

One

My dad talked me into working at the mill that summer, my last before college. A job in the steel industry paid three times what I made as a waitress downtown, so I was sold on the idea after two or three phone calls. All year I'd never come home from the diner with more than a sneeze of bills and loose change, plus some fratty's phone number crayoned across the back of an orphaned receipt. All of my clothes smelled like two in the morning—spilt beer, burnt coffee, secondhand smoke. I'd often reminded myself that all great artists started somewhere. A job at my dad's mill, at least, promised a better start than what I had so far. When May arrived and school ended, one branch on the oleander in my mom's yard "bloomed" for a day and then fell onto the driveway, like a bride's severed arm. My mom saw it happen and smiled. Figures. Growing up in Alabama, she used to drown cats in the river.

"You could never kill those fuckers," she once told me. "Hold them with a stick for three minutes, five, eight, water gushing over them. Their heads would pop right up as soon as you let go, and off they scampered. Wish I had that kind of resilience. Anyway, killing them wasn't my idea. My mom told me to do it. Cats spread disease, she said. They were a total plague."

My last Saturday morning in Marietta, Georgia, the mountains stood in the middle of my window as usual, bored and tired of being covered with trees. My high school graduation gown swayed in the closet. It caught a draft and ballooned out, a kind of momentary sail. I

arose to spend a few minutes in the shower and then, deciding to skip the day's ceremony altogether, I packed my clothes and art supplies into the backseat and mapped the three-hour drive to Columbia, South Carolina, where my dad had moved after my parents divorced a year earlier. Hoping to leave without a prolonged goodbye, I didn't wake my mom.

I should have.

In a way, I didn't have to. Her paintings did plenty of talking for both of us. She'd hung them in the upstairs hallway, living room, den, kitchen, everywhere. Someone died in every single one—victims of various mill accidents. Men drowned in bowls of hot metal. They dangled from construction cranes by nooses made of power cables. Their crumpled bodies accorded out of twelve-ton stacks of rebar. In her recent masterpieces, the victims resembled my dad. They were a kind of voodoo, or maybe just wishful thinking. My mom once said that Picasso never used the switchblade of cubism to draw the people he loved. But there my dad lies, in a work entitled *No. 7*, limp on the floor of an overstocked warehouse, his body peeled like an orange.

Was I next?

Even if I didn't die in my mom's paintings, the threats of a steel plant were real. My dad had promised me I'd be safe. "Don't worry, Sarah. Only the dropouts have to work in the melt shop, and that's the most dangerous place," he'd said over the phone. "You'll probably assist the receptionist in various ways."

"That's thoughtful of you," I said.

"I know."

Every time we talked long distance, I imagined his attention aimed at a calculator or some broken gadget he'd pried open. My dad never quite looked me in the eye. Even when he did, he seemed to be watching some part of the eye, a slash of black in the green iris or a red scrawl on the white. I didn't mind those parts of the eye, the blood

vessels. They reminded me of someone testing out a pen. Still, I tried to make the people on the other end of my conversations feel important. My dad somehow failed.

“You’ll be safe,” he’d said, to finally reassure me. “I’ll bet you won’t even lose a finger.”

My mom had sketched me the afternoon I first told her about working at the mill. She’d smiled acidly from her side of the kitchen table, unwilling to share my enthusiasm. “You’re eighteen, and your dad wants you to start turning a profit. That’s all. Now, raise your head. Keep your hands still. And stop blinking.”

Like a good model, I tried to speak without moving my lips. “Dad says it’s worth the money.”

“Let me tell you about your dad and money.” My mom slashed at her sketchbook. “Right before he was baptized, the preacher held out a Bible and a twenty dollar bill. The preacher told him to pick one. He picked the twenty.”

“Mom, you haven’t been to church in twenty years. Do you really care?”

She glared at her sketch, as if my image had just contradicted her. “Your dad says he already had a Bible, and that’s why. But he doesn’t get it. The whole thing wasn’t about God. Stop blinking, Sarah. It was about greed. We’ve argued for years.”

“Don’t I know that already? You guys argued all the time.”

“We always argued privately, in the bathroom or the garage, never in front of you.”

“We’re arguing about arguing.”

“You started.”

“About the whole Bible thing, isn’t he also standing up for what he wants? If my dad wanted the twenty, then he did the right thing.

Besides, how can I not blink? You've been painting for thirty years, and you've never complained about blinking."

"The general act of blinking doesn't bother me. It's you blinking, here and now. So, stop. I don't know why. Today, your blinking bothers me. End of story."

"Would've been worse to take the Bible if he didn't want it," I said.

"Go on," she said, trying to hold her mug and charcoal in the same hand. "I'm listening."

"Good," I said. "The real issue is conformity. Taking the Bible, he would've been doing what everybody wanted him to."

"Don't give him that much credit," she said. "What other people want has never, in my opinion, factored into your dad's thoughts." My mom suddenly slammed her sketch book on the table. "For God's sake, Sarah, stop blinking. Some people can stare without blinking for up to an hour. You can stop blinking for twenty minutes, can't you? It's not an unreasonable demand. So many people ask you to do things. I'm simply asking you *not* to do something."

That's why my dad had left, I guessed. His wants trumped our needs. The decision had nothing to do with his promotion or the fact that my mom was insane, like an unwound ball of yarn, tangled and sprawling, dangerous. She'd tried to kill him once, and me. Things were better lately, though the social services woman came once or even twice a month. In South Carolina you can decide at age sixteen which parent you want to stay with, just like you can marry any man you please. My dad had asked me to stay here and keep my mom's yarn clumped together.

So that Saturday morning I simply packed my car and drove straight to the plant. Three hours placed me on a shredded road that carved across an obstacle course of train tracks and then plunged into the woods. How a steel mill could hide out here in this forest baffled me. Spanish moss hung so low from the oaks it nearly brushed the top

of my car. I could barely see beyond the next bend in the road until, a mile or two down, the wilderness opened up and factory buildings began to peek out from the treetops. The scene reminded me of the books where explorers stumble onto a city of ruins in some lush jungle.

Something screamed from the distant steel plant, a whistle or siren, and I imagined someone was being sacrificed. My mom had done a series of paintings on that theme. She'd drawn my dad and some of his mill friends, their hardhats transformed into ceremonial headdresses, carving open young girls and boys and tugging out their guts. I'd begged her to make me a sacrifice. She never did.