, because she felt sure that he would continue asking.

“Where did you get that dress?”

She spun quickly toward him, but remained silent for a moment, her mind racing for an explanation.

“It’s funny that you should ask about that, too,” she said anxiously. “You see, Mr. Weebles introduced me to a wonderful and kind old woman who lives just several blocks from here. We’ve become fast friends. Well, it just so happened... that her daughter’s husband took a job in Boston! He’s a banker or something and makes a lot of money. Anyway, this kind old woman’s daughter simply couldn’t pack all of her wonderful dresses and shoes—and makeup, too!—for their trip (she had such a large wardrobe, you should have seen it yourself!), and so being that we share the exact same size, she was generous enough to give them to me! Isn’t that incredible?”

Nina searched his face eagerly for a response, hoping and praying with all the spiritual fervor she possessed that he would believe her and simply let the argument rest at that. In the past, he may have let such questions settle, but today, he was in rare form and had decided that he would not be satisfied until he had uncovered the truth.

“Yes, darling... It is absolutely unbelievable,” he said slowly.

She thought she sensed sarcasm in his voice, but chose to believe that he believed her, and once again tried to change the subject, and also, perhaps, tried to shift some of the discomfort of this situation onto him: “So have you found much work, darling?”

Jacques ignored her question completely. His body position remained fixedly accusatory. He looked from the radio towards her faced, searched it for a minute and then looked her up and down.

“Nina, that dress does not look worn at all. In fact, it looks like it might have just come from the shop today.”

She laughed nervously. “Well dear, like I said, this young lady—Mrs. Brewer, as I recall—had so many things that she never touched simply because she had so many things! It would have taken her a lifetime to wear all of the things she had, even if she wore two a day!”

“I see...”

His gaze searched her eyes again; she looked quickly back to the stove to avoid his eyes.

“Nina,” he began a new line of questioning, noticing the fresh provisions near the stove. “Where did you get all that food? Is that salami? Where did you get salami?”

She was beginning to get quite irritated with his questioning and was unsure how to shake him off her trail. She just knew that whatever story she invented had to sound believable. “One of Mr. Weebles’s tenants is the butcher, Khohklakov, a Russian or a Jew, I think, or maybe both. Anyway, he rents his shop space from Mr. Weebles and is greatly indebted to him for the generous rate he receives—I believe. So, Mr. Weebles simply asked him to spare some extra meat for us whenever he could, knowing that we have two growing boys—”

“Monsieur Weebles?”

“Yes, dear... our landlord,” she answered timidly.

“Every answer to any question I ask seems to begin with Mr. Weebles. Mr. Weebles knows this person; Mr. Weebles knows that person. May I ask, to what do we owe all of this kindness from Mr. Weebles?”

Her mind raced again.

“Why, it’s just that, well... he is an exceedingly generous man.”

Jacques looked out from under his brow in utter disbelief. He knew that Weebles was a conceited, money-hungry lowlife, and that taking care of a young, foreign family was the last thing he would

have on his mind. He felt a primeval rage bubbling to the surface of his countenance.

“Gen-er-ous?” he asked, enunciated each syllable and giving his best effort at keeping his building anger in check.

“Yes, darling, he knows how hard you are working and how hard it is to provide for a family these days, and he is simply using his connections to benefit us and our children. He is a very charitable man, Jacques.”

She swallowed hard as she realized how absurd her statement had been and how unlikely her husband was to believe it.

“Char-it-a-ble?” he said quietly, shaking his head.

“Yes, he is very charitable,” she said softly, attempting to reassure him that this was indeed the truth.

Suddenly, Jacques flew into a rage, standing up promptly and pounding his fist on the table.

“I will not be another man’s charity!” he screamed.

Nina recoiled suddenly in fear, and both of their children suddenly looked up from the floor at their father. Nina quickly ran and took them in her arms.

“Jacques, please don’t yell,” she pleaded sweetly. “You will scare the children.”

“I will not allow you to disgrace me, woman, by taking handouts from other men and their wives!”

“It’s not like that!” she responded, becoming somewhat agitated herself. “We all must rely on the goodwill of our friends and neighbors from time to time.”

“No, no, no!” he thundered, continually banging his fist on the table for effect. “Not me! Not my family! I am Jacques Laroque! I am not a pauper, I am not a beggar, and I am not a charity case! I am a husband, a father, and I am the provider for this family!”

There was a moment of silence when suddenly Nina let go of the children and stood up. She and Jacques were face to face.

“Then provide for us, damn it!” she yelled at him. He was a bit taken aback by her boldness. “If you are the provider for this family, then provide! All you do is take handouts from your women—clothes, liquor, and god-knows what else! But you do not provide for your own family at home!”

He stared at her, the fire behind his eyes building again. He felt as if the room had suddenly gotten hot, and reached up to feel the sweat building on his brow.

“You insolent woman—you ungrateful bitch!”

“Ungrateful? What am I supposed to be grateful to you for?” her tone had shifted to one of utter disbelief at his audacity. She had lost the will to protect him, and had lost the will to pretend that she loved him. “Am I ungrateful to you for seducing and getting me pregnant at sixteen? For sleeping with other women from the very first weeks of our marriage? For being dragged halfway around the world to live in misery, far away from everything I know? For being left with your sons to be turned out into the street, while you waste your days drinking and fornicating?”

He was too shocked to respond, and simply let his jaw hang open while she berated him. There was another moment of silence between them before Nina continued, growing quieter after being suddenly aware of the children again, although the anger in her tone did not subside.

“Jacques, you are a pauper. You are a beggar, and on top of that, you are the worst man I have ever known—”

At hearing this, his heart actually broke. However, he responded in the only way he knew how—he hit her.

Her nose and mouth went numb and her eyes watered from the force of the blow. She did not fall to the ground; she kept her balance out of pride, although she did feel the room spinning around her. She put her hand to her face and felt warm blood running down. She looked down toward her hands and saw it dripping down onto her

new dress, down onto the new table, and down onto the new Persian rug. He had hit her before, but she had never been hit that hard in her life.

Little Thierry began to cry behind her. His older brother Martin took him in his arms and began to rock him slowly, avoiding his parents with his eyes. Jacques walked over to the radio slowly, and suddenly kicked it down onto its face, the force of the shock shaking the room. He then turned it over roughly onto its side, and then again onto its back—rolling it towards the door.

Nina began to protest, pleading with him not to break it, not to destroy it because the children loved it. Jacques simply rolled it from side to side, broken shards of glass and splinters of rich cherry wood flying off in all directions.

“Jacques, please!” she cried.

When he reached the door he shoved it roughly out into the narrow hallway. Nina grabbed him by the arm; she was almost hysterical.

“Jacques, please, do you know what that cost?” she shrieked.

“It was free, you stupid woman! And I will not tolerate another man’s charity in my home!”

He quickly pulled his arm loose from her grasp and then froze. He stared into her eyes, soaked with tears, and her face, running with blood, and for the first time he understood. There was indeed something running much deeper under the surface than what she presented. A silence of just a few seconds ensued, which felt more like an eternity to her.

“You whore,” he said, looking her up and down with utter disdain. She weakly stared back at him, with growing horror in her eyes. “You’re not a charity case after all... you’re a slut. How long, eh? How long has my wife been the village harlot?”

“What does it matter to you?” she yelled back.

“Well, I’d like to know how far this goes back. How long have you been making a fool out of me?”

“A fool out of you? Do you think I wanted this? I would have traded a pauper’s existence for this hell a thousand times, as long as it would have meant being poor with you!”

He hit her again, and this time, her brightly-colored blood splattered on the wall just inside the apartment, on the stacks of china just inside the door, and, worst of all, across the face of little Martin. Nina screamed when she saw her little boy’s face spotted in her warm blood. She feverishly tried to wipe the splotches off her child’s frozen face with the folds of her dress, but succeeded only in smearing the red fluid over his cheeks and forehead. The boy stood there as if in a state of shock. She wept hysterically, blood still dripping from her nose and mouth. There was a terrible pounding in her head.

Suddenly, she heard a series of thunderous crashes outside the door, and she immediately climbed to her feet. At the threshold, she saw Jacques returning from the landing. He grabbed her roughly by the hair and pulled her toward the stairs.

“Look!” he commanded, pointing down the staircase.

Her radio lay smashed into a thousand pieces at the bottom. Her husband strengthened his grip on her hair and said slowly and quietly, “You’re going to look something like that when I’m through with you, slut.”

Just then, a door creaked open down the hall, and for a moment, Nina thought she might be saved, but it was only the old Italian lady who lived by herself, peering out to see what all the commotion was. Once she saw the blood on Nina’s face and Jacques standing over her, she quickly closed the door and went back in to the safety of her small abode.

Nina prepared herself for death. She had always feared that Jacques would kill her if he found out about her new occupation. She had been torn between her Christian faith, her vows to her husband, however unfaithful he might have been, and her duty to provide for her children above all else. So now she prayed. She prayed that God might

have mercy on her soul. She prayed that he would accept her into heaven because, although her sins were many, they were committed selflessly.

Jacques pulled up on her hair, and she knew that he was about to send her down the stairs as hard as he could. She may have still had the will to resist him, but simply did not have the strength. Then suddenly, she was saved—her prayers answered from on high.

A small voice cried out behind the couple. Jacques immediately turned, yanking Nina's throbbing head around with him. Little Martin stood on the threshold, his small face still smeared in his mother's blood.

"Monsieur," he called softly. "Monsieur please... my mama... please... it's my mama..."

Jacques stared at his son who did not even recognize his own father and clenched his teeth. He did not feel mercy; he did not feel a tinge of remorse. In actuality, he felt quite the opposite—he felt repulsion and utter disgust towards the woman he had married and his small son. He released his grip on Nina's blood-soaked hair and she crumpled down to the floor, but not down the stairs. The boy just stood there with long, streaky tears flowing down his red stained face.

Jacques approached him slowly and calmly. Martin stood his ground.

"Go to your mama," he commanded softly, pointing to the woman lying in the heap on the floor. Martin ran to her and embraced her. She began to weep and gently hugged back.

Jacques disappeared into the apartment momentarily, and then emerged with Thierry, carrying the toddler gently. The young boy was calm and curiously stared at his father's sweaty face. His father did not look back at his. Jacques knelt beside Nina and Martin, and placed Thierry down gently next to them. He lifted Nina's head gently so that their eyes met.

“Woman, if I ever see you again,” he drew up a breath, “I swear on everything holy...”

Jacques did not finish his sentence. He simply stood upright, brushed off his pants, and walked nonchalantly back into the apartment. The door then slammed behind him.

That was the last time either Martin or Thierry ever saw their father.

After several minutes, Nina regained the strength to stand and in that moment she made a conscious decision to carry on. She wiped her lip on her sleeve, picked up Thierry, and took Martin by the hand. They walked down each flight of stairs, step by step. When they got down to the bottom, she gently stepped over the shattered remains of her cherished radio and helped little Martin navigate his way through the splintered mess without tripping.

Nina and her two boys stepped out of the apartment building and into the bright sunlight, and this young woman again began an endeavor to leave her past behind.

## JANUARY 1928

Christmas came and went that year, all without Nina’s notice. The boys received no gifts.

The young lady moved her two children across two rivers into New Jersey, where the friend of a distant relative back in France had agreed to loan her a small room in an apartment building for a couple months, until she could find work. Nina knew that this arrangement could not possibly be permanent, and felt that she owed the new landlord, whom she had never actually met before, to find work as soon as she felt capable of getting out in the weather, and as soon as her bruises went in completely.

The mother and her children had a small wooden stove in one corner of the room, a table with one stool adjacent to it, and five ragged,

but warm blankets for both a mattress and covering. There was a communal toilet on the first floor of the six-story building. Nina's new landlords were also kind enough to give her a half-carton of eggs, two loaves of bread, and a few thin pieces of bologna. This, in addition to the clothes on their backs, was all that they could claim as their own.

She laid on the blankets with the boys for long periods of the day and night, although she rarely slept. She tried desperately to regain her strength, knowing that their food supply would soon run out, and that she must get up and find some kind of work. She had made up her mind that no matter what the cost, she would not allow herself to be used like she had in New York. She would find some other kind of legitimate and humane line of work.

Then, a terrifying thought struck her for the first time: how would she take care of the children while she worked? This thought came to her in the middle of the night and she sat up in her makeshift bed in a cold sweat. Certainly no employer would allow her to watch two young children, prone to getting into things, while she worked.

She noticed Thierry was stirring a bit, and gently reached down to touch his face. The small boy's nose felt frozen stiff, so she got up and stoked her last log on the stove. She knew that before the night was over she would need more wood for the fire, so she tucked the two boys in under the blankets, except for the one on the top layer which she wrapped around her fragile frame.

Outside the apartment building, and around the corner in the alley, there was a small wood pile kept under lock for the tenants of the building. A portion of their rent each month would go to provide fuel for the stoves that kept each small apartment warm. The cold was bitter, and a cruel wind blew steadily from the North. Nina trudged through a few inches of snow and into the dark alley that always made her feel uncomfortable. She usually tried to load up on wood before dark, but the temperatures dipped so low that extra was required.

When she reached the metal crate that held the wood, she searched her pocket for the small key that would open the padlock. The realization that she had left it upstairs made her curse under her breath. She noticed two decent sized pieces of timber sticking precariously out of the crate, and thought that she might simply be able to tug them out without having to unlock the top. She struggled mightily, yanked and pulled, but to no avail. The wood wouldn't budge.

Tears began to stream down her face and she became angry. She was almost ready to give up, not just on pulling the wood out of the crate, but on life itself. It seemed to her that all she knew was hardship, and that she could not catch a break—one piece of good luck. Her life had been on a continual spiral out of control for as long as she could remember, and the only things keeping her going at all were the two sleeping boys on the sixth floor.

She pathetically yanked at the two pieces of fire food, and just when the thought crossed her mind that her life could not possibly get any worse, she heard a loud voice behind her in the dark:

“Hey! What are you doing?”

She startled, and realized that it looked like she was trying to steal from the pile. She prayed that the strong voice wasn't that of a police officer. Nina turned and saw a tall, thin black man in a heavy, but tattered coat.

“I was just... trying to get some wood.”

“Well I can see that!” he said accusingly, his tone raised, although he kept his volume down as if to keep from disturbing the otherwise peaceful night.

“Sir, please,” she replied, “I live in this building, I just forgot my key upstairs.”

She shivered, a fresh gust of frigid air blowing raw against her face.

“I know you live here!” he said as he looked quickly over his shoulder. “I've passed you on the stairs. You have those two little boys.”

She nodded.

"I'm just trying to get some wood for the fire."

"I didn't mean what are you doing getting wood—I meant what are you doing out here in this weather, wearing practically nothing!"

Nina felt a sharp sting in her heart—she hadn't expected kindness.

"Get inside!" he ordered.

"But sir, I need this wood for my fire—"

"Get inside!" he commanded again, this time pointing towards the front door.

She was frustrated, but didn't quite know what to do, so she obeyed. As she passed him, he said gently, "Now you just wait in the foyer."

Inside the foyer the building wasn't much warmer, but at least she was out of the wind. She shook her hair and stamped her feet to knock the snow loose. The air inside the building had a smoky quality from all of the stoves and cigarettes lit up constantly during the course of the day. She wondered if she should just go get her key to the wood box.

At that moment the man entered through the door carrying more wood than she could have grabbed in five trips. He stomped his feet as well.

"Ok, what floor?"

"Me?"

"Well, of course you! I know what floor I live on!" he retorted cheerfully.

Nina thought that his smile was genuine and pure. He was middle aged, with half of his hair turned white, the other half still youthfully black. There were lines on his face—laugh lines—and for as cold as he may have been at the moment, he radiated warmth.

"Six," she said with a responsive smile.

"Ok, well, up we go."

As he leaned towards her he asked her to grab the log on top of his pile and said, "You didn't think I was gonna do this by myself, did you?"

He carried the rest of the wood all the way up all six flights of stairs, Nina following behind, feeling guilty that she wasn't doing more to help him help her.

"Are you sure I can't carry another? I can at least grab two or three more!"

"Don't you worry about it, child; I may look old, but I'm strong as an ox."

"You don't look old," she replied, afraid that she may have offended him.

Then, under his breath, she heard him say with confidence, "I know."

Eventually, they reached her door. She opened it and asked him to come in. The man gently placed the pile of wood down next to the stove. As he stood up straight, Nina heard his back crack loudly.

"Oh, well that was a good one," he said, arching backward to stretch his muscles.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine."

He looked down at her two sleeping boys under the blankets, then at the small table and over at the stove. He glanced at the bare walls and the one small window that was practically draftier closed than it would have been open. He motioned her out into the hallway.

Nina walked out and closed the door gently behind her. She wasn't sure what to expect. The man leaned in seriously, but didn't say a word. He simply watched her face, as if searching for something. Nina was a bit uncomfortable, but wasn't sure what to say, if anything at all. After a few seconds, which felt more like an eternity to her, the man's serious expression quickly changed and he backed up a step, helping her to feel more at ease.

"Honey, is that all you got?"

"I beg your pardon?"

“Inside,” he pointed behind her towards her door, “is that all you’ve got?”

She nodded.

“Oh, honey...” he shook his head in sympathy and disbelief that she could be that poor. “Are you doing anything tomorrow morning?”

“What time?” she asked, even though she knew that she had no plans—what could she possibly do?

“Seven.”

“Nothing, it’s open.” After the words escaped her lips she suddenly realized that there was an outside chance that he was asking her to do precisely what she swore she would never do again, but in that moment, the thought of having some cash in her hands and some food in her stomach convinced her to take him up on the offer.

“Well, why don’t you come down to number 306?” he said slowly.

She thought for a moment about this choice and its potential to crush her dreams of starting over. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. She nodded her head.

“Great! And bring the boys!” he exclaimed, suddenly cheerful again.

Nina’s mind went blank.

“The boys?” she asked quietly, not sure what else to say.

“Yeah, the boys!” he said excitedly. “I’ll have my wife Henrietta cook up some good breakfast! You like eggs right?”

She began to sob in relief. No tears would come to her eyes, but she struggled to control her breath. She had given herself to the worst kind of existence imaginable, again, but this kind stranger’s intentions had been as pure and noble as his smile.

“Hey, are you alright?” he asked, putting his hand on her shoulder to steady her.

“Your wife?” she asked, as soon as she was able to compose herself.

“Yes, Henrietta. And my name’s Henry. What do you think of that?”

She didn't know what she thought.

"About breakfast?" he asked reassuringly.

"Oh," she was calming down, and a smile came back to her face, "that would be lovely!"

"Great! Well, we'll see you tomorrow then! Seven o'clock, number 306!"

With that Henry tipped his hat, turned and bounced down the stairs like a man in his twenties. Nina went over to the railing and thanked him. She could see him hold his hand up and point upwards towards her as he lightly jogged down.

Back inside the apartment the boys were still sleeping, so she stoked a couple more logs into the stove, and stood near it for a few moments so that she wouldn't be cold when she got back under the blankets. She thanked God for her new friend, for the unlikely angel that he had sent into her life at such a bleak moment. The feeling of hopelessness had suddenly vanished and, with a content smile on her face, she was able to sleep peacefully for the first time that she could remember.



At seven A.M. sharp, Nina knocked on door number 306. There was a bustle inside the door, the sound of raucous laughter (the type you might hear at midnight rather than early in the morning), and then a cheery and high pitched, "Coming!"

Henrietta opened the door quickly and smiled immediately when she saw Nina, holding little Martin's hand and Thierry in her arms. Nina smiled back instinctively, and said, "Hello."

"Well, hi, honey!" Henrietta exclaimed, immediately hugging Nina around the shoulder. She then said hello to Martin in a serious, but playful tone, and then cooed at the silent Thierry. "Please, come in!"

The apartment was warm and smelled like butter and fresh bacon. There was a wood stove, similar to Nina's, although slightly newer, a

wooden table set with chipped porcelain plates and chairs, and most magnificent of all, a cherry colored radio that stood in the corner. Nina put Thierry down and the two boys immediately ran towards the music machine, spun the dial to a familiar setting, and plopped down in front of it as if mesmerized. Nina glanced at Henrietta nervously and began to apologize for her children's harmless, but impolite behavior.

"Honey," Henrietta cut in, "please don't apologize. Your children are lovely! I know we only just met a minute ago, but please, please, make yourself at home here. We're gonna get to know you and your children just fine, and you're gonna get to know us, so in the meantime, why act like strangers, huh?"

"Thank you," she replied with a naturally charming smile.

"Don't mention it," Henrietta replied warmly. "After all, life is too short to and this world is too cruel to go around pretending like everybody's out to get us, like we're just wandering around and can't see nothin' 'cause of the dark."

Nina could sense that Henrietta had suffered a great deal in her lifetime, and was amazed at the poise, the subtle grace, and the deep joy of this woman. There was something about this couple that Nina had never experienced before, and for a minute, she wondered if it had something to do with race, being as she had never really spoken with a black person before.

"Sometimes, the world is very dark," Nina replied.

Henrietta smiled sweetly. "Well, honey, that's what I mean. That's why we're here—and I'm not talking about you and me, I'm talking about all of us." She waved her hand around the room. Then she spoke slowly, enunciating each word for emphasis: "Humankind. We *make* the light." Henrietta raised her eyebrows and leaned backwards slightly, a smile crawling across her lips.

At that moment, there was more commotion at the door, and Henry entered, dressed in the thick coat he had worn last night as well as a navy blue wool cap, and carrying a large bundle wrapped in

brown paper. He was whistling happily. When he looked up, he saw Nina and a bright smile shot onto his face.

“Hey, young lady—glad to see you could make it!” He placed the bundle down on the kitchen table and hugged her tightly. “Make yourself at home,” he said cordially.

Henry then wrapped his wife in his arms and squeezed. She let out a quick squeal. He did not let her go and rocked her back and forth, saying “Wow, did I miss you! You’re even more beautiful than I remember!”

When he finally did let go, Henrietta took a moment to catch her breath, shaking her head and smiling.

“Well, you’ve only been gone twenty minutes, you old fool!” she teased. “What did you think I looked like?”

Henry shot a playful glance at Nina, and then shouted playfully toward the boys, who turned suddenly from the radio to see the large man. Within minutes, the three boys were wrestling on the floor. Nina sat at the table drinking hot coffee—real coffee—and staring in amazement at the playful scene taking place on the floor. She had never actually seen her boys with an authentic father figure, and she practically had to choke back tears at how happy they seemed.

“How’s the coffee?” Henrietta asked. “Do you need milk?”

Nina took a sip and shook her head. “I drink it just black. And it’s marvelous, thank you.”

“Good—I’m glad to hear it!”

Henrietta turned back to the stove, and after about a minute of scraping some pots and pans, announced that breakfast was served. She then removed the large bundle from the table and placed it gently in the corner.

The meal was fantastic. Fried eggs, bacon, toast, and more coffee. Henrietta even served buttered grits, which Nina had never eaten before, but thoroughly enjoyed. She learned that grits were a Southern thing, and that both Henry and Henrietta were from Georgia.

“The weather down there is great. At least the winters are,” laughed Henry.

“How did you end up all the way up here?”

“Work,” Henry replied. “Couldn’t find nothin’ down there.”

“You see,” Henrietta chimed in to help explain her husband, “both sets of our parents were born slaves.”

Nina nodded in understanding, although all she knew about the American Civil War was that it ended slavery and that it itself ended some time ago.

“We were both born free, though, after the war,” Henrietta continued. “But things are tough down there. Our parents were from the same plantation and the master told them to beat it once things calmed down. He wasn’t gonna pay no Negroes to work for him—he was one of the principled ones. So, our folks picked up work on farms here and there, and a lot of us stayed together wherever we went. The two of us,” she pointed to herself and her husband, “grew up together.”

Nina smiled at the thought of that.

“And I knew I was gonna marry that woman from the time I was twelve years old!” Henry exclaimed, pointing to Henrietta quickly and then slamming his fist on the table for effect. “And good God was she beautiful! I mean, she still is—look at her. But every boy I ever met wanted to marry that woman, and I—”

“You’re an old fool!” Henrietta piped in playfully. “Now shut up and let me tell the story!”

Henry waved at her and pretended to be upset. She continued:

“So we ended up all over the South—Tennessee, the Carolinas, even Texas for a minute—but it was hard to put your feet down anywhere. No colored person could get a break, and although there were some good white folk who would’a helped, most of them had enough trouble putting food on their own plates, so what could they do?”

“Then we got married!” Henry chimed in again. “And that woman made me the happiest man there ever was! Oh, Lord, we had nothin’!

Not even a dime to our name, but that woman made me the happiest man the Good Lord ever blessed.”

Nina couldn't fathom such genuine devotion. She had always known that her marriage was one of necessity, at least on her husband's part, and in addition, due to the fact that most of her former johns had been married, she had begun to believe that such honor and fidelity did not exist among men. Her beauty had always made her the focus of admiration and adulation, but never genuine fondness and respect.

“How long have you been married?” Nina inquired.

“Thirty-eight years of wedded bliss!” Henry replied happily.

“Thirty-eight years! Whew!” Nina exclaimed.

“Yes, honey,” said Henrietta with a sigh, “I was sixteen and Henry over there was seventeen, and we didn't have a damn clue what we were doin'.”

“Hmm, I sure did,” Henry coyly responded.

Henrietta laughed gently and shook her head. “You old fool... Anyway, we were young, but having each other's been the only thing that's kept us alive.”

“Do you have children?” Nina asked.

Henrietta nodded and sighed again, this time quite solemnly.

“We did, but they passed on to a better place.”

“I'm so sorry,” Nina gasped at the thought.

“Some things just weren't meant to be,” Henry answered. “We had two who were stillborn, one drowned when she was eleven, and one was lynched in Aiken, South Carolina.”

“Lynched?” Nina wasn't quite sure what the word meant, but imagined it must be something horrible.

Henry nodded soberly. “That was Junior, our first son.”

“I'm so sorry,” was the only thing Nina could think to say.

“Well, that's life, ain't it?” Henry asked rhetorically. “The good Lord giveth, and sometimes man taketh away.”

“That’s so horrible,” Nina said as she took another sip from her mug.

“There’s nothing we can do but look back with fond memories and be thankful. Our children, for the short time they were here, made the world a brighter place.”

“Well how about you, sweetie?” Henrietta asked. “We’ve been talking about us for so long, tell us about yourself—I mean, other than the fact that you’re European. We’d figured that out all by ourselves,” she joked.

“Well, where to begin?” Nina thought out loud. She did not want to burden them with the details of her relationship with Jacques, so she told the story’s abridged version.

“I moved here, to New York, with my husband several years ago. These are our two boys. We had a bit of a falling out and separated. So I’m here.”

She shrugged her shoulders as if to imply that this was all there really was to the story.

“So you’re here...” Henrietta repeated with a tinge of sadness in her voice.

“Yes, and now I suppose my biggest worry is looking for work. I can’t imagine what I can do with two boys to watch. Martin will be old enough for school next year, but in the meantime, I don’t know what to do. And then even when he goes, what to do about little Thierry?”

“Well, what did you do before you separated from your husband?” Henry asked innocently.

Nina blushed and was afraid that her guests could see it.

“Um, I was just a housewife,” she replied nervously. “Although I have done some sewing and worked in cafes and such.”

“Well, I know there are still plenty of places like that in business,” Henrietta replied. “Whether they’re offering jobs or not—I don’t

know what to tell you. I'd expect that they're trying to protect their own, and no offense, but you ain't their own."

"What do you mean?" Nina asked naively.

"Well, honey, you're an immigrant," Henry replied.

Nina glanced quizzically back and forth between them.

"What Henry means, is that you're not from here. People are trying to protect American jobs first and foremost, and you're gonna be hard pressed to find somebody that wants to give a new job, if they have one, to someone with an accent."

A look of hurt crossed Nina's face. She had never considered that anyone would consider her to be anything but American at this point.

"Hell, you might as well be a Negro like us!" Henry blurted out jokingly.

"But what have we done to deserve this kind of treatment?" Nina asked after a moment of stern consideration. "Aside from the color of our skin, or the way our words sound, what is so different about us that we are outcast?"

Henry chuckled warmly.

"Look," he responded in his typically assuring charm, "it's the way of the world, what can I say? There will always be rich folk, and there will always be poor folk. There will always be people who let power get to their heads and there will always be some that never lose their sense of humility. Don't let us get you down, though—that's the last thing we're trying to do."

"You're right, Henry," his wife chimed in. "I'm sorry if you thought I was trying to discourage you. Like I said earlier, we have to make a way for ourselves to survive, and more than to just survive, to thrive—wherever we find ourselves."

"And there are plenty of good people out there," Henry continued. "They're sometimes a little bit harder to find, though. The good ones are usually the ones that stay quiet—they don't make as much noise. So, we just gotta know where to look for 'em sometimes."

“Do you work?” Nina asked the couple.

Henry nodded.

“We both work at night—I fix the big presses at a printer, and my wife cleans offices. That’s why we’re in such a good mood this morning, you see? We just got off work an hour before you came over, and we make a habit of eating a good breakfast every morning to celebrate!”

Nina smiled. She looked over at the small clock that stood on a shelf in the corner. It was almost 11am.

“Oh my, we’ve stayed so long, and you both must be tired,” she started.

“Don’t worry a thing about it,” Henrietta said reassuringly. “We don’t sleep till later in the afternoon anyway.”

“And we sure ain’t got nothin’ to do now, except enjoy your company and your boys,” Henry said, pointing over to the two lads who had dozed on the floor in front of the radio.

Henrietta got up and moved toward the bundle that Henry had brought in earlier.

“This is for you, honey,” she said, placing the package in Nina’s lap. “I didn’t want to forget to give it to you before you left.”

Nina looked at it in wonder and disbelief. She opened the package slowly, and saw inside it three gently used winter coats. They were thick and would be quite warm. The two boys’ coats were a little bit oversized, and Henry explained that they would grow into them and could be of use the next couple years as well. Her coat was marvelous—it looked like it had been quite expensive at one point, and was sized perfectly for her. She looked back and forth between the couple and the coats in her lap, not sure quite what to think.

“You have both been so kind to me,” Nina said softly, and with those words she burst into overwhelmed tears of gratitude mixed with disbelief.

“Oh, honey!” Henrietta exclaimed, as she got up from the table and moved around towards Nina. The two women embraced as Nina bawled uncontrollably.

After about a minute, Nina calmed down a bit and composed herself the best she could.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her face dry with her sleeves. “Things have been so hard lately, and I can’t tell you the last time I found kindness like yours. I can’t believe that you’ve only just met me, and have taken me into your home and your hearts like you have.”

Henrietta smiled widely.

“It’s what we do, honey,” she said in such a nonchalant way that Nina just shook her head in disbelief.

“But why? Things aren’t easy for you either. The food, the coffee, the coats—the way you treat my boys—what have I done to deserve this?”

“If it’s dark in your room at night and you want to be able to see in order to read or eat or whatever, what do you have to do? You can’t just think and make it bright, you have to flip a switch or light a match or *something*.”

Nina shook her head, not sure where the old woman was headed.

“There was only one time somebody spoke and the lights came on, and that was a long, long time ago. It’s the same in your room as it is in the big world out there. If we want to see more clear, if we want to chase that darkness, we’re the ones who gotta make it happen.”

Henry just smiled calmly and added, “*We* gotta strike the match.”

His wife nodded affectionately. “And if we can get enough of them matches lit,” she paused, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply, as if the words were emanating from her very soul, “then this world ain’t gonna be such a dark place no more.”

With those words, the spark within Nina began to glow.



# THREE

*Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell  
There God is dwelling too.*

WILLIAM BLAKE

MAY 1928

Life was changing drastically for Nina, and for once, changing for the better. Her relationship with Henry and Henrietta grew deeply, and as a result, she felt herself bounding into life like she hadn't since she was an eight-year-old farm girl in the French countryside. The couple agreed, rather happily, to watch her children during the day while she sought work, and she was able to pick up odd jobs here and there. She was putting food on the table and keeping her boys warm, and that was all she cared about at this time. She was meeting lots of people, some nice and some nasty, and was learning slowly to let her inside seep onto her outside. Her existence was still not easy by any means, but once in a while, she was stopped in her tracks by the thought that she might actually be happy. She considered this thought seriously for an instant, and after a short moment, a large and genuine smile would force itself onto her face, which would be followed by a burst of laughter.

One warm Sunday afternoon, Nina took the boys for a walk. They walked for several miles, window shopping, telling jokes, and laughing. Nina even had enough spare change to buy the boys an ice cream cone. She had never seen anything as truly precious as those chocolate smeared smiles.

As the trio was entering their apartment building, Henry came bursting upon them, smiling excitedly like a little boy, himself. He

grabbed Nina by the shoulders and then hugged her so tightly that he squeezed the air from her lungs momentarily. When he relaxed his grip he took her by the shoulders again.

“Great news! Great news!” he exclaimed.

“What? What is it?” Nina replied anxiously.

“We found you a job!”

Nina’s jaw dropped in disbelief. The old man picked up the two boys and swung them around happily. Squeals of laughter spun round the foyer.

“A job? Where? Doing what?” Nina asked impatiently.

“Come on up and we’ll tell you!”

Henry flung Thierry over his shoulder and all of them bounded up the stairs to the third floor. Once inside the couple’s apartment Henrietta squealed and threw her own bear hug around Nina.

“Oh, honey, this is great!” Henrietta exclaimed. “Did Henry tell you?”

Nina shook her head, “Just barely!”

Henrietta calmed herself for a moment, adding to the anticipation Nina was feeling.

“There’s a rich older white lady in our church—and I don’t mean old like me, honey, I mean older—whose husband passed away a couple years ago and she told me this morning that she’s looking for a companion!”

Nina quizzically looked back and forth between the large smiles of her friends.

“What does this mean—companion?”

“It’s a job! And it’s easy!” Henry replied hastily. By this time, he and the boys were wrestling on the floor, as was their custom.

“Yes, and Mrs. Carrington is a sweet, kind woman!” Henrietta added.

“That’s good... right?” Nina asked, still a bit perplexed.

“Yes of course that’s good!” Henry called out.

“But again, what is it? What do I do?”

“It’s gonna be wonderful for you!” Henrietta practically shouted. “All she needs is someone, five days a week, to go over the house, do some cleaning, some cooking, and sit around and talk! That’s all there is to it!”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it, honey!”

“And she wants me?”

The older woman nodded emphatically. Nina threw her arms around Henrietta.

“I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you.”

“All she wants is for you to stop over in the morning and get acquainted. She wants to make sure she likes you before she hires you full time.”

Nina suddenly got frantically worried. “Will she like me? I mean, does she know I’m not from here? Does she know I’m unmarried—”

“Slow down, slow down, honey,” Henrietta insisted. “She’s gonna like you just fine. And it doesn’t matter to her where you’re from or anything like that. She’s gonna love you just like we love you—you ain’t got nothin’ to worry about.”

As much as Nina trusted Henrietta by this time, she didn’t quite agree with her on this point—she felt like she had a lot to worry about. What if Mrs. Carrington didn’t like the way she cleaned or cooked? She had never cooked for an American before and was worried that the old woman would be particular and cranky. Nina swallowed hard and Henrietta could see that she was still nervous.

“I’ll tell you two things, honey,” she said reassuringly. “The first thing is this—give it a shot. What have you got to lose? If, for some bizarre, crazy reason, it doesn’t work out, then so what? You move on to somethin’ else.”

Nina quickly nodded her understanding. She was trying desperately to calm her nerves.

“And second,” Henrietta continued, “be yourself.”

Henrietta let that thought sink in for a moment. Nina bit her lip, feeling the tension rising in her again.

“Believe me,” Henrietta said with emphasis. “Don’t doubt now. This is your chance! And I’m telling you, this lady will love you and you will love her.”

Nina seemed a bit more at ease after those confident words.

“Rest, child,” Henrietta said gently. “It’s all gonna work itself out and you ain’t gonna help it one bit by worrying.”

The young mother smiled and nodded.

Nina had trouble sleeping that night. She couldn’t stop thinking about this new opportunity. She desperately didn’t want to make a fool of herself. Although her English had continued to improve, she was still having language issues from time to time—uncomfortable moments where she wasn’t sure she understood the native speaker and was positive they did not understand her. Nina, however, did seem to have enough charm to avoid ugly scenes, as most of the time, she was able to laugh off any misunderstandings, whether it be with a merchant at the market or an employer. She was sure she could do the job, but the nagging monologue in her head tried to tell her otherwise. This was a church-going woman she’d be working for. What if she found out about Nina’s past transgressions? What if she found out Nina was pregnant before wedlock or the fact that she worked as a prostitute? What if Nina didn’t live up to her moral standards for someone working in her home? She felt like Henrietta’s advice to rest was the last thing she possibly could do, but just when the night seemed like it would never end, she fell asleep.



The morning was glorious. Warm rays of sunshine filled her spirit and the soft spring breeze kissed her face as she walked. She was already

familiar with the neighborhood where Mrs. Carrington lived, as she had done some odd work for a couple families on adjacent streets.

Nina was wearing a soft blue dress with a delicate floral print that she had been given by Henry and Henrietta when the weather turned warmer. She thought it was a beautiful dress, though gently worn, and made her feel elegant and confident again. During this time, it was not uncommon for people to sell off used items for almost nothing, although many times, they were in near perfect condition, because of other demands. Would a young lady part with a dress that she's only worn once to keep the electric running for her children? The key to finding a great bargain on such things was knowing where to look, and it so happened that Henry knew where to look. He found great buys on everything from the radio they had sitting in their home, to pots and pans, tools, and clothing. And on top of it all, he was a legendary haggler.

300 block, Essex Avenue. Here she was.

The house was gorgeous—and massive. It had been built in the late 1800's and then updated, added to, and redecorated through the years. Most of the homes in this neighborhood were large, luxurious, and dignified, but Nina had never seen a house as beautiful as Mrs. Carrington's. It was inviting, no pretension in its design. Painted a light blue—it almost matched her dress—with white trim on the windows and doors, and a white porch that stretched across the front, turned onto the sides, and meandered back as far as she could see. The front door was large and solid—also painted white.

Nina walked slowly up the cement slab leading to the front door. She was surrounded on both sides by budding flowers, lush green grass, and delicately positioned shrubs. The yard was immaculate. She took the four steps onto the porch and paused to collect herself before knocking confidently. After about a minute of silence she knocked again—still no reply. She tried to look in the front windows on either side of the door, but the drapes were pulled. For a moment

she wondered if she was at the right house. She checked the sheet of paper she had with the address and then checked the numbers on the door. This was it.

Glancing down the porch again, she decided to try walking around it to see if someone would answer the back door. She followed the porch all the way around to the back yard—the house was actually bigger than it looked from the street. The back yard was even more exquisite than the front—filled with exotic plants and delicate flowers. It was exactly how she pictured the elegant serenity of an English garden. The aroma was fantastic. The back door of the house was an exact duplicate of the front, and so again, she paused for a moment and then knocked. Nothing. She was beginning to get anxious and thought about walking away altogether. She raised her hand to knock one last time when she heard a strong female voice call out behind her:

“She won’t hear you in there!”

Nina spun around quickly, her heart practically leaping into her throat.

“The old bat is deaf as a tree trunk,” said the woman dressed in white. She was wearing an outdoor jacket, smeared with mud and dirt, a gardening hat and gloves, and was moving swiftly towards Nina with a small spade and a plant of some kind, roots and all, in her hands. Nina thought she might have been in her fifties.

“I’m sorry, you startled me,” Nina replied.

“Well, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to,” the woman replied. Due to the sarcastic tone of her words, Nina wasn’t sure if she was apologizing.

“I... I’m here for an interview with Mrs. Carrington. My name is Nina Laroque.”

“I know who you are,” the woman said, brushing briskly past Nina and towards a table holding an array of planters and bowls. “I heard you were coming by.”

“Oh... you did?”

“Yeah—although I don’t know why you’d want to work for this old crab.”

“Well, it’s work isn’t it? And I’ve heard that she’s lovely.”

“Ha!” the woman exclaimed. She then started to giggle as she placed the plant into the pot.

“Well... what is she like?” Nina asked innocently.

“Old. Crotchety. Mean. I suppose that’d be a good place to start describing her.”

Nina could hardly believe her ears. Surely a friend of Henry and Henrietta’s couldn’t fit that description.

“She can’t be that bad,” Nina replied.

“Hmm,” the woman mumbled something under her breath. “You just wait and see.”

“I was told she is looking for a companion,” Nina replied.

“Ha! A companion! Or should I say another companion?”

“What do you mean?” Nina asked timidly.

“Oh, that crazy old witch runs them off almost as soon she hires ‘em,” the woman replied harshly. “The one before you lasted two hours, and that was nearly a record.”

Nina was stunned. “Then why do you work for her—if she’s such a terrible person?”

“First of all,” the woman replied, “I know how to handle her—been around her long enough. And secondly, I’m a gardener, so I’m outside most of the time. God knows I’d go crazy, too, if I was cooped up in that house all day.”

Nina’s frustration began to boil over.

“Well, that’s fine that you don’t like her. You probably won’t like me either, but can you take me in to see her? I need to meet her and I need to start work.”

The woman turned around suddenly.

“Now who do you think you’re talking to?” she snapped. “Am I your servant or something?”

“Of course not, but you work here, and I am not going to barge into someone’s home without permission.”

There was a moment of silence between the two women on the porch.

“You’re a bit feisty aren’t you?” the woman asked.

Nina rolled her eyes, hands on her hips. “Only when I have to be.”

The woman smiled.

“You’re European?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you cook?”

“Of course I cook,” Nina replied flatly.

“Is your food any good?”

“That depends on the person’s taste,” Nina said harshly, becoming more and more irritated by the inane conversation.

The woman simply nodded and began to take off her gloves.

“Well, I’m not very picky,” she said quietly.

“What does it matter what your taste is?” Nina replied hotly.

“Now, will you please show me inside so I can speak with the lady of the house?”

“Oh, you don’t need to go in there.”

“Madame, please,” Nina pleaded. “I need to see if I can get this job. I have children to feed and I will put up with anything—a crotchety old woman or even you.”

The gardener laughed kindly, grabbing her side with one hand.

“Like I said, you don’t need to go in there. You’ve already got the job.”

The look of perplexity that shot on Nina’s face made the woman laugh again.

“I’m Mrs. Carrington,” she said warmly, extending her delicate, blue veined hand.

Nina swallowed hard and almost fainted. She took the woman’s pale hand and shook it.

"I... I'm sorry... I thought you were the gardener," she said nervously.

The woman looked around at the cultivated Eden surrounding them and casually said:

"I am the gardener."

Nina couldn't believe her ears.

"It just so happens that I'm also the lady of the house," Mrs. Carrington said. "And I'd like to apologize for that little game I played. Most girls don't even make it to the back door, and you're only the second that's made it through to the end."

"Please don't apologize," Nina responded sincerely, still catching her breath. "But may I ask why you do this?"

Mrs. Carrington shrugged.

"I need to know who is going to be in my home with me," she answered. "I want a companion who wants to work, who is honest and respectable. And above all, I need someone with a little personality. And you've got all of those things. So, if you would like to be my friend and help me with a thing or two around this old place, I'd love to pay you more than it's worth."

Nina smiled broadly and took the woman's hand again.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Carrington. I will do anything you ask of me."

"Well that's great! But rule number one is this: please call me Beth," the lady said amiably.

"Ok, I will," Nina answered. "And you can call me Nina."

Thus, a friendship was born.

---

Working for Beth was an uncommon pleasure. It turned out that despite her youthful face and considerably good health, she was already in her mid-seventies. She was sincere, kind, and not at all hard to please. She had a passion for horticulture and for watching things blossom to life. She enjoyed coffee in the mornings and tea

in the afternoons. Most of Nina's day was spent outdoors, which she relished. The air at that time of year was growing warmer and rain was keeping the ladies indoors less often. They planted, they watered, they transplanted, they trimmed, they weeded, and they pruned. While working, the two women also laughed quite a bit, as Beth had an extraordinary sense of humor. She was a refined lady in many ways—it was obvious that she had become accustomed to money and living well—but she was also incredibly earthy, and Nina began to suspect that she had suffered her fair share of hardships, as well. The two ladies got to know each other quickly, although Nina did not include much detail about her rocky relationship with Jacques and her previous form of “employment.”

One balmy afternoon, while the two ladies sat on the porch with tea, Nina realized that Beth had not said much at all about her own family life. Nina didn't think it was because she had something to hide or wished to forget, but genuinely believed that she hadn't brought it up because she was too interested in learning about Nina's life.

“Beth, do you have children?”

“Yes, I do,” she answered. “I have three—two boys and a girl. I lost one boy to diphtheria in 1899, but my other two are alive and in good health.”

“How old was he?”

“He was twenty-one,” she replied sorrowfully. “He was traveling the Pacific and came down with it somewhere in the Philippines. His name was Jack.”

“I'm so sorry to hear that,” Nina empathized. “I couldn't imagine losing a child at any age—may God forbid it.”

“It is the hardest thing that a mother can ever endure,” Beth replied. “But he is in a better place that I may get to see one day, along with my dear husband.”

“What was his name?”

“Charles,” the old woman replied, a warm smile spreading on her lips as she said the name. “He passed in twenty-four. He was eighty-five years old and the love of my life.”

“That is very sweet. How long were you married?”

“Fifty-four beautiful years,” Beth responded. “I married him when I was eighteen. I would have married him earlier if it hadn’t been for my father.”

“What do you mean?” Nina asked inquisitively.

“Well, we had already been in love for a couple years, but Charles was almost fourteen years older than me, and worked for my father to boot. My father simply wouldn’t allow us to marry until I was eighteen.”

“Were you angry with him?”

“At the time, I suppose I was. But after having children of my own, especially a daughter, I understood his reason. I was still a child and would be for many years. He wanted to make sure that I wasn’t rushing into something that would inevitably alter my life forever. So, he kept strict rules on where and when and in whose company we were allowed to meet, and when I turned eighteen, he gave us his blessing.”

Nina reflected on her own youthful marriage and how rushing into something like love had certainly altered the course of her life. She couldn’t say that it was all negative—she had two beautiful children whom she lived for—but Jacques had stolen her innocence and caused her unimaginable anguish. She wished that she had had a father like Beth’s—a father who would have looked out for her wellbeing rather than simply wishing her out of his hair. How different her life might have been. She might have married a nice French boy and still been on a farm in Europe. She might have had security and even wealth by now. The thought of her two boys, however, kept her from daydreaming about what might have been, and she actually felt a pang of guilt for thinking such things.

“If he was so much older, how did you meet and fall in love? You said he worked for your father. What did your father do?”

“Did you know that before all these towns and cities started springing up around here, this area was mainly just farmland?”

“No I didn’t. It is hard to imagine.”

“Well sure, and it was some of the most fertile land in the whole country. I know it’s hard to believe now, but years ago this was a regular old bread basket. And all those farmers needed supplies—feed, seeds, tools—so many years ago, my father, James William Beckett, opened a small shop to try to provide some of those things. It was a tough business at first—very competitive—but the one thing my father was best at was, was finding new ways to do things. So he started selling consumer goods as well as farming products. He started selling little shaving kits for gents and magazines and dime novels for the ladies. He even stocked little trinkets and toys for their children. At first, everybody thought he was out of his mind—especially his competition. But over time, people started to realize that instead of having to run to four different stores on every corner in town, they could just stop at Beckett’s and get everything they needed.”

“That’s amazing,” Nina said in true admiration. “It was almost like a modern department store?”

“Exactly!” Beth replied. “My father was successful, but it wasn’t until he met Charles that the business really came to life.”

---

It was 1871, and I was fifteen years old. I had been working in my father’s shop, when not in school, for several years already. All four of my siblings worked for Father, too. We all had different jobs and different talents, and Father tried to get as much out of us as he could. My job was arranging things on the shelves, sweeping, cleaning, and helping customers as was needed.

One very ordinary day, the most extraordinary gentleman I would ever meet walked into the store and changed my life forever. He was wearing a brown suit and his clever mustache was groomed for business. He was dapper and handsome, and as clumsy as a bat is blind. Lord knows how he made it all the way to eighty-five years old without getting himself killed. So, in walked Charles with his stiff leather briefcase. He was so handsome that I blushed and hid behind a stack of big burlap bags filled with chicken feed.

He stood there and looked around the store, clearing his throat several times as he saw no one to help him. Father must have heard him and came out from the back room.

“Beth? Beth?” he called. I was too embarrassed to reply.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Father said to Charles. “How can I help you?”

“Hello, sir,” Charles replied cordially. “I must admit that I am here to ask you the very same question.”

“I don’t understand,” Father replied.

“My name is Charles Carrington, and I have come to offer my services.”

“Well, young man, I certainly appreciate your offer, but am fully staffed at the moment and don’t require any further assistance.”

“That’s perfectly fine, sir. I will work for free,” Charles replied confidently.

“I do not understand you. Is the goal of employment not to make a living?”

“Most certainly, sir.”

“Then how can you work for free? Are you bored and independently wealthy?” Father asked with a laugh. Charles smiled as well.

“Quite the contrary, I assure you.”

“Well, what then? Is this some kind of joke?”

“Not at all, sir. I assure you I am quite serious.”

“Well, come with it then,” Father replied sternly. “I am a very busy man—either get to your point, buy something, or leave.”

“That’s just it, sir,” Charles countered. “You’re very busy, and I imagine that much of the work that consumes your time is work you would rather not do.”

“This is my business and I do the work that is required to run it efficiently.”

“Exactly, sir!” Charles answered, pointing his finger quickly at my father. He then just stood for a moment and smiled.

“So, again, what is your point?” Father asked, this time on the verge of anger.

“What would you say if I offered you an opportunity to spend more time with your customers, with your children, and with your wife? What if you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that your business was being run exactly as you would run it yourself, like clockwork, and the all while freeing up your time to do more of the things you love?”

“Naturally, that would be wonderful,” Father said in a much more calm tone of voice. He spoke with the slightest ring of sarcasm. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me how that can happen?”

“Certainly,” Charles answered. “I have a small inheritance from an uncle who died in combat—it’s just enough for me to live on for six months, or so. I was an officer’s steward during the war and have a great mind for minute detail. Planning and organizing and acquiring goods and the like—I’ve done it all.”

Fathered chuckled at the thought that he was actually entertaining this conversation with a man that he’d never met before.

“So,” Father continued, “I am to let you take over the duties of managing this store and you are to work free of charge?”

“For six months,” Charles added, nodding his head quickly.

“For six months—and then what?”

“And then you are to pay me a percentage of the store’s profits—”

“Oh, so I am to take you on as a partner as well?” Father countered. “You must be crazy! I’ve never seen you in my life and you have the gall to propose that I give my business away?”

Charles took it as an insult and looked quite hurt for a moment, but then bounced back.

“Well, you didn’t let me finish, sir,” he said calmly. “You will pay me a percentage of the store’s profits above what they are today.”

“I’m afraid I still do not understand you,” Father replied suspiciously.

“Simply put, if after six months of my work—free of charge—you are not making more money than you are today, you will not owe me a penny. If, on the other hand, I have managed to cut costs and raise revenues, then I shall require twenty-five percent of profits, again, over what you are currently making.”

Father thought hard. I could see him biting his lower lip, which he always did when concentrating on a problem. It was at that moment that I lost my balance and fell loudly into a rack of pots and pans. I got up awkwardly and ran towards the back of the store.

My eyes did catch Charles’s for a moment and I thought I heard a cannon shot. He simply stared at me, wild and wide-eyed.

“What are you doing?” Father called to the blur of motion that was his daughter.

I simply ran to the back and closed the door behind me. I was out of breath and felt as if an arrow had pierced my heart. Had that man felt what I had felt in that moment? I put my ear to the door to listen to the rest of the conversation between the two men.

“Do you have references?” Father asked.

“Oh... of course, sir,” Charles answered, sounding completely unsure of himself and utterly preoccupied. To this point, he had seemed supremely confident. The change in his demeanor was striking to me, although my father did not seem to notice much. “My aunt lives in town... Mrs. Hensley.”

“Mrs. Hensley!” Father almost shouted. “Say no more. Allow me to talk to her and you will have your answer.”

“Thank you, sir,” Charles said, sounding as if he was trying to catch his breath. “I also have references from officers under whom I served who will vouch for my work ethic and my character.”

“Certainly, certainly,” Father replied. “But I do not believe them to be necessary. As far as I’m concerned, your connection with Mrs. Hensley is sufficient. I believe we have a deal, Mr. um..?”

“Carrington, sir. Charles Carrington.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Carrington,” Father replied affably. “And my name is James Beckett.”

“A pleasure, as well, Mr. Beckett.”

There was a moment of silence in which I assume the two men shook hands.

“One more thing, Mr. Beckett, before I go,” Charles blurted out nervously.

“Certainly,” Father replied.

“May I presume to ask about that girl who ran through here a moment ago. Does she work here?”

“Yes,” Father said slowly and sternly.

“Sir, she may very well be the most beautiful sight I have ever gazed upon. She is breathtaking!”

I was flattered and embarrassed by his high praise. I certainly was pretty—who isn’t at fifteen?—but had never thought of myself as a real beauty. I know now that from the first moment he caught a glimpse of me to the very last breath he took, Charles Carrington believed with all his heart that I was the most beautiful woman who had ever lived, and, while it may be foolishness, it is something that I will always cherish.

There was another moment or two of silence before in sheer naivety, Charles asked:

“Does she come from a respectable family?”

“Yes, she does,” I heard Father answer in a low, serious tone.

“Who is her father, sir? I must meet him and ask for her hand immediately, if she is not spoken for already.”

“Well, I can assure you that she is not spoken for yet,” Father said. It sounded as if he was clenching his teeth.

“Oh, wonderful!” Charles exclaimed. “So you know her father?”

“I am her father, you idiot!” he roared. “And she is but fifteen years old, you scoundrel!”

There was such a frantic commotion after this that I thought Father might kill him. The two men were yelling—Father in fury and Charles in apology—and didn’t stop for a few minutes. Suddenly, I heard the bell ring at the front door and both men immediately went silent. After a moment, I heard a female voice ask for a bag of oats. My father began conversing with her warmly, as he did with all of our customers. After a few more seconds, I heard the lady leave the store—the bell rang again—and instead of picking up where they left off, there was more silence. I heard Father say something quietly, to which Charles did not respond—at least he didn’t respond loud enough for me to hear through the door. I began to wonder if Charles had left along with our customer, but then I heard Father call my name.

I immediately opened the door and rushed through. I knew well enough not to keep Father waiting. Charles glanced at me quickly and turned his attention back to my father.

“Beth, this is Mr. Charles Carrington. He may be working with us starting next week,” Father said, pointing towards the young man in the tidy suit. “And this is my precious daughter, Beth,” he said, pointing back towards me.

I looked back at Charles and he looked quickly at me. I will always remember how kind his eyes were at that moment. He had no venom in him at all, but simply a forlorn longing, like a traveler who had wandered a great distance and had not yet found his home.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” I replied, trying not to show Father how smitten and embarrassed I was. Charles nodded and bowed like a true gentleman.

“Well, then,” Father continued sternly, “now that our introductions have been made, I have one simple rule, and I better not catch either of you crossing it. You are not to communicate with each other during working hours, or even after, for that matter. You may say ‘good morning,’ in the mornings and ‘good evening,’ in the evenings, and that is to be the extent of your discourse. Am I understood?”

We both looked at Father and nodded our assent. I was trembling.

“Good,” Father pronounced. “Mr. Carrington, allow me to make my inquiry with Mrs. Hensley in the morning, and I will certainly send you word as to my final decision.”

“Thank you, sir,” Charles replied confidently. “I will look forward to hearing from you.”

The two gentlemen firmly shook hands, Charles looking my father unflinchingly in the eyes. He then bowed to me and said, “Good evening,” as he left, even though it was only eleven in the morning. I couldn’t help but smile.

After Charles walked out, Father turned to me. I was expecting another strict admonition, but instead, he simply put his arm around me and kissed my forehead. When a moment in his embrace passed, he pointed to the door and then, in the most peculiarly melancholy tone, said the most curious thing:

“Marry that man... and you will be happy and well-fed all your days.”

My smile must have faded into a look of sheer bewilderment because he began to laugh heartily. He then got playfully serious and said with a slight chuckle and a shake of his head, “But not now.” He pointed his long, calloused finger at me and smiled again. “For now, you must obey my rule—understood?”

Needless to say, Father interviewed Mrs. Hensley about her nephew and was thoroughly impressed. Charles had served during every year of the war, most of it under Major General Henry Blackstone Banning, and saw action everywhere from Bull Run to Jackson to Nashville. His service and experience were distinguished. Father learned, quite accurately, from Mrs. Hensley that Charles was gentlemanly, industrious, and most importantly, honest. We would soon thereafter learn that Charles was also undoubtedly brilliant.

By the end of the first six months of his work one of our competitors had shuttered his doors, our store's profits were up almost thirty percent, and Father was spending more time enjoying life and less time worried about keeping the shop open and the children fed. At first we were both very careful about abiding by Father's rule and would only greet each other as we came and went. However, as time went on and Father gained firsthand knowledge of Charles's character he became more comfortable with the young man, and although he never verbalized a change in his rule about the two of us, we did slowly start to talk more and more and he never said a word.

Shortly after I turned sixteen, Charles asked Father for my hand in marriage. It was not terribly uncommon for a girl to be married at sixteen in those days, nor was it terribly uncommon for her to marry a man who was substantially older than she, but still my Father rejected the proposal outright, telling Charles that he would not consent to his daughter's marriage until she was eighteen. I was heartbroken at the time, and in a moment of girlish desperation, even told Charles that we should run away together. He was mortified by the thought, as his honor would not allow him to consider such a rash and improper action. Twenty-two months later, we were married, and twelve months after that, I gave birth to our eldest son who we called Jack.

Father's business continued to profit and soon expanded to two, three, then four locations. This all took place largely under the careful direction of my new husband, although he and Father certainly did

work closely together. Eventually, Father took Charles on as a full partner, which allowed us to purchase our first home. Charles insisted that we pay cash, as debt was anathema to him, so it was a small, rickety old house, but it was ours, and we filled it with such happy memories over the years. Our daughter Rachel was born there a couple years later, and our youngest boy Jasper was born there as well.

Eventually, as the business expanded, we were able to buy a larger house on this side of town, though I certainly don't associate that home with as much happiness. In fact, after a while, I hated the sight of it. A few years ago, it was badly damaged in a storm and they had to tear it down completely. I couldn't have been more delighted.

It was in that second house that my life became unraveled. The children were growing up and were getting their educations, while working in the shops. Charles was working more and more, as Father had retired, and a fifth store was in the planning. It was 1898, and in April, the Spanish-American War broke out. We were shocked to learn that shortly thereafter, our eldest boy Jack, by this time in his second year of university studies, enlisted in the army. Charles, knowing full well the terrible nature of war, did everything that he could to talk him out of it, but it was no use. Jack was a strong-headed young man and dreamed of seeing the world. No argument, no form of persuasion was of use, and Jack headed off towards the Pacific.

Charles went out of his mind. He put the plans for the new store on hold and was able to convince some old army comrades from the Civil War to allow him to reenlist as a steward in the company in which Jack would be serving. I hated the idea, but was somewhat comforted by the thought that at least Charles would be with him. So Father came out of retirement and my husband went off to war as well.

With Charles and Jack overseas and my two younger children pre-occupied with school, work, and youthful living, I grew terribly lonely and bored. At first I would try to visit lady friends of mine or go to

the city and shop or have lunch, but eventually I became increasingly isolated, though I might not have realized it at the moment. I was so accustomed to family and friends and work and suddenly found myself feeling useless. Letters from my boys were few and far between, as the distance was so great. With no husband to love, no children to care for, and no real work to do, I began to lose all sense of purpose in my life.

Then, one cold, snowy day in December of that year, just a few days after Christmas, I learned that our next door neighbor Max had suddenly lost his lovely wife, Louise. He was utterly devastated, as you might expect. They were both a couple years older than I and had no children, and I felt terrible that Max was seemingly all alone in the world. I would bring Rachel and Jasper over at night with meals in an attempt to cheer him up and entertain him a bit. He was very glad of our company, and over the course of the next few months began to slowly reemerge from the abyss of his desolation. The same could not be said for me, however.

It had been almost two months since I had heard from either Jack or Charles, and while the two younger children were away at school, I felt like I would lose my mind completely. I happened to glance out the back window and saw Max pacing around his garden, which was frozen stiff at this point, wearing a large overcoat and looking rather sullen. I quickly heated a kettle of tea, dressed for the weather, and headed out to meet him. He smiled warmly when I greeted him and invited me inside. I hesitated for a moment, but then thought of how foolish it would have been for me to make tea and then force the man to drink it outside on such a fiercely cold day. We spent several hours in his parlor, talking and laughing and forgetting our troubles. He was a genuinely nice man and was very conversational. He shook my hand warmly, thanked me for the tea, and then walked me to my door in a very gentlemanly fashion. I really didn't think anything of our meeting, and a few days later, under much the same circumstances,

I met him with tea again. Over the course of the next few weeks, we met regularly for afternoon tea and each day our time would end with him walking me to my door in all types of weather. He was a salve for my loneliness, and I believe I served something of the same function for him.

At tea on an early spring afternoon—I now had not heard from my husband or my son in close to three months—a terrible thing occurred. Max told a story in his typically poetic style and had me laughing so hard that I spilled my tea all over the rug in front of me. I apologized fervently as I dropped to my knees and began to blot the stain with my handkerchief. He did the same with his handkerchief while telling me adamantly not to apologize. A moment later, with such curious timing, our eyes locked. We had never been that close before. I remember he had a warm smile on his lips. His eyes pleaded to me, not lustfully, but as if he couldn't speak the words in his heart because I was another man's wife. I was yearning for affection and tenderness. I slowly closed my eyes, leaned forward, and pressed my lips against his. At first, he did not kiss back, and I was suddenly afraid that I had offended him or the memory of his wife. I swallowed hard and leaned back.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

He sat there for a moment, looking at me again with those tender, lonesome eyes.

"No, it's alright," he whispered in reply.

I do not know what came over me at that moment, but I leaned forward and kissed him again. This time, he returned my kiss. We embraced each other and kissed yet again, more fervently this time. After a while, I was lying nude on my back, staring up at the ceiling in another man's home, in another man's bed, another man pressed warmly against my body. Max lay sleeping, his head propped on my shoulder, his strong arms around my waist. It felt so satisfyingly human to be held, to be warm, to share comfort as well as a bed with

another person. I could smell his expensive cologne, which he had more than likely purchased at one of my husband's stores.

*Charles.*

I suddenly thought of my husband. I cupped my hand to my mouth in horror. This was betrayal of the worst kind. I was Judas Iscariot. I didn't know what to think; I didn't know what to do. I had to get up—I had to get out of there.

"Max," I whispered to no response. "Max!" I said louder, waking him.

He looked at me almost lovingly and smiled. I knew that I was going to break his heart all over again, but I felt that I had to.

"Max, I'm sorry," I said, sitting up in his bed and brushing his arm off of me gently. "This shouldn't have happened."

"I know," he said softly as he traced the contours of my back with his fingers.

"Please, this must never happen again."

"I understand," he replied tenderly, a warm smile again on his lips.

"I am very sorry, but this should not have happened. I should never have—"

"Beth," he cut in, "It's alright. You're married... and I can't expect you to continue this."

He was being truly genuine. I got out of bed and rushed to put my clothes back on. I could feel his stare, watching my skin as I clothed myself.

"Can I walk you to your door?" he asked politely.

"No—please don't," I answered sternly, shaking my head quickly back and forth.

He just watched me, that affectionate smile clinging to his face. Throughout all of this, he conducted himself with a matter of gentility. I could not be angry with him; I was, however, furious with myself.

“One last kiss then?” he asked, those grey eyes again pleading for affection. I kissed him again quickly, perhaps in recognition of my own role in the affair, then grabbed the rest of my things and quickly walked home.

To my utter astonishment my daughter was home when I walked through the back door. She looked at me, jaw dropped open, without saying a word. My hair was disheveled, my dress untidy, and I’m sure I looked as if I had just seen a ghost. Rachel glanced out the window, directly at Max’s home, and then turned her piercing blue eyes back to me. It was obvious that she had put two and two together. I tried to apologize quickly, but am not sure if any words came out, as I brushed past her and up the stairs into my bedroom. I locked the door, threw myself on the bed, and wept bitterly, burying my face in my husband’s pillow. I did not come out of my room all evening and no one came to disturb me or even check on me. Rachel must have told Jasper what I had done when he arrived and they both decided to let me alone.

It wasn’t until very late that night that I was able to sleep at all. I had vivid and horrible dreams about my husband and my son suffering on some God-forsaken tropical island. I saw them in a squalid war camp, bruised and bloody, barely clinging to life. I could hear Jack coughing and wheezing and could see Charles weeping uncontrollably. There were enormous insects buzzing all around the men and filthy rodents picking at their skin. There were some men harshly yelling orders and others crying out in pain. Puddles of blood gathered on the floor and a pile of limbs lay rotting in the corner. I dreamed that there was a very loud explosion that rang in my ears—or was it a dream?

I shot up suddenly.

Silence.

Something, however, was not right. I suddenly heard commotion outside my room and unlocked my door. I looked into the hall and saw Jasper moving quickly towards the stairs, still dressed in his night clothes, the shotgun in his hands.

“Is everything alright?” I asked anxiously.

“I don’t know,” he answered harshly.

Rachel came running from her room and quickly into mine.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I thought it was a dream.”

We sat on the bed and held each other closely. We could hear Jasper moving hastily around the house downstairs. We could hear him checking the locks on the doors and windows, and then it got quieter as he moved towards the back of the house. For a moment there was silence. Then we could hear the back door open and close.

A man’s scream rang out in the black stillness.

I got up and ran to the top of the steps. The back door opened and closed again.

“Oh God!” the scream came again, this time from inside the house.

“Jasper!” I hollered down the stair case.

“Oooh God...” his scream had turned to a horrified wail.

I cried his name again as I flew down the stairs. He was dreadfully pallid and was clutching his hands to his temples. “Jasper, what is it?” I asked, trying to pry his hands from his head.

“Outside, outside,” he replied in a frenzied state of shock, pointing towards the back door.

“Where’s your gun?” I asked quickly. “Is it safe?”

He just nodded, tears streaming down his face. In my attention to him I barely notice Rachel whizzing past me. I heard the door open and close again, a moment of silence, and then another blood curdling scream. I ran through the kitchen and flew out the back door. I saw my daughter standing there, turned towards Max’s house, clutching her hands over her heart. I spun in the direction of her gaze and remember a scream catching in my throat as I saw Max’s limp body, sagging in his lawn chair. He was completely nude in the glacial air; a pistol still dangling from his lifeless hand. In the clear moonlight his blood, which looked terrifyingly black, was

sprayed all over the side of his house, chunks of his brain and skull plastered onto the siding. His mouth was open and the top of his head was completely gone. His eyes, and I will never forget his eyes, were open and still had that aching stare, which will haunt me all my days.

*It's my fault*, was the first thought that entered my mind after the initial shock of the moment. He hadn't even dressed himself after I left him.

Rachel began sobbing wildly and I remember calling for Jasper to come take her inside. He was always a strong child and had been able to compose himself enough to take his sister by the shoulders and lead her back into the house. I remember staring at Max's corpse, until for a brief second, I thought I saw him smile at me. It was at that moment that Jasper came through the door again, telling me that a police officer had arrived.

The police interviewed all of us thoroughly that night and an ambulance wagon arrived to take the body away. Dawn was upon us, and Rachel was back in bed, although I don't believe she slept. Jasper and I sat at the kitchen table, staring blankly at the dying fire in the hearth. A sudden knock on the back door jolted us both. Jasper answered and I heard a police officer identify himself and ask to come in.

"Are you Mrs. Beth Carrington? This was left for you," the policeman said, handing me a folded sheet of paper with my name written on it in delicate, masculine hand. He then told us that the death had been officially ruled a suicide and that their investigation was over. Jasper showed the officer out and then promptly and silently went upstairs.

I turned the paper over in my hands and saw that the seal had been broken, meaning that a police investigator had already read it. I read it several times and then tossed it in the fire, although I will never forget what it said:

*My Dearest Beth,*

*You have been an unimaginable comfort to me in these hard times. I thought that losing my dear Louise would be the end of my life, but I have now found that losing you is the final, unbearable torment that leads me to a desperate act. I know that I cannot, and should not, have you to myself, and this is an agony that I simply cannot live with. Do not blame yourself for my actions or my feelings—you are truly an angel and have made these last months worth living. I feel as if I have sinned against my God and my darling wife, and now throw myself upon their mercy that I may join them soon.*

*Your dear friend,*

*—Maximilian*

That morning at eight o'clock, I received a telegram that my son Jack was dead.



A few days after that, I received a letter from Charles. He was to be returning home with our son's body and would see us in a matter of a week. I couldn't help but feel that Jack's death was a punishment for my infidelity with Max, although witnessing the aftermath of his violent end would certainly have been punishment enough. I couldn't sleep; I couldn't eat. My two living children would not speak to me. In fact, Jasper had begun to pack his things as though he was moving out.

That next week dragged on painfully, but it couldn't have lasted long enough. I entertained the idea of keeping my affair a secret, but knew that I couldn't live with myself if I did. I also knew that my secret would not be safe with either of my children, for they were far too loyal to their father to allow him to live in ignorance. But how could I tell him? How could I admit that while he was in the midst of the most terrible suffering, watching our little boy die a dreadful

death, his most beloved wife was lying in the luxury of another man's embrace?

It was a frosty morning when Charles opened our front door. A friend of his from the army picked him up by carriage and drove him home. I sat in the parlor, sipping tea and anticipating the scene that would unfold. He walked in slowly, put his bags down and turned to look at me. He looked like a different man—he looked old. His eyes sagged in their sockets, much of his hair had fallen out, and his skin was wrinkled and brown, a stark contrast from the whiteness of the frost that blanketed everything outside. He just stared at my tear soaked face with a blank expression, as if somehow he already knew what I had to tell him. Suddenly he nearly ran towards me and picked me up from my seat. He embraced me so tightly that I could hardly breathe and began kissing my face and my neck with such fervor that I thought we might have been on our wedding night all over again. I tried to stop him, the shame of my deeds completely overwhelming me; I did not want him to love me as he once did. As much as I longed to comfort him, I wanted to suffer as he had suffered, and worse. He suddenly cried out and began to sob. I felt his warm tears dripping down my neck. Finally after a moment I was able to pry myself from his arms.

“Charles,” I whispered. He simply stared at me. I couldn't bear the look of anguish on his face and knew that I had to tell him immediately. Suddenly his eyes dropped to the floor. His hands were cupped together in front of him; for a moment I thought he might have been praying.

“Yes, my love,” he said softly, his glance shifting back to mine.

“Charles, let me first say that I'm sorry—terribly sorry.”

He did not respond. His soft, kind eyes penetrated my soul. I collapsed to my knees and clutched at my heart.

“Charles, please!” I wailed. He did not react. His body was simply frozen, but I could tell that his mind raced as it always did.

Then, he slowly extended his hands. He simply said, "Come." I took his worn hands and he lifted me to my feet. I was not sure if for the first time he would hit me. Instead, he didn't do anything. There we stood for what felt like an hour holding hands.

"I heard about Louise," he finally said. "And I heard about Max."

"What did you hear?" I asked sheepishly.

"I heard that they're both gone," he answered solemnly.

I nodded.

"It is good," he pronounced confidently.

I couldn't believe my ears—this coming from such a religious man, from such a kind heart.

"How is it good?" I asked anxiously.

"Because you may have lost me forever," he replied quietly. "For I surely would have killed the man with my bare hands."

I closed my eyes and began to quietly sob.

"Charles, please do not blame him... he was a lonely man, grieving the death of his beloved wife."

"Beth," he said tenderly, as he began to caress my cheek. "I am filled to the brim with hatred. I am angry and I am desperate. But I could never hate you."

I looked questioningly into his eyes.

"It is easy for me to hate the world and almost everything in it," he continued. "I can hate this damn country for which I've sacrificed so much. I can hate the Spanish, I can hate the Pacific, and I can hate the sky, the sun, and the moon. I have had my time stolen from me, my decency, my honor, and my son. So please, at the very least allow me, for a time, to hate the man who wounded me so."

"Oh, Charles..." I whispered, taking his face in my hands. "I'm so sorry."

He kissed my hands.

"My dear Beth, I am as much to blame for this as you are."

"What could you mean by that?"

“I allowed my belief that I could control my own destiny blind me into believing that I could control our son’s fate. I believed that being with him would somehow allow me to guide his steps, to keep him from harm. I traipsed around the globe, following blindly while I believed that I led, and where did it get me? I left you behind—my one true love—left you alone and that was supremely selfish. In truth, when I admit what I have concealed deep inside, the only person that I considered when I made the decision to follow him was myself, and for that I have suffered greatly.”

He suddenly got nervous and cast his gaze at the floor between us.

“I must ask you one thing, however,” he said gently.

“You can ask me anything.”

He paused for a moment, as if gathering his strength.

“Do you still love me?”

“Charles, of course!” I answered hastily. “With all of my heart and soul! I love you more now than I have ever loved you!”

“Can I make you a promise, then? Beth, I promise that as long as I have breath in me, I will never leave you like that again.”

I smiled warmly, took his strong hands in mine and pressed my lips fervently against his.

From that moment, we were never the same. He never brought up my affair after that day—not once. I would spend the rest of my days trying to show him my gratitude for his kindness and mercy, showering him with affection and attention. He would spend the rest of his days trying to convince me that all was truly forgiven. There we were, two people who had already lived more than half our lives, beginning to get to know each other as if we were courting all over again. And in a sense, I suppose that we were.

Watching her father’s response to me over the next few days was certainly helpful for Rachel. Seeing his strength and graciousness towards me gave her a sense of direction in dealing with her now complicated relationship with me. We sat together several times

and she allowed me to apologize, and eventually I allowed myself to accept her forgiveness. Rachel had always been a strong girl, both physically and emotionally. She was much more like her father in that respect than she was like me.

Jasper was another story completely. Oh, he was furious at me. Charles did everything that he could to calm him, but he was inconsolable. I cannot say that he was irrational, although some of his behavior might have been. He was intent on seeing his father for a week, attending his brother's funeral, and then moving to Philadelphia with a friend.

We laid Jack to rest on a cold, wet Saturday morning, and that night, I overheard part of a conversation between Jasper and Charles in my husband's study. They had already been at it for a while, and their voices were growing agitated.

"Father, I cannot stay in this house with her!"

"And why not, son? For this is my house as well as it is hers!"

"I am not willing to consent to living in this house, with that woman who has shamed you! It's not Christian!"

"That woman? That woman is your mother!"

"Father, I can forgive her for her transgressions against me, but I cannot simply overlook her sins against such an upstanding man as yourself, not to mention the vows she broke in front of almighty God."

"That is not yours to judge, son. I have forgiven your mother her sins against me, and as such you should forgive her as well."

"I will not," Jasper flatly pronounced. "I cannot err on the side of injustice—everything in my upbringing simply will not allow it!"

There was a pause that lasted a few seconds.

"Son," Charles started softly, "in this family, injustice perpetrated against the weak and the oppressed will never be tolerated—about this you are correct. But if we are to err in our dealings with each other, we will boldly err on the side of grace."

I heard rustling within the room and a second later the doors flew open, almost hitting me square in the face. Jasper flew out of the room, carrying a small bag under his arm. He burst through the front door and out into the cold night. I don't think he even saw me. Charles followed him to the door of the study and called out to him. He then turned as he saw me out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm sorry," he said, placing his hand on the top of his balding head.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I answered. "Thank you for what you said to him."

"How do you talk nonsense into the head of such a rational being?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nonsense," he replied. "Forgiveness is nonsense. It's not rational; it's not logical. But how else is the world to be reborn?" Charles asked the question honestly, as if he really didn't know the answer.

"He'll come around," I tried to assure him. "We raised him, after all."

But Jasper moved to Philadelphia. Charles received regular letters from him, but I did not. I wrote constantly to no reply. He didn't even inquire about me in writing his father, however, Charles let him know that I was well anyway.

Over the next few years, much took place. Charles and Father opened a fifth store and we moved permanently into this house. I was so glad to be rid of the constant reminder of those times. Rachel was married in this very garden to a fine young Princeton man who would go on to be quite a success himself. They now live in Newark in a fine home with three beautiful daughters of their own.

Jasper went on from Philadelphia to Cleveland in 1907 to work for Packard Motor Cars, then served in the First World War as a mechanic. He spent eighteen months in Europe. So our second son also followed his father's footsteps and went off to war. Charles, however, never left my side this time. Thankfully, Jasper survived unscathed, and

returned to Ohio. He went on to work for an independent mechanic shop, married a beautiful young lady named Mary, with whom he has several children. As time went on, our relationship healed, thanks in large part to his father's continual insistence that he forgive me. Jasper truly did mature, and from the letters I regularly receive from Mary, he has grown into the kind of husband and father that Charles was. I couldn't be more proud of him. In his last letter to me, he mentioned opening his own shop in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, just across the river from Cincinnati.

Charles and I were, alas, alone together again. My mother was extremely sick for several years, and finally passed away in 1906. Father's health immediately deteriorated, and within four months, we lost him as well. By this point, however, Charles was in complete control of all of our stores, and was managing them with astonishing success. We made money hand over fist and my husband managed to give much of it away to those in need. He never retired—he would go to work every day until he was physically unable, and we grew inseparably close over those tender years.

---

“And that's my story.”

“Incredible,” Nina replied. “I'm so glad that Jasper has come around. It seems to me like he was too hard on you, and that you were too hard on yourself. Everyone must have closeness to other human beings. But your husband's forgiveness without so much as a second thought is truly remarkable.”

“Yes it was. The most difficult part, I'll tell you, was finally forgiving myself.”

“Yes, but how do you let go? How do you live with yourself when you are your own worst enemy?”

“The key,” Beth answered, leaning back in her chair, “is to understand that what you've done is not who you are. That was the biggest

## THE WAGES OF GRACE

lesson Charles ever taught me, and I wasted a lot of years reliving those horrible days, when I should have been living the days I had.”

When she got home after dark, Nina picked up the boys from Henry and Henrietta’s. She held her children close that night and told them over and over again how much they were loved. The next morning, the sun rose warmly over the skyline of the city, and in the depth of its shadow, she was being set free.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandon Dragan grew up in northeastern New Jersey and attended Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee.

He is currently a 2L Juris Doctor candidate at Belmont University College of Law.

Brandon enjoys road cycling, cigars, Irish whisky, and is an avid supporter of the Arsenal Football Club.

He and his wife Jami live in the Nashville area with their two daughters.

For more information, visit:

**[BrandonDragan.com](http://BrandonDragan.com)**





Many voices. One message.

Quoir is a boutique publisher that provides concept-to-publication solutions and creative services for print and digital books, podcasts, and videos. We are committed to being author-centric, collaborative, and unconventional.

For more information, please visit

*[www.quirrel.com](http://www.quirrel.com)*

*“A brilliant piece of literary art... Dragan is a gifted writer and master storyteller, and this novel is likely just the beginning.”*

**MATTHEW J. DISTEFANO**

AUTHOR, PODCASTER, AND SOCIAL WORKER

Thierry Laroque, war hero and retired mechanic in rural Tennessee, would like nothing more than to live out his days in peace and quiet, but a dark secret buried in the distant past continues to haunt him. When his Wall Street power-broker brother—the person he blames for the loss of his one true love—shows up destitute at his door after decades of estrangement, Thierry comes face to face with the ghosts of a life frozen in time.

Epic in scope yet intimate in detail, *The Wages of Grace* asks the universally human questions of not only whether healing and forgiveness are possible, but ultimately, are they worth the cost?



QUOIR

WWW.QUOIR.COM

ISBN 978-1-938480-71-3

5 1799



9 781938 480713

FICTION