

4-1-2013

# Waiting for Errol

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## Recommended Citation

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TRINITY COLLEGE  
Hartford, Connecticut

Thesis

Waiting for Errol

Submitted by

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Class of 2013

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

2013

Advisor: Professor Francisco Goldman

Reader: Professor Kevin Gonzalez

Reader: Professor Sarah Bilston

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## CHAPTER ONE

During recess, I found my brother Errol sitting in his usual spot underneath the maple tree behind the swings reading his book of poetry. He looked completely content with his glasses perched on the end of his nose and his legs stretched out on the grass. I stomped over and crashed down onto my knees in front of him.

“Pamela Jenkins got me sent to Principal Higgins’ office today!”

“Jeez, Eleanor, that’s the second time this week.”

I was well aware. It was on the way to gym class. I was concentrating on my feet, making sure I was stepping in the dead center of the twelve by twelve inch tiles on the floor, when Pamela Jenkins stuck her foot out and tripped me, causing me to step out of the lines.

“Then she called me spaz, and all the other children laughed at me,” I told him.

So, I grabbed her by her neat little braid-- I bet her mother gently brushed and braided her shiny red hair every morning-- and yanked it as hard as I could. If only I could rip it right out of the side of her head and hold it, still tightly braided, in my hand.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s possible,” Errol agreed.

When Pamela Jenkins screamed and fell to her knees on the ground, trying to pull her hair from my grasp, all the other children gathered around, and Mrs. Dorigen came rushing out of classroom four. I immediately let go, but Pamela was crying-- she would always cry over the littlest things; one day she cried over a paper cut-- and all the children, crowded tightly around her, were patting her on the head gently, and wiping away her tears. They said, “Poor Pamela,” and “Let me take her to the nurse, Mrs. Dorigen!” Mrs. Dorigen joined their little circle to

inspect the damage and without even turning around said, “Eleanor, principal’s office. Now.” I stared for a minute at their tight little circle with Pamela Jenkins safe and content in the middle. Then I turned around and walked down the hall, feeling the hateful stares of all the children boring into my back.

“And then Principal Higgins told me that if I was sent to his office one more time this week, I would have to stay after school for an hour cleaning the chalkboards. Then he made me sit in his office and write lines for the rest of the period.”

“Dang,” Errol said. He had been picking up on slang lately, but I just let it slide. “Well, she deserved it.”

I nodded in solemn agreement. “They all hate me,” I told him.

“They’re all idiots,” he said firmly. “We don’t need them. Here, why don’t we go to the Chasm after school today. I found something that we can throw in. Look.”

He dug around in his back pocket and pulled out a rusted coin, caked with dirt and residue.

“It’s a silver dollar,” he said, giving it to me. “I can’t read the date, but it must be really old. It’s probably really valuable.”

I held it close to my eyes to examine it, turning it over and over to try to find the date. I picked up the edge of my blue cotton dress and rubbed the coin with it to try to get off the dirt.

“No, Eleanor. The dirt’s part of the coin’s history. Don’t rub it off.”

I quickly stopped and grasped it tightly in my hand. “It’s perfect,” I said.

The bell signaling the end of recess rang in the distance, and all the children started slowly shuffling back toward the doors to the school.

“Okay, I’ll see you later,” Errol said as he got up and brushed the dirt and grass from his khaki pants. I held out the coin to give back to him, but he shook his head. “Why don’t you hold onto it? Don’t lose it.”

I watched as he joined rest of the eighth graders, the oldest children in the school. Then I slipped the coin into the pocket of my dress, got up, and slowly followed the fifth graders through the other door.

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After the bus dropped me off at three o’clock, I sat on the front steps of the office waiting for Errol to come home. I wasn’t too concerned that he wasn’t home yet. I knew he would be back soon since the walk to the Chasm was long, and we had to get there and back again before dinner. He wasn’t on the bus, but sometimes he missed it because he liked to stay and talk to his teachers about a Yeats poem or something he read about in the newspaper that morning. All the teachers loved him, and he always got straight A’s. He was without a doubt the smartest person that I knew, ten times smarter than any of my teachers at school. I never bothered to pay much attention in class, because I knew Errol would tell me anything I ever needed to know. He read the entire newspaper every night after dinner, front to back, without even skipping the business section, the most boring part of the newspaper. I tried to read the whole paper once too, but as soon as I started reading about the Dow Jones I gave up and threw it across the table. Errol’s favorite sections were the international and travel sections. Sometimes he would cut articles out and thumb tack them to the wall above his bed. They were articles with pictures of the Great Pyramids, the Roman Ruins, and the Eiffel Tower, and they described all the great places that one could visit if one were in Egypt, Italy, or France. I always found Errol’s interest in these

things strange since we had never been outside Breinigsville County, except that one time when we went to Father's great aunt's funeral an hour away in Franklin. Since Father went to war, Errol became obsessed with reading the articles on the Vietnam War and especially the antiwar protests. He would wave his hands around in excitement and his glasses would slip to the end of his nose whenever he talked to me about the protests, but I always got bored and suggested that we do something else.

Since the road to our house was too narrow for the bus to be able to turn around, the bus driver always dropped me and Errol off at the office, and then we would walk the quarter mile back to our house. The office was a white two story house with black lettering above the front door that said *Bingham Family Gravestones and Monuments*. There were twelve sample gravestones neatly displayed in three rows on the front lawn. The office was where Mother conducted the family business, and where Errol and I were expected to take over once she and Father were gone. Great, great, great grandfather Errol Bingham the First started the business one hundred and fifty years ago. Mother said that we would always be in business because people would always die.

*Some people not soon enough*, I thought, picturing Pamela Jenkins and all the other children at school. Errol always managed to stay out of trouble with the other children. They didn't particularly like him either, but they always left him alone. One boy picked on him in third grade but he punched him hard in the nuts, so everyone left him alone after that. I don't know why the same thing doesn't work with me. I pulled Pamela's pigtail, but I knew she'd still pick on me the next day.

I took Errol's coin out and examined it again, trying to find the date without scrubbing off any of the dirt. Errol was always finding old historical objects in the dirt behind the barn or in the woods around our house. So far, he'd found three arrowheads, two silver dollars, and an old smoking pipe. We always cast these things into the Chasm. Errol said we could only throw sacred objects into the Chasm, and I was always extra careful to not accidentally kick any dirt in when we stood close to the edge. I knew that if even one speck of dirt or one extraneous pebble fell in, something really bad would happen.

Suddenly, the front door opened behind me, and Mother stuck out her head.

"Oh, hello, dear," she said, peering over her wire rimmed glasses. Her slightly graying bun had slipped a little to one side of her head. "Where's your brother?"

"What time is it?" I asked.

She glanced down at her wrist watch. "It's almost four thirty."

"*It is?*" I jumped up. "He hasn't come back yet. He wasn't on the bus. Should we go look for him? He's not supposed to be this late, he promised he would take me to..." I trailed off. Errol and I were forbidden from going to Slippery Hill Chasm.

"Oh, there are my next clients," Mother said as a black station wagon pulled into the driveway. "I wouldn't worry about it, dear. As long as he's back in time for dinner."

A solemn looking young couple got out of the car and Mother ushered them inside. The door shut with a bang behind them.

I stayed standing and stared down the street. Then, I walked to the end of the driveway and looked east toward where he should be coming. There was the one truck fire station, the

spectacle shop, and the dentist's office on the left, and a row of houses on the right with little picket gates in the front. An old man weaved on an even older bicycle on the sidewalk.

I walked back up the driveway and slowly sat down again on the front steps. He was never this late. Especially not when he promised to take me to the Chasm.

I put my head in my hands and looked down at my Mary Janes. What was going on? Something was terribly wrong, I was sure of it. He would never forget. Suddenly a thought cut into my head. *What if he was kidnapped?* These kinds of things happened all the time. Errol just told me about a boy in the newspaper who went missing last month. They still hadn't found him. Errol told me he read that if a child isn't found after three days, the likelihood that he is dead goes up exponentially. I didn't know what exponentially meant exactly, but the word never sounded scarier. *Exponentially*, I thought to myself and let out a long shiver, *exponentially, exponentially, exponentially*.

What if Errol was dead? What if I was sitting on the front steps as he was being killed?

*That's horrible, Eleanor. You mustn't think that way*, I scolded. But then another thought crept into my head: *But really, how would you get on without him?* I let a twinge of fear rustle in my stomach.

The school would have closed by now. He couldn't still be at school. There was nowhere else he could have gone. And he promised to take me to the Chasm. Errol never broke a promise to me before. Never.

*He must be dead.* I let the words reverberate around in my head. There was no other explanation. *Errol is dead, Eleanor*, I said to myself. *Your brother is dead.*

Suddenly a furry warmth pushed into my hands. I looked down and my cat Marigold purred, rubbing her head into my lap. I grabbed her roughly by the soft folds of fur on either side of her neck and pressed my forehead down against hers.

“Errol is dead, Marigold. He’s never coming back,” I told her. She twisted out of my grasp and stalked away.

I put my head back in my hands and dug my fingernails into my face, just below my eyes, until tears welled up. I thought of how Mother’s clients acted when they came to choose a gravestone. Solemn, but dignified. I took my hands away from my face and looked out at the horizon where the sun was beginning to set. *I won’t cry*, I thought, *Errol wouldn’t have wanted me to cry*.

I sniffed loudly and wiped my nose with the back of my hand, then stood up and walked over to my favorite gravestone. It was the newest one, the one that Mother designed. It was probably the happiest looking stone, light gray, with flowers and angels engraved around the edges. I knelt down and leaned my forehead against the cold stone. We would probably never find Errol’s body. When children were kidnapped, Errol said, there was usually only a fourteen percent chance of finding the body. We would have to mourn at an empty grave.

I wondered how I was going to tell Mother. She had been around so much death due to her job that she would probably take it better than most mothers. She would probably make his gravestone herself. She would make it special for him, maybe even put in a Yeats quote. He would like that.

I thought back to this morning at recess. With Errol gone, I would have to take care of myself in school. Never again would I see him under the maple tree. I would no longer be able to

spill my troubles to him. He would never again comfort me. He would never again say exactly the right thing to make me feel better. With a sinking feeling, I realized without Errol, I was completely alone.

“Eleanor, what are you doing?”

I looked up, and there he was, peering down at me from over the other side of the gravestone.

“*Errol!*” I said weakly, and got up and gave him a shaky hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay!” I hugged him tighter. “Where were you?” Then, over his shoulder, I noticed a girl in a gray dress standing with her hands clasped around an armful of school books. I felt the blood rush from my face. “Who is that.”

She had dark blond hair that fell to her shoulders. Her dress was slightly faded. Clutching her books tightly to her chest, she looked to Errol who had taken a step back from me, releasing himself from my locked embrace.

Right then the door to the office opened, and Mother stepped out with her clients.

“Yes, yes. It will be ready by the funeral, I assure you. Call me if you have any questions. Goodbye, now... Errol! There you are. These were my last clients, so I’m just going to straighten up, and then we can head back for dinner.” Then she froze, noticing the girl standing uncertainly behind him. “Who is this?”

“Mom, would it be alright if Martha came over for dinner?”

“It’s nice to meet you Mrs. Bingham,” the girl piped up.

“Dinner?” Mother gasped. “*Yes!* I mean, yes, of course. *Errol, how nice!*”

“NO.” I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe he would do this to me.

“Eleanor--” Errol started.

“*Eleanor*. Mind your manners! What are you saying! Errol is bringing a friend home!

This is *wonderful!*”

“NO!” I yelled, and without even looking at Errol, I ran down the road with tears streaming down my face.

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I didn't slow down until I passed my house and started climbing up the dirt path behind the barn. The air was starting to cool but I barely noticed. I picked up a stick from the ground and smacked it against the tree trunks as I walked by. *I* was Errol's best friend. I was Errol's *only* friend. There had *never* been anyone else. And I had *waited* for him. My mind flashed back to the girl in the faded dress. How dare he forget about me for her. I was his *sister*. I had been worried sick over him, and he forgot all about me because of a stupid girl. How dare he leave me all alone like that. I furiously tried to kick a stone into the trees and fell, ripping my new navy blue tights at the knees. A fresh batch of tears soaked my face as the stinging in my knees swelled. Without brushing the dirt from my dress, I got up and began to run again to get to the top of the hill.

I reached the Chasm in record time and ducked under the wooden railing, ignoring the sign which told me to keep back. Then I swung my arm far over my head and flung Errol's coin in as hard as I could. It bounced off the opposite wall on the way down and made a tiny splash in the dark water below. I then reached down and threw fistful after fistful of dirt into the water after it.

*"I hope you die!"* I screamed into the Chasm and listened as my voice reverberated around me, a hundred curses bouncing off every tall stone wall. I collapsed to my knees. Tiny pebbles bit into the raw skin where I had fallen before.

As silence fell, I suddenly felt a cold wave wash through my body. The blood drained from my face and my chest tightened as I realized what I had just done. Scrambling to the edge of the cliff, I peered over the side. Everything was still.

*"I'm sorry,"* I called weakly into the abyss. Using my hands, I frantically tried to brush back any last remains of dirt, making sure that no more could fall in. The sky had grown dark and it suddenly felt too low to the earth. *"I didn't mean it. I take it back,"* I cried. But the silence settled around me and the dirt had already sunk to the bottom of the pool.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was well after dark by the time I started to make my way back home. My legs were exhausted from scurrying around in the dark, trying to find as many precious objects as I could to throw into the Chasm in order to reverse the damage I had done. I found a smooth gray pebble, a plummy white feather, and a small piece of shiny tinfoil. I lined them all up at the edge of the Chasm and with a sinking stomach, knew that they were not good enough. I needed to find something so valuable that the Chasm would forgive me for the dirt.

I carefully put each of the objects back where I found them. I found the crevice in the dirt under the wooden guardrail with the sign that read *Keep Back*, and placed the pebble carefully back into the hole. I walked twelve steps up the path to put the piece of tinfoil back into the thinning grass under the maple tree where someone probably left it after a picnic. When the feather wouldn't stick back into the bark of the tree and kept fluttering to the ground, I started crying in fear and frustration. I wet my finger and frantically dabbed the tip of the feather and pressed it hard into the bark. Finally, it stuck. Shaken, I stood there for a minute before I slowly turned around and walked back down the path. Tomorrow I would begin my search for the perfect object to throw in the Chasm to save Errol. I briefly wondered how much time I had before it would be too late. Three days, I decided. Three days, and everything would be okay.

Far too soon, the house loomed in front of me. I passed the barn where Mother's horses were sleeping and looked up at the gray stone house. The light was on in the far left window on the second floor-- Errol's room. I let out a tiny sigh of relief. I could sneak in through the back

door and up the stairs to my room on the far right side of the house. For the first time in my life, I knew I couldn't face him.

I walked through the grass in the backyard and up the two steps to the back door that led to the kitchen. I opened the door to see Mother washing the dinner plates in the sink, up to her elbows in suds. It was almost startling how calm and normal she looked. I couldn't tell her anything. Then she'd know I had gone to the Chasm, and wouldn't allow me to go back and fix things. As I closed the door, she turned around to face me, a dripping dish in hand.

"Eleanor," she said severely. I had forgotten I would get in trouble with her for running away and being home after dark. It didn't seem to matter though after the bigger problem I had on my hands. "Where have you been?" she asked. Her glasses slipped to the end of her nose, and when she tried to push them back into place, she left behind a dollop of suds.

Mother had a difficult time with discipline ever since Father left for the war a year ago. Father had always been the one to discipline us, and he was very good at it. All he had to do was lower his voice and say our name once, and we knew we were in trouble. If we weren't in front of him right away, we would get a smack across the behind with his belt. He had no problem sending us to bed without supper. Poor Mother couldn't bear punishing us and didn't know what to do when Father left. Both Errol and I felt bad for her and tried to help her out when she was struggling.

"I'll go to my room without supper," I told her.

"Yes. You do that," Mother said, looking relieved. She turned back to the sink to continue washing the dishes. They were the blue dishes, the nice ones that Mother used when Grandmother Rose came over for Easter. And there were three plates in the sink instead of just

two. I suddenly felt light headed, but then I remembered what I had done. Errol was in danger because of me. No matter how horrible he had been, my crime was much, much worse.

Light poured from Errol's open door at the other end of the hallway upstairs, so I slipped into my room as fast as I could and closed the door. A minute later, I heard his footsteps coming down the hall, and his knock at the door.

"Eleanor?" he called. I stayed silent. "Eleanor, I'm sorry I forgot to take you to the Chasm. I promise I'll take you tomorrow after school. I swear. Okay?"

I climbed into bed, not bothering to take off my shoes, and buried my head into my pillow. He wouldn't ever take me to the Chasm again if he knew what I did. If I didn't make things right again. I listened as his footsteps receded back down the hallway and then I drifted into sleep.

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The next morning I felt much better. I knew what I was going to do. I was going to skip school to find my precious object. I was so happy with my plan that, while I dressed, I twirled around in my blue cotton dress and hummed my favorite song from Mother's funeral march record that she played at the office sometimes. I then brushed each section of my teeth for exactly ten seconds and dabbed my forehead and cheeks with a wet washcloth. I smoothed my hair behind my black headband and ran downstairs to eat breakfast.

I was up before Errol this morning, and Mother was out feeding the horses, so I poured a bowl of Rice Krispies for myself. I was extra hungry since I went without supper last night, so I briefly wondered if I should pour two cups of cereal rather than my usual one cup this morning. I always used a measuring cup to make sure that it was exactly one cup of Rice Krispies to one

half cup of milk. I would then shovel the cereal into my mouth as fast as I could so not even one piece of Rice Krispies would have time to get soggy. If I started to taste a soggy one, I'd have to dump the whole thing out. My stomach was growling, but I settled on one cup since I didn't think I could finish two cups of cereal to one cup of milk fast enough for the Rice Krispies at the bottom to not get soggy. I sat down with my bowl and proceeded to eat.

"Morning," Errol said as he walked through the kitchen door in his khaki pants and red shirt. It looked like he forgot to brush his hair this morning. I nodded to him. He knew I couldn't talk until after I finished my cereal. He poured a glass of orange juice for himself and drank the whole thing at the counter, then filled it again and put it on the kitchen table. Then he fetched a bowl and sat down to pour himself some cereal and drown it in an unknown amount of milk. I avoided looking at it and returned to thinking about my plan.

I would take the bus to school so Errol wouldn't ask me questions, then I would go to the corn fields down the street. Errol told me that Indians used to live on that land, so maybe I would find an arrowhead, or a string of beads, or a shrunken skull. Once I found my sacred Indian object, I would run up to the Chasm, throw it in, and then we could all relax.

"Morning, Mom," Errol said as Mother walked in from outside, letting a wave of cool air blow into the kitchen. She was wearing jeans and a fleece coat, but would change into her work clothes after breakfast. Father always made her wear black and gray to work to keep up appearances, but since he left, she had begun wearing her favorite bright colors, like yellows, blues, and purples.

"Good morning, good morning," Mother said and went to put on a cup of coffee. "Eleanor, must you always gobble up your cereal like that? Slow down a little!" I ignored her

and continued to gulp down my cereal. “I put your lunches in the fridge,” she told us after settling down at the table.

I drank the last of the milk in my bowl then went over to the refrigerator to inspect. Mother had a terrible habit of trying to be creative with our lunches. One time she put raisins in my tuna salad sandwich. I opened up one of the brown paper bags and found a bunch of grapes wrapped in a paper towel and a sandwich wrapped in plastic wrap. I unwrapped the sandwich and pulled apart the two slices of Wonder Bread. Peanut butter and jelly. But she had sliced some of the purple grapes in half and put them in the sandwich. I gingerly picked out a grape half and threw it into the trash.

“Eleanor, grapes are expensive! Don’t just throw them away,” Mother said getting up from her seat at the table. “Here, if you don’t want them, I’ll put them in Errol’s sandwich. Errol, you like grapes don’t you?”

“It’s fine. I’ll eat Eleanor’s,” he said getting up and putting his empty bowl into the sink.

“What a good brother you have,” Mother said, smiling down at Errol. Errol was small for his age, but Mother always said that he would grow to be just like Father: six feet and two inches.

“Come on, Eleanor,” Errol said, grabbing his own lunch bag from the refrigerator. “We have to catch the bus. We can deal with the sandwiches at lunch hour.”

Mother wrapped up my sandwich for me and handed me the brown paper bag. I picked up my book bag from the floor by the door and swung my coat over my shoulder.

“Be good, Eleanor,” she said to me and waved us off.

Errol and I walked out the front door, passed the two stone lions that guarded the house, and to the dirt road that led to the office. Errol waited for me as I paused to pat the nose of each stone lion for luck.

As we walked down the dirt road, I swung my book bag back and forth as I counted my steps to the tune of the funeral march I was humming earlier. This was going to be a wonderful day. No Pamela Jenkins, no nasty children teasing me, and no boring teachers. I vaguely remembered that we had a quiz today in math class, but saving Errol was much more important. I looked over at him walking a little behind me reading his poetry book. He didn't mention yesterday, so maybe after I fixed things at the Chasm this whole mess could be forgotten.

We soon reached the office at the beginning of Bingham Road. Father's black Cadillac was parked in the driveway where it had stayed ever since Father left. When Father first bought the car two years ago, he said that we were one of only three families in Breinigsville to own a Cadillac. He had saved up for years to get it, and we ate lots of eight cent boxed macaroni and cheese, canned green beans, and the cheapest cuts of meat (I refused to eat the beef tongue that Mother bought one night) to make up for it. Before he left, he would drive the Cadillac the quarter mile to the office every morning. Mother preferred the exercise and would leave early so she could walk the distance, unless it was snowing or raining. Then she would sit in the passenger's seat. When Father decided to enlist, he tried to teach Mother how to drive, but she would not have it. She enjoyed walking, she said, and the grocery store was less than a mile away. There was no reason for her to learn how to drive. One time Father made her go driving with him in his beat up pickup truck that he used to carry the tombstones. He took her to a wide grass field behind the house, and told her which pedal was for the gas, and which was for the

brake, and how to use the stick shift. She was so terrible at it that Father finally agreed that it would probably be safer for her and for his Cadillac if she stayed off the roads while he was gone. But he insisted that we keep the Cadillac parked in front of the office in order to “keep up appearances.” Mother made Errol and me take out some old rags and a bucket of soapy water and wash the parked car every month. In the winter time, we would have to clear the snow from the car, and Errol would use an old broom to brush the snow off from the top.

I walked up the red brick walkway to sit on the front steps and wait for the bus while Errol went to fetch the newspaper at the end of the drive. We had all of our mail delivered to the office since the mail truck was too large to get down the narrow dirt road to our house. Errol walked back to me with the paper and sat down on the step next to me.

“So, you’ll go to the Chasm with me after school today, right?” Errol said.

“Umm,” I said. I needed to go alone in order to drop in my sacred object without Errol finding out.

“I’m really sorry, Eleanor. I didn’t mean it.”

My stomach twisted in guilt. He was apologizing to me when he didn’t know the extent of what I did.

“Let’s go tomorrow instead,” I said.

“Okay. Tomorrow then,” he said.

When the yellow school bus with the black number six painted on the side came down the street, I got up to meet it. Usually both Errol and I would drag our feet before getting on the bus, and Mr. Yeoman, the cranky man who drove the bus and who the children said lived in his

seventy year old mother's basement, would yell out the doors for us to hurry up. But today I knew that the sooner I got on the bus, the sooner I could escape to the corn fields.

We were the last stop on the way to school which was good because it was a shorter distance, but bad because all the other children would stare at us as we got on the bus, and we would have the last choice of seats. It was always the worst when there were no seats left and I would have to sit next to one of the children. Today, the first two seats on the left hand side of the bus were free. I slid into the one closer to the back and Errol slid into the one in front of me. I smiled and leaned my head against the cool class window. It was going to be a good day.

"Hey," I heard Errol's voice from in front of me. My head shot up from the window. Who was he talking to?

"Hello," a small voice replied.

I whipped my head around to the seat across from Errol, and there sat the blond girl from last night in a pale pink dress and a worn, gray fall coat with her white knapsack on the floor next to her. A purple scarf spilled out of the top of the bag. My mouth fell open. She rode bus number six? How had I not noticed her before? It was true that most bus rides I busied myself with looking out the window and counting the number of cars that we passed. This was a difficult task since it was extremely important that I did not miss even one car, even if I saw it from a distance and it turned down a side road. But I think I should have known if she rode the same bus as us. How dare she escape my notice. She probably always hid in the back seats. But what was she doing up in the front of the bus today? Did she come up to talk to *Errol*? I glared at her. She was smiling down at her hands which were clasped together in her lap. How *dare* she come talk to Errol. This entire mess was her fault! If she had not followed Errol home then I

wouldn't have run to the Chasm and thrown dirt in and said-- and said what I said. It was all her fault that Errol was in danger. I felt my nails digging into the fleshy pads of my palms. All because of her I had to skip school-- miss my *math quiz*--- and find an object to save Errol. How could she have the nerve to come sit up in the front after all the trouble she had caused my family? I stared at the purple scarf that spilled out of her knapsack. I instantly decided that I hated the color purple. I just wanted to snatch that scarf and throw it out the window. I could just see it snaking through the air before gently falling into a heap on the road where a car would plow it over, and then another, and another, smashing it again and again into the dirty pavement.

Suddenly, I felt a thump on the back of my brown leather seat. My stomach tensed in annoyance as I was torn away from my thoughts. This sort of thing happened on the bus all the time. I crossed my arms and sat straight ahead. I wouldn't turn around and give them the satisfaction. Thump, thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump. I closed my eyelids tightly together, willing myself to stay seated. Thump, thump. Thump, thump. That was it. I sprang up onto my knees and leaned over the back of my seat to see Roger Cooper smiling up at me. Roger was in Errol's grade and twice my size with floppy brown hair and a crooked front tooth. He kicked the back of my seat once more for good measure.

"You stop that this instant," I glared at him.

"Ooh, Miss Eleanor Bingham's tryin' to tell me what to do. What makes you think you can order me around, huh? You think you're better than me 'cus your daddy owns a Cadillac?"

"Well, does your father own a Cadillac?" I asked him.

"*Eleanor!*" Errol hissed. He had turned around to look back at us.

“So you *do* think you’re better than me, huh? Well let me to you somethin’. Your family is full of creeps. What do you all have buried under those gravestones at your house, huh? If someone in town goes missing, I know who I’d blame first.”

I opened my mouth, about to scream at him to shut his or I’d knock his crooked tooth out, when a small voice called from the front, “You leave her alone!” I froze and slowly turned to see the girl with the blond hair standing up in her seat and glowering at Roger.

“Everybody shut up and sit down!” Mr. Yeoman barked from the front seat. We all ignored him.

“You stickin’ up for the Adam’s Family, huh?” Roger said to the girl. “I’d stay away from them if I was you, or you’ll find yourself six feet under in their front yard before ya know it.”

“I’ll murder *you!*” I yelled and swung a punch over the seat. The whole bus went silent and the children in the back stood up to try to get a better view as Roger dodged my punch and I went for another, my arms flailing over the back of the seat.

Suddenly Errol was pulling me back as the bus driver yelled at everyone to sit down, or he’d stop the bus right then and there.

“Yeah, restrain your psycho sister, Errol,” Roger called from behind us. “Freaks.”

“Screw you, Roger,” Errol said. I gasped. Roger stood up.

“What did you say to me, Bingham?”

“He said screw you!” the girl piped up with her hands on her hips. “If you want to pick on them, you’re going to deal with all three of us! So why don’t you sit down and mind your own business!” she said.

“*Sit down!*” Mr. Yeoman barked. “All four of you are going to the principal’s office right after I stop this bus.”

“No!” I cried, “I can’t! I have to--”

“No more talking! Anyone!” Mr. Yeoman yelled.

I sank back down into my seat. There was no way that I could go to the principal’s office. How was I supposed to sneak away to get my sacred object? This was all *her* fault! How dare she get us in trouble? I glared over at the girl. All because of her I wouldn’t be able to save Errol. She got me into the whole mess in the first place and now she’s sticking her little blond head into our lives again and ruining everything! I was running out of time. I took one look at Errol and burst into tears.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Errol said. “If Principal Higgins makes you do the chalkboards, I’ll wait and we can walk home together.”

I put my head in my hands. I had forgotten that Principal Higgins told me that if I was sent to his office again this week, I’d have to stay after school. Well. That was not going to happen. I’d make a break for it the moment I got off the bus. I’d run so fast that they wouldn’t be able to catch me. I didn’t care how much trouble I’d get in as long as I found my sacred object.

The bus pulled into Breinigsville County Elementary School, passed the sign that said Read! Read! Read!, and stopped at the front of the school behind bus number four. Before he opened the door, Mr. Yeoman turned around in his seat and told me, Errol, Roger and the girl to wait. The rest of the children walked down the aisle and sneered at Errol and me as they passed. “Go back to the graveyard where you belong,” they said, “They are *just* like the Adams Family,”

“So *creepy*.” After they all left, Mr. Yeoman jerked his sweaty forehead at the door, and we stood up to file out.

“After you,” Errol nodded to Roger. Roger threw us daggers but stormed out first. It was a smart move. I didn’t want Roger behind us either. He would probably have pushed us down the stairs going out of the bus. Errol stood up next and gave the girl a small smile before exiting the bus. My stomach tightened and I stared at the back of Errol’s head as he walked away. Then a streak of purple blocked my vision as the girl stood up, slinging her book bag over her shoulder. In a flash of anger, I reached out and grabbed the soft, knitted material and gave it a sharp tug. The girl kept walking, and the scarf flowed out of her bag in a long purple stream of fabric. I looked down at my hands, clutching the scarf. This was it. I would throw the girl’s awful scarf into the Chasm and she would be punished and everything would be okay.

Mr. Yeoman was rummaging around in his seat, turning off the engine and grabbing his coat. He would soon follow us out and take us to Principal Higgins office. I quickly balled up the purple scarf and stuffed it into my book bag before grabbing my coat and hurrying down the aisle. Taking a quick glance out the dirty windows on the right hand side of the bus, I saw all the children milling around, waiting for the bell to ring. Roger, Errol and the girl were slowly walking toward the front doors to go to the principal’s office. This was my chance. I bounded down the steps, took a sharp right turn and ran, dodging between book bags that were dumped on the ground, skirting around a girl with a jump rope, and almost running over a boy who was sitting on the ground scribbling last minute homework. I clutched the strap of my book bag as it hung from my shoulder and pounded heavily against my side. After escaping the sea of children, I raced passed the playground, passed the Read! Read! Read! sign, and down the sidewalk. The

school was only two blocks away from the corn fields where I could hide and be safe from anyone who would try to catch me and take me back. But all of a sudden, I began to hear the pounding of another set of feet against the pavement. It had to be Mr. Yeoman coming to get me. I sped up, not daring to look back in case Mr. Yeoman was right there, ready to grab me. But the pounding kept getting closer and closer. I was breathing heavily. My legs were starting to hurt, and my shoulder and back were in pain from the beating of my school books. I couldn't run much faster. My mind swarmed with thoughts of how to twist out of his grasp. With dread I realized that the footsteps had finally caught up; they were right behind me, then right next to me. With a deep breath I turned my head, and there was Errol, staring straight ahead and running with me down the street as fast as his legs would carry him.

## CHAPTER THREE

When we got to the corn field, Errol and I raced between the rows until we finally tumbled to the ground in exhaustion. Errol lay on his back with his arms spread out on either side of him in complete submission to the sky. I collapsed at his feet, but was careful to prop my bag up against me so the contents did not spill out. We both didn't speak for a while, trying to catch our breath.

"I think we lost him," Errol finally said.

"Mr. Yeoman followed you?" I asked.

"Yeah, for a little while. I don't think he could keep up though."

"How'd you lose the girl?"

"Martha? I didn't lose her, I just ran when I saw you book it, and she stayed there."

I nodded. The sky was blindingly blue today. It almost hurt to look at it. Instead, I looked down to inspect my hands and arms for the tiny scratches that one gets from running through the corn. The leaves and stalks were sharp and would slice little paper thin cuts into your skin if you weren't careful.

"You know, the punishment for running away from school is going to be much, much worse than just cleaning the blackboards," Errol finally said. He was still looking up at the sky.

"I didn't leave because I didn't want to clean the blackboards. I was planning on skipping school anyway. *You* shouldn't have run though. *You* don't have any bad marks."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Errol said unconcerned. He plucked a green shoot from the ground and stuck it in his mouth. "Watcha skipping for?"

I went back to inspecting my hands so I wouldn't have to look at him. "I have things to do," I said.

"Yeah? What sort of things?"

I picked the dirt out of one of the fresh cuts with my fingernail, contemplating what I should say. I finally looked over at him. He was sitting up on his elbows and looking at me curiously. A floppy piece of hair fell into his eyes. "Important things," I said. "In fact, I should probably get to them. Goodbye!" I picked up the straps of my bag and climbed to my feet.

"Hey now, wait a minute," Errol said, sitting up. He reached out and tried to grab my bag to pull me back, but I snatched it to my chest. "Aw, come on Eleanor. Sit down and talk to me for a sec."

I stayed standing but waited for him to speak. The corn stalks towered on either side of us, throwing long shadows across his face.

"You're upset about Martha," he said.

"No I'm not!" I snapped.

"Then why did you run away last night? Why are you running away now?"

"I have things to do!" I said shrilly.

He paused for a moment, studying my face. "Well, then, let me help you do them."

I hesitated. "You can't."

"Why not?"

"It's something that I have to do by myself."

The sun was starting to get higher in the sky and the dewy smell of the morning was fading away. Errol ran his hand through his hair and pulled his legs underneath him, crossing

them Indian style. He looked at the ground and pulled a handful of grass out by the roots. "Please stop being mad at me," he said. "I'm sorry I forgot to take you to the Chasm yesterday, and I'm sorry that you were upset about Martha coming over. But why am I not allowed to have a friend?" he asked, raising his head to look at me.

I looked down into his dark brown eyes that looked exactly like mine. "Because *I'm* your friend!" I said.

"You're my sister. I mean, you're my friend too, but that doesn't mean I can't be friends with Martha does it?" he asked. "She would probably be friends with you too if you gave her a chance."

I stared at him. Why would I need a friend? Why would *he* need another friend? It had always been just the two of us, safe and secluded from the rest of the world. No one had ever walked down our street to our house until Errol broke the barrier and let Martha, *Martha*, inside. It had just been us, playing hide and seek in the corn fields, finding robin's nests in the woods, and throwing coins and arrowheads into the Chasm. I realized, as I looked down at Errol, that it would never be the same ever again.

I turned around and walked back down the row of corn. The sun blinded me as I stepped out into the grassy field. I walked down to the sidewalk, and took a right, past the convenience store where they sold barrel pickles as big as my forearm for a nickel, past Peter's Car Repair Shop where Father took his Cadillac once to get inspected, and finally up the small hill and past the sign that said Read! Read! Read!. The American flag in front of the school was hanging down dejectedly from its pole, the air too still to lift it up. There were no children outside at this point, so I walked up the steps through the front door, and down the hall to classroom ten that

held one of the two eighth grade classes. I peeked inside and saw Martha with her blond hair sitting in the back row quietly doing a worksheet. I went inside, walked right past the teacher reading at her desk, and down the row to Martha's desk. She looked up at me, startled, as I stood in front of her, but I quickly reached into my bag, pulled out her long purple scarf, and thrust it into her hands. Without a word, I turned around, walked out the door and down the hallway to the office at the front. I didn't bother to remember to step inside the twelve by twelve inch tiles on the floor. Ignoring Mrs. Hauss, the secretary with the black horn rimmed glasses as she called out my name sharply, I walked straight into the open door to Principal Higgin's office where I collapsed in the hard wooden chair across from his desk and waited for my punishment.

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I walked home from school after washing the blackboards of classroom four, five, and six for an hour. Principal Higgins decided that I would have to stay everyday after school for a week to wash the blackboards, and I got four raps with a ruler on each knuckle. Thank goodness it was Friday, so I had a whole weekend before I had to go back there. He also called Mother at the office and told her what happened and that Errol was still "awol," as he called it. She thanked him and assured him that we both had it coming when we got home. Poor Mother was probably worrying all day about how she would discipline us.

I walked home, first stopping at the office to let Mother know that I was back from school. She was in the small room in the back with the big oak desk where Father used to sit, fiddling with a calculator which spit out a long roll of paper printed with tiny digits.

"Go home and wait for Errol," she told me, squinting at the tiny numbers. "I'll deal with you both together. I don't want to have to go through this more than once."

Errol wasn't home when I got there and still wasn't home by the time Mother walked through the front door. I remembered yesterday, which felt like ages ago, when I waited for Errol to come home and thought he had been killed.

After sending me to bed without dinner last night, Mother was too worried to not let me eat again. She spent fifteen minutes opening and closing cabinets and talking to herself, wondering what to do, while I sat at the kitchen table.

“Why must you do this to me Eleanor? Why couldn't you just be good, like I asked you? Sometimes you really worry me, you know that? I can't not feed you for two nights in a row. I can't have you starve to death! But you don't deserve to have dinner. Only good children can have dinner. Your brother is certainly not getting any dinner tonight. Oh, I wish your father was home, he'd know what to do.” She opened the refrigerator for the third time and stared into it. “I know!” she said finally, straightening up. “I'll feed you, but you're not going to like it! No tasty food for you tonight; I'm going to make tuna fish casserole and your going to eat it!” I nodded. I hated tuna fish casserole. It was smelly, and thick, and gluey, and coated the inside of your mouth with that oily fish taste that lingered long after dinner. Mother had stopped making it a few years ago when she found out that none of us liked it-- not even Father. She started humming as she pulled an onion and a block of orange cheese out of the fridge, then she went over to the cupboard and pulled out two cans of tuna in oil and a box of white rice.

When dinner was finished cooking, we ate in silence except for Marigold who purred and mewed at our feet, weaving herself between the chair legs. Marigold loved tuna fish casserole. I debated sneaking her some under my seat, but remembered that this was my punishment, so I kicked her away with my foot. She went over to Mother who reached down and petted her.

“Wait until we’re done eating, you good kitty, and I’ll give you some casserole.”

Errol walked in through the back door just as we were finishing. It was just before dark; there was a pretty sunset out the back window. Most of it was hidden by the trees, but little slivers of pink and orange peeked through the branches. The rule was always that we had to be home before dark, so Errol had perfect timing. He wouldn’t have wanted to worry Mother any further.

“Errol,” Mother said severely, “go into the living room and wait for me and Eleanor to finish eating. I’m going to have to have a talk with you two.”

Errol nodded and put his book bag by the door then walked through the kitchen and into the living room. Mother inspected my plate to make sure that everything was gone, then told me to put it in the sink and join Errol. She got up and scooped a small glob of casserole onto a saucer and placed it on the floor for Marigold who darted over and swept her tail lazily back and forth while she ate.

I went over and sat on the opposite end of the scratchy blue couch from Errol. We sat in silence facing forward, listening to Mother put the rest of the casserole in the fridge.

“Alright,” Mother finally said walking into the room. She stood in front of us and put her hands on her hips. “What’s going on? Why did you two skip school?”

“Umm...” I said.

“We got in a fight with this boy on the bus,” Errol said. My tuna casserole felt like it was going to come up again. Was he actually going to tell her the truth? I turned around and opened my eyes wide at him, trying to tell him to stop. I was not going to talk about our argument again, especially not in front of Mother. He ignored me and continued, “He started it; it was really his

fault. He was insulting our family, and saying that we murdered people and buried their bodies under the gravestones out front. So the bus driver was going to send us to the principal's office so we ran away," he finished.

"Yes, that's it," I nodded, relieved that he stopped there.

Mother looked at me then back at Errol again. She studied his face for a minute, her eyebrows knitted intently and her lips pierced. "Errol, I really expected more from you. You never get into fights," she said. She knelt down and put her hand on the side of Errol's cheek. "Is this because of your father leaving? I heard from Mary Jane Walters that her son started getting into fights when Jonathan left. This must be affecting you even more than I thought! Oh Errol!" she said and wrapped her arms around him. He patted her gently on her back looking a little confused. "Your father will be back soon. His time there is almost up." She pulled back and looked him in the face. "But don't take this out on other people, Errol. No fighting. You're better than that." He nodded to her and she stepped back. "Okay, you two. Go to bed. No dinner for you tonight Errol," she said.

We both went up to our rooms. Errol stopped for a moment at the top of the stairs and looked at me curiously, his brows furrowed in thought. Then, he took a left and I took a right to walk to our opposite ends of the hallway. I took off my shoes and tossed them into a corner of my room. I threw my dress into the corner with it, put on my nightgown, and climbed into bed without brushing my teeth or washing my face. I ran my tongue over my front teeth, trying get rid of the sharp, oily taste of cheddar from dinner. Then I turned off the lamp by my bed and waited for sleep.

From the crack under my door, I saw the light go on in the hallway a couple of minutes later. Once again, footsteps came down the hall. I waited for Errol to turn into the bathroom to brush his teeth, but they came up to my door. I heard a crinkling of paper, then a small swish as something was slid under my door. I waited for the footsteps to go back down the hall, then I sprang up and padded across the thin beige carpet. A folded piece of paper was lying on the ground. I picked it up and went back to my bed to turn on the lamp. Unfolding the paper, I realized that it was a page carefully ripped out of a book. It was from Errol's book of poetry.

*The Cat and the Moon*

by *William Butler Yeats*

HE cat went here and there  
And the moon spun round like a top,  
And the nearest kin of the moon,  
The creeping cat, looked up.  
Black Minnaloushe stared at the moon,  
For, wander and wail as he would,  
The pure cold light in the sky  
Troubled his animal blood.  
Minnaloushe runs in the grass  
Lifting his delicate feet.  
Do you dance, Minnaloushe, do you dance?  
When two close kindred meet,  
What better than call a dance?  
Maybe the moon may learn,  
Tired of that courtly fashion,  
A new dance turn.  
Minnaloushe creeps through the grass  
From moonlit place to place,  
The sacred moon overhead  
Has taken a new phase.  
Does Minnaloushe know that his pupils  
Will pass from change to change,  
And that from round to crescent,  
From crescent to round they range?  
Minnaloushe creeps through the grass  
Alone, important and wise,  
And lifts to the changing moon

His changing eyes.

After I finished reading the poem, I folded it back up again and put it on my nightstand.

That night I dreamed of Marigold dancing beneath the stars. Her eyes were big white moons.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It was exactly 12:00 a.m. when I woke up with a start. Marigold was kneading her claws into the quilt on my stomach. It was dark outside, and the moon was high and full, shedding silver light through the break in my curtains. For a minute, I thought I heard it humming.

I swept the quilt back, causing Marigold to jump to the floor. Then I grabbed the ripped out page on my nightstand and padded across my room to the door, not pausing to put on socks or shoes. I quietly opened my bedroom door and slipped out. The wooden floor would sometimes creak, so I carefully tiptoed down the hall to avoid waking Mother or Errol. The crack under each of their doors was dark, so I knew they were both sleeping. I then crept down the stairs, avoiding the third to last one which also creaked, through the dark kitchen where plates were drying on the dish rack, and out the back door. I felt Marigold bump against my legs as she snuck out behind me, then I closed the door softly behind us and we slipped into the night.

My feet were the only part of my body that felt the cold as I stepped on the cool grass that tickled my feet. The moon seemed to have warming properties tonight, so as long as I stayed in its light, I was protected from the autumn chill. The air was completely still as I crossed the yard behind my house. Past the barn, and up the hill, I stepped lightly on the leaves and dirt and sticks that made up the path so as not to get poked and prodded. Marigold found the path in front of me, and once we got deeper into the woods where the light was sliced up by the tall trunks and long branches, all I had to do was find the white glint of her eyes to not get lost. We did not speak, and we were careful that our feet did not make a sound, so the moon was the only one that

knew we were there. Even the farsighted stars were too far away to hear us, and they blinked down in mild confusion as we disappeared beneath the trees.

I felt warm again once we reached the clearing at the top of the hill. The moon created a pool of light that made the silver tree trunks around the edge of the clearing shimmer and glow. Each blade of grass was laced in the white moonlight, and a breeze bent them slightly at the hip as it flowed into the toothless mouth of the Chasm. Tonight, the Chasm was a solid black hole that the moon could not seem to penetrate. Marigold and I crossed the clearing where my skin seemed to become translucent, and we crawled under the fence to the edge where we lay down on our bellies to peer over and avoid getting swallowed. The pull of the Chasm was extremely strong tonight. I knew that the water at the bottom must be freezing if the moon couldn't reach it. I suddenly felt bad for the objects that we threw in to sink to the depths of the Chasm, never to feel the warmth of the moon again. My fist tightened around Errol's poem. Marigold looked at me expectantly and slowly blinked her wide moon eyes. I stared back at her, then we both turned our heads to look back down into the Chasm. It was so black that it was impossible to see into at all. I could feel the cold dampness as it sucked in the warm moon air. My nightgown fluttered around my knees and Marigold's thick orange fur was swept forward as the air current flowed past us. Her ears pointed forward as she looked straight ahead. The current seemed to be moving faster than it was when we first lay down a few minutes ago. I knew if I was going to do this, I had to do it soon. I had to do it before the hour was up. But I held tighter to the poem, unable to loosen my fingers. Unable to sacrifice the poem to the darkness of the Chasm. The breeze was now turning into a wind, growing stronger and stronger. Marigold dug her claws into the dirt to hold herself steady. The more the Chasm wanted it, the tighter I held on. The wind whistled past

my ears and the ends of my hair pelted against my face. For a split second, I desperately wondered if I could throw Marigold in and keep Errol's poem, but she looked over and hissed at me. The Chasm wouldn't want her anyway. The only thing that would work was the poem. I slowly unclenched my hand. Instantly, the wind died down. I smoothed the page out on the ground. Then, I held it over the edge for another second, and released. The moonlight caught it as it fell, and within the solid black precipice, I watched the white page as it gently glided to the bottom.

Once it disappeared, I let out a long slow breath that I hadn't realized I had been holding. I looked over at Marigold and said, "Well, that's that." She hissed at me again, angry I had thought about throwing her in, then got up and ran into the trees. I crawled back under the fence and brushed the dirt from my nightgown. I rubbed my arms, suddenly cold. The moon seemed further away; its light no longer touched the clearing. I turned around and walked back down the path. Without Marigold to guide me, it took longer to get home, though I tried to walk faster to keep warm.

Inside the house, I crept back up the stairs, into my room and then climbed into bed. Immediately, I was exhausted, but completely content. Errol was finally safe.

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Mother made pancakes for breakfast the next morning. She stacked Errol's plate extra high to make up for him missing dinner the night before. I took my usual two pancakes and ate them plain without the syrup or margarine that Mother and Errol liked to load on top. I liked pancakes better than cereal because I could relax and eat them normally without having to worry about soginess.

“So, what are you two going to do today?” Mother asked us as she poured herself a glass of orange juice.

“I don’t know,” Errol said stuffing an overlarge forkful of pancakes into his mouth.

“Probably just hang out.”

“Well, I’m going to take Lady out riding today. Remember to check the mail at the office this morning.”

“Okay,” Errol said.

“And no getting into trouble today! Either of you. I want a nice relaxing weekend,” she said, pointing her fork at Errol and me for emphasis.

“We won’t,” Errol said, and I repeated him.

Once we finished eating, Errol and I walked up the street to check the mail. It was almost always bills for Mother, so I took my time as we walked to search for a branch to use as a walking stick and count my steps. I wondered if the walking stick counted as an extra step each time I put it on the ground, but I decided that it didn’t if it came down at the exact same time as my right foot.

Errol checked the mailbox at the end of the driveway as I poked at the dirt under the gravestones with my walking stick to see if there were any bones hidden just beneath the surface. I knew that they were just sample stones, but Roger Cooper’s comment yesterday made me think it would be neat to find a dead body buried beneath some of the older stones. I knew that *we* never put anyone under there but maybe great, great, great grandfather Errol Bingham the First actually used the front yard as a mini cemetery. Or maybe a murderer hid a body under one of them thinking that no one would ever find it. I poked around here and there but couldn’t dig up

the ground too much or Mother would get angry at me for ruining the front lawn. If I had a dog, he would be able to sniff out the dead bodies and tell me where they were. Too bad I had a useless cat.

“Eleanor, what are you doing? Come over here! There’s a letter from Dad!” Errol called over to me. I dropped my walking stick and ran over to peer over his shoulder as he carefully slid his thumb under the seam to open the envelope.

“Dear Katharine, Errol, and Eleanor,” the letter said in Father’s perfectly uniform script.

It has been raining here for exactly eighty five hours nonstop, and I do not believe it will let up anytime soon. As always I cannot tell you my exact location or too many details about where I am, but know that I am doing well, except for the rain.

Please remember to keep up with the bills, Katherine, it will be very difficult if we get behind. And make sure to keep the Cadillac clean and keep the paperwork in the office in order.

I hope that Errol and Eleanor are keeping out of trouble. Have them take care of your horses so that you can worry about the office. It will be good for them to have some responsibilities. Love you and miss you.

Errol Bingham V

Errol folded the letter back up and stuffed it rather roughly back in the envelope. “He doesn’t change does he?” Errol muttered.

“No,” I said happily. “Would you like to make sure the Cadillac is clean with me?”

“No,” he said. “It’s clean enough. He’s all the way across the world and still manages to tell us what to do and assumes we’re doing it wrong.”

“He just likes to make sure everything is in its proper place.”

“Yeah,” said Errol frowning down at the letter. “He should worry more about what he’s fighting for over there.”

I shrugged. “What should we do today?” I asked.

Errol sighed and looked back at me. “Do you still wanna go to the Chasm? I said I’d take you today.”

“No thank you,” I said. I had no need to go back for a while at least. “Let’s see if there are dead bodies under the gravestones.”

“Eleanor, there are no dead bodies here, you know that,” he said rolling his eyes. “Don’t let the other kids’ stories go to your head.”

“What if a murderer hid a dead body under a gravestone to hide it from the authorities?”

“Someone would have noticed because the ground would have been torn up.” I had not considered that and frowned in disappointment. Errol looked back down at Father’s letter in his hand. “I wonder if Dad’s killed anyone over there.”

“Only the bad people,” I said.

“Yeah, and who are the bad people?” he said, still looking down at the letter.

“The ones who need to be punished.”

“Hmm,” Errol said distractedly. He ran his hand through his hair, making his cowlick stand up even more, and looked out across the street.

“Come on,” I said, tugging at his arm to try to get him out of his thoughts. Errol did this sometimes. He would get caught up in silly little problems that didn’t make much sense, but I could usually snap him out of it. “Let’s see if we can get Marigold to ride Bucky. We can put a saddle on him and everything.”

Errol shook the thoughts away from his head. “Here, why don’t we get a snack at the corner store,” he said. “I have a nickel.” He took it out of his pocket and tossed it to me. It slipped out of my hand, but I bent down to retrieve it in the grass.

“Okay!” I said.

Errol shoved the envelope with Father’s letter back into the mailbox to pick up when we got back. He scooped up the rolled up newspaper at the end of the driveway and put it under his arm, then we crossed the street. It was a nice sunny day, so there were quite a few people walking about in their scarves and fall coats. None of them stopped and said hello, which was how I liked it. As we passed the dentist’s office, Mrs. Kent, the middle-aged woman who would sometimes go door to door selling makeup products, stepped out of the door in front of us. Errol gave her a small smile, but when she saw us, she quickly looked down and hurried away, holding her black shawl closer to her face. We had seen her at the office at the beginning of the week to order a stone for her husband. Mother said he had died of a heart attack while cleaning the gutters of their house. On his gravestone Mother had carved, “Devoted husband, and loving father,” even though Mother said the whole town knew he cheated on Mrs. Kent with his secretary.

The corner store was two blocks away, the same place I passed when I ran away from school yesterday. We would usually get one of their enormous barrel pickles and split it in half.

“Let’s get a pickle,” I said as we passed under the chestnut tree. We always sped up when walking in its shadow, since it wasn’t uncommon for a chestnut to come pelting down and hit us on the head, especially if there was a squirrel in the branches.

“We just ate breakfast,” Errol said.

“But they taste so good!” I pleaded.

“Okay... if you really want one.”

The little bell on the door rang as we walked through the front door. Errol went up to the register to ask Mr. Fitzgerald for a pickle. The store was small, not very well lit, and a little dingy. Candy and cigarettes were located at the counter and different snacks and small necessities were on the three different rows of shelving throughout the store. Soda pop, milk, and orange juice were kept in a glass refrigerator in the back.

Mr. Fitzgerald never smiled or talked to us, except to say the price of an item. His wife bought a gravestone from us for her mother last year. He was tall with rough wrinkled hands and a bald spot on the back of his head. I stood back when he came out from behind the counter and walked over to the pickle barrel near the door. He picked up the tongs that were placed on top of the barrel and lifted the lid. The sharp, salty smell of pickle juice filled the air. I watched as he lifted the huge dripping pickle from the barrel, put it in a clear plastic bag, and twisted it into a knot so it wouldn't drip out. Errol handed him the nickel and we walked outside to sit on the front steps and eat it.

Clear pickle juice ran down Errol's arm as he snapped it in half and gave me a piece. He unrolled his newspaper to read while I looked out onto the street and slowly nibbled at my crunchy treat.

"Wow, over three thousand people protested at the Republican National Convention this August!" Errol exclaimed as he folded the newspaper back.

"The what?"

"The Republican National Convention? It's where the republicans decided they want Nixon to be president again. Come on, I told you all about this, remember?"

“Oh, yes. I remember.” I didn’t know why Errol was so excited by the protests. Father said the date he would return was June 12th of next year. The protests weren’t going to change that.

“Hey Errol.” Errol and I looked up to see Martha and what must of been her mother walking toward us. How did she keep finding us? She looked down at Errol shyly, her cheeks pink. I noticed she was not wearing her purple scarf. If she told Errol I had taken it, I would punch her in the nose, I decided.

“Are these your new friends, Martha?” her mother asked. She had the same color blond hair as Martha but it was longer and she wore it piled on top of her head.

“Yes, this is the boy I had dinner with,” Martha said.

“I’m so glad Martha has made such good friends so quickly!” her mother told us. “We just moved here from Tennessee, you know. Her father got laid off from his job, but found some construction work here. Well, I’ll let you catch up with your friends while I grab some milk and bread.”

Martha sat down on the step next to Errol while her mother went inside.

After a moment of silence, I turned to Martha. “Did you know that there are bodies buried under the gravestones at the office?”

“No there aren’t!” Errol said, giving me an exasperated look.

“That’s what that boy on the bus said, but I didn’t believe him,” Martha told me.

“Well, it’s true,” I said. “Our great, great, great grandfather, Errol Bingham the First-- that’s who Errol’s named after-- murdered a man. He tried to take over great, great, great grandfather’s business and run him out of town. So Errol Bingham the First killed him with an

axe and buried him underneath one of the sample gravestones in the front lawn to hide the evidence. Every time you see a new gravestone added to the samples, it is because there is a new body that needs to be buried. Sometimes, at night, the bodies come out and punish anyone who has done anything wrong to the Bingham family.”

“Don’t listen to her, Martha. She’s just trying to scare you,” Errol said, and glared at me.

“No, it’s true,” I said. “We keep it a secret so no one checks under the gravestones. But Errol and I trust you.” I gave her as big of a smile as I could muster.

“I’m sorry about her,” said Errol, grabbing my arm and dragging me to my feet. “She’s not usually like this. Well, actually, she kind of is. Come on, Eleanor, we’re going home.”

“No, don’t go! I think it’s great!” Martha exclaimed, “I love scary stories! One time, my mom swore she heard a ghost in our old house. Apparently a little girl was killed in the cellar. We should go back to your place and explore the graves! Maybe we’ll find something!” She jumped to her feet. Errol and I both stared at her.

“What?” I said.

“Come on!” she said. “I’ll tell my mom that I’m going home with you guys.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” I said, trying to backtrack. “You’ll make them mad. They don’t like strangers.”

At that moment, the little bell dinged and Martha’s mother walked out of the store, a brown paper bag in her arms.

“Mom, can I go spend the day with Errol and Eleanor?” Martha asked.

“Of course! Goodness, I should probably bake your mother a pie or something for having Martha over so often! I do make a wonderful apple pie, just ask Martha. I use my grandmother’s recipe!”

“Mother hates pie,” I said.

Errol squeeze my hand hard so that it hurt. “It’s no problem at all. Our mom loves having Martha over.”

“Okay, well you kids have fun!” Martha’s mother said. She waved to us as we turned around and walked back down the street, Errol dragging me tightly by the hand.

“This is going to be so great!” Martha said, skipping along beside us. “You never know what we’ll find!”

“There’s really nothing there,” Errol said. “Eleanor’s just being a pain.”

“Aw, don’t be a spoil sport,” Martha replied. “It will be fun!”

I stayed quiet and let Errol drag me along. Who would have thought that Martha *liked* dead bodies?

As we crossed Franklin Street, we passed young Mrs. Baker who looked like she hadn’t slept in days. Her stringy brown hair fell on either sides of her face, and she wasn’t wearing her normal red lipstick. I looked down and walked faster, but Errol smiled gently at her and said, “Hello, Mrs. Baker.” She took one look at us, burst into tears, and hurried past us. Errol shook his head.

“It’s better if you just ignore them,” I hissed. “They don’t like it.”

“What was that about?” Martha asked, confused.

“Her baby died last week. She came to us to buy a stone,” Errol explained.

“Oh. Does that happen to you guys a lot?” she asked.

“I mean, not a lot, but people aren’t exactly comfortable with us here. We either remind them of someone who died, or that they’ll eventually have to come to us when someone dies.”

“Oh,” she said again.

Once we got to the office, Martha ran up to the first stone, closest to the brick walkway, and sat down on her knees in front of it. Errol and I both hung back.

“Come on, guys! We have to look carefully to see if the ground has been broken anywhere.”

“There’s nothing there,” Errol said again.

I picked up my walking stick that I had dropped earlier and poked it around the grass.

“Yes, you’re right, Errol. There isn’t anything here. My mistake. I guess you can go home now,” I said to Martha.

Martha got up and brushed the dirt from her knees. “What we have to do,” she said, her eyes wide in excitement, “is come back after dark and see if the dead bodies come out. If there are any, they would come out at midnight. We’ll sneak out and all meet here tonight. Got it?” Errol and I looked at each other. Maybe Martha was crazy.

“Okay,” I said. Maybe if she really believed our place was haunted, she’d tell all the other children and they’d be so scared they’d leave us alone.

“Okay,” Errol said, shaking his head. He walked over to sit on the steps with his newspaper, clearly unimpressed with the plan. Perfect. Maybe he’d realize she was crazy and stop being her friend.

“Great,” Martha said. “In the meantime, we need to plan a way to defend ourselves if they do come out. Eleanor, you’re the smallest, so you should probably hide near the bushes by the house and keep watch. Errol and I will protect you if anything bad happens.”

“My father’s in the Army. He’s killed plenty of people. No dead bodies would dare attack me. Maybe *you* should hide in the bushes.”

“Your father’s in the war?”

“Yes he is!” I said. “He’s a Sergeant.”

“Right before I moved here, my sister attended the antiwar protest at her college. She’s really into it,” Martha said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“*Really?*” Errol set his paper down and jumped up from the steps, suddenly interested in the conversation. “Your sister’s part of the antiwar movement?”

“I mean, kind of. My parents aren’t too happy. It was a big deal that she’s even going to college since my parents can’t afford to send her. She ended up getting this huge scholarship and now my parents are afraid she’ll lose it if she gets into trouble.”

“But that’s so cool!” Errol exclaimed. “I’ve never met anyone who’s so close to the antiwar movement! I’ve been reading all about it in the papers.”

“You’re against the war even though your dad’s in the Army?”

“He only went because his father was in World War II and his grandfather was in World War I. He felt like he had to keep up the family name. But I don’t think I could be for the war after all I’ve been reading.”

“Yeah, my sister’s been telling me all about it. It doesn’t seem right.”

“This is amazing. I’ve never had anyone to talk to about this before!”

I sighed loudly, stomped over to the steps, and crossed my arms. They didn't take any notice. What did he mean he didn't have anyone to talk to about the war? I had to listen to him talk about it all the time. I picked up the newspaper that Errol left and opened it to a random page in the middle. I knew as much about the war as Martha did. I knew all about the-- I squinted at the headline-- "End in Sight for Operation Linebacker." Operation what? I roughly folded the paper back up and shoved it aside. No one cared about those things anyway. Mother never talked about it at home. I never heard the children in school talking about it. Only Errol had this odd obsession with the war. Hopefully it was just a phase, like when Mother said I went through a phase when I was three and liked to squish ants between my fingers and eat them. But I quickly got over that, and so should Errol.

I got up and walked over to them still talking.

"I'm sorry, Martha," I said. "We have to go. We have to help Mother with the horses. Father wrote us a letter and said we had to."

"Eleanor," Errol said, "I'm not following everything Dad tells us to do in his letters. He has no right to tell us what to do all the way across the world. Besides, Mom likes taking care of the horses."

"Fine," I said. "Then I'll do it myself." I turned around and walked down the brick path. When I reached the driveway I looked over my shoulder to see if Errol would try to stop me. But he had picked the newspaper back up and was showing her the article on the front page. She was nodding her head to whatever it was that he was telling her. I turned around again and stomped back down the drive to our house.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Martha left by dinnertime that night so we finally had some peace. Mother made shepherd's pie, but I separated the layers of my portion and first ate the mashed potatoes on their own, then the corn, and then the ground meat. Unfortunately, she had chopped up little pieces of black olives from a can and mixed them in with the ground meat. It took me forever to pick out all of the olives and scrape them off on the side of my plate. Just as we were finishing, Errol took out the letter from Father and handed it across the table to Mother. "It's from Dad," he said.

"From your father! Why didn't you show me this earlier? It came just at the right time, too! This should be a good reminder that your father's alright, and thinking of you, and there's no reason to act out and get into fights, right Errol?" She opened it and read it quietly under her breath. When she was done, she put it carefully back in the envelope and set it down on the table next to her.

"Hmm, I *should* get you two to start feeding the horses once in a while," she said thoughtfully. "Goodness, it's so nice to hear from your father. Doesn't it make you both feel better?" I nodded enthusiastically, my mouth too full of olive-less meat to talk.

"I'm glad he's doing okay, but it doesn't make me feel any better," Errol said quietly, staring decidedly down at his food as he mashed what was left of his potatoes with the back of his fork.

"Yes, yes, we all miss him, but don't worry, sweetie. He'll be home before you know it," Mother said, reaching across the table to pat Errol's hand.

“That’s not what I mean,” said Errol, putting down his fork. “I was talking to Martha today, and her sister is involved in the student antiwar movement, and I just don’t see how Dad can be fighting over there--”

“Errol, how can you bring up such things in this house?” Mother said, pulling her hand away. “Your father is risking his *life* over there and you are talking about the *antiwar movement*? How could you Errol? Do you care about him at *all*?”

“Of course I care about him!” Errol said. “I just read all these things in the newspaper. Look!” He pushed his dinner plate aside and hurried over to the counter where he had left the newspaper. He flung it open, his glasses sliding down his nose in excitement, and folded it back to show Mother. “This article says that *children* are being killed by American soldiers. *Children*,” he said, jabbing his finger at the page.

I looked up in surprise as Mother snatched the paper from Errol, crumpled it up, and threw it on the empty seat next to her where Father used to sit.

“You will never bring up that nonsense in this house again, Errol, you hear? Or I’m not going to let you read the paper anymore. I’ll cancel our subscription. I’ll do it, Errol.”

“Okay, okay, I won’t talk about it anymore,” Errol said, standing alone in the center of the kitchen.

Mother stood up and swept away my plate just as I was about to finish my last bite of ground meat. I was about to protest but noticed how white her face looked and decided that it wasn’t the best of ideas. She grabbed Errol’s plate as well, and they clattered as she dumped them both in the sink.

“Do you two have any homework this weekend?” Errol nodded and I shook my head no but Mother gave me a sharp look so I quickly changed it to a yes. “You better get it done now,” she said, dismissing us from the kitchen.

Errol and I went upstairs and I followed him into his room, having no desire to do any homework. His room was covered in blue wallpaper with a wooden desk in one corner and a bookshelf in the other. His bed wasn't made, and there was a pile of dirty laundry in his open closet and a pair of pants were hanging out of his bureau. I sat down on his beanbag chair and struggled to sit up straight as it sagged under my weight. Errol sat down at his desk, put his head in his hands and let out a deep sigh.

“Do they really kill children?” I asked him. I tried to imagine what it would be like if soldiers came to our school and killed all the children who did bad things like trip me in the hallway or make fun of me on the bus. Everyone would have to be nicer to me if soldiers were around.

“That's what the papers are saying,” Errol said into his arms, his voice muffled. Then he lifted his head and said, “Here, I want to show you something.” He reached down and opened his desk drawer to reveal a large stack of newspapers. He took out the one on top, opened it to the second page, and knelt down to show me. On the top left hand side was a photo of a naked child running towards the camera. Other children with clothes on were running too, crying with their mouths wide open.

“Errol, he's not wearing any clothes!” I said quickly turning my head away and thrusting my hand out to cover the photo.

“It’s a she-- she just has short hair. She had to tear all her clothes off because they were set on fire,” Errol said. “The caption said that she got burned so bad that she’s probably not going to make it.”

“I wonder what she did,” I said, slowly taking my hand away and peeking at the photo.

“What do you mean? It was a bombing attack. Her whole village was destroyed.”

“Wow,” I said. I wondered what the whole village was being punished for. Someone must have done something really terrible.

“The thing I can’t shake,” Errol said, standing up, and walking back to his desk, “is what if Dad is involved with this kind of thing? What if... what if he was involved in bombing a whole village and killing civilians... killing children...” I watched as he roughly folded the paper back up, and stuffed it in his drawer.

“You think that Father’s killed children?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, looking out the window behind his desk. He ran his hand through his hair and grasped a handful of it tightly. “That’s the problem. I don’t know what he’s doing over there. He could have. I just don’t know.”

I tried to imagine Father coming to the rescue in his Army uniform, punishing all those who needed to be punished. “Some things just have to be done,” I said.

“No, Eleanor. These things don’t have to happen. These things shouldn’t be happening. You’re just too young to understand.”

Offended, I tried to spring up from the beanbag chair but only clumsily was able to make it to my feet as it sagged beneath me. I lifted my chin and made to stroll out of his room.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it like that,” Errol said. “I mean, Mom doesn’t understand either... Martha’s really the only one who understands,” he finished under his breath.

I put my hands on my hips but before I could open my mouth to protest, Errol looked down into his hands and said, “Maybe it’s better if I meet her by myself tonight.” My mouth dropped open in shock. “I mean, it’s awfully late to be outside,” he continued, “and we both know there are no dead bodies anyway.”

“Fine,” I said, feeling hot tears begin to prick at the corners of my eyes. “Fine. I didn’t want to go anyway!”

I could feel my face turning hot and red as I stormed out of his room and down the hallway. I marched into my room, slammed the door behind me, crawled into my bed and burst into tears. How could he not want me there? It was my idea to look for dead bodies in the first place! And now he didn’t even want me to go. I sniffed and wiped my nose on my pillowcase which was covered in awful mustard yellow daisies. Mother had picked it out from the thrift store because she thought it would brighten up my room. Well, if it was my idea, then Errol couldn’t stop me from going. I was not going to let Martha alone with him. I would leave early so I could sneak out before Errol and he wouldn’t be able to stop me. Then I’d show him how bad Martha was or maybe pretend to see a ghost or a dead body and scare her away. Then she’d be gone for good.

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I snuck out of the house at exactly 11:30 p.m. so I would have plenty of time to get to the office before Errol did. As I approached the white house, I realized that I had never been to the office after dark before. It looked different in the dark, less familiar, like it belonged to someone

else, and I was trespassing. Wispy white clouds drifted slowly over the moon. The air was still and cold and tasted like the beginning of winter. I pulled my black coat tighter around me as I walked up the path to sit on the front steps behind the stones and wait. They looked taller in the dark. The lamp posts illuminated the sidewalk across the street, but left the stones in complete darkness. They all looked completely black. The one that was in the shape of a cross in the back row stood out, taller than the rest. I stared at it for a moment, transfixed, as I remembered that one time Father made us all go to church, and the Priest spoke in startling urgency about hell which existed right below our feet and just after death. Mother refused to take us to church again after that, saying it was not appropriate to scare children that way. I tore my eyes away and shivered. It suddenly felt too cold, even inside my jacket. Maybe I should wait inside. Then I wouldn't have to be so close to the stones and it would be warmer. I walked up the steps and bent down to lift the welcome mat and retrieve the spare key. I looked over my shoulder at the stones one more time, then unlocked the door and hurried inside.

Upstairs I would be high enough to watch all the way down Main Street for when Martha was coming. I closed the door behind me and let my eyes adjust to the dark for a minute, then I climbed up the steps to the second floor. The second floor of the office was barely used, and I hardly ever came up. A long time ago, when I was little, I hid up in the back room after Father had scolded me for laughing out loud when there were customers. I had sat with my legs curled up to my chest behind a box for what felt like hours until Errol came up and found me and brought me back home. Most of the upstairs was used for storage, but there was also a bathroom with a shower that didn't work and a toilet with a lever that had to be held down for exactly ten

seconds before it flushed. The front room was used for filing, and I turned the knob to open that door.

Inside, just enough light shown through the two dirty windows for me to see all the walls lined with stacks and stacks of gray metal filing cabinets, some of which were labeled with notes written in dark permanent marker that said the year. An old wooden desk was pushed right between the two windows, and on top of it sat two brass candlesticks, a small book of matches, and a dried up old ink well. A matching wooden chair was placed in front of it. I crossed the room to the window to the left of the desk and pressed my face to the glass, but it was too dirty to see through clearly. I reached up and found the two metal latches at the top of the wooden window pane and heaved with all my strength until it screeched open about five or six inches. It probably hadn't been open in years. Leaning over to peek outside, I saw that I was situated right above the front steps, and just as I thought, I could see all the way down the street to watch for Martha. The cold air wafted in, but it was still better than waiting outside. I pulled the chair closer to the window and sat down to wait while fiddling with the book of matches. If Martha got there first, I decided, I would try to scare her away before Errol got there. Maybe I could light one of the candles and bob it up and down to make it look like a ghost was in here. I could scream out the window to make it even scarier. She would run away for sure.

A couple of minutes later, I saw a figure hurrying down Main Street. It was Martha, her blond hair bouncing against her back as she ran across the street. I noticed she didn't cut through the gravestones in the front yard, but gave them a wide birth as she walked up the driveway to the brick walk. She was wearing a deep hooded fleece coat and black gloves. She looked around the yard for a moment, probably searching for Errol, then turned around and climbed up the front

steps. I shrank to the side of the glass so she wouldn't see me through the opening in the window, but she just sat down in the middle of the top step to wait. Now was my chance. I slowly reached over to grab the brass candlestick.

"Martha!" I flinched. It was Errol's voice. I watched through the window as he walked up the pathway in his dark blue coat. His hair looked especially neat tonight; his cowlick was flattened down, like he had run a wet comb through it.

"Hi! Where's Eleanor?" Martha asked as he sat down a couple steps below her.

"She went to bed," Errol said. "Midnight's kind of late for her." I bit my tongue before I could yell out a protest. Midnight was not too late for me! I had been out at midnight the night before while *he* was in bed sleeping! I had never heard him lie like that before.

"Oh, okay," she said. "Well, I'm glad you came. Or I would have been out here by myself."

"Of course I came! I wouldn't have left you here," Errol said. He looked down at his hands. "I was thinking about what we were talking about today, and I'm really glad I finally have someone I can talk to. I tried to bring it up to my mom today, and she got really mad and threatened to cancel our newspaper subscription. And Eleanor just doesn't understand. Anyway, I brought this for you..." He put his hand in his pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. He handed it to her, then he quickly turned away and began intently fiddling with the button at the bottom of his jacket.

Martha tucked a yellow strand of hair behind her ear, then unfolded the piece of paper. I felt my pulse begin to quicken.

“Brown Penny, by William Butler Yeats” Martha’s soft voice wafted up through the window. I froze, suddenly unable to breath. He had given her a Yeats poem.

“‘I whispered, I am too young,’ And then, ‘I am old enough’; Wherefore I threw a penny to find out if I might love.”

I clenched my fists into tight balls, my nails digging into my palms. My mind flashed back to the poem he had given me fluttering down to the depths of the Chasm. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe he gave her a Yeats poem. I sat back, feeling light headed. She now had a Yeats poem, while mine was at the bottom of the Chasm. I had thrown it in to save Errol’s life, all because of what *she* had done. And now he gave her a Yeats poem! Suddenly, I noticed it wasn’t just my nails digging into my palms, but the book of matches was wedged tightly in my fist.

“Go and love, go and love, young man, If the lady be young and fair.”

I slowly opened my fist and looked at the matches. The picture of the naked girl from the paper flashed into my mind. Her clothes were set on fire, Errol had said.

Father punished children in the war who had done wrong. All people who do wrong need to be punished. But Father wasn’t here. Only I was here. I slowly opened the matchbook and took out a small cardboard match with a bright red tip. Clenching my teeth, I swept it along the rough brown strip at the bottom. With a sizzle, it came to life.

“Ah, penny brown penny, brown penny, I am looped in the loops of her hair.”

I stared at the yellow and white flame. It flickered gently. I felt its heat at the tips of my fingers. Then I looked at the cardboard book of matches that was almost completely full in my other hand. I folded back the cardboard flap and brought the flame to the ten red tipped matches.

As the book caught on fire, it made a loud hiss, and down below, I heard Martha hesitate in her reading.

“What’s wrong?” Errol said, and I quickly lowered the matches away from the window so no one could see.

“Nothing, I just thought-- no, it was probably nothing,” she said, then hesitated. “This poem is really sweet, Errol. I--”

“Finish reading it,” Errol urged her.

Slowly, so not to risk the flame going out, I reached my arm out the window. Martha’s hood was opened wide, a deep pocket that I could drop the matchbook into. Then her clothes would light on fire, and she would be punished just like the girl in the picture. I stood on my tiptoes and stretched my arm out as far as it would go. The air was completely still. My flame was bright against the dark sky. I let it hover there for a second, watching as it ate at the cardboard matchsticks. Then, I let go. It dropped in a silent, shaky line of light, right into Martha’s hood. I strained to look at the yellow flame as it disappeared, and for a moment I thought that it had been smothered and my whole plan was ruined. But then I saw gray smoke begin to rise.

“For he would be thinking of love, Till the stars had run away, And the shadows eaten the moon.”

Errol was still staring at his hands, fiddling intently with his jacket, as the flames began to peek out from the smoke. Soon her hood was a bowl of smoke and fire.

Martha broke off from reading, lifted her head, and looked behind her. Her mouth opened in a silent scream. She jumped to her feet, the poem falling to the ground. Errol reached out to pick it up.

“Errol, help me!” she shrieked, frantically waving her arms and trying to slap at the flames behind her. Errol turned around, the poem still in hand, and froze.

“Help me! Errol, help!” she screamed again, as the flames grew around her. She reached for the buttons on her coat and feverishly tried to undoe them. I admired the fire which had now eaten through the hood and was spreading. White, warm, and clinging to her, it looked like a second coat. It was beautiful. If only it would spread to her sleeves, then she would have wings that would fly her far away from here. The fire reached the ends of her blond hair, and she paused in undoing the buttons to slap at it with her hand. It angrily fought back, burning her, and she cried out in pain. I watched in satisfaction, urging it on in my head.

Finally, she undid the last button on her jacket and shrugged it off. It fell onto the concrete steps and continued to burn. The bitter smell of burning fabric was strong now, and I had to concentrate on not sneezing. Errol jumped forward and stomped on the flames with his shoes as Martha stood back and checked her body for damage. The fire in her hair was out, but the ends were singed dark. Errol quickly beat the flames out, leaving the coat smoking and scorched, the hood completely in tatters. He then went over to her as she reached around to the back of her head to feel her hair and her blistered neck.

“Are you okay?” he asked. She pulled her hand back around in front of her and opened it. A chunk of hair was sitting in her palm. She stared down at it for a moment in horror, then clutched her fist around it and waved it at Errol.

“*Why didn’t you help me?*” she shrieked. “Look at my *hair!* You just wanted to save the stupid *poem?*” Errol looked down at the poem still tightly held in his hands.

“No, no, I didn’t-- I wasn’t trying to save--” he said, aghast as he stared down at the page. He threw it behind him, and it fluttered to the pathway at the bottom of the steps. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“I was on *fire!*” she yelled, dropping the clump of hair to the ground, and then burst into tears.

“I know, I’m so sorry! I just-- I’m sorry, Martha,” he said and hesitantly took a step toward her, but she roughly pushed him away.

“*What happened? How did this happen?*” she cried, staring at the burned coat on the steps. It looked like a dead animal from up in my window.

“I don’t know! I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head helplessly. “But we’ll figure this out--”

“No! I’m going home!” she cried.

“Okay, okay! Let me walk you--” Errol said, reaching toward her.

“NO! Get away!” she shrieked, pulling her arm away. I could tell she was shaking at this point, even from my view upstairs.

“I’m sorry Martha. Please, I’m so sorry!” Errol said desperately.

“I have to go,” she said, and rushed passed him, cutting between the stones and through the grass. He stared after her as she disappeared down the street, still sobbing, her arms hugging tightly around her. After a few moments, Errol turned around to face the house, clutching at his hair with both of his hands, and I shrunk back from the window. He kicked at the ground with his

foot, making a scratchy, scraping sound against the brick walkway. Then he picked up the poem by his feet, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it as hard as he could into the trees that lined the side of the office. He stared after it for a moment, running his hand through his hair, then he turned and collapsed on the bottom step with his head in his hands. I wondered how long he would sit there like that when all of a sudden he lifted his head and turned around to look at the tattered coat lying on the top step. He walked up the remaining two steps and knelt down to study the coat. After about twenty seconds, he reached forward and gingerly picked up something with his thumb and index finger. He held it up in front of him. Burnt, black, and falling apart, with most of the cardboard cover missing, he had found the remains of the book of matches.

I immediately shrunk back against the wall as far as I could as he tilted his head back and looked up, seeing the opened window.

“Who’s in there?” he called up, his voice harsh, scared, angry. I held in my breath; my whole body was trembling.

“Who’s up there?” he called again. I stayed frozen, not daring to breath, not daring to blink.

I heard him as he scrambled to his feet and tried the door. It was unlocked. I thrust my hand into my pocket. I had brought the key with me, but I had forgotten to lock the door. I felt all the blood rush from my face as I heard the downstairs door slam against the back wall. I darted my head around scanning the room for somewhere to hide. My heart felt like it would beat out of my chest as I heard Errol’s footsteps clamoring up the steps. I couldn’t hide under the desk; he would see me right away. There was no way to get behind the filing cabinets-- they were all

stacked up right to the wall. My eyes suddenly fell on the door to the room. There was a little switch lock on the doorknob. I ran forward as fast as I could, trying to get there before Errol, when the door flew open with a bang. Errol stood there, his eyes immediately fell on me standing in the middle of the room, and he froze. We both stared at each other for a moment. Errol's face was twisted in confusion, his mouth slightly opened, as he stared at me. Then he rushed forward, took me by the shoulders and shook me, hard, making my head flop back and forth.

*"What did you do? Eleanor, what did you do?"* he hissed between his clenched teeth as he grasped me tightly, his fingers digging into my skin.

*"Let go! Ow, you're hurting me! Let go!"* I cried. My teeth were knocking into each other hard in my head. He stopped shaking me but held even tighter. *"Stop, Errol, please stop!"*

*"Why did you do that? Tell me! Why?"*

*"She needed to be punished!"* I cried.

*"Martha? Why the hell would Martha need to be punished?"* he said giving me another shake.

*"Bad people need to be punished,"* I said. He threw me away from him and I fell backwards onto the hard wooden floor. I stared back at him in shock as he looked down at me, his jaw clenched.

*"Get up,"* he said.

*"What?"* I whispered.

*"Get up. Now,"* he said.

I slowly got to my feet, and he roughly grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward the door. Numbly, I let him drag me along, down the steps and out the front door. Without a word he

slammed the door behind us and pulled me down the final four front steps. I stumbled a little on the last one, but he jerked me to my feet again and kept walking. I had to take three steps for every one of his as he strode down the dirt pathway back home. Once the house was in sight, I tried to slow down a bit, digging my heels into the dirt, but he jerked my arm forward, hurting my shoulder, and I stumbled along.

He pulled me around to the back door, which he must have left unlocked earlier, and dragged me inside, through the kitchen and up the stairs to the door outside Mother's room.

*"Errol, what are you doing? Don't wake her!"* I whispered, trying to pull back. He ignored me and lifted his hand to knock loudly on the door.

"Mom? Mom! Wake up, it's important!"

We heard the rustle of cloth, then soft footsteps. The door opened, and Mother stood looking down at us in her pink cotton robe, her eyes puffy little slits from sleep. "What's going on? Why are you two up? Why do you have your clothes on? There better be a good explanation for this."

Errol pushed me forward. "Eleanor needs to tell you something." I shook my head and tried to shrink away from Errol's grasp. Suddenly, the phone began to ring.

Mother stared at us. "What's going on?" she asked, then brushed past us to go down the stairs to get the phone in the kitchen. Errol let go of my arm, and I rubbed my wrist. There was a big red mark around it where his fingers had dug into my skin. Errol's eyes were wide and anxious as he arched his head to try to hear what Mother was saying on the phone downstairs. Her voice grew louder as we listened, and by the end we could hear her perfectly.

“Errol? At midnight?... She caught on *fire*?... *At my office*?... *On fire*?... I assure you I will get to the bottom of this. I am so sorry... I will speak with them now...” We heard the clatter as she put the phone back on its cradle. A moment passed then, “Errol! Eleanor! I need to see you down here, *right now*.”

I looked at Errol, but he refused to look back at me. Instead, he pushed past me and walked down the steps. I followed slowly behind him. Mother stood in the kitchen, her hands on her hips, her face red in anger. I had never seen her look so scary with her hair sticking out in every different direction and dark puffy circles under her eyes.

“Do you two want to tell me what *happened* tonight?” she asked. I gave my head a decided shake and kept my eyes on the linoleum floor.

“Martha and I met up at midnight at the office,” Errol started in a deadpan voice. I felt sick to my stomach. “We were talking on the front steps when her jacket caught on fire. We...” he hesitated, “*she*, finally got it off and we put the fire out, and she ran home. She wouldn’t let me walk with her. After she left, I checked the jacket to see what had happened, and I found a burnt up book of matches.” I stared hard at the floor, pleading with him in my head to not get me in trouble. But he didn’t hesitate. “Then I looked up and noticed the upstairs window was open a few inches. Someone must have dropped the lit matches out the window. So I ran upstairs and opened the door to the room above the front steps, and that’s where I found Eleanor.”

I looked up. Mother reached out her arm to steady herself on the kitchen chair. “Did you try to light Martha on *fire*, Eleanor?”

I nodded.

“*Why*?” she asked, bewildered.

“Father does it in Vietnam, so I have to do it here,” I explained.

“Your father? Your father does no such thing! What are you saying, Eleanor? Is this from what Errol’s been telling you?” Mother said, suddenly turning to Errol. Errol narrowed his eyes as he looked from me to Mother.

“You two go to your rooms. You are not coming out for *days*. *Days* you hear me? I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it. I have to call Martha’s mother back. What am I supposed to tell her? My daughter tried to set her daughter on *fire*?” She sat down heavily on the kitchen chair. “Where did I go wrong with you two? If only your father were here,” she said, shaking her head, then her eyes fell on the clock on the wall. “My God, it’s one o’clock in the morning! Go to bed. I’ll deal with you tomorrow.” She picked up the black rotary phone and dialed for the operator as Errol walked back up the stairs and I followed behind him.

Errol went straight into his room and slammed the door behind him. I went into my room, closed the door and crawled into bed. My neck was starting to ache from when he shook me so hard, and my wrist still stung from where he had pulled me all the way back to the house. I rubbed at my wrist gently while I stared at the ceiling and remembered the look on his face when he found me upstairs in the office. I had never seen him that angry. He had never laid a hand on me before; he had never tried to hurt me. Father was the only one who would spank us or hit us with his belt if we did anything wrong. But I hadn’t done anything wrong. I was punishing *Martha*. He just didn’t understand yet. Someday he would though. I turned over onto my stomach and closed my eyes. He was mad at me now, but I knew he would get over it eventually. *Martha* had been punished, so the world would be able to right itself, and everything would go

back to normal. He would be angry for a little while, and we would spend the next few days in our rooms, but that was a small price to pay for Martha being gone for good.

## CHAPTER SIX

On Monday morning, Mother told me that I had to come home right after I cleaned the blackboards-- I still had to serve my punishment for Principal Higgins--then I had to stay in my room for the rest of the day, every day this week. No playing outside, no hanging out at the office, no snacks from the kitchen. Especially not the pint of strawberry ice cream that she bought from the store the other day. She was going to eat that all by herself, she said.

Yesterday, she made me write an apology note to Martha and walked me over to her house to hand deliver it. Martha lived in the third house on Lyman Street, a street off of Main near the railroad tracks. It was a green two family house with Martha and her family living on the left side and another family living on the right. A beige station wagon with wooden panels sat in the driveway, and I immediately thought back to our shiny black Cadillac at the office and smiled slightly. There were also some cheap lawn ornaments in the front: a gray stone frog on a stone lily pad, a grumpy looking gnome with a fishing rod, and a red lawn chair. I guessed that they belonged to the other family since Martha and her mother did not seem like the lawn ornament type.

Mother stood at the bottom of the front steps, so I had to go up by myself and ring the bell. After a couple of seconds of silence, I turned around to tell Mother that they weren't home, so we could leave, but she gave me a sharp look so I turned around again to wait. I fingered the corners of the white envelope with Martha's name scrawled across the front. I had paged through the yellow phone book and written her address on it as well, in case Mother changed her mind and allowed me to mail it, but no such luck. Part of my punishment was that I had to say sorry in

person. Inside the letter, I had written a short note on Mother's stationary from the office with "Bingham Family Gravestones and Monuments" and our address across the top in formal black lettering. I couldn't lie in writing, so I had chosen my words carefully. "Dear Martha," I wrote, "You have gone through a very traumatic experience, and you have my deepest condolences"-- I picked this phrase up from Mother, since she used it a lot when talking to her customers-- "I cannot imagine the pain and suffering you have gone through. I promise I will never light you on fire again. Most sincerely, Eleanor Margaret Bingham." I signed my name in big loopy cursive and finished it with a decisive underline. Mother read it over before she allowed me to seal it in the envelope, and she clucked her tongue but told me that it was "good enough."

Soon, I heard footsteps coming from inside the house, and the front door opened to show Martha's mother. She was wearing light blue jeans that were slightly too large for her and a gray sweatshirt with "Monty's Seafood" written across the front in block letters. I would have been embarrassed if my mother wore something so frumpy, but she was in her own house, so I guessed she could wear whatever she wanted. She didn't open the screen door but looked down at me coolly and spoke through the screen. "Eleanor, what can I do for you?"

I held out my letter, showing her Martha's name on the front.

"Tell her what you're here for," Mother called sternly from behind me.

"I have come to apologize to Martha," I mumbled, looking at my shoes. I wasn't sorry, but Mother said I was, so I had to say it anyway. It was okay to lie out loud, so I would be all set in that department.

"Martha!" her mother called over her shoulder. She still didn't open the screen door. I scuffed my shoe against the cement landing as I waited for Martha to come. Soon I heard her

come down the steps inside, and she appeared behind her Mother at the front door. Through the screen, I could see that her blond hair was cut; it was so short now that it looked like a boy's. It looked just like the little girl in the picture, I realized in astonishment. "Eleanor has something for you," her mother said, and I quickly tore my eyes away from Martha's hair and thrust out the envelope again.

"I'm sorry that I lit you on fire," I said all in one breath. Martha stepped forward, but didn't open the screen door.

"Why did you do it?" she asked. I hadn't expected that.

"I don't know," I mumbled at my feet again.

"You don't know?" she repeated, crossing her arms. I shook my head. "No idea?" I shook my head harder. "Fine," she said, and opened the screen door to take my letter. I handed it over and clasped my hands behind my back.

"I promise that I will never do it again," I said, taking a small step back, hoping that the conversation was over.

"You will never light me on fire again," Martha repeated in disbelief.

"Never," I assured her.

"Again, we are very, very sorry," Mother said from behind me, and I took that as my cue to start descending the steps. "Like I said on the phone, we will cover the expenses for a new coat, anything she likes."

"We will let you know," Martha's mother said and then closed the door.

On Monday, while my teacher was talking about adding fractions during arithmetic class, I thought about Martha's hair being just like the naked girl from the photo. It must be a sign, I

decided, tracing the eraser end of my pencil against the wooden desk in one by one inch squares. I used my ruler to do this to make sure the squares were exactly one inch by one inch. It didn't count as "writing on the desk," which was not allowed, because the eraser didn't make a permanent marking, only a light trail of pink eraser bits. Martha's hair must be a sign that I had done the right thing, I thought. Father had punished the girl in the photo and I punished Martha here, and now they looked exactly the same. Everything was all fitting together. That meant that Errol would stop being mad at me soon-- maybe even by the end of the day-- and everything would go back to normal.

"Eleanor, stop writing on the desk!" Mrs. Goodman screeched from the front of the room. Mrs. Goodman never raised or lowered her voice, but it was a high pitched screech every time she opened her mouth. We were ordered to call her Mrs. Goodman, even though she never had a husband. One time, a boy accidentally called her "Miss" and he got whacked with her long white pointer stick. With her hunched over shoulders and gray dress that she wore every day, she strongly reminded me of a vulture and was one of the oldest people I had ever seen. Contrary to what the children at school believed, I had never actually seen a dead body. My family only sold stones; we did not deal with the dead body side of things. But Mrs. Goodman looked like she might fall apart any moment. Her waxy looking skin hung over her bones in loose folds, and her nails were long and yellowish. She had short, curly, thinning gray hair, and did not see very well, even with her thick glasses, so I held up the eraser end of my pencil.

"I'm not, Mrs. Goodman, it's just my eraser!" I called loudly so she could hear me.

"I don't care what you're doing it with, stop writing!" she screeched back.

"But it's not permanent, so it doesn't count!" I protested.

“Eleanor, do not talk back to me! What is the answer to question number four?” she said, slapping her pointer stick against the chalkboard. All the other children stared at me as I squinted at the problem. Three fourths plus one half. My stomach sunk as I realized that I hadn’t been listening for the entire class. Her voice was so shrill though, the last thing I ever wanted to do was listen to her lecture. Maybe you just add the numbers at the top, and then the ones at the bottom? Then it would be four over six?

Sally Henderson, who sat next to me in her high brown ponytail, hissed across to me, “It’s two thirds!”

“Two thirds!” I said aloud.

“No!” Mrs. Goodman screeched. The class laughed, and Sally Henderson whispered something over to Laura Miller behind her hand and they laughed even louder, high pitched giggles. I sank down in my seat and crossed my arms, my face and ears hot.

“Sally, what is the answer?” Mrs. Goodman asked.

“It’s five fourths, or one and one fourth,” Sally piped up.

“Correct!”

“That’s not fair, she told me it was two thirds!” I yelled shooting up to my feet. My chair clattered behind me.

“Eleanor, sit down! I will not have you making a ruckus in my classroom!” Mrs. Goodman shrieked. All the children giggled behind their hands.

“It’s not fair!” I said sitting back down.

“Better listen in class next time, Eleanor,” Sally whispered across from me.

“If my Father were here, he’d shoot you dead,” I whispered back.

“Mrs. Goodman,” Sally called, her hand shooting up in the air, “Eleanor just said that she was going to shoot me.”

“Eleanor Bingham!”

“No I didn’t, I said-- ”

“She did, then she pinched me under the seat, Mrs. Goodman!” Sally said.

My mouth fell open in protest. “No, I didn’t!” I shrieked, “I didn’t touch her!”

“Eleanor, you cannot threaten to shoot other students, and you certainly cannot pinch them! Come to the front of the room now!”

“But I didn’t, I didn’t!” I shrieked, realizing my voice had reached the same pitch at Mrs. Goodman’s.

“Do not talk back to me! Come to the front, now!” Mrs. Goodman shrieked back. I got up and stomped to the front of the classroom. I could feel all the children’s eyes on me as I made my way up the rows of seats.

“Put out your hands!” Mrs. Goodman screeched once I got to her desk.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” I protested, shoving my hands behind my back. “She’s the one who lied to me and told me the wrong answer!”

“Now!” she said. I looked up trying to plead with her with my eyes, but it wasn’t possible to get any negotiations past those thick glass lenses. Slowly, I put out my hands and lay them palms up on her wooden desk.

Thwap, thwap. Thwap thwap. Her white pointer stick came down on each palm twice, first my left then my right. It stung, a hot, sharp pain, and I fought back angry tears. Two white lines crossed each palm where the stick had landed, and hot pink welts spread out on either side.

Then the bell for recess rang, and everyone got up, grabbed their coats from the hooks near the door, and filed outside. Sally was smiling smugly with Laura as they passed Mrs. Goodman's desk and went out the door.

"You may go now Eleanor," Mrs. Goodman screeched, so I walked out, pressing my hands against my legs to try to put out the hot fire and feeling completely betrayed. My father only ever hit us if we did something wrong. He would sit us down in the kitchen chair, look us in the eye and tell us exactly what he was punishing us for. If there was some discrepancy, he would hear us out, and then adjust the punishment accordingly, or let us go if we didn't do anything wrong.

Once I got outside, I headed straight for the maple tree behind the swings to look for Errol. He wasn't in his usual spot, so I checked the picnic benches by the side of the building, but he wasn't reading there either. I knew he wouldn't be on the jungle gym since there was nowhere for him to read there. Finally, as I circled back to check the maple tree again, I passed the basketball hoop, and found him bouncing an old green rubber ball up and down. I had to look twice to make sure it was him as he flung the ball at the hoop, missed, and walked over to retrieve it. I had never seen him shoot baskets during recess before.

"Errol, what are you doing?" I asked him, bewildered.

"Go away," he said, and flung the basketball at the hoop again with all his might. It bounded back against the rim and he ran forward to catch it.

"Why are you playing basketball? Where's your book?" I asked.

"Go away, Eleanor. I don't want to talk to you."

"But look!" I said, holding out my hands. "Mrs. Goodman hit me with her pointer stick!"

“You probably deserved it,” he muttered, keeping his eyes on the basket and ignoring my hands.

“No, that’s the thing! I didn’t! She punished me and I didn’t do anything wrong! Sally Henderson framed me!”

“I don’t care, Eleanor! Okay? I don’t care!” he said, and shot another basket. “I don’t care about your stupid little problems!”

“What?” I said, taken aback.

“I. Don’t. Care. Do you know what *I* have to worry about?” he said, finally turning to me, the ball in his hands. His eyes were hard and looked at me in disgust. “Martha won’t talk to me, all because of you. She wasn’t on the bus today, then when I saw her before the morning bell, she told me that she never wanted to see me again. Her neck’s all burnt up, and her hair’s falling out, and she is never going to forgive me! She was my only friend, and now she’s gone, all because of *you!*” and with his last word, he threw the ball at me. I caught it in my hands and gasped as the pain from the pointer stick erupted tenfold where the rubber ball slapped against my newly formed welts.

Slowly, I released my hands to let go of the ball, and it bounced to the ground by my feet. But Errol had turned around and was walking back into the school. He didn’t look back. His jacket flapped behind him in the wind, and the bright sun reflected off of his dark hair. I sat down on the ground, looked down at my hands which were an even brighter shade of pink, and cried.

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After I finished washing the chalkboards after school, I decided that I would go the Chasm. I knew that it would fix everything and make Errol not be mad at me anymore. I had to

do it quickly before Mother got home, so she wouldn't know that I was breaking her punishment. I would make up for it later by staying in my room an hour after my punishment was over.

I debated about what I should bring as my offering to the Chasm. It didn't matter as much what it was this time because I didn't have to reverse any curses. It just had to be sacred, and the Chasm would have to like it enough to grant my wish. I went back to my room to quickly search for something.

The walls of my room were white because I didn't like any of the colors Mother had picked out to paint it. The only decoration on my walls was an old photograph of my great grandfather Errol Bingham III, his wife, and two children: my grandfather Errol Bingham IV, and his baby sister, Elaine. Father told me Elaine died shortly after the picture was taken. I had found it in the storage room upstairs in the office, and Father let me hang it in my room. The photo was surrounded by a tarnished oval frame, and no one smiled.

On the far side of the room I had a white wooden desk where I would let my homework sit until I would stuff it in my backpack in the morning, usually unfinished. Inside my desk, I kept my favorite little nicknacks, things that I had either been given as a present, or that I had collected over the years. There was a jawbreaker candy about the size of a ping pong ball that I allowed myself one lick per day so that I could make it last as long as possible. Right now it was red, but a yellow layer was starting to show through in one spot. There was a fake pearl necklace that Mother gave me to wear on special occasions, a figurine of a little girl praying with the leg broken off that used to belong to Grandmother Patricia, and a long brown hawk feather that Errol gave to me for my eighth birthday. There was also a diary with a fake leather cover that Father gave to me before he left. It had one week of entries in it, because I thought that someone might

find it and read it in the future, and then I would become famous. But then I got bored of it and left it in my desk.

I opened my desk drawer and took a lick of the jawbreaker, wondering what I should offer to the Chasm. There was no way I was giving it Errol's feather; I had already given it his poem, so I was not about to lose another one of Errol's presents. I picked up the string of fake pearls by the end and dangled it in front of me. They were fairly expensive, but I didn't think that they would count as sacred. Mother had a string of real pearls that had belonged to her mother, Grandmother Patricia. That was probably sacred enough. I crept over to Mother's room with my fake pearls in hand. I had to pass Errol's room to get there, so I was extra quiet. He was being grounded as well for sneaking out after dark, but he had gotten home an hour before me since I had to stay after to clean the chalkboards. As I passed his door, I could hear Bob Dylan, Errol's favorite, playing inside. I didn't really like music in general, but I couldn't understand how anyone could listen to Bob Dylan. He sounded as if Marigold was trying to sing. But I was glad he had it on today, because then he wouldn't be able to hear me slip into Mother's room. I tiptoed anyway as I passed his door and slowly turned the doorknob to Mother's room.

Since Father had left, their bedroom was not as neat as it used to be. Mother's closet was left open, and her shoes were piled up inside rather than placed in rows. Her pink robe was draped across her bed, and a tube of waxy red lipstick was sitting opened on her bureau next to her wooden jewelry box. I walked over, unhooked the metal clasp and lifted the lid of the jewelry box. Inside there were a couple of rings, a gold bangle bracelet, silver earrings, and wound in a coil, the pearl necklace. I picked it up and dangled both necklaces in front of me. Mother's was a good few inches longer than mine but they both had a silver clasp. My pearls were also a lot

shinier and whiter, but I doubted that Mother would notice. They were also not as heavy, but she probably wouldn't notice that either. I coiled my fake pearl necklace up and put it in the exact spot that Mother's necklace was placed in the jewelry box. Satisfied that she wouldn't be able to tell the difference, I redid the clasp and left the room, closing the door behind me.

Marigold did not come with me as I walked to the Chasm this time, so I quickly made my way up the hill alone. The day was cloudy and gray, and the woods were cold and quiet. At the top of the hill, I crossed the clearing and approached the Chasm. I wanted to get this over with quickly so I could get home before Mother did.

"I give you these pearls as an offering so that Errol will stop being mad at me," I said into the Chasm. I let go and watched as the pearls dropped in a white straight line into the gray water below. With a tiny splash, the Chasm swallowed it up, and the necklace was gone. I stared down for a moment, letting the Chasm do its magic. Then I turned around and headed back down the path.

When I got home, I went straight up the stairs to my room. Errol must have turned his music off by now, because I could no longer hear it. I quickly walked up the stairs, not so worried if he heard me because the magic from the Chasm was instantaneous, so Errol would have stopped being mad at me by now anyway.

As I reached the top landing, Errol's door opened and he stepped out into the hallway.

"Where have you been?" he asked. He had changed into sweatpants and his hair was no longer flattened to his head. His eyebrows were furrowed behind his glasses. He must have been worried about me.

“I just had to do something, but I’m back now,” I said, and smiled. “Want to play Rummy until Mother gets home?”

“What? No! Don’t you get it?” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t want to do *anything* with you anymore! You’re grounded! You weren’t allowed to leave the house. You shouldn’t be allowed to do *anything*!” he said taking a step toward me. I stepped back, studying his face in confusion. What was happening here? Why wasn’t the Chasm working? “You don’t even care, do you?” Errol’s voice got quiet. “You’re not sorry. You would do it again, wouldn’t you?”

“No, of course not!” I exclaimed. “I wrote down on paper that I wouldn’t light her on fire again.”

“So what? You lit my best friend on fire, and you’re not even taking it seriously! I’m telling Mom when she gets home that you left,” Errol said, and turned away.

“No! Wait! Please don’t do that!” I said, reaching for his arm. He jerked it away.

“Screw you, Eleanor. You deserve whatever you get.”

I froze as he stormed back into his room and slammed the door behind him. Mother had not turned the heat on yet, so the house felt extra cold and drafty. I went back into my room, closed the door, and buried my head in my pillow. Why didn’t the Chasm make Errol like me again? Why was he still mad? I had given it the pearls, so now it had to give me something in exchange. That’s how it worked. I heard the door open downstairs and Mother’s heels click against the linoleum floor in the kitchen. I’d give the Chasm three days, I decided, and if it did not fix things by then, I’d have to go back and negotiate. I heard the third stair creak as Mother came up. I held my breath for Errol’s door to open, but her steps kept walking all the way down the hall, until I heard her own door open and shut. Errol was probably waiting to tell her after she

settled down a little from work. She usually changed out of her work clothes, took off her shoes and jewelry, and changed into a sundress or pants. She would be so angry when she found out I didn't come straight home.

“ELEANOR!” I froze as her voice pierced the air. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY *PEARLS?*”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

All I could tell Mother was that they were gone, so I was grounded for an extra week, had to go to bed without supper, and had to do chores until I worked off enough money to buy her another necklace. I didn't know how much pearl necklaces cost, but I knew I'd probably be doing chores for the rest of my life before I had enough money to pay for one. Errol must have decided that Mother was angry enough, so he did not tell her I had left the house when I was supposed to be in my room. All Mother could say after she finished yelling at me was that she didn't know what to do with me anymore and that she wished Father were here. I wished Father were here too. It was tiring doing his job for him and getting into so much trouble while he was all the way across the world. That night, I tried to take Marigold into bed with me to keep me company, but I guessed that she was angry with me too because she twisted out of my grasp and ran downstairs.

The next morning, I found a list of chores with my name on it stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet. I loved lists, so I immediately felt better and went over to inspect.

- 1) Buy milk and OJ on way home: 10 cents
- 2) Pick up mail: 5 cents
- 3) Rake leaves in front lawn: 25 cents
- 4) Muck out Bucky and Lady's stalls: 25 cents
- 5) Fill Bucky and Lady's water: 10 cents

I tallied up how much money I would earn by the end of the day: seventy five cents. Like I thought, it would take forever to save up enough money for a necklace. I went over to the kitchen

table and sat down heavily in my chair. I couldn't believe she could tell the difference between the two necklaces so quickly. They looked the same to me.

When Errol walked into the kitchen, I looked up hopefully from my chair, but he didn't look at me and went straight for the refrigerator. He pulled out the orange juice, but there was only a little bit left, so he finished it off from the carton in one swallow and rinsed it out in the sink.

"I'm picking up more today," I offered. "It's one of my chores." Errol took his lunch out of the refrigerator, grabbed a spotted banana from the basket on the counter, then picked up his book bag and walked out the door. A puff of cold air hit my face as the door slammed shut behind him. I swallowed back the lump in my throat, then got up and took out the box of Rice Krispies from the cabinet. The box was almost empty; there wasn't enough left to fill the whole measuring cup and the very top of it was only crumbs. I poured it in a bowl anyway and filled up the half measuring cup with a little less milk than normal. My less than precise measuring didn't work, and my cereal ended up soggy, so I had to throw it away.

School was unbearable. I tried to sit in the back to avoid getting into any more trouble, but the children wouldn't stop whispering at me. Despite the fact that Martha had tried to keep it a secret, word had finally gotten around that I had set her on fire. According to rumors, she hadn't wanted to tell anyone because she was worried she would get teased about it. But the children loved any excuse to gang up against me and Errol, so she found herself a willing group of new friends who wanted to hear all about how crazy the Bingham's were.

"I heard that she dug a grave right in the front of the house to put Martha in after she burned her alive." "She'd be turned to ash, stupid, she wouldn't need a grave." "She should be

locked up. They all should be locked up.” “You can’t trust any of them-- poor Martha didn’t know any better,” they whispered in class, in the hallways, during recess, at lunch. I tried to close my eyes, put my head down, and cover my ears to stop all the whispering, but the teacher yelled at me from the front of the class to sit up and pay attention. During lunch period, I tried to take my food into the library to eat in silence, but the mean librarian with the plastic apple on her desk found me unwrapping my baloney sandwich and chased me out. At recess, I saw Errol, but when he saw me he turned around and walked in the other direction. I hid behind a bush next to the school for the rest of the period and ripped off the little oval leaves one by one until the bell rang for everyone to go inside.

After school was over, Principal Higgins assigned me to scrub the chalkboards of classrooms eight, nine and ten. He looked at me intently, but didn’t say anything about Martha. It was a relief that I could finally be by myself and get some peace and quiet. I had my wad of wet paper towels in my hand and washed the black chalkboard in long precise straight lines. I stood on a chair and dragged the dripping white wad from the very top of the board all the way down to the bottom. The white streaks of chalk that were inevitably left over always bothered me, and I tried to scrub them off with my finger. They always stayed though, and I would have to go to the next classroom with that tight, tense feeling in my chest and the white lines of chalk etched in my mind.

On my way home from school, I stopped in Mr. Fitzgerald’s store to pick up orange juice and milk. Mother had given me a five dollar bill to buy a carton of orange juice and a gallon of milk and told me to give her back the change. Mr. Fitzgerald followed me with his eyes from behind the counter as I went to the refrigerator in the back to retrieve the milk and juice. He was

leaning with both huge hands spread out on the counter and watched me heave the heavy containers up in front of him. I took the wrinkled five dollar bill out of my book bag and put it down on the counter. He stared at me as I stood there and waited, not picking up the money.

“What’s this I’ve been hearing about the graveyard kids settin’ people on fire,” he finally said in a hoarse low voice. He let each word slowly leave his mouth, drawing out the words “graveyard kids.” We weren’t graveyard kids, there was no graveyard around us, unless he counted the pet cemetery behind the house. But I was too shocked that he’d addressed me to correct him. I had never heard him talk before, except to say the prices in one word answers.

“What kinda... screwed up kid sets someone on fire,” he continued slowly, letting the words drip from his tongue. This wasn’t posed as a question, so I waited, looking down at the counter.

“Ya know, I always thought your family was kinda weird. I mean, what kinda people make a livin’ out of gravestones?” he said, reaching up to wipe his nose with the back of his hand. “But what kinda screwed up family sells gravestones and sends their kids out ta’ murder nice little girls? Is business slow? Huh? Is that what it is?”

I pushed the five dollar bill across the counter toward him. “I’ll like to buy milk and orange juice please,” I said.

“Oh, yeah? Ya wanna buy milk and orange juice, huh? Keep your money. I’m not gonna serve your whackjob family here,” he said.

“But--”

“Get outta my store,” he growled, and leaned down over me until his face was level with mine and his hot, smoky breath enveloped my face.

I quickly grabbed the money and ran out, the bell dinging urgently behind me as it slapped against the glass door. I ran down the street as fast as I could, my heart beating in my chest. Before, the people in town would always make a point to look away when I passed, but as I ran down the street, they all stopped where they were and openly stared at me, glared at me. They all knew. Everyone knew.

I ran up the front steps of the office and burst through the front door. I ran into Mother's office where she was writing up figures and leaned over her desk, trying to catch my breath.

"Eleanor, what's going on? Are you alright?" she asked leaning forward and taking off her reading glasses.

"Mother, the people in town, they all know!"

"What? They all know what, dear?"

"They all know!" I repeated, breathing heavily, and flung the crumpled up bill onto her desk. "Mother, he wouldn't let me buy the orange juice!"

Mother picked up the five dollar bill and unfolded it slowly. "He wouldn't sell you the orange juice?" she said.

I nodded. Her face stiffened as she stared at the money in her hand.

"Okay, Eleanor. Thank you for telling me. Why don't you go home now. Don't go back into town, okay?"

I nodded again.

"Is your brother home?"

I shook my head and shrugged.

"If he's not, please come straight back here and tell me, okay?"

“Okay,” I said.

“Go back home now, Eleanor. I have a lot of work to finish up, but I’ll be home to make dinner.”

Once I reached the doorway, I turned around to look back at Mother. She was still staring at the five dollar bill, her face pale and stricken.

Back home, I went straight up to Errol’s room to see if he was there. His door was closed, and there wasn’t any music coming from inside, so I knocked, and held my breath. I heard his chair squeak, and footsteps cross to the door.

“What?” he said as he opened it. His face looked hard and tired.

“Just checking to make sure you were here,” I mumbled.

Errol nodded. He stood there for a moment, holding the door opened. “Eleanor,” he finally said, “Did you throw Mom’s necklace into the Chasm?”

How did he know? I looked down at the floor, unsure of how to answer him. The hallway carpet was unraveling slightly where it met the darker shade of carpet in Errol’s room.

“Well, did you?”

I gave him a quick nod.

“Why?”

“I needed it to do something for me,” I said quietly to the floor.

“The Chasm? Do what?” Errol crossed his arms.

I hesitated, still staring down at the floor. I thought back to all the people in town staring at me, the children at school hating me. Errol was all I had. “Make you stop being mad at me,” I finally mumbled.

“Okay,” Errol said, and let out a long breath. He seemed to be struggling with something in his head as he bit his lip and ran his hand through his hair. “First of all, if you want me to not be mad at you, maybe you shouldn’t have set my best friend on fire,” he started slowly. “Or maybe you should have come to me and apologized or taken it even a little bit seriously. Not try to go behind my back and *magically* change how I feel. Second, you can’t just go to the Chasm and expect it to fix all of your problems. You can’t just throw something in, make a wish, and expect everything to be better again. It’s not a magic wishing well, Eleanor. Life doesn’t work like that. You need to grow up.” At the last word, my eyes flew up to meet his. But then he shut the door, and I was left standing there staring at it, my head spinning. The Chasm wasn’t a wishing well? Well, of course it wasn’t a wishing well; I wasn’t stupid. But if you sacrificed something to it, then it would give you something in return. That’s how it worked. But then again, I suddenly realized that Errol and I had never thrown a sacred object in together and expected something back from the Chasm. We had thrown in those silver dollars, the smoking pipe, and the three arrow heads over the years without ever asking for anything. *I* was the one who started asking. I felt the blood drain from my face as I realized what was happening. The Chasm was punishing me for treating it like a wishing well. That was why Errol was still mad at me. I had to go back there tonight and apologize before it got any worse. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Everything would be okay after tonight. I would bring the feather that Errol gave me just in case. Not to make a wish, but to sacrifice without asking for anything in return. If that’s what it took, I would give up my gift from Errol to make everything go back to normal.

I walked back downstairs to get the rake from the garden and do the rest of my chores. As I raked the drying leaves into a pile in the center of the yard, I kept telling myself over and

over that everything would be okay. After tonight, everything would be okay. One of the red metal forks on the rake got caught in a hole, and I jerked it back to make it come loose. Mother stopped assigning me the chore of raking when she realized that I would spend hours trying to clear the lawn of every last leaf. But this time she either forgot or wanted me to spend hours picking up the extraneous leaves one by one to add to the pile. This task always left me with an uneasy feeling, because even though I would scour the lawn for every leftover leaf, I knew that there would always be one that I would miss, or one that would fall from a tree, or blow off of the pile. When Mother came walking down the street a couple hours later, I was on my hands and knees desperately running my fingers through the grass. Despite my protests, she dragged me to my feet and pulled me inside.

“You did good enough, Eleanor. Leave the rest,” she told me.

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That night, I woke up at midnight to go to the Chasm. The clouds were thick, trapping in a hazy grayness, but blocking the moon. I put my coat and hat on before I slipped outside. Marigold did not follow me; she must have been hunting mice and crickets in the trees around the house. I crossed the backyard, passed the barn, and stepped into the woods.

The path was dark and steep, and my legs felt heavy, like it was an effort to lift each foot. I wasn't sure why I was so tired, but I kept having to rub the dryness from my eyes, and each yawn was contagious to the next, until I couldn't make myself stop. The path seemed extra long, and I tripped a couple times on rocks sticking up from the dirt as my feet dragged. I wished that Marigold was there to lead the way and wondered why it was taking so long to get to the clearing. The trees were all gray and looked exactly the same, like they were lifeless props put on

a stage. I thought back to Errol, shutting the door in my face. *It's not a wishing well, Eleanor. You need to grow up.* I tried to keep pushing forward, but soon Mr. Fitzgerald's words were swirling around in my mind too, intertwined with Errol's, and I could smell his hot smoky breath in my face and feel the unforgiving stares of the people in town as I ran home. I wanted to yell at them, *you don't understand!* but Errol didn't understand either and neither did Mother. I thought of the searing pain in my hands when he threw the ball at me, his receding figure as he turned away from me at the playground. The Chasm would fix it all, I thought, and everything would go back to normal. All I wanted was for everything to go back to normal. I heaved a big breath and made myself walk faster as the forest got darker around me.

When I reached the clearing, I ducked under the wooden railing and lay down on my belly at the edge of the Chasm. Because of the cloud cover, it was light enough to see all the way to the bottom. Everything looked normal and calm. There was no wind, no pulling force from the Chasm. But if Errol was still angry with me, then the Chasm was angry with me too. I reached into my pocket and took out Errol's feather. It was silky and light in my hand. I carefully smoothed it between my fingers, making sure none of the feathery bits were going in the wrong direction. Then, I looked over the edge.

"I'm sorry I used you as a wishing well," I called. "I promise that I won't ever do it again."

I reached my arm out and dropped Errol's feather. It drifted slowly through the air, weaving back and forth. When it finally reached the bottom, it floated lightly on the surface, a small brown dot on the black water. What did that mean if it didn't sink to the bottom? Did it

mean that the Chasm wasn't accepting it? I waited and watched. But the feather stayed floating at the top.

"I'm sorry!" I called again, more urgently this time, peering down to see if it had an effect. "I know that you are not a wishing well!"

Nothing happened. I looked around anxiously, wondering if there was anything I could do. But the cold was setting in, and I couldn't lie here much longer. I got up, looked down at the water one more time, then climbed under the railing and made my way back home.

When I got back to the house, I slowly walked up to the kitchen door. I felt completely miserable. If the Chasm wouldn't accept my feather, then Errol might never stop being mad at me. As I reached the door, I noticed the garbage bin beside the house was knocked over and wrappers and napkins and a can of tuna fish, licked clean, were spilled across the ground. Marigold or some other animal must have gotten into it again, looking for leftover food. I lifted the trash bin upright and noticed a book was among the pile of garbage. I picked it up to see it closer in the dark. It was Errol's book of poetry. How did it get there? Errol couldn't have thrown it away. He loved that book. Maybe it had accidentally fallen into the trash basket in his room, and Mother had emptied it into the outside trash without noticing. It was a good thing I found it or he would have been really upset. Inside, I quietly slipped the book under Errol's door, then crept into my room. Exhausted and defeated, I fell into a restless sleep.

I woke up to my alarm clock at seven o'clock in the morning with the sun peeking through the window. I put my head under my pillow and squeezed tightly. I didn't want to go back to school where all the children made fun of me. I didn't want to get out of bed knowing that Errol may never like me again.

After a while, I heard Mother bustling around downstairs. I pushed the pillow aside, and with enormous effort, pulled my covers back and crawled out of bed. I picked up a dress and some tights from the floor and slowly put them on, threading one arm through a sleeve and then the other. I dragged myself out my bedroom door and walked down the steps, one at a time. I stopped when I heard Errol's voice coming from the kitchen.

"Mom, I threw this away because I didn't want it. Why did you put it under my door?" he said. Errol threw his book away on purpose? Great. Now he'd be mad at me even more for retrieving it.

"You threw it away?" Mother exclaimed. "Errol, why? You love that book."

"I just don't want it anymore..." Errol said.

"You don't want it anymore? Sweetie, what's going on? You can tell me." I heard a kitchen chair scrape against the floor as Mother sat down.

"I-- well. It just--" Errol started haltingly, "It reminded me too much of Martha. I gave her a poem... that night... and when her clothes were on fire she dropped it, and I didn't notice she was on fire, so I picked up the poem... She thought I was trying to save it over her. And now she won't talk to me," he said miserably.

"Oh, sweetie," Mother sighed, "you really liked her didn't you? Don't give up, you never know, she might still come around."

"But if you didn't put it under my door, who did?"

"Well, who else? It must have been your sister."

"Eleanor did it?" Errol asked.

I cringed as he said my name and debated going back upstairs and hiding under my covers for the rest of the day. But I knew Mother would call me and make me come down, so I stepped down the remaining four stairs, going as slowly as I absolutely could. I hunched over, trying to make myself look as small as possible as I made my way into the kitchen and kept my eyes fixed on the floor. Maybe he wouldn't yell at me if I looked as inconspicuous as possible. But I could feel Errol's eyes staring at me as I sat down at the kitchen table. The book was in front of him.

"Eleanor, did you put my Yeats book under my door?" Errol asked.

I nodded at my lap, getting ready for the blow. But it never came. I felt Errol's arms reach around me and pull me toward him. Shocked, I froze while he gave me a quick hug. After he let me go, I sat there for a minute, dumbfounded. Then it dawned on me. The Chasm must have finally worked! It must have accepted the feather and forgiven me! A wide smile slowly spread across my face, and I jumped up from my chair, skipped over to the counter, and opened the cabinet to find some breakfast. There wasn't any milk or Rice Krispies left. I always had Rice Krispies on weekday mornings. But this morning, it didn't seem to matter. I grabbed a piece of Wonder Bread and ate it plain in three bites. Then I skipped through the living room, and down the hallway to the front door where Mother had put my book bag, and grabbed my coat. It didn't matter if the children made fun of me today. Now that I had Errol back, everything was going to be okay. I slung my book bag over my shoulder and yanked open the front door. Then, I let out a loud yelp in surprise and slammed it shut again. Two men dressed in Army uniforms were standing on the front step.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Mother rushed to the front door with Errol right behind her. “What is it? What happened, Eleanor?” she asked, and then there was a loud knock. She took my arm and pulled me aside so she could open the door, still in her pink cotton bathrobe. When she saw the two men, her face turned white and she gasped. She grabbed Errol by the shoulder and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Mrs. Bingham? We regret to inform you that Sergeant Errol Bingham was killed in service to his country. We are so sorry for your loss.”

Through her hand, Mother made a sound like I had never heard before. It came from her gut and seemed to suck all the life out of the room. She sunk to her knees on the floor, pulling Errol down with her. He pushed away, scrambling to his feet and down the hallway, then stumbled through the door of the downstairs bathroom. I heard the toilet seat clatter and Errol heaving.

Father killed? Father couldn't be killed. He was coming home on June 12th of next year. That was in exactly seven months and two days according to the calendar Mother kept in the kitchen. No one ever told me that Father would die before coming home. That wasn't supposed to happen. All of a sudden, an image of the Chasm flashed into my head, the brown feather floating at the top of the water. All the blood rushed from my face and my mouth dropped opened in shock. I put my hand out to steady myself; I felt like I was going to pass out. The feather never sank to the bottom of the pool. And now Father was killed. The Chasm hadn't forgiven me after all. It killed Father to punish me for treating it like a wishing well! My mouth

went completely dry as a wave of cold certainty rushed over me. It was all my fault. My knees felt weak and I was afraid I might collapse. Mother reached her hand out to me, and I stumbled over to her as she kneeled on the floor and sobbed. She pulled me down to her, and wrapped her arms around me. She pressed me hard into her shoulder and I breathed in her familiar sent. I couldn't take it and broke away. In her arms I knew I wouldn't be able to stop myself from crying. I covered my face with my hands and closed my eyes tight. I wasn't allowed to cry if it was all my fault.

I felt Mother slowly get to her feet and, as if from far away, I heard her voice say shakily, "Come inside." I wanted to yell out, *no, don't let them in*. But it was too late and the servicemen were already through the door.

Even though it was our house, the servicemen ushered Mother into the living room and sat her down on our scratchy blue couch. I sat down stiffly next to her, and she grasped my hand tightly in hers. Errol emerged from the bathroom, his face streaked with lines of tears that he had hurriedly wiped away. He sat on the chair farthest away from the Army men who sat uncomfortably on the edge of the matching blue love seat.

"Mrs. Bingham," said the Army man on the right side. They looked exactly the same with their short hair and ugly green uniforms. "Your husband died in an ambush on his campsite by Viet Cong guerillas. Five other soldiers died as well."

My eyes widened in shock. Gorillas killed Father? I thought it must have been the terrible Vietnam children he was fighting. I wondered if the children trained them to attack. I let out a shaky sob but quickly covered my mouth. Mother pulled me into her chest.

“He died an honorable death. He was a very brave man and died serving his country. Though I know it is very difficult now, you should be proud to have him as your husband.”

“No!” Errol yelled jumping up from his seat. “He shouldn’t have been over there in the first place! This is a pointless war and he died for nothing! *For nothing!*”

“Errol!” Mother cried, “Stop it! Stop it right now! I can’t take it-- I can’t take that from you,” she said, and broke into a new set of sobs. But Errol’s face was dark and his fists were clenched, and his whole body was shaking. I could count the veins in his neck.

“Son, you should be proud of your father. There is no death more honorable. He died for your freedom.” Errol opened his mouth to yell again, but looked at Mother who was crying in her hands and turned around and left the room. I listened as he ran up the steps in the kitchen and cringed as his bedroom door slammed shut.

“This is a very hard time,” the left serviceman said to Mother. “He’ll be okay.”

Mother sniffed. “Where are his-- the-- is he--” she asked haltingly.

“His remains are on a plane heading back here now. It should arrive within the next day. If you wish to have a military funeral, we can make arrangements.”

“No, I don’t think-- we’ll do a small service here. No military funeral,” Mother said, shaking her head.

The servicemen both nodded sympathetically. “We are very sorry for your loss,” they said. They both stood up and Mother untangled herself from my grasp and got to her feet.

“We will be in contact,” the serviceman on the right said. Mother stepped forward but the serviceman on the left said, “Don’t worry, we can let ourselves out.” Once we heard the front door close, Mother collapsed heavily on the couch and took me in her arms again.

“What are we going to do? What are we going to do?” she said into my hair as she rocked me back and forth. I closed my eyes as hard as I could and gave myself up to her swaying. Maybe if I closed my eyes it would all go away. But I couldn’t shut Father’s face out of my head or the gorillas coming out the jungle while he was sleeping in his tent, unaware. Or the feather floating at the top of the Chasm.

“*I’m sorry,*” I finally whispered into her shoulder, too muffled and quiet for her to hear. “*I’m so sorry.*” Father wasn’t coming home. He was never coming home, and it was all because of me. I couldn’t hold it back any longer. My throat felt like it was going to close up in pain. I gripped Mother’s bathrobe tightly in my hands and sobbed.

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That night, I snuck into Errol’s room after everyone went to bed. I closed the door behind me and knelt down on the floor by his pillow. He was lying down under the covers on his stomach, facing the opposite wall.

“Errol, are you asleep?” I whispered. My throat hurt from crying so much throughout the day. He groaned and turned over, and I could see his eyes shining in the dark.

“No,” his voice was hoarse. “I can’t.”

“Neither can I,” I said. We sat there in silence for a while, listening to the darkness. I stared at the floor and drew little circles in the carpet with my finger.

“I can’t believe he’s not coming back,” Errol finally said turning over to stare up at the ceiling. “I can’t believe he left us for that stupid war and now he’s never coming back.”

I dug my pointer finger into the carpet and didn’t say anything.

“And Mom was against the antiwar protests, and look what the war has done now! How could he do this to us?” His voice broke.

I burrowed my finger deeper into the carpet and pulled at a loose strand.

Errol swallowed and took a deep breath. “How could he... How could he go fight in a pointless war where innocent people are dying, and then go and get himself killed? I just... I can’t believe he did this to us.”

“Errol, he didn’t. It wasn’t his fault,” I said staring hard at the floor.

“It was his *choice*. It was his choice to leave.”

“It wasn’t his fault that he died,” I said, my heart pounding in my chest. “Errol?”

“What?”

“It’s my fault,” I whispered. “I killed him.” Then I started to cry again.

Errol turned over and grasped me by the shoulder. “Eleanor, don’t say that. Of course you didn’t.”

“But I did,” I whispered, tears streaming down my face. “I--I treated the Chasm like a wishing well, and now it’s punishing me.” I let out a shaky breath. Errol may never forgive me. I could never forgive myself.

“Eleanor stop, that’s ridiculous. Come on now, stop crying. The Chasm didn’t kill Dad. It’s just a Chasm. That’s what I was trying to tell you when I said it’s not a wishing well. There’s nothing magical about it.”

“But there is, Errol, there is! That’s why Father’s dead. It’s punishing me!” I sobbed.

“Eleanor,” Errol said urgently, giving my shoulder a strong shake. “The Chasm doesn’t have the power to do that. It’s just a hole in the ground. It can’t go out and kill people. Remember what the servicemen said? It was the Viet Cong guerrillas.”

“I know, but the Chasm sent the gorillas out to kill him! It sent them to his camp, all because of me!” An image of big black gorillas thumping their chests as they emerged out of the jungle filled my head, and I cried harder.

“Eleanor, you can’t think that way! It’s not true. It’s not your fault, and it definitely wasn’t the Chasm! It’s the stupid war, that’s what it is! That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all along! Too many people are dying for no reason because of this war!”

I put my head in my hands and shook my head miserably. He didn’t understand. All he cared about was the antiwar movement.

“Come on, you should probably try to get some sleep” Errol said. “It will make you feel a little better. Or at least forget for a couple hours. We all need to get some sleep.”

I sniffed and nodded, wiping my nose with my pajama sleeve.

“It wasn’t your fault, Eleanor,” Errol said.

I covered my mouth and hurried out of the room before I erupted in a fresh set of tears.

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The funeral took place three days later at the little white church next to the cemetery at the far end of town. Errol, Mother and I had to stand by the door as people filed in and “accept their condolences,” as Mother put it. Thank goodness only a few people came, so we did not have to stand there long. I wore the same black dress that I wore to Father’s great aunt’s funeral three years ago, and it was scratchy and tight. Errol wore a black suit that was also too small for

him, and he kept uncomfortably tugging at the sleeves. Mother was the only one of us who was put together with a long black dress and jacket, and high heeled shoes. Errol told her that she looked nice before we left the house in the morning, and she teared up and gave him a hug.

We were driven to the church by one of Father's workers named Joseph who cut and sanded the stones in the workshop behind the office. He picked us up in his red pickup truck, and Errol, Mother and I had to squeeze to fit next to him in the front seat. He told us that the rest of the workers were coming as well to pay their respects and would see us at the church.

In the parking lot, before we went inside, Mother fixed my hair and told me that I had to let people hug me or pat me on the head if they tried, because it wasn't polite to dodge away. Grandmother Rose, Father's Mother, was already there. She hired a taxi service to drive her in from Jefferson for the funeral, but she refused to stay over night with us. Inside, she gave Mother a stiff hug, and told her that she should be proud to have had a brave husband like her son. Then she bent down and gave me a wet kiss on the cheek, which I quickly wiped away, and shook Errol's hand telling him, "You're a man now," before taking a seat in the first row closest to the casket. She was the only family member who came since Grandfather Errol died before I was born, and Grandmother Patricia lived too far away and was too old to travel.

Next, Mrs. Dean who owned the grocery store where Mother shopped came through the door. She stood in the entrance and took a long look around the room before coming up to us and giving Mother a big hug with lots of pats on the back. She knelt down and pinched my cheeks, then patted Errol on the cheek and said "Poor dears! Poor dears!" before sitting down in the second row. Mother used to tell us that Mrs. Dean was the biggest gossip in town, and when I looked over at Mother standing next to me, she didn't seem too happy to see her here.

But then Mrs. Walters came with her son Dylan who was dressed up in a black suit. Mrs. Walters' husband was also in the war, so she and Mother would talk whenever they met in town. She hurried over and gave Mother a long hug.

“If you need anything, don't even hesitate. I'll bring over a casserole or something tonight. You'll get through this,” she said holding Mother tightly.

Mother's eyes teared up as she let go. Mrs. Walters then pulled me and Errol in for a hug as well, before motioning for Dylan to follow her to a seat in the third row. Dylan was a year older than Errol and went to Breinigsville County High School. When he was in school with us he would always ignore us, just like he was doing now, which I appreciated.

The last people to come were the rest of the workers who made the stones. Errol and I did not know them well since we were never allowed in the workshop behind the office in case we got crushed by one of the stones or the sanding and cutting machines. They all lived on the far side of town, near the railroad tracks, and would drive to the office in their pickup trucks every morning. They all gently squeezed Mother's hand, and nodded to me and Errol before sitting near the back, next to Joseph.

After everyone was seated, Mother took me and Errol by the hand and led us down the center aisle to the bench in the front, across from Grandmother Rose. A priest stood behind a podium to conduct the service. It was a small church, and Mother had ordered yellow flowers to be placed in the front. As we sat down with Mother sitting between Errol and me, I immediately felt uncomfortable so close to the casket. It was black and locked shut with an American flag draped over the top. Even though we weren't having a military funeral, the servicemen gave the flag to us when they delivered Father inside the casket. The priest was saying something into a

microphone, but I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that Father was inside the casket. He was *right there*. I tried to imagine him lying down inside it, with his arms crossed over his chest like I would see on television. But then I realized that he was killed by gorillas, and an image of him mangled and bloody inside the casket after having been ripped apart by vicious gorillas filled my head. I let out a shudder and buried my head into Mother's shoulder. What had I done? Father would be lying in pieces in the casket forever. He will never come back and protect me from all the evil children at school, I thought, never drive home in his Cadillac from the office, and never again save the day by punishing all those who did wrong. Nothing would ever go back to normal. I cried into Mother's shoulder as she rubbed my back, but it was hopeless and I was the one to blame.

After a while, Mother stood up, pulling me up by the hand, and we all filed out of the church to the cemetery. It was especially cold and damp, and the sky was gray. The workers carried the coffin, and Errol went with them to help. Mother and I walked behind them. She had managed to not cry for most of the service, only dabbing at her eyes once in a while with a tissue. Even now as we walked, her face was set and her head was held high.

Father was to be buried with Errols one through four. They had all lived in our house, worked in the office, and now were buried in the same cemetery. The stones were all designed to look the same, so Mother did not have to worry about designing a stone for him. Dark gray granite, they only varied in the years and the roman numeral after Errol Bingham. Father's stone was a few paces away from Errol Bingham IV with a big rectangular hole in the ground in front of it. Grandmother Rose patted Grandfather Errol's stone then stood in the empty grassy space next to it, telling everyone who passed by her that this was her burial plot, between her son and

husband, when the time came. Whenever anyone tried to walk over it, she yelled at them to get off of her plot. Mother tried to steer her away, but she insisted on standing there while Father's casket was lowered into the ground. I watched as Errol stood back from the casket after having helped put it on a contraption to be lowered into the ground. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his jacket and his hair was blown back by the wind as he looked down into the grave. As I stared at Errol standing among all the Errol stones, a sudden chill washed over me. This is where Errol would be buried. He would be buried right here with his own gray Errol stone, right beneath our feet. I stared at him in horror, and when he looked over at me, I burst into tears. He crossed over to me, and in a moment his arms were around me, holding me together, as he whispered into my hair, "We'll be alright." But I couldn't get past the raw empty feeling in my stomach knowing that someday I'd be standing here again and Errol would be beneath the grass where I would never be able to reach him. I cried as we watched Father's casket being slowly lowered into the ground.

After the ceremony was over, we walked back to the church to say goodbye to everyone and see Grandmother Rose off. Mother told her that she was welcome to stay longer if she liked, but now that Father was buried she wanted to get home. She came to visit us once a year for Easter, that was it, and who was she to break tradition?

I stood next to Mother as she talked to Mrs. Walters outside the church. Dylan had decided to wait in the car. Errol was sitting down on the bottom step when suddenly he straightened up and looked past us, his eyes widening. I followed his gaze and saw a figure walking toward us, wrapped in a purple scarf. My heart dropped. It was Martha. Errol slowly got to his feet and walked toward her across the dirt parking lot. She said something, and Errol

nodded; then they both walked together around the back of the church. I looked up at Mother, who hadn't noticed and was still talking to Mrs. Walters, then quickly followed them.

I hid behind a bush against the side of the church and peeked around the corner. They were sitting a few paces away on a wooden bench under a tree stripped of all of its leaves. Beyond a black gate, you could see the whole cemetery: black, gray and white stones placed here and there across a plane of dark fall grass. Beyond the stones, you could see for miles. The wheat had been cut and harvested so all that was left was a flat brown plane that reached the gray horizon. The end of fall had left all the trees bare, and all the colors looked muted in the cloud-covered sky.

"I was so sorry to hear about your Dad," Martha said as I crouched in the bush and peeked my head around the corner. "I couldn't believe it. I had to come see if you were okay."

Errol leaned over with his elbows on his knees. He nodded at the ground.

"Errol," Martha said hesitantly, looking down at her hands, "I want to tell you that I'm sorry. I don't know if it matters anymore, but I'm sorry I was so angry at you after the fire. I know it wasn't your fault. And I never got to tell you... that poem was one of the sweetest things that anyone has ever done for me." She paused. "I hope that you can forgive me."

Errol looked up at her, his eyes shining. Then, he slowly reached over and squeezed her hand. My stomach tightened. "I'm sorry too," he said.

They sat in silence for a while looking out into the field. He held her hand tightly in his, and her purple scarf fluttered in the wind. It was the only splash of color for miles.

"It just makes me so mad," Errol finally said, still staring out at the horizon. "This war. I can't believe what it's done. So many people killed for nothing. And now my Dad is dead. He's

dead. And he's not coming back." Errol's voice broke and he let go of her hand. Looking away, he sniffed and hurriedly wiped his nose with his sleeve.

"I can't believe it either," Martha said looking down at the ground. "I know it's not right."

"I just wish there was something I could do," Errol said.

Martha hesitated. "You know, there might be something."

"Yeah? What's that?" Errol said, his voice hoarse.

"It's a secret, so you can't tell, okay?" Martha said, looking at him earnestly. "My sister is quitting school and running away to Michigan to join this youth antiwar movement. Her friend is one of the people who started it, and it's getting really big... I was thinking of going with her."

"You're going to join an antiwar movement?" Errol asked in astonishment.

"My parents have no idea, and they can't know until after I leave. They would be furious. But I hate this town and this school. I didn't want to move here in the first place. And my sister said I could stay with her, and we'd both do something that really mattered. Something that would go down in history."

"You're going to run away to Michigan? But how will you get there?"

"There's a bus that goes from Philadelphia to Detroit. I would just need to hitchhike to Philly." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and looked down at her lap. "You could come with me," she said.

Errol looked intently out past the cemetery and ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know," he finally said. "I mean, it's so far away. What about my mom and Eleanor?"

“You don’t have to decide right away. I’m planning on leaving in about a week-- or as soon as my sister tells me that she’s there and everything is set. Think about it,” she said. Then she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. She got up and walked back around the church and I shrank behind the bush and held my breath as she passed me. Then I turned back to look at Errol. He was gazing out at the horizon with his fingertips touching the place where she had just kissed him.

## CHAPTER NINE

The only thing I could do over the next few days was watch Errol and try to figure out what he was thinking. I couldn't punish Martha, and the Chasm was definitely out of the question. I had vowed to never go to the Chasm again. Errol said that it didn't have the power to kill Father, but I was terrified of it. Even if I wasn't the one to blame, I wasn't going to take any chances. I knew Errol wouldn't leave me though. It was really just a matter of time before Martha left town forever, and Errol, Mother and I would begin to learn to live together knowing that Father was not coming home.

Mother went out riding for three days straight, leaving early in the morning and not coming back until right before dark each night. Then she heated up a casserole that Mrs. Walters had prepared for us and watched as we ate, only picking at it herself. On the fourth day she went back to work, and told us that we had to go back to school. We had missed over a week of school, and it was time to get back into the normal routine, she said. Even though it involved going to school, I couldn't agree more. But when I got up in the morning and opened the cabinet to find that we were still out of Rice Krispies, I broke down and cried, dropping the bowl and measuring cups to the floor. The ceramic bowl smashed into pieces as it hit the linoleum and the plastic measuring cups flew in either direction. Mother calmly got up from her seat at the kitchen table and picked everything up, dumping the pieces of the broken bowl into the trash.

"It's okay, dear, I'll get you more cereal for tomorrow," she said. "Come on now, it's time to go to school." She handed me a couple of pieces of dry toast, and ushered me outside before I had a chance to tell her that I couldn't go to school anymore.

Though I felt miserable, to my surprise, school was better than normal. All the children left me alone completely. No one's father or mother had ever been killed before, so they weren't sure what to do. On the bus to school, no one kicked the back of my seat, so I was able to count all the cars without missing one. There were exactly twenty-two cars and buses, including the buses parked at the school. Whenever I entered a classroom, everyone stopped talking and none of the teachers called on me. I spent each class concentrating on making one inch by one inch squares on the desk with my eraser. When I went into the girls bathroom before lunch, all the girls stopped talking and hurried out so I could wash my hands in peace. I made sure to walk within the twelve by twelve inch tiles wherever I went and everyone moved to the side to get out of my way. When I sat down at a lunch table, everyone moved over a seat to be further away from me. It was a relief. As I sat eating my cold leftover casserole, it suddenly dawned on me that Father was protecting me from the children. It was him that was keeping them away from me. That must mean that he had forgiven me for what I had done. For the first time in what seemed like forever, I felt a small rush of happiness.

At recess, I found Errol sitting under the maple tree talking to Martha, but when I approached, she hurried away as well. He must have told her that he wasn't going to run away to Michigan with her, I thought. I gave him a small smile and sat down Indian style at his feet.

"Hello," I said.

"You doing okay?" he asked.

"Yes. Everyone ignored me today. It was really nice."

"Good, I'm glad," he said. "Mom seems to be getting better too."

"Yes, Mrs. Walters has been very nice to her. I think they're going to be friends."

“I do too,” Errol said. He hesitated for a second, pulling up a handful of grass from the ground. “So, as long as you have your Rice Krispies, you’ll be okay too?” he asked.

I thought of Father forgiving me and protecting me from the children. “Mhm,” I said, “I think we’re all going to be okay.”

Errol grabbed my foot and looked me earnestly in the eyes. “You’re one in a billion, you know that, right?”

I thought about it for a second, and figured that there were probably about a billion people in the world, so it sounded about right. “Right,” I said.

“Don’t forget it, okay?” he said, still staring at me intently. I nodded, and repeated the fact over in my head three times to memorize it. *One in a billion, one in a billion, one in a billion.* Then the bell rang, and Errol gave my foot a tight squeeze, then got up from the ground. He gave me a quick hug and ruffled my hair, then we both made our way back into the school.

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Mother went food shopping before she came home from work. She bought a whole chicken to roast in the oven, potatoes, carrots, milk, bananas, orange juice and my Rice Krispies for breakfast. The chicken tasted really good after four nights of casserole. I separated the skin from the chicken and gave it to Marigold under the table. Then I cut up the breast meat and ate that first, then the carrots, and then the potatoes which were my favorite.

That night, I went to bed early. I hadn’t been able to sleep much since Father died, and I was especially tired. I found Marigold and lugged her into my bed. Pulling the covers over both of us, and tucking her in, I instantly fell asleep.

I woke up at midnight to the sound of something outside my door and Marigold squirming out of my arms and jumping out of bed. I turned over to go back to sleep, thinking it was just Mother going to get a drink of water from the bathroom, but then Marigold mewed at the door to be let out, so I pulled back the covers and got out of bed.

“Shh,” I hissed as she mewed again in the dark. “I’m coming!”

I tiptoed over to her, but as I reached the door, my foot kicked something hard. I reached down and picked it up. It was a book. I held it up to my eyes and squinted at it in the dark. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. What was this doing here? Then, my heart dropped in my chest. No, it couldn’t be true. I dropped the book on the floor and yanked open the door, causing Marigold to jump out of the way to avoid getting hit. I anxiously walked into his room and turned on the light switch by the door. His bed was made and everything was tidied and clean. His drawers were closed and there were no clothes left on the floor. I quickly shut off the light and ran down the steps into the kitchen. “Errol!” I hissed. I switched on the kitchen light and saw a note on the table written on a piece of Bingham Gravestones and Monuments stationary. I snatched it up. “Dear Mom,” it said,

I have left to join the Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor. I know that this doesn’t make things easy for you, but I need to do something. This war has killed thousands of innocent people, and now it’s killed Dad. This needs to stop. I just can’t sit back and do nothing any longer. I have to do this for Dad. I hope you can forgive me. I love you.

Errol

No. It couldn’t be true. I wrenched open the kitchen door and sprinted down Bingham Road as fast as I could. My bare feet hurt as I pounded over pebbles and sticks, but I was too scared to slow down. My white nightgown was thin and the cold air seeped right through it as I raced down the road. I reached the office, breathing hard, and stopped to look around. Up ahead I saw

him, a dark figure against the lamp lights on the other side of the road. His backpack was slung over his shoulder, and his jacket was buttoned up to his neck against the cold. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“ERROL!” I screamed. “ERROL, COME BACK!”

He stopped and turned around, and I ran forward, finally reaching him. I grabbed him hard by the jacket, pulling him toward me.

*“Where are you going? Don’t go, please don’t go!”* I cried, panting to try and catch my breath. “You can’t leave! You can’t go.”

*“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,”* he said, his voice low and hoarse. His eyes were shining in the dark as he looked down at me and grasped my fists balled around his jacket. “Eleanor, I have to go,” he whispered.

“No!” I shrieked, “You can’t! You can’t leave me!”

“Shh, shh. I have to! I have to do this. I have to.”

“No! Take me with you then!” I said, crying and grabbing harder as he tried to pull my hands away.

“Stop, Eleanor! I can’t!”

*“Why?”* I wailed.

“You need to stay here,” he grasped me hard by the shoulders and looked me in the eyes. Tears clouded my vision and I couldn’t meet his gaze. “You have to stay here with Mom. I’ll be back, okay?”

*“Don’t leave me. Please,”* I cried.

“You have to let me go, Eleanor. I have to go.” He slowly peeled my hands away from his jacket as I tried to clutch on to him. But he was too strong and I was left standing in the middle of the road, my arms hanging limply by my side, tears staining my cheeks.

“I’ll be back, okay? I promise I’ll be back,” he said. His eyes were red and shining as I stared at him, pleading with him to stay. But he gave me one last look, then turned around and walked down the road. All that I could hear was the soft pounding of his feet against the pavement, the soft scrape as his shoe hit a pebbled. I watched him cross the street and walk up the sidewalk, throwing long shadows against the concrete as he passed beneath the white lamplight. His figure got smaller and smaller until he reached the end of the road and then he disappeared.

I stayed standing there for I don’t know how long, staring at the place where he disappeared. Then I turned around and walked through the sample gravestones, up the red brick walkway to the front steps of the office. The only lights that shone were from the street lamps on the other side of the road, making the gravestones look completely black. He promised me that he would come back. Errol never broke a promise to me before. I sat down on the middle step, pulled my nightgown tighter around me, and waited for Errol to come home.

## AFTERWARD

My mother has always loved to tell me stories about her childhood. I could never get much out of my father-- his childhood is still a mystery to me-- but my mother loves to talk about her life growing up in Breinigsville, Pennsylvania. She lived on a horse farm in rural Pennsylvania and was expected to join the family gravestone business that had been around for generations. Her life seemed to come right out of a book, and when I decided to write a novella, I knew that I wanted to incorporate her story. However, I had no idea how I wanted to do it until I took an English class with Francisco Goldman called "Contemporary Fiction: Not Realism."

Before taking this class, I did not have much of an appreciation for magic realism. I could suspend my belief to enjoy a fantasy or science fiction novel, and realism was never problematic, but I could not understand this space between called magic realism. In Bruno Schulz's book of short stories, *The Street of Crocodiles*, did the narrator's father really turn into a cockroach or is it supposed to be a metaphor? Did the horse really shrink or is it just in the narrator's mind? Then I realized that I was asking the wrong questions. It is not a question of what is real and what is not real; rather, non-realism is the creation of an experience. It is not fantasy in that it takes place in a different world where horses shrink and people turn into cockroaches; but rather, to accurately describe and create the experience of a character, the horse *must* shrink and the father *must* turn into a cockroach. Because non-realism is the creation of an experience, and every person's reality is different from the next, non-realism becomes even more real than reality. Once I finally understood this, I fell in love with magic realism, and it was all I wanted to read and write.

I especially loved the book *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson. I admired how nothing magical happens, but everything is a little off, a little creepy, a little dark, even before the reader finds out that the protagonist, Merricat, killed her family. I decided that I wanted to create a novella that had a similar unsettling quality. The family gravestone business seemed to lend itself perfectly to this idea. The gravestone business, the Chasm, and Eleanor's warped sense of reality all tie into creating this unsettling kind of magic realism.

In creating Eleanor's character, I was very inspired by Merricat. I loved her childlike imagination, her prissiness, and her dark insanity. Eleanor embodies many of Merricat's qualities but the important difference is that Eleanor lets the reader into her thoughts and feelings. Because of that, she is a more sympathetic character; she is someone who is crazy, but who the reader can understand. Unlike Merricat, who borders on being sociopathic, Eleanor is capable of feelings like remorse and guilt, but has such a warped sense of reality that she feels like she can and should do crazy things. For example, Eleanor has the idea engrained in her head that all bad people need to be punished, so she convinces herself that Martha is bad and needs to be punished so she can light her on fire. Though this violent act really stems from Eleanor's jealousy of Martha, she still feels the need to validate and rationalize her actions. Also, unlike Merricat who loves her sister, but who knows that she has the capacity to murder her like the rest of her family, Eleanor's entire existence revolves around her love for her brother. When he leaves her in the end, he is taking away her whole world, so all she can do is wait for him to come home.

I was also influenced by the small town atmosphere and the secluded setting in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The scene in *Waiting for Errol* in which Eleanor goes to Mr. Fitzgerald's store and he refuses to sell her milk and orange juice draws directly from the first

scene in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* in which Merricat goes into town and people are openly hostile to her. I also liked how Merricat's house is down a long driveway and secluded from the rest of the town, and how that influences Merricat and her sister Constance's fear of outsiders. I wanted to use the same idea for how Eleanor's house affects her. The description of the office, Bingham Road, and their house is drawn directly from my mother's life. The office in the story looks exactly like the office that is owned by my mother's family with the white house, the sample gravestones in the front, and the workshop in the backyard. The dirt road that leads to Eleanor's house and is named after their family, "Bingham Road," is drawn directly from the road to my mother's house. It too was a dirt road that was named after their family, and it led to their stone house which was guarded by two stone lions. Similarly to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, I wanted to use the secluded setting to influence Eleanor's character. She has a very private life with just her mother and Errol, so when Martha breaks the barrier and enters their home and their life, Eleanor is terrified, and goes to great lengths to try to get Martha to leave and to make things go back to normal.

The image of the Chasm was influenced most by one of my other favorite authors, Haruki Murakami. In his book, *Kafka on the Shore*, nature is magical, and it does mysterious and terrible things. For example, a clearing in the woods makes an entire class of children fall into a coma, and causes permanent damage to one child's brain. In Eleanor's mind, the Chasm is a magical force that creates order in her world. Since Eleanor is a dark character, the Chasm takes on a dark nature as well. If anything not sacred is thrown into the Chasm, it has the power to kill. In the beginning, Eleanor fears that the Chasm would kill Errol, and then at the end she believes that it kills her father because she treated it like a wishing well. Because Eleanor needs a sense of order

in her world, she relies heavily on the Chasm to create that order for her. But it doesn't work out that way because the Chasm has a consciousness, and it becomes angry at her for treating it like a wishing well.

Though I tried to use different author's works to help me create a magic realist story, my main goal was to create and explore a character. All the themes in the story, for example, the themes of punishment and order, are used to influence Eleanor's character. In Flannery O'Connor's essay, "Writing Short Stories," she argues that writing short stories is about "showing how some specific folks *will* do, *will* do in spite of everything" (90). Though she was referring to short stories, I believe that this piece of advice applies to every kind of story telling. Whether it be a short story, a novel, or a novella, a successful story starts as an exploration of a character, and what that character *must* do because of who he or she is. I kept this idea in mind as I wrote *Waiting for Errol*. Once I knew my main character, Eleanor, the action simply flowed from her. There were multiple times I wrote an entire scene and then read it over again, and realized that it was not right because that was not what Eleanor would do. But once I had her voice and her thoughts and feelings in my head, she would guide me in the direction the story had to go. More than anything else, this is a story of Eleanor and what she must do in spite of everything. By the end of reading this novella, my main goal is for the reader to feel like he or she knows Eleanor, and why Eleanor must act the way she does.

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