

-1      The old farm road jutted sharply between the rustling cornrows and seemed to disappear into the stalks. It had been a dry year but there had been enough rain that the crops were going to be good. A large, oddly shaped, rust-colored dog walked along the path. She snuffed along the edges of a puddle that stood like a miniature lake in the middle of the road. Mabel was in no hurry. She would hear the bus long before it crested the hill. Here and there along the edges of the water were the small, child-like prints of a raccoon that had stopped to wash its meal. Deer tracks the size of saucers crossed the middle of the road. All these smells drew the dog in. She licked her nose and stuck it deep into the mud.

A shriek and a groan broke the afternoon silence and Mabel lifted her head. Her ears perked, she left the scent trail without regret and headed to the end of the dirt road. The sound of a struggling motor could be heard through the whisper of the corn. With a shudder, a dirty yellow bus pulled level to the end of the road. It rolled to a stop before Mabel who stood waiting.

The glass in the door reflected the dog and the corn for a fraction of a second before pulling back onto itself to release its cargo. The sticky, sweet smell of children wafted from the exit, hovering, almost visible in the still air. Mabel's nose twitched as she tried to pick among them for the scent of her own pups. She waited patiently and was not disappointed.

A boy, tall, with skin the color of a black walnut tree carelessly tossed his backpack over his shoulder. His hand pushed black hair from dark brown eyes, at the same time pulling the head phones from his head to dangle around his neck. He carefully tucked the CD player he had been listening to inside his jacket pocket. He thrust four

fingers into the front pocket of his faded Levi's, and gave a quick glance behind him before giving a nod to the bus driver and hopping down the steps. The waiting dog's mouth hung open. Tongue lolling in an uneven smile, Mabel licked eagerly at the boy's hand. He scratched her head and gave her ear a quick tug.

Slowly down the stairs came Mabel's other pup. Dragging uncaringly both bag and jacket along the dirty stairwell, a small, thin boy stepped down from the bus. In a gesture of absentminded habit, he shoved a pair of thick heavy glasses up on his nose. He shuffled a few steps forward to join his brother. Having released the prisoners, the bus gave a farewell honk, closed the door and rattled away.

The younger boy immediately kicked off his shoes and began to strip off his socks. The backpack he wore slid haphazardly down on his shoulder almost grazing the dirt. The older boy watched his younger brother's balancing act for a moment before helping him.

"George, you lose another pair of socks, Mama's gonna knock you into next week." With that, he took his brother's bag from him and threw it across his shoulder on top of his own. "Come on, Mabel." He good-naturedly slapped the dog on her wiggling rump and together they started down the road.

George carefully tucked the socks into each shoe. He tried, but somehow he almost always ended up losing one sock. The odd thing was, when his mother would send him back to find it, the missing sock was never there. He dug his toes into the dust, feeling good for the first time that day. He rubbed his feet, one on top of the other, coating the dark skin with a layer of the soil. Grabbing the dreaded winter shoes, he shuffled his feet in the dirt and followed his brother and the dog down the path.

The sky over the corn held the barest wisps of clouds. Grays and blues danced in the air but the scenery and beauty was lost on the boys. They traded stories of their day as they walked down the road. Mabel kept pace between them. Her head turning from one to another, she seemed almost to follow the conversation.

“Carl, if you do all the watering, I’ll feed everybody.” George’s thoughts had already turned to the chores waiting at home. With luck, he hoped, his brother would get stuck with the job he disliked. No matter what he did, whenever he tried to handle the watering, he always ended up getting soaked. He particularly hated filling the duck ponds, shallow children’s plastic pools that floated with a layer of muck. The minute he started adding the fresh water, the geese and ducks got in and pooped. He hated the smell of the slimy water, and with all the splashing of the wings, the mess always ended up on his feet and legs.

“I’ll do the watering.” Picking up a stick, Carl switched it teasingly at his brother before throwing it for the waiting dog. “Mama gonna make me anyway, but you’re doing your own rabbits and chicks.”

Carl had just turned seventeen. The farm animals had long since lost their magic. The weight of their responsibility just meant more work. He had liked it when they had first moved to this farm. Seeing the young kids born had been dreamlike. The chickens had seemed like fluffy friends. But the mystery of a chick hatching had long since lost its appeal. He knew the finality of the other end and had learned how to swing the hatchet with precision. It was too hard to become fond of these lives. There had been too many moves, too many other animals left behind, too much death. He could not feel any real sense of attachment to this farm. George, being only twelve, still hadn’t figured

out much as far as the older boy was concerned.

“Think Mama’s made anything good?” George, still trying to engage his brother’s attention, jumped to something that he thought might draw his brother in. Food was always a good choice. Carl was constantly hungry.

“It’s Friday, you know she’ll have done the baking.” Carl reached down to wrestle the stick from the dog. Shaking her massive head, Mabel growled playfully. Finally she gave it up and then, her head crooked and her mouth open in a goofy grin, stood anxiously waiting for her boy to throw it again. “We won’t get any until Papa gets home, though.”

George was no longer listening or paying attention to his brother. He had gone to the edge of the road and was reaching for a stalk of corn rising up taller than himself. Bending it, he twisted an ear free of the stalk. With sure fingers he flicked a few yellow kernels of the dry field corn into his hand. Carefully, he tossed one into his mouth and then whipped one at the side of his brother’s head.

“Knock it off.”

“Make me.”

With that the race was on. They tore up the dirt path, past the irrigation pipes that lay still in the field. George may have been younger, but with his brother, loaded down with both book bags, it made for an even match. The landlord’s old red truck sat parked along the edge of the pipes and a man stood in the back of the flat bed looking out over the corn. The boys waved to him as they ran by but did not slow down. Scattering chickens, the boys and dog hit the yard at the same time and ran up the steps leading into the house.

They pushed open the faded yellow door and threw their belongings onto the floor of the mudroom. George struggled with the interior door, he did not turn his back on his brother who was still trying to grab him.

“Mama! Where are you?” he called, hopeful that his mother was near. He tumbled into the kitchen before Carl could have a chance to retaliate for the corn.

“I’m right here,” she answered from near the stove where she was bent over her work. She was a short woman, her coarse hair was graying at the temples. Her face showed a hard life spent toiling in the sun, but about her eyes her dark mahogany skin creased in wrinkles from a quick smile. She slammed the door of the oven. In her hands was a pan with two large loaves of bread. She swung around and placed them on the counter. “Where else would I be?”

“That smells good.” George moved next to her to hover over the fresh bread. “I’m hungry.”

She swatted him on the rear with a folded dishtowel to shoo him away. “Move. How was school?”

“Boring.” Carl plopped down in the chair next to the flour-covered table. “Mr. Muntz is out in the corn by the pipes.”

A pitcher of milk sat on the one clean spot in the center of the table. Two glasses waited beside it. Holding a spatula to the rim of the container to hold back the cream, Carl poured milk for himself and his brother.

“What was he doing?” Anna picked up a plate and walked back to the oven. She set it on the top of the stove and opened the dented oven door. With a bare hand, she quickly snatched out two miniature loaves and plopped them on a plate. She then

brought them over to the table for the boys.

“I don’t know, he was just standing in his truck staring at his corn. He isn’t anywhere near our patch of corn though.” Carl slugged down half the glass of milk in one gulp and snatched up one of the small loaves.

“Where’s the butter?” George grabbed up his loaf and looked around for the butter jar.

“I didn’t get a chance to make any.”

Anna turned back to the sink and looked out the window. With a slight smile to her lips, she glanced at the reflection of herself and the boys in the glass.

“Not it!”

Carl caught on to the game the moment the word “Not” left his mother’s mouth and before it was fully formed he echoed her. “Not it!”

George sighed. They had played this game before and, knowing he was truly caught, he nodded. His mother grabbed an empty mason jar from the drying rack and handed it to the child. She scooped the cream from the top of the pitcher and put it in the jar. George screwed the lid on and, tightening it, began to slosh the mixture back and forth. With his other hand, he dipped his bread into the glass of milk and took a huge bite.

“Carl, you’re on watering when you’re done.” Anna washed the dishes as she spoke. She did not look at the boys. Her gaze instead was focused on the drive and the flower garden just out the window. “George, you’re upstairs, get those rabbits fed.”

“Told ya.”

Carl slapped at his brother, chugging the last of his milk. He slid the chair back

from the table and went to change his clothes. He had been told so often, “Barn clothes for barn chores,” that it no longer needed to be said.

He threw his school clothes on the narrow bed that sat in the center of his room. The clothes from yesterday still lay on the floor and picking them up he gave them a sniff and put them on. His mother yelled constantly about his dirty behavior, but he couldn't see the point of washing clothes when they were just going to stink like shit the next day anyway.

“One more year,” he whispered under his breath as he headed out his bedroom door. Mabel, who had been following him faithfully from room to room, followed him to the back door. He didn't notice her devotion. He slammed out of the house, almost catching the dog's nose. She stopped, and after a longing glance through the screen door, ambled back to the kitchen. With a deep sigh and a weary thud, she lay down again under the table near the woman.

“How's the butter, George?” Anna grabbed the empty plates and glasses and put them in the soapy water.

“It's butter.” He lifted one of his eyebrows to make his mother smile. Inside the jar, a yellow ball floated on thin, pale blue liquid. His mother handed another jar to him. He scooped the ball from the shaking jar with the spatula and tossed it into the clean one.

“Sweet or salty?” he asked, the lid in his hand.

“Surprise me.”

He sprinkled a bit of salt in the jar and handed it his mother. Taking the shake jar, he poured the leftover buttermilk into the saucer on the floor. He made a kissing

noise and a tiny tabby grey kitten came running into the room. He watched as the kitten lapped up the few dribbles of milk. When he was sure that the dog would not get his kitten's milk, he ran off to into his own room to change his clothes.

Anna remained in the kitchen. In the now quiet room, she finished washing the dishes from the boys' snack and from her days baking. She dried her work calloused hands on the sides of her apron, took it off and hung it on the hook in the wall beside the aging yellow refrigerator.

Anna held the door opened with her foot for the dog to pass and hollered into the house for the child as she followed the dog out, "Hurry up, Georgie."

Anna saw a cloud of dust billowing on the dirt road and a dirty, rust ridden red truck slowly pulled up by the house. Mabel let out a bark but wiggling with excitement, but when Anna put her hand to the dog's head, it stilled.

"Hey, Bill," she nodded to the landlord who sat behind the wheel.

"Hey Anna, your husband gonna be home later?" Bill spoke through the open window. Not meeting her gaze, he stared at the house like he had never seen it before.

"He'll get home about the same time as always. David's shift at the factory ends around six and they haven't been offering overtime for a while. He should be coming straight home if you need him." Anna's forehead creased and she tried to catch Bill's eye. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Nope." He started to pull away. "Tell him I'll be by." And without a wave he drove off, leaving a cloud of dust to cover Anna and the dog.

Anna watched the truck as it drove out of sight. A slight breeze shifted the walnut leaves above her head and she stood for a moment, lost in thought. Bill was the

best landlord they had ever had. He left them to their own crop as long as they took care of his and didn't care anything about the eggs and cheese that Anna sold on the side for extra money. Normally, after he checked his fields, Bill would have gotten out, passed the time of day, and asked about the boys, but the last few times he had been by he had seemed preoccupied. He hadn't had much to say about anything. Anna frowned, and then slowly she turned and together her and the dog headed toward the barn.

“Carl, where ya at?”

“Getting the hoses,” His voice came from the side of the house. “Where the hell do you think I am?” was mumbled after.

Anna heard the last bit, but, tired, she chose to pick her battles, and kept walking. Following the small dirt trail that cut through the grass, Anna crossed the yard and approached a sagging building. The old building had seen better days and it looked like a strong wind could cause it trouble. It didn't matter. Anna could still see the magic in the old barn. Her hand reached for the door. The wood almost spoke its history. The door needed lifting. It was so warped that it would no longer swing on its own with a smooth push. Her calloused hand lifted the handle and she shoved the door inward with her hip. The loud squeak of the hinges traveled across the yard and caused Mabel to lift her ears, but when Anna did not call her, she laid her head back down and stayed in her patch of sun. Anna stepped across the cracked threshold and entered the dim interior. She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust and, when they did, she watched the dust and feathers dance in the draft she had let in. The little breeze was enough to move this lightness, but not enough to erase the smell of sweat and alfalfa that still filled the air. It would take more than this weak current to remove the smell of a hundred years from this

small room. She breathed in, deeply, inhaling the fragrance. The walls were patched with old tin signs and license plates. She walked to the row of bins that stood beneath a weathered staircase. Hands had passed that way so many times that smoothness had been worn to the wood. A groove in the wall showed where bodies had leaned against it to reach into the bins. It gave Anna a good feeling when she placed her hand on it. She could feel the watchful eyes of past farmwives as if they stood at her shoulder to keep her company. The heavy lids of the bins stood open. She reached in with an old coffee can to scoop up the remaining bits of grain that lay on the bottom of the bin.

The door slammed into the wall and sunlight crossed the threshold. Anna momentarily startled by the noise, spun around.

“Mama,” George, wearing only boxer shorts and a sweatshirt, came in the barn to stand next to her. “I can’t find my pants.”

“Georgie,” Anna sighed and brushed a few errant curls that had come loose from her bun out of her eyes, “what do you mean you can’t find your pants? How the hell do you lose your pants?”

“My work pants, I can’t find my work pants.” He crossed the room and took the coffee can scoop out of his mother’s hand and poured the rest of the grain into a nearby bucket.

“Okay, just go feed your rabbits. I’ll go find your pants when I’m done milking.” She picked up the bucket and walked out of the barn into the harsh daylight.

George, shoeless and pantless, headed for the steep stairs. They sagged under the weight of his bare brown feet. The layers of old straw that clung to them almost seemed part of the wood. Without it, the stairs would be thin. To remove the history that

lay in the straw would remove the substance of the stairs. George loved being in the barn. He knew his older brother found it all work but George loved the animals. Even though he knew some of them would inevitably end up on the dinner table, George was able to see the beauty of their lives. He climbed the stairs past the cobwebs and placed his hand on the picket door that waited at the top. Nothing metal marred its surface. Straps of leather held it to the wall. They had once been crimson, now they, like the rest of the barn, had faded to a dull dark brown.

George lifted the latch of hand-hewn wood and let it swing free. This was his domain. His mother had given him the whole of the second story of the barn when they had first moved here from the city. The loft was surprisingly bright. Sunlight fell gently through the many-paneled window. Small rabbit cages lay tucked under the eaves. The barn cats, lolling in the highest beams, looked up when the door opened. They watched all who entered here, like kings regarding their subjects. Seeing that it was just their boy, their eyes slowly drifted back closed. George could not hear his mother here. The sound of water splashing as his brother filled the troughs below was muted through the old walls and floor. The haymow door hung slightly off kilter, making a striped pattern of sunshine across the bare wooden floor. His rabbits made no sound of greeting but George knew they were glad to see him. The nearest rabbit stood on its hind legs and pushed its nose to the bars. Stopping for a moment, George opened the cage door to scratch between the rabbits ears with one finger. The bunny's eyes drifted closed with pleasure and he pushed his head back against the boy's hand. Finally George moved away from the rabbit and went to retrieve the rest of the water bottles from all the cages. Placing them in a milk crate, he went to the haymow door and attached the crate to the fraying yellow

rope.

“Look out, below,” he yelled down, and dropped the crate to the ground. Back at the cages, he grabbed a dish from the closest one. A metal garbage sat at the end of the row of cages. It was half filled with rabbit chow. George filled a dish with the food and opening the cage, he placed it in front of the small white bunny.

“Soup’s on, Deedles.”

The little rabbit immediately began eating and George moved to the next cage, filling dishes and carrying on a conversation with each bunny in turn.

“Your rabbit’s water bottles are filled, George,” his brother yelled from the ground, and the scrap of rope jumped on the pulley as Carl tugged it from below.

When George finished the feeding, he returned to the haymow door and pulled up on the rope, the pulley screeching in protest. The crate came into view and he pulled it over to the floor. He grabbed the full water bottles and hung them on the cages. It took only a few moments for the job to be done. With a quick pat to the nearest bunny, he went back downstairs. He shivered, cold without his trousers. He looked to see if his mother was still in the barn.

Going through the small door that led from the feed area, George entered the dark recesses of the broody barn. A line of cubbies built of pale yellow wood sat against the far wall. Straw had been tucked inside the boxes to protect the precious eggs. Perfect little orbs lay abandoned in some of the boxes. In another, a buff hen tucked an egg under a moist wing, glaring at the boy with beady eyes as if knowing he was there to steal her offspring.

“Mama?” he called softly, trying not to disturb the broody hen. His mother was

nowhere in sight. George moved slowly over to the boxes and grabbed the eggs that were not under the sitting chicken. Making an apron of his sweatshirt to hold them, he went through another door that led outside.

“Carl, where’s Mama?” His brother was standing in the yard spraying a hose into an open chicken water container. The fine mist created a perfect rainbow as it filled the plastic white container.

“What am I, her keeper?” He shrugged and pointed the spraying hose at a shed that sat adjacent to the barn. “I thought she was milking. Did you look in the goat barn?” Carl screwed the red base to the water jug and looked at his brother for the first time. “Where are your pants?”

“Not on, that’s why I’m looking for her.” George headed for the shed where the sound of low bleating could be heard. Careful not to break the eggs he held cradled in his shirt, he pushed the door open. His mother was sitting on a stool next to a cream-colored goat. Her head rested against its side and the sound of a steady stream striking the silver bucket filled the air. “Mama, didja find my pants?”

Not stopping in her milking she answered, “Does it look like I have your pants? I told you when I’m done with these girls. Now put those eggs in the house and take care of your chicks, then start looking for them. I got about fifteen more minutes here and then I’ll come to help you if still haven’t found them.” Her practiced hand picked up the stool and, shoving on the rear of the cream-colored goat, moved to the next goat tethered in the barn. Without a word to the goat or the boy, she sat back down on the stool and began milking. The little black goat chewed its cud, oblivious to the hands milking her.

George watched his mother for a few squirts before heading back out of the

barn. He truly wasn't that concerned about his pants. If it weren't for the cool breeze, he wouldn't have even mentioned it to his mother and would have just gotten his work done in his boxer shorts. As long as he had on his boxer shorts, half the time his mother would not have noticed the lack of pants. George headed into the house, sticking his tongue out at his brother as he passed.

Carl turned the hose towards his brother, threatening him with the stream of water before finishing filling up the last chicken water container and placed it in the yard. He didn't feel like filling the pools that were waiting anymore than George did, but he always got stuck with the despised job. He knew that his brother wasn't strong enough to handle the work, but Carl hated it too. It seemed like he always got stuck doing the worst chore. His Papa used to be able to do some of the chores but right now he was picking up extra work at the fruit plant in town until harvest time and Carl had to cover the slack. It stunk being the oldest. It already felt like he had done this particular job a million times and it never got easier. He still didn't get why they had had to move here.

The tiny apartment that they had had when they lived in Milwaukee hadn't been that bad. His father worked a double shift at the plant and had hardly been at home, and when he was home he was sleeping. His mother worked nights at the corner store to make money for groceries after the rent was paid. They hadn't had any extra money for anything but at least there had been things to see and do. He had been pretty much on his own. He had enjoyed hanging with his friends in the nearby alley. When they could scrape up a few extra bucks, he and his buddies would talk a local homeless man into buying them a case of beer. If they couldn't come up with any cash, they would just stand around and watch people go by.

Skipping school was easier in the city. George had missed a lot of school because he was always sick. Carl, when George wasn't tagging after him to school, could cut whenever he wanted to without fear of his parents finding out. Then the plant had closed, his father had lost his job and without it the family couldn't pretend to make ends meet anymore. A distant cousin knew of a farmer who was looking for new tenants and his mother had talked his father into turning his hand at farming again.

Carl hadn't gotten to voice his opinion on what the family should do. His mother had packed up their stuff and they were moved before he had time to say to much about anything. . Now trapped back in the country, the work seemed nonstop, and he didn't get why they had to plant when all of it didn't belong to them anyway. Digging in the dirt had always been his mother's thing. She had always found a bit of earth to till, no matter where they lived. When he had been little he thought it was fun, too, and played in the dirt beside her. He still remembered helping her plant that stupid flower each time they had moved. She had the darn thing since before he was born and it wasn't like it ever got a flower.

Carl looked around to make sure his mother wasn't standing right behind him and decided to leave the task undone. Hopefully, if she didn't bother to check the pools, he could get away without filling them. He had done it before and none of the animals had croaked. He dropped the hose and wandered into the house. Carl kicked off his wet shoes in the mudroom and wandered into the kitchen. Yanking on the handle of the old refrigerator door, he bent to peer into the interior. There was never anything good in there. He pushed the gallon jug of strained milk out of the way but the shuffling of objects didn't reveal anything else. On the bottom, where there should have been

drawers, cartons of eggs were stacked, waiting for customers to come and buy. The brown eggs were off limits. People paid more for those for some reason. It didn't make much sense to Carl. When he had asked his mother about it, she had just said that city people pay more for brown now. She said when she was little it was the other way around, only country people would eat the brown. Carl couldn't figure it out. The chickens were fed the same and the eggs tasted the same but the yuppies from the subdivision up the road would pay almost twice as much for a carton of the brown. He grabbed two of the white duck eggs that his mother kept boiled for him off of the top rack of the fridge. He gave them a quick roll on the counter to crack them and peeled them into a pile. Leaving the mess he walked from the room.

The back door squeaked as Anna came in carrying the buckets of milk. She managed not to spill the precious liquid when the dog pushed past her. She placed the shiny silver pails on the table that was still littered with the flour from the morning baking. Going to the drain board, she grabbed the Mason jars that stood there waiting. When she noticed the egg mess, she hollered for her older son, "Carl!"

With a quick swipe, she scrapped the shells into her hand and pitched the mess toward the trash. She opened the drawer next to the sink with an angry jerk and grabbed a clean linen handkerchief and placed it over the first jar. Slowly she poured the milk through the cloth, straining off any dirt from the frothy white liquid before it went into the jar.

"What?" Carl sauntered into the kitchen. He sat down at the table and picked at the drying flakes of flour that covered its surface with a dirty finger nail.

"How were the duck eggs?" Anna asked him while she began to lid the jars

now filled full of fresh goat's milk. She didn't wait for an answer nor did she see his shrug. "Did you fill the pools?"

"I filled the chicken water bins already. Did you see George? He doesn't have pants on." He continued to scrape at the flour, making patterns in the surface.

"Never you mind what George's doing. I was asking about you. I looked at those pools on the way in. Get your butt out there and get them filled. Animals fed first, then people, unless you can figure out a way for them to do it for themselves." She placed the jars in the freezer to quick cool. Grabbing the yellow slop can and a rag, she began scrubbing the dried dough and flour off of the table and into the can. The stuff had dried on almost completely. The task took enough force to make her concentrate her anger on that instead of the boy. Carl stomped from the kitchen and went into the mudroom. Back on went the soaked shoes; he whipped the screen open and slammed it shut behind him. With curse words barely audible under his breath, he went back to the hose.

"Georgie, where the heck are you?" Anna tossed the dishrag on the table and went through the swinging kitchen door into the living room. The fireplace took up almost half a wall and she absentmindedly noticed that the log bin would need refilling before the night came.

A door, almost hidden at the right of the mantel led to a small room. It was the warmest room in the house. The original owners had built it on as a nursery and a fire burning in the fireplace would turn the whole room toasty. When the family had first moved here, Anna had allowed the boys to pick which rooms they had wanted. While they had lived in Milwaukee, the boys had shared a bedroom. Carl had chosen the large loft like room upstairs but something about the smallness of this particular room drew

George. To him it felt like a cozy hiding place, almost like an animal den. Before the first box had even been brought in the house, he had claimed it for his own.

Anna pushed the solid wooden door open and saw, sticking out from beneath a narrow bed in the room, a pair of thin brown legs.

“George, what on earth are you doing?” His slender ankles felt cold as she grabbed them to pull him out from under the bed.

“Looking for my pants, but I got stuck.” George immediately began rummaging through the box next to the end of the bed. “I know they were here this morning. I really am looking, Mama.”

“I can see that. Okay, stupid question, ‘cause I already know the answer, but did you bother to look in the closet? Crazy thing I do, I hang things up after I wash them.” A sheet hung in the corner hid his clothes from view and she reached behind it to pull the missing pants from a hanger and handed them to him.

“I didn’t know you did laundry today, Mama, I thought you just did the baking.” Quickly he got up and pulled the pants on and followed her from the room. “Want me to get some wood after I do the chicks?”

“Yeah, that would be a big help. You might have to scrounge a bit, but I think there still might be a branch or two left from the walnut that blew down.” Anna kept walking toward the back door, the boy at her heels, “Either that or look by the barn, might still be a piece or two of scrap wood lying down there that we haven’t grabbed up.”

She grabbed the yellow slop bucket off of the kitchen counter as she passed and holding the door for both the dog and the child she followed them into the yard.

George ran ahead of his mother down the path that led to the barn. “I’m feeding the chickens, right?”

“Yep, toss them this slop from the house and some of that cracked corn too. Don’t forget your chicks. Give them a couple of handfuls of that scratch and make sure the big ones don’t get it all. I’m gonna gather up some leaves to toss in for the goats.” The dog followed the child as Anna began to cut across the yard.

Far to the left of her she could hear the distant sound of construction. The farm less than a cornfield away had been sold this past winter to developers. They were starting to build a subdivision on it. Why someone would pay that much money for a house built on an old cow pasture was beyond her. The developers around here always seemed to end up keeping the name of the farm that they tore down to build these expensive houses. They usually put it on huge wrought iron fences that led into the subdivisions. Perhaps, to buyers of these huge homes, it was quaint. Anna didn’t know. She and David had never owned the land they lived on and now was no exception. A lot of the farmland around the house they were renting had begun to be developed. Anna had tried not to think about it but it had begun to weigh on her mind every time she heard the big construction trucks passing by.

This was the best place they had lived yet, as far as she was concerned. In the twenty years that she and David had been married, it was the first time she could plant her bulb in good black soil. The bulb was for a fancy type of lily that would bloom only if planted and left undisturbed. This was as long as it had ever been left in one spot. For almost two years now she had waited to see a stalk extend from the palm-like fronds that grew from the bulb.

They had moved here by luck and by chance. A little more luck and this would be the year she would see her flower bloom. She was beginning to let her guard down and starting to love this place. The one -room apartment they had had in Milwaukee had been damp and dirty. No amount of scrubbing could remove the lifetime of filth held in the walls. The boys had only the streets and alleys to play in and Carl had begun to run with a wild crowd. A couple of the boys in his group had already had run-ins with the law and Anna had been afraid that it would only be a matter of time before Carl would cross paths with the police the way he was going. Then there was George. In Milwaukee, he had been constantly sick because of the mold growing in the walls of the building and the yeast in the air from the Red Star Factory up the road. Without insurance they had been unable to do more than take him to the clinic for breathing treatments once a week. On the farm, his lungs had grown strong. In Milwaukee, he had spent hours peering into a book. His whole life had just been stories that he could escape into. At ten he could quote Shakespeare but tired so easily that he didn't have the breath to say an entire soliloquy. Now, because of the farm, he could run. If for no other reason than that, Anna would have loved this place.

Carl was leaning against the side of the house near the spigot when Anna found him. The hose lay before him, snaking its way through the yard to the pools. The ducks and geese splattered and splashed in the water that gushed from its end. He didn't even bother to watch their antics. His eyes blind, he stared into the corn, a million miles away. His mother rounded the corner and the boy stood up.

“Come on and give me a hand, I want to gather some more of the maple leaves to toss for the goats, I still haven't been able to get any more hay.”

Together they walked to the front of the house and took the empty bushel baskets that sat on the steps of the stone front porch. A rake was already leaning against a nearby tree. They took turns raking until large piles of jumbled colors rose in mounds in front of them. They bent and began gathering leaves by the armload and putting them in the baskets. It was backbreaking work but mother and son worked in companionable silence.

George and Mabel rounded the corner and, seeing his brother and mother at work, George bent down to pick up some leaves of his own. Without a hint of sneakiness, he walked over to his brother and threw them onto his head. Anna looked up as Carl yelled and, taking stock of the situation, did the only thing she could.

“Get him,” she yelled and picked up the basket, throwing the leaves at her youngest son. Carl grabbed leaves up in both hands and pelted George. The leaves danced in the air around them and together the woman and the children played. The dog caught leaves in her mouth. Her tailless rump wagged so hard she almost fell over. Their echoing laughter filled the yard while the pile slowly dwindled down to almost nothing.

Out of breath and realizing that David would be pulling in any minute and the chores were not done, Anna finally put an end to the foolishness.

“Okay, enough all ready, everybody back to work, many hands make light work.” Her basket began to refill as she shoved large handfuls into it. George took leaves and put them in his mother’s basket. Taking another large wad, he helped his brother fill the other basket. Together they carried them to the fence and tossed them to the waiting animals. They made several trips, talking of nothing important, Mabel kept pace beside them. They cleared most of the leaves from the front yard until the goats had a healthy pile in front of them.

“Okay, George, run the baskets back out front and put them on the porch. Be careful of the rake. Carl, roll the hoses up and make sure to turn off the water.” Anna headed back into the house. The boys knew how to complete the tasks unsupervised. They moved quickly to do what they were asked. Carl squatted down in front of his brother and George took the silent invitation and hopped on his brother’s back. There would be time later to lock up the barns. A chill was beginning to nip in the air, and, as one, the boys hurried into the house.

In the living room, Anna was lighting a fire. “You did good on the wood Georgie, now get cleaned up before your father gets home.” Her voice was muffled and she cursed quietly as she struck yet another match trying to light the green wood Georgie had brought in. The boys headed toward the bathroom. Water splattered into the yellow sink as they scrubbed the yard off their hands. The boys fingers left light dirt smudges on the towel, which they tossed, crumpled onto the ledge. Anna wandered in after them and seeing the mess they had left, cleaned it up without comment.

“Clean clothes!” she hollered and headed for the kitchen. By the sink Anna stood to look through the split window to her flower patch below. She had planted her flower bulb beneath this window. She spent a lot of time there looking out while doing the dishes and watching the flower grow. When her grandfather had given it to her on her wedding day he had told her it would bloom a brilliant yellow, but so far she had yet to see it to know. She had come close. The last time she had been close to seeing a bloom, right before they had moved from Flint to Milwaukee. But then David had come home from his shift at Schmeltzer with a pink slip in his pay envelope and a box carrying the contents of his locker. There had been plant closings everywhere in Flint but this had

been a non-union job just outside of Flint so Anna and David had hoped it wouldn't happen to him. But the plant had shut down, jobs had moved elsewhere and they had been forced to pack up themselves and baby Carl and leave the farm they had been living on to find work. She had patiently dug up the bulb, carefully placing it in a brown paper shopping bag, effectively trapping it in the dark. They had tried their luck in the Milwaukee, thinking it might offer more opportunities for the boys. She always replanted the bulb, and even in the city she had found a bit of littered soil next to the fence that led into the alley. But both of David's jobs had ended when Red Star Yeast had closed, and her meager salary at the corner grocery had not been enough to support them in the city.

Now, with the bulb planted at this new farm, Anna waited. She didn't think it had been planted for long enough, but maybe at least the stalk would grow. It was good soil. Already she could imagine the outline of the flower against this window. She closed her eyes and could almost see it, almost smell it. She could hear the children moving about the house, yelling at one another, but still she stood by the window, feeling the sunlight on her face through the glass. Things had been tight lately. The chickens had been making up the difference. The rich white people from the subdivisions that bought eggs and cheese gave her just enough extra money to make sure there was always food in the house. David's check covered just the bare necessities. There was never anything left over for luxuries.

David had been short tempered with the children when he came home from work the last few nights. Tired, the grease from the machinery he fixed at the plant still under his nails, he had eaten his dinner and fallen asleep in the chair.

Anna was used to worry, her life had been nothing except worry, and she knew

that something other than David's jobs had been bothering him. The landlord had been out yesterday with a man who was wearing the shiniest shoes she had ever seen. His jeans had creases and, though he was dressed in flannel, he stepped high. Placing his feet with inordinate care he walked around the house and barns. Neither man had come to the door. By the time she got out to the back yard, they were off in a cloud of dust along the road. It just wasn't like Bill not to stop. As far as landlords went, he was a good man. He let them grow a little bit of extra corn on the side to keep and sell. Any free fall from the trees was theirs to take for firewood. No charge. He didn't mind her husband doing extra work on the side, fixing lawnmowers or picking up a shift at the fruit packaging plant as long as he got the farm work done.

Today, she had watched the dust from that truck until it faded, and although the sun was warm on her head, she felt sick, like a winter's chill taken to the chest.

The boys tramped into the kitchen on the legs of young ponies, the dog, as always at their heels.

"Papa home yet?" George said, aiming a kick at his brother.

"No, and quit kicking before someone gets hurt." Anna's eyes never left the window. She was waiting for a glimpse of the little black car that would mean her family was complete once more. She didn't have to wait long. Her husband pulled up the road just as the sun began to darken the sky above the corn to a deep red. David was not alone, however, so she didn't call to the children to run out to meet him as they usually did. A white truck, shiny and new, followed him up the dusty trail. It glowed iridescent, ghostly almost, against the corn, reflecting the last of the day's light. No dust marred its surface. It could have been a ghost for all the substance it had. Bill stepped down from

the sparkling yellow leather interior and walked over to David's rusty little car. In the passenger seat of the truck was the man whom Anna had seen earlier with Bill. He got out carefully from the other side of the truck, still trying to keep from having his shoes dirtied. David unbent his long frame from behind the wheel of the small car and stepped out. His head was full of curls that once upon a time had been as dark as the side of a black walnut tree. Now the color matched the wings of the mourning doves that roosted in the trees above his head. His brown eyes, which could cajole a smile from her even at the worst of times, narrowed when he saw Bill. They seemed to go dead when he saw the shiny brand new truck.

The boys, jabbering back and forth to one another, were unaware of the drama unfolding in the driveway and Anna didn't call their attention to it. The bickering started to escalate but she didn't put a stop to it as she usually would. She kept her dark eyes on the men in the drive. It seemed that Bill was doing most of the talking.

David seemed to be listening, not interjecting anything into the talk that was coming now from the new man and their landlord. Her husband's shoulders sagged. He nodded his head at the men and then, as if with a heavy sack upon his back, he began walking toward the house. He did not lift his eyes from the ground.

Anna watched his bent head for a moment and then reached under the sink. Bringing out a brown paper bag, she took a deep shuddering breath. She turned from the window to the two boys who sat waiting at the table.

"Boys, run and fetch Mama the shovel from the barn." She turned, looking out the window, and waited for her man to come in. .