

The World of Shadow and Light

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Ellie had been driving all night towards Tennessee, black tires a revolving record that carried out a tune to bring her home along the quiet highway. The radio was broken. The windows were down, her hair tangled. That was how she liked it—lots of wind and road and quiet, time to think. In the back seat was a guitar, clothes with holes in them, a hand-bound journal, a mug she had thrown in pottery class, half empty pack of cigarettes.

She wasn't smoking now. She was carrying an invisible life inside her, and she was coming home to recollect herself, make a plan, tell her parents she was having a baby. She wouldn't be staying home. She would go back to Chicago, maybe work for a gallery until she could become established. She would have to make it work, make things work with Stephen. She knew he would change his mind once he saw the baby.

Ellie was wheeling back towards the past, to her parents' farmhouse in Sevier County. She'd managed to avoid coming home since she got the scholarships, since she'd left for college. At the thought of going home, she reached to the back seat and let a cigarette slide out of the soft pack into her moist palm. She put it to her lips, pressed her knee against the steering wheel, cupped one hand around the end and lit it with the other. She inhaled, blew smoke out of the cracked window.

"Damn," she said aloud, stubbed it into the ashtray. "Not smoking."

She rounded the thin bend in the highway and descended the ridge, came to the straight part of the road that led directly home. The air was pregnant with rain and heavy with heat; still the sun blazed and made the thick clouds into a golden haze. The Tennessee sky often wore this veil.

Stephen had put this life inside her, but he wouldn't come here to this dump-ass town, he said. He didn't care to meet her family right now. She was ashamed to show him pictures of the house after going to his parents' place with its carpet and art on the walls, wine glasses on a rack, dinner plates in a glass cabinet. When she was in their home she



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remembered to cross her legs proper, and she whirled her wine around in the glass and sniffed it as if she knew just what to do.

"Do you like Van Gogh?" his mother had asked.

"Yeah, I really like..." she hesitated. "The Old Guitarist."

"Honey, that's Picasso." she had said with alarm in her eyes.

Ellie's face turned red. She tried to think back to Art 101, so many famous artists and works of art, she could've sworn it had been Van Gogh. But it didn't matter. Stephen's mother had fluttered into the kitchen, was taking a tray out of the fridge for guests. Ellie stood staring at a framed piece on the wall: a large block of dim red and gray paint with strokes of brighter red brushed in a square around it.

Ellie had gone the next day and purchased a print of The Old Guitarist for her apartment.

"It's Picasso's best," she told Stephen. "We have to go see it at the Art Institute."

Something about the old man struck her—his frailty, his loneliness.

Ellie almost missed the driveway. She quickly turned her wheels onto the gravel. A rusty metal sign hung from a fence post: Part of the Historical Trail of Tears. She had seen it always, a reminder of the Cherokees' rugged path. They had left their tears in the dirt, left their sadness hanging in this place. Her grandmother's great-great grandmother must've stood and watched them go, her people living among them a hundred and fifty years by then—loving and making children with them, building cabins with them, digging soil and sweating with them until their blood all ran together in an indiscernible line. But lines were drawn. Some had to go and some stayed. Ellie hadn't cared to stay. She saw one line, and it pointed towards the inevitability of leaving this place.

But she was here. A half-mile creaking over the gravel, and then she was there to where the creek bended back and her father stood wrapping a fence post with barbed wire, as if he'd been doing the same thing since she left four years ago.

Ellie cut the engine and stepped out, leaving the truck's door ajar. He looked up at her. For a moment she was afraid he didn't recognize her.

"We were expecting you," he said. He looked away. "June's been breakin through the fence again. You should shut your door, Ellie. You stayin awhile ain't ya?"

"Yeah, Papa. I'm stayin awhile. She slammed the rickety door. Her father was bending the wire around itself with pliers. She looked out at the fields.

Without her asking, he answered, "Tomatoes got a fungus. Cain't keep the dang potato beetles off this year. But I put up twenty-five bushel of beans so far and sold another fifty."

"Corn's comin along," she said.

"Well, go on in and take your shoes off if you're stayin. I'll be in after while."

Ellie lugged some of her books and clothes over the dirt path to the house and dropped them in the kitchen. The house was quiet and seemed more spacious than she remembered. There was only the hum of the refrigerator. This was her homecoming? she wondered. Where was everyone to congratulate her on her college degree? The only place people in the community gathered was White Star Market. She would have to go to them. Life at the end of a long gravel drive, she scribbled in her journal.

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She went out of the empty kitchen, passed through the screen door.

"Papa, I'm goin down to White Star!" she yelled from the porch in the direction of the potato field. She felt that half her life had been spent yelling across the fields, trying to get her mother or father to discern her words.

"What's that, Ellie? I cain't her you," Papa yelled.

Ellie descended the porch and walked out to the field. There her father was bent, picking potato beetles off of nibbled leaves and dropping them into a jug of gasoline. His hands looked heavy, hard-worked, with thick knuckles. A mesh cap sat high on his head, sweat rolling out the edges at his temples. Always focused on his work, his light blue eyes shone intently on his hardened brown face like two clear pools of water in the middle of the Dust Bowl.

"Think it'll rain?" he asked.

"Would it make you stop working if it did?" said Ellie.

"You have to work hard to stay on the land, Ellie. You give and it gives — a partnership. Stewardship, Ellie. And I'll be damned if I take that government subsidy like the Ogles and now the Atchleys, plant a thousand rows of engineered soybeans with a durned tractor." Papa looked up at her standing there. "You can do lots with that college degree, Ellie. Be a schoolteacher in town if you want, or work out there at the County Clerk's office — anything."

"I know, Papa," she said, feeling sorry that she didn't want to be a schoolteacher or work at the County Clerk's office; but she couldn't tell her Papa now, here in the field. She felt as if her life wasn't hers anymore. How could she have a baby and be an artist? She suddenly felt she might lay herself down here in the field until her baby grew ripe alongside the potatoes. These must be the crazy inclinations that come with pregnancy, she thought. She saw an image of Stephen, sitting across from her in some café. *Just tell your father he's an old fool*, he would say, brushing Papa aside like some old defunct and dusty art piece. *Irrelevant*.

"Ellie, did you come to tell me something?" Papa asked.

Ellie felt hot and sick. Her belly lurched like a tractor jerking into gear, and it took her down to the ground with it. Her knees grinded into the dirt as she knelt down.

"I don't feel good," she groaned.

"Must be the heat getting to you," Papa said. "Go on down to the White Star and get yourself an ice cream, why don't ya?"

"Yeah," groaned Ellie, standing up on wobbly legs with weak resolve to fetch some ice cream.

"Where's Mom today?" she asked.

Papa twisted his face to the side, as if scanning the fields for a sign. "She went over to your Aunt Margaret's, help her do some canning."

"OK. I'll be back after while, Papa. I'm gonna see who's down there." She left her father and slowly walked up through the tall, dry grass, the nausea flashing through her body like a hot summer storm.

In front of White Star the usual old men were bent in their chairs, spitting tobacco, talking unhurriedly, unemphatically. Ellie thought of taking a photograph of the men — their clothes

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looking like some other time, the stark lines of the rectangular market behind them framing the shot.

"Hidy Miss Ellie, you back from college?" said Mr. Breeden. Ellie felt a simultaneous triumph and defeat. She gave the men a familiar and friendly smile.

"For a little while. I just graduated," she said.

"Well I'll be. You gonna teach school now? Is that what you do with one of them art degrees?" The older folks mapped the young ones' lives, always sure of their direction, like a creek they could trace the course of.

"I'm not sure yet," Ellie said, tentative.

"Maybe you could draw us sittin here. We got all day," Mr. Breeden joked.

"Shore, we're livin works of art just waitin to be discovered," said one. The old men laughed.

"Well, you're young, you've got time to figure it out," Mr. Breeden offered.

"Yeah, I'll figure it out," smiled Ellie.

Ellie walked the five short aisles of the market, enjoying the cool air blasting out from a vent on the ceiling. She looked at bags of chips, frozen meats, cheese slices, cokes. Nothing looked appealing though she had a vague hunger for what she did not know. As she scanned the canned foods, Darryl Hill pushed open the store's glass door, jingling a small bell as it swung to.

"Darryl? Oh my god! I was hopin I would see somebody down here, but I didn't know it would be you!" cried Ellie. Darryl's face looked worn, older than before, like he was settling down into himself. His brown hair was parted to the side and his dark skin was balmy with sweat.

"Where else did you think I would be?" joked Darryl, always seeming familiar no matter how long they had gone without talking.

"Are you working in those fields today?"

"I was, but I'm ready to get cooled off. Wanna go for a ride?" A sideways smile slid across his face, reminding Ellie of their younger days together, always cooking up trouble in the summer.

"I'm up for a ride," she said easily. "Let me get us an ice cream."

As they ate their ice creams in the seat of Darryl's truck, the cracked windshield fragmented gathering clouds into triangle slices of gray.

"Think it's gonna rain?" she asked.

"Hard to say. You know how it'll stay this way for days." Humidity hung in the cab like something substantial. Both windows were down as they snaked along the back roads that were once so familiar to Ellie, now like a dream revisited. Everything was vivid outside of her window, made poignant by time and distance. She noticed the spreading limbs of oak and tulip poplar, the trunks straight like vigilant old soldiers that had stood watch through summer droughts, winter blizzards, spring floods; generations of children looking wide-eyed up through their green, sometimes red and yellow and orange, canopies; the ritual pilgrimages

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of cicadas up and down the rough bark. Everything was a cycle, thought Ellie — cicadas, seasons, children. She looked at the people's houses — shacks, really — with their collections of things on porches and in yards, strewn about like so many artifacts. Had she really lived her eighteen years without noticing?

"Earth to Ellie, Earth to Ellie," Darryl was saying.

"Oh, sorry. ... I was just thinking about something. The truck rumbled and turned on the skinny roads. How could Ellie tell Darryl she was thinking *she had left this place, moved away, and a space had been made where she wasn't, and now that she was back she looked out from that space and saw something new, something new had grown, a vision obscured, seeking a voice.*

"Where are we headed, Ellie?"

"Huh? Oh. Do you want to just park the truck on the side and walk?"

"What's that? Walk where?"

"Nowhere. Here, I mean. Just walk around in the woods, go explore." She looked over at Darryl, pressed to the seat behind a large steering wheel, and waited on his response.

"There's a cave over near where I used to live," he said, slowing the truck, pulling off onto the grassy shoulder, swinging it around to head the other way.

They walked through two back yards and a field of cows to get to the woods. Darryl led them in what seemed a meandering path, cutting between trees and around slabs of rock jutting up from the earth, stacked sideways.

"Nobody ever came back here but me," said Darryl. "I never made a path. Took a different way every time so no one would figure me out. There's old Cherokee pottery shards in there and arrowheads. I hid some of em."

"Really?" said Ellie.

"Yeah, all kinds of stuff."

The cave led farther and farther into blackness. Darryl had brought his flashlight from the truck, and it put forth a bulbous reach of yellow light. The air in front of the meager beam looked thick, filled with particles of dust, but the air that filled Ellie's lungs was unobstructed and cool. It reached down into her belly and brought a calm there. Her belly — how would she tell her mother and father? That's why she was here, wasn't it? She pushed the thought back down, back down to her belly and breathed in the cool air there in the womb of the earth. Darryl shut off the flashlight and they sat breathing, looking into blackness.

"I used to hide in here when I was a kid," whispered Darryl.

"You never told me that," whispered Ellie. "What were you hiding from?"

"Everything there is to hide from. All the scary stuff in life," said Darryl.

"Yeah. There's lots of that," whispered Ellie. They fell into silence again. Drops of water grew fat and let go of the cave ceiling, plinked onto the damp floor where stalagmites grew, percolated down through layers of rock, filtered through thick stone for weeks or months or years before releasing here into something richer, something that could grow.

No shadows of the outside world crept in, no light. They were in a world within a world,

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a place where nothing could touch them. Still, Ellie thought, they would have to emerge again into the world of shadows and light, of things unspoken that needed speaking, things spoken that no one could take back, the world where all matter had consequence.

Darryl reached into the darkness and took Ellie's hand. He pressed some small rock there into her palm.

"What's that, Darryl?"

"One of the pottery shards. I hid it here. Thought an artist like you would appreciate it."

Ellie rubbed the rough shard between her fingers, feeling its broken and worn edges. She held the form in her hand and sought not to bring it to light. It was enough to sit here in darkness and hold it in her palm. With her other hand, she reached out and held Darryl's.

Back at White Star, Ellie jumped down from the high seat of the truck. Darryl came around, stepped forward to give her a hug.

"Thanks, Ellie. You help me see things in a new way." He looked at her with changed face, brown hair ruffled, eyes bright.

"Oh yeah, how?" she said.

"You came home," he said. Ellie ran back into the White Star as Darryl pulled away, got her father his favorite ice cream, and headed down the road, the evening air still thick and warm.

When Ellie got home she looked down towards the creek to see her father still bent under the lowering globe of sun. She walked down with his ice cream, seeing now that he was working on another part of the fence.

"June's been leanin against this section too. I just need to tighten it up," he said, as if to negate any thoughts that his efforts might be futile. Ellie handed him the ice cream.

"Sorry I was gone so long," said Ellie, wanting to hug her father, who was always distant to her. "I got your favorite ice cream, though."

From the crystal pools of his eyes tears rose to the surface, and he stepped forward. He reached out and embraced her frail frame in his warm and sturdy arms.

"It's good to have you home, Ellie. You were gone a long time."

They walked slowly up from the field. A chorus of cicadas rose and fell like so many violins in great successive waves around them, and frogs bellowed from the creek bank. The heavy clouds hung even still, as they often did for days on end during these long stretches of summer, until finally they would burst into warm buckets of rain and thunder and lightning that split the trees. Not yet, thought Ellie. Not yet.

The kitchen was dim, the whir of the refrigerator the only sound.

"Is Mom not home yet?" Ellie said.

"Uh..." Standing at the sink, Ellie's father scanned the lower fields. "I'll bet they're having a long day of canning. I know Aunt Margaret had a lot of stuff come in last week," said Ellie's father as he scrubbed potatoes and put them into the large stew pot with water. He had taken off his cap. Ellie spoke to the back of his balding head, flanked with gray hair.

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“Oh. I thought she would be here since I just got back.”

Suddenly the stew pot tipped off the edge of the sink where it was balanced. Water and potatoes scattered on the floor. Ellie got down on the floor to gather them and put them back into the pot.

“Would you like me to cook supper tonight, Papa?” asked Ellie, not waiting on a response. “You seem tired. Go sit down.”

Ellie washed beans, tomatoes, squash and okra at the sink, looking out at the deepening orange clouds through the window. She saw the hermetic fence that Papa had labored over, three straight lines of barbed wire to contain their last remaining horse, who was always trying to escape. As the fields fell into dimness, the window in front of her became more opaque. She could see the reflection of her father reclining in his chair in the living room behind her, the sporadic lights of the television washing his exhausted face. She could see her own face, too. She thought about the invisible life inside her, growing, seeking a voice — she would tell her father at dinner, whether her mother was there or not. Her heart began to knock lightly at the door of her ribcage. Her thoughts fell and scattered as she chopped vegetables for stew. *What is this life inside me? What will I give to it? Where is its home? What does it see in the blackness inside me? How can I tell Papa? You just have to tell him. Just tell him.*

A low rumble vibrated the window, the floor under Ellie’s bare feet.

“Storm’s comin,” said Ellie softly. The television lights flickered on her father’s face. The rumbling moved across the sky as if the clouds were grumbling among themselves.

When they sat down to supper, Ellie’s mother was still not home.

“Probably gonna wait out the storm over there,” said Ellie’s father.

Ellie ladled stew over cornbread for her father and herself. Their metal spoons clanked on the bowls. Ellie had so much to tell about Chicago but she found herself terse, nervous about the one thing that she knew she had to say.

“You like Chicago pretty good?” Papa asked.

“Yeah, Papa. It’s really cool. They have a lot of museums and coffee shops and bars with good music.”

“You playin my old guitar?”

“Yeah.”

Ellie’s father lifted a spoonful of stew to his lips. His face turned down towards his steaming bowl, as if he were examining the vegetables floating there.

“The vegetables taste great,” Ellie offered.

Her father chewed his cornbread with ruminating jaws. A great, long flash of lightning lit the yard outside the windows. Ellie saw the sycamore trees swaying and bending in the wind. She counted, one Mississippi, two Mississippi — then a deep, guttural rumble broke open, sounding like the earth turning over under the dark sky. She ventured farther, her heart knocking loudly against her ribcage. *Just get to the meat of it, she told herself. There’s no easy way.*

“Papa, there’s something—”

A loud crack split her words; a flash of light filled the room— and then darkness.

“Power’s gone out,” said Papa, matter-of-fact. He scooted his chair back across the wood

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floor, grinding out a gravelly sound that was followed by heavy drops pelting the tin roof.
“We’ve got candles.”

Ellie sat in the darkness at the table, listened to her father’s trudging footsteps. And then a heavy fall of meat and bone on wood — Papa.

“Papa?” she cried, rushing blindly to where she had heard his body slump. She reached out into the dark and felt his twisted leg, squeezed his warm hand, and then laid her own hand to his forehead. She felt a thick liquid there.

“Papa?”

“Ellie ... I fell. His words were dragging as if through sludge.

“Your mom’s gone, Ellie.”

“What?”

“Your mom. She left with a suitcase last week. She said—”

Ellie struggled to understand the words above the pelting rain and growl of thunder.

“—said she wanted more.” His words gave way to the barrage of rain on the tin roof, and he fell into silence but for a faint sob. Ellie held his hand. They had never been this close before. Here in the darkness of the storm Ellie could see her father’s hurt— his isolation, years of working, holding on, clinging to this place. She saw now why he’d been working on the fence so obsessively, trying to pin in the last living soul here with him. She looked down where he lay but saw only darkness, felt only the warmth of his rising and falling breath as he sobbed.

“Papa? I’m pregnant.” She had said it, released it as if it were a bird that would take flight and find its own passage.

“I cain’t hear you, Ellie,” he moaned.

“I’m pregnant.”

Raindrops fell from the clouds’ iron grip, made their passage down to the soil. In the darkness Ellie felt she could not tell up from down. She only felt the dark circle of night enveloping her, felt the roundness of her womb as it expanded inside her belly and the earth tumbled over and over in its course.