

PASSING *through* PERFECT

Grinder's Corner, Alabama 1946

The war was over, and hundreds of thousands of young men headed home to pick up the pieces of their lives. Benjamin Church was one of them. Many came home missing an eye, an arm, or a leg, but not Benjamin. Although he'd joined up thinking he'd fight Germans, the truth was he'd done little more than unload trucks and work on the motors that kept them running.

In the years he'd been gone Benjamin had sent countless letters home. His mama had written back several times saying things at home were just fine. But after the fall of that third year, he'd received only one letter telling how his mama had gone to be with the Lord. The letter was penned in Reverend Beech's neat, even script, but at the bottom in shaky block letters his daddy had written OTIS CHURCH. They were the only two words Otis could write.

Benjamin climbed down from the bus in Bakerstown, slung his duffle bag over his shoulder, and started walking. It was almost twenty-five miles out to the farm and most of it back road. On the far edge of Madison Street he veered toward Pineville Road and left the town behind.

On the long nights when he'd lain in his bunk thinking of home, Benjamin had remembered raucous rolls of laughter and the smell of pork roasting over a wood fire. He saw girls in flowery dresses and called to mind the sound of their high-pitched giggles. Of course, it had been four years so he expected to see some change: a few new houses maybe, a new store, a cement road. But there was nothing. It was exactly the same as when he left. In a strange way, the sight of sameness felt comfortable. It was the part of home he'd longed for.

The sun was low in the sky when the house came into view. It sat there silent as a graveyard; no motors chugging, no people talking, not even a barnyard chicken squawking. For a brief moment Benjamin wondered if his daddy was gone also, but when he turned into the road the old man came out onto the porch.

Benjamin raised his arm and waved. Otis brought his hand to his face and shielded his eyes from the sun. He leaned forward, trying to identify the stranger.

Dropping his duffle in the road, Benjamin took off running. He was three steps shy of the porch when his daddy finally recognized him.

Otis gasped. "Lord-a-mercy, I hardly knowed it was you."

Benjamin hugged the frail Otis to his chest and laughed. "You saying I put on some weight?"

"Some weight?" Otis echoed. "Why, you done went from boy to man."

It was true. Benjamin had left home a lanky, bone-thin boy and returned a man who was broad of chest and heavily muscled. His face had also changed. It wasn't a change you could

point to and say his nose was shorter or his cheeks fuller; it was the look behind his eyes. They were still brown with scattered flecks of gold, but there was a wisdom that hadn't been there before. If you looked only at Benjamin's eyes, you could almost believe him to be an old man.

"I'm sorry about your mama," Otis said.

A look of sadness shadowed Benjamin's face. "I'm sorry too, Daddy. Real sorry."

He said nothing of how for nearly a month his mama's laugh was something he couldn't forget. No matter how hard he tried not to think of her, the thoughts came and he cried. There were nights when he'd fall into his bunk exhausted from the day's work, but the moment he closed his eyes a picture of her came to mind. He'd see her baking a pie, drawing water from the well, or singing in the choir, and knowing she was gone would sting like a hornet nesting inside his brain.

After a short time of talking Benjamin went back, picked up his duffle, and came inside the house. It was the same as the day he'd left. His mama's apron still hung on a peg alongside the wood stove. As he sat at the kitchen table and drank a glass of sweet tea with his daddy, her ghost slid in alongside of them. It was a sadness neither of them wanted to speak of. In time they would talk of it, but not now.