



December 31, 2010
Shelby

In the cemetery tucked behind First Baptist Bible, next to the broadleaf tobacco patch twelve miles south of town, scrawled-out writing on a buckled, tin sign reads: “NO BURIAL’S WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION”. Those words piss off Mama—dead men don’t need no rules—but she obliged.

Last night, she mended the zipper of her darkest dress. She put the permission slip, alongside eight, crispy-new, one hundred-dollar bills, into a manila envelope. She

hid it under the mat in her hatchback Chevy, and checked that car half-a-dozen times to make sure it was locked.

Uncle Watley's funeral is in thirty minutes and we'll be late. Mama's right hand trembles as she leans into the mirror, fumbling with her eyeliner; a freshly lit menthol balances across the rim of her coffee cup, a slug of ashes threatening to fall. I tap it on the saucer, hand her the cig, and then dump the pyramid of soot into the trash. The ashes puff into a cloud before most of them settle on the floor.

"You said you'd stop smoking in the house." I brush my hands together. "What a mess."

She responds with that cocked-brow, pursed-mouth look and then takes another drag. Moving to the dresser, she digs in the drawers, fists thrusting through nylon, searching for pantyhose without a run. She slides and wiggles into her last wadded pair. There's a tiny tear at the ankle, but I don't speak.

"Fetch me some polish, Shelby."

I scurry to the shoebox with *Manicure* written on the side. There's no clear polish to stop the run, only a bottle of Cherry Bomb Red. Mama dabs the tiny bristles at the rip, that laurel sprig tattoo peeking over the nylon's waistband like an easy grin. Straightening her back, she places the brush on top of the dresser. A drop of scarlet drips onto the wood.

Screwing the brush into the bottle, I feel the skin around my jawline tighten. "I could spend my life cleaning up your trail." I wipe the mark with a tissue, smearing it deep and dark into the grain.

Mama glances at the splotch. "I'd best be following you."

What's this? She's telling *me* that *I'm* the cause of this chaos? I want to lash back, but we've got to keep moving. A sick headache's coming on, and an image of that stain keeps looping across my vision.

She slips into the two-sizes-too-small dress, a deep V cut down the front. "Zip me up, hon. Careful so it don't catch the gauze." Arms clamped around her paunchy midriff, she inhales, sucking in her gut. I pinch the fabric together, slick cloth sliding between my thumb and forefinger, and inch my way up, the zipper straining against the seams.

"Finally," I say, as Mama exhales, rasping and coughing. "You wouldn't have stood a chance without the control-top."

She smooths the shiny fabric over her hips. "I've gained near eight pounds since you started foolin' in my kitchen."

"And no one's complained about mealtime since." I blow her a kiss.

Shrugging, she regards herself in the mirror, tilts her chin, and continues. "Still. Not bad for forty-four." I admire her reflection: quick blue eyes, chiseled jaw and fine-tuned profile. My mood softens. This woman is finely made. Mama is *fine*.

She rings her head in some no-brand hairspray; it smells like pesticide. I open the bedroom door and fan away the stinking fumes. Television laughter floods the room. Mama crushes out the cig, craning her neck through the door.

"Miss Ann, young lady, turn off that TV and *scoot*. Get your butt in the car." We slam through the back door, pile into the car, and screech off to the cemetery. Halfway there, I remember the most important part.

"Sweet Jesus, Mama. We forgot the ashes."

“Damnation, Shelby.” Her words sound irritated, hissed between teeth, as if I were the warden of those ashes. A purplish-gray vein snakes up her neck as she lights another smoke, then she makes a hasty U-turn, roadside gravel spitting up to rattle the wheel wells. We backtrack home to get the ashes. We’ll be late now for sure.

She scurries into the house, and then returns walking slowly, clutching the funeral urn to her chest. Handing it to me through the passenger window, she trots to the driver’s side and slides behind the steering wheel. She busts up the speed limit retracing our route, knocking against curbs, jolting around corners, and racing along the stretch of highway. I hoist, shift and clinch the urn between my thighs; I’m worried it’ll fall, or that the top will be knocked off, spilling the ashes between my legs.

At last we arrive at the church.

“Lord, Shelby,” Mama smirks, giving me the once-over, “smooth your mane. You look like a wild-eyed dugout soldier.”

“Whatever. I’m just grateful we’re alive.” I twist my hair into a back knot then turn and wink at Miss Ann, my child.

Mama retrieves the envelope from the trunk and secures it under her armpit, I hand her the urn, and then we tread toward the cemetery. Moist weedy grass grows in clumps, dampening my feet and scratching my ankles. I wrap my fingers around the rickety iron handle and push open the graveyard gate. The hinges make a high-pitched creaking whine, and this sound and all this nervousness scares Miss Ann, who whimpers, “Maa...ma. Maa...ma.”

That word: *Mama*. Settles my soul. Links in a chain that life can't break. The rusted clasp of the gate cuts a sliver into my palm so I spit on it, pick out a metal splinter then grab her tiny fist.

Uncle Watley's widow, Aunt Mama, is facing the preacher with her head bowed. Cutting her eyes in our direction, her lips curl into a faint smile, as if relieved we finally made it. Mama places the urn and envelope on a table next to the shoveled-out grave, gives her sister a tight hug, and whispers something in her ear.

Aunt Mama chuckles. Then, remembering her role at the gathering, she frowns, swipes fingertips under dry eyes, and directs her gaze to the preacher.

We stand next to Uncle Watley's skinny-boned, slick-haired poker buddies and sing "Walking with Jesus." More sober than I've seen them in years, the men try to settle themselves, hitching up trousers and appearing uncomfortable in their ill-fitting, saggy suits. Swaying to the refrain, I push my daughter closer to Mama so she won't smell those rank wafts of mothballs. The men's whispers of belch are bad enough, stinking of sour whiskey and pickled eggs. Miss Ann's hand is yanking at mine, raggedy nails curling into my wrists. She hiccups back tears, trilling, "Who-whip, who-whip," mewling like an unweaned coon. Hoisting her six-year-old body onto my hip, I stare her quiet.

I can't wait to hightail it out of this backwoods churchyard but the preacher, Reverend Thomas, hasn't even begun. He's a nice enough man but he is aware we aren't in his flock; no flock for that matter. The crematorium gave us his card. Truth is, I admire the mysteries of Jesus, a flesh-and-blood man, but I can't wrap my mind around something as big as God.

The preacher's eyes squint in the dazzle of the high-noon sun and dart across our group, not judging, but searching, blinking, seeming confused, as if he's misplaced his Bible. He clears his throat.

"We commend our brother to you, Lord Christ, splendor of life eternal."

He proceeds to sketch a picture of Uncle Watley's spirit like a white-winged dove flitting off to heaven. What a joke; my uncle was a bat out of hell. Reverend Thomas never once met Uncle Watley but that's not why my stomach's in knots. I'm worried he'll lift the urn and realize it's a good bit heavier than the one he delivered to us from the crematorium.

Mama's used to pinching pennies. Says it's the Scottish in her but the reality is that she's been broke her entire life, so when she had to figure a way to provide a Christian burial for her boyfriend, Sam Cox, she relied on inbred Georgia wiles.

Shelby, really, who'd ever find out? she had asked me, the words rolling around her mouth like sausage balls in flour. *Why not combine Watley's ashes with Sam's? Believe me, I've checked, and there ain't nothing in the Bible that says it's a sin. Just makes horse sense.* I wondered where she'd been keeping the Lord's book all these years, much less reading it.

I told her no. That was a terrible idea. That the church expects payment for every soul dug into its property. Besides, we both knew Uncle Watley despised Sam; the men had quit speaking after Sam shot off Uncle's brand-new Remington 700 without asking his permission. It wasn't the gun itself but the fact that Sam borrowed it and nailed the

largest buck ever recorded in Jeff Davis County history. Why, I'm talking the biggest whitetail *ever*. That animal sported a twelve-point rack.

If Watley hated the sight of him when he was alive, I said to her, imagine how he'd feel about Sam poaching in his ashes.

But we couldn't get our heads around the cash problem, and a proper burial for him might give Mama some peace. The trouble began last spring: Sam stepped on a rusty nail, developed blood poisoning, and died two weeks later from complications.

He left Mama crazy as a hit dog—wild-eyed and bumping into furniture, limping around the house—she lost the car keys for an entire week and paid it no mind. At last she slumped into a chair and sat heaped at the card table, face filling her hands, with that teased red hair swaying back and forth; she looked like some split overripe tomato, swollen with late-summer heat, heavy on the vine.

He also left behind a wallet full of credit cards, maxed-out to the limit.

Mama had Sam cremated with funds provided by the State then, gray-faced and empty-eyed, she crept back into the shadow of her life before she'd met him. The preacher brought us his ashes in a plastic-lined cardboard box, no sturdier than a Happy Meal so she scrubbed a two-quart pickle pot with bleach and kept his remains bottled up in the cellar. After a spell, he latched onto the aroma of Clorox, scented with vinegar, garlic and dill. Last month Uncle Watley died from heart failure. His death, followed by a life insurance check for ten thousand dollars, spelled bingo for Mama. At last she could send Sam off in style.