

VACANT

DYLAN HENDERSON

I snaked my arm through the window and unlocked the back door, broken glass crunching under my boots. Inside, the floorboards were stacked in a corner, and I waded through the crawlspace until I reached the kitchen. My brother was sitting on the back porch, prying a nail out of his loafers.

"I wore the wrong shoes for this," he called.

I climbed out of the crawlspace onto the dining room floor. "There are pictures in here," I called, examining the paintings on the wall.

My brother materialized behind me. "I thought you meant there were photographs," he said. He began to brush the dust off his slacks.

"The wife painted this one," I said, tapping the glass with my finger. "Her husband hung it over the dining room table. He wouldn't have displayed his own work."

"Do you see a signature?" my brother asked.

I shook my head. The morning sun shone through the lace curtains, leaving a checkered shadow on the floor. An imaginary cat slept in its light. Its paws twitched as it dreamed.

My brother was exploring the living room. "I found a name," he called. I could hear him flipping through a magazine.

I turned back to the dining room where a man and woman were eating breakfast at the table. The cat hopped onto the man's lap, and he scratched it behind the ears as he turned the page of his newspaper. The woman laid her hand on the table, and the man took it without saying anything.

"What have you found?" I asked from the doorway. The sofa and two

armchairs were piled on top of one another in the corner. The wallpaper hung in strips.

"The Millers," he said, holding up a copy of *The Watchtower*, "were Jehovah's Witnesses." He tapped the cover of the magazine. "It's dated 1976."

I stepped over the books scattered on the hardwood floor. Two bookcases, built into the wall, flanked the door to the hallway. I replaced the shelves and, crouching down, began to flip through the pile of Bibles, commentaries, and paperback novels. In the corner, the antique television poured its white light on the braided rug. Mr. Miller was sitting in his armchair, reading. He adjusted his glasses and wrote something in the margins of his Bible. His son was stretched out on the floor in front of the television, his chin propped up on his palms.

"How's the baby?" my brother asked. I heard the click of his camera over my shoulder.

"It's fine," I said, dropping the book I held in my hand. I stood up. "It's smaller than the doctors would like, but they don't want to take it yet."

My brother snapped a picture of the fanlight over the door. "How's your wife?" he asked quietly, adjusting the shutter on his camera.

I shrugged and, pushing aside the paneled door, stepped into the bathroom. The toilet was gone, leaving behind a gaping hole in the tile floor, but the pedestal sink and cast iron bathtub remained. The floor, spongy with rot, sagged.

I sat down on the edge of the bathtub and watched the cows in the pasture through the window. On the far side of the field, hackberries and blackjack oaks clustered along a creek, the papery trunks of sycamores poking through the roof of the wood. I watched a flock of blackbirds rise from the treetops and, wheeling as they climbed, fly over the house.

"You have to see this," my brother said. He was standing in the doorway and wiping the sweat from his eyes.

I followed my brother to a small bedroom at the other end of the hall. Several hundred Mason jars, smashed to bits, coated the floor. A bed, a nightstand, and a desk overlooking the gravel drive were the only furnishings. My brother, smiling, pointed up, and I lifted my head and saw the

bluish-green swirl of the Milky Way arcing across the night sky.

"He loved stars," I said, touching the ceiling with the tip of my fingers.

The boy glanced at us before turning around in his chair and bending over his desk. I looked over his shoulder at the radio, now reduced to an assortment of wires, panels, and speakers, sprawled across his desk. The boy ran his hand through his short hair and, licking his lips, selected a pair of wire cutters from the toolbox beside him. Sketches of motorcycles and robots hung on the wall.

"It's just that she seemed upset," my brother said as we climbed the stairs. The walnut rang with our footsteps. "Do you usually fight like that?"

"She didn't want me to leave," I said over my shoulder. "She doesn't like being left alone."

"I didn't mean to upset her," he said.

We paused at the landing where a window looked out over the barn and tool shed. Beneath us, a cellar, overgrown with brambles, yawned at the base of the house. I could see its splintered door floating in the water below.

"I just don't see how it can last," he resumed, fiddling with his camera. "Truthfully, I think she should have stayed in the hospital. If you want my opinion, there it is."

I nodded, brushing away the cobwebs that spanned the window.

"Do you even love her?" he asked, trailing after me.

I paused at the top of the stairs. A single room filled the entire upstairs, its ceiling sloping with the pitch of the roof. Paneling ran along the walls, the yellow pine peppered with mouse holes. The closet doors hung open, and piles of clothes littered the bed and dresser. I stepped into the alcove, which overlooked the gravel drive and the cottonwood shading the front porch. Beneath my feet, the chains on the porch swing squeaked as it swung. Arm in arm, the Millers sipped lemonade and watched their son as he chased a butterfly through the tall grass, his net flapping in the warm breeze.

"I love having a family," I said, watching Henry, his face red with laughter, weave through the meadow, the butterfly appearing and disappearing in the weeds before him.